MATERIAL IMMATERIAL ARTEFACT INFLUENCE

Studies in Material Thinking

AUTHOR

Gabriel A. Maher

ASTRACT

This paper investigates systems of design as they relate to representations of gender and identity. It considers how design presents conservative systems of gender representation through the vehicle of the media. The media is interpreted through its production of material artefacts, namely that of the magazine—which is seen to contribute to the establishment and reinforcing of gender norms, on a conceptual level, through the imagery it reproduces. These media narratives are analysed through one specific case study—the aim being to analyse gendered meanings inherent in specific representations and explore the condition of the 'mediated body' in design: in other words, the body as it is captured, effected and transformed by the vehicle of the media. The study focuses on representations of the body found in seven consecutive issues of Frame Magazine (numbers 89-95). The findings of the study are seen to initiate a shift in behaviour by the magazine on account of the feedback provided, leading to a change in the production of gendered material from this source. Therefore, it could be claimed that this study has exercised an influence over the concepts of gender materialised by the magazine.

INTRODUCTION

To understand the media communication system and make ideas about the construction of gender tangible, a visual analysis pulls apart popular mainstream design publication *Frame Magazine*. This publication was selected for analysis because of its content diversity, wide readership, popularity as a professional design publication, multidisciplinary approach, and ability to influence. The following issues of the magazine were analysed:

> *Frame* #89 (Nov/Dec 2012)
> *Frame* #90 (Jan/Feb 2013)
> *Frame* #91 (Mar/Apr 2013)
> *Frame* #92 (May/Jun 2013)
> *Frame* #93 (Jul/Aug 2013)
> *Frame* #94 (Sep/Oct 2013)
> *Frame* #95 (Nov/Dec 2013)

Representations of the body are strongly present in this publication. They feature in advertisements for design objects and the body of the designer is often pictured alongside their work. The analysis presented here performs a type of visual surgery—each body appearing in the magazine is physically cut away from the context and objects which surround it. This analogue process isolates the form of the body and aims to slow down the speed with which images of the body are naturally consumed. The process of cutting is akin to a visual endurance exercise, which allows the conditions which enclose a mediated body to be contemplated.

These body images are subsequently grouped and re-arranged. The reorganisation attempts to reveal patterns of gendered behaviour through posture and gesture, gendered relationships as defined by composition and visual weight, and depictions of lifestyle ideals inherent in the magazine. These rearrangements also analyse broader intersectional implications such as questionable racial and class associations.

Aesthetic techniques of montage are used to assemble the visual critique. The cutting and joining of multiple body images seeks to create a unique and critical image. This new assemblage shows a collection of mediated bodies which, together, make explicit the cultural framing of gender and identity by the magazine. In the construction of these montages, the parameters of the printed images are not altered. The print size and quality is consciously maintained, and no cropping, enlargement or reduction occurs. This preserves consistency and authenticity of the new, creatively-derived montages in relation to the visual structure and hierarchy of the magazine.

The process of pulling apart, dissecting, analysing and re-arranging are actions accommodated as part of a semiotic visual analysis. This research is concerned with the application of gendered meaning—as such, semiotics is recognised as a culturally specific language used in this study to decode these meanings and give a framework to the analysis. The analysis interprets the organisation and structure of sign systems embedded in cultural artefacts and in conjunction with the use of the body. Furthermore, it looks at the signification of the body in relation to gender and attempts to understand how people and objects become interchangeable in this system and how, together, they produce meaning.

These representations illustrate a broader problematic of gender and social binaries existing in design media as a whole. Through this, a dichotomy can be observed between the recognition of design industry innovations set against conservative visions of the human subject. This study contemplates how the complexity and intricacy of human subjectivity is reduced to image.

Throughout the analysis, I assume the role of de_*sign*(er). From this position, I de_*sign* the research material. In other words, analyse the signs, symbols and relationships produced by the magazine through its media narratives. This de_signification process articulates the methodological framework for the analysis.

The method involves an act of de_signing, which searches for and pulls apart a complex system of signs related to gender. Current feminist discourse on design and gender is expanded on by exploring this relationship beyond the binary of male and female and positioning this exploration within queer frameworks.

In response to findings of the study, the editors of *Frame Magazine* became collaborators. The issues raised by the analysis were debated publicly and, furthermore, published by the magazine. This process introduced an alternative communication cycle. As such, a cycle of constructive criticism can be seen to have engaged various stakeholders in culturally responsible dialogues and attitudes. This informing relationship is central to the study as a key objective and a rationale for the methodology.

MEDIA NARRATIVES

Media constructs narratives based on socio-political and cultural phenomena, as Meenakshi Giig Durham and Douglas M. Kellner explain:

> …*media and culture today are of central importance to the maintenance and reproduction of contemporary societies. Societies, like species, need to reproduce to survive, and culture cultivates attitudes and behaviour that predispose people to consent to established ways of thought and conduct … narratives of media culture offer patterns of proper and improper behaviour, moral messages and ideological conditioning, sugar coating social and political ideas with pleasurable and seductive forms of popular entertainment.* (Durham & Kellner, 2001, p. 2)

In particular, these media narratives are often restricted to conservative and traditional visions when it comes to representations of gender. The connection between design and the media narratives it produces establishes a culture which heavily influences the construction of identity and contributes to the development of certain concepts of lifestyle—the reproductions of which are embodied in society on many levels.

The enactment of these concepts play out in many ways through consumption. As design theorist Hlide Bouchez explains, 'consumers read into the different meanings of things…they decipher the codes linked to the symbolic meaning and…through the acquisition of goods, they…create an identity and take a social position…' (Bouchez, 2013, p. 53).

The media dimension of design assists in cultivating symbolic meanings and coded ideologies through representation. This seemingly allows consumers to own or appropriate certain (constructions of) realities.

However, I will argue that this media dimension reduces representations of lifestyle and identity within constrained spheres of representation. Bouchez claims that these lifestyles and identities are often reduced to 'homogeneous, non-critical, spectacular form' (2013, p. 41). This will inevitably circumscribe and apply parameters to the realities we perceive and therefore recognise. Consequently, an expanded concept of gender and identity is largely unseen in the media narratives of design.

Gender and identity is constructed on many levels; culturally, socially and politically. For this reason, its construction can be questioned within the context of design media. When design is positioned as a primary producer of cultural milieu, it can be observed how media narratives of design unite cultural, social and political constructions of gender through representation. As sociologist Don Slater suggests, 'not only my identity but the social relations themselves are reproduced through culturally specific consumption [design] and by changing or rejecting the consumption

codes of my culture, I negotiate both identity and aspects of the culture' (Slater, 1998, p. 132).

The media dimension of design further manifests the construction of gender through certain kinds of artefacts. The work of Teresa de Lauretis highlights the implications of this. In *Technologies of Gender*, de Lauretis positions the production of gender within certain devices, or technologies; film, montage, signification and decoding. For the purpose of this study, photography will be included as a major technology of gender. These technologies come together and materialise in the media.

De Lauretis credits this conceptual basis to Foucault's theory of sexuality, as a 'technology of sex'. In so doing, she proposes that 'gender, too, both as representation and as self-representation, is the product of various social technologies' (de Lauretis, 1987, p. 5). It is equally important to acknowledge that de Lauretis understands 'the construction of gender as both the product and the process of its representation' (1987, p. 5).

De Lauretis determines that gender is embodied or made material through self-representation. Such self-representation is manifest through certain artefacts that we acquire, make or desire. This process of acquisition effects and is effected by our perceptions of reality and is fundamentally linked to the representations we experience. Seminal queer theorist, Paul B. Preciado cites the work of de Lauretis who elaborates this opinion:

> *The constructed-ness or discursive nature of gender does not prevent it from having real or concrete effects, both social and subjective, for the material life of individuals. On the contrary,*

…media dimension reduces representations of lifestyle and identity…

*the reality of gender is precisely in the effects of
its representation: gender is realised, becomes
'real' when that representation becomes self-
representation, is individually assumed as a form
of one's social and subjective identity. (de Lauretis
in Preciado, 2013, p. 109)*

The conceptual foundation for the material production
of gender is explored in this study by looking at gender
as a construction through image. Here, the ways in
which images are appropriated into representations of
self are considered.

GENDER AS CONSTRUCTION THROUGH IMAGE

In order to confirm the relationship between gender
and culture, as well as representation to culture, it is
necessary to distinguish between biological sex and
the cultural term 'gender'. Preciado notes that 'in
1955, the North American pseudo-psychiatrist John
Money coined the term "gender", differentiating
it from the traditional term "sex", to define an
individual's inclusion in a culturally recognised group
of "masculine" or "feminine" behaviour and physical
expression' (Preciado, 2013, p. 27).

The concept of gender has since become a central
pillar of feminist thought because it emphasises the
fact that categories like woman, man, femininity,
and masculinity do not come from biology or nature.
Therefore, gender, as a concept and a cultural term, is
socially, culturally or politically manufactured. In this
sense, it can be modified or changed, it isn't frozen or
permanent. Judith Butler argued this as a precursor to
the rise of queer theory:

*Gender reality is created through sustained social
performances [which] means that the very notion
of an essential sex and a true abiding masculinity
or femininity are also constituted as part of a
strategy that conceals gender's performative
character and the performative possibilities
for proliferating gender configurations outside
restricting frames. (Butler, 1990, pp. 192-3)*

Images allow for the documentation and
aestheticisation of these performances. Major
platforms for the distribution and creation of such
images are mechanisms of media, which are exploited
to the advantage of consumer culture.

As such, Butler describes how 'strategies of
exclusion and hierarchy are…shown to persist in the
formulation of the sex/gender distinction and its
recourse to "sex" as the pre-discursive as well as the
priority of sexuality to culture' (Butler, 1990, p. 202).

One such strategy of consumer culture relies
on the binary rhetoric of a gender-sex distinction in
order to sell products and concepts to an ideal majority
seduced into this understanding of gender and sex.
As a strategy, it creates a culture primarily founded on
binary rhetoric.

This strategy can be observed in design media by
way of the images it includes and the language it uses.
Frame Magazine clearly reproduces a visual and textual
language which refers to the primacy of binary gender
as if it were the workings of biological sex. One example
of this can be seen in binary separations made in the
magazine's headlines 'Man with a purpose', 'Mr Chair',
'Renaissance Man', 'Master meets Machine', as opposed
to 'Design Diva', 'Metal Matriarch', 'Grande Dame of
Curation'. These headlines were selected between

issues 89 and 95 for their direct reference to gender associations. Each headline aligns with an image of a designer and specifically refers to the gendering of this figure. These gendered titles are strongly binary and implicate the body of the designer as part of such rhetoric.

It can be noted here that the tone of gendered language differs between masculine and feminine associations. For instance, when referring to the masculine, *Frame Magazine's* headlines speak of 'Purpose', refer to the 'Renaissance', the 'Machine' and the 'Master'. However, if we consider Figure 1, which features Guta Moura Guedes, the chair of Experimenta, a non-profit cultural body responsible for organising Lisbon's design biennale since 1999, this image receives the headline 'Design Diva'. This strongly gendered headline can be read as a symbolic positioning of a woman by the magazine, which potentially undermines her important cultural

position and reduces the effect of her strong body language. The slang of the term 'diva' can be negatively associated with attention seeking or temperamental persons, thus stereotyping the success of a woman in negative ways.

This plays out similarly in the title 'Grande Dame of Curation'. 'Dame', as Suzanne Romaine states, 'is used derogatorily, especially in American English' (Romaine, 1999 p. 145). Not to mention the relationship of 'fake violence' and gendered power play in the image which accompanies the headline (figure 2); a 'Grande Dame' with a gun to her head.

This brief discourse analysis reveals how cultural meanings and stereotypes have built up over time and can be difficult to change. It also shows a relationship between text and body images that documents and aestheticises performances of gender.

With this in mind, gender can be seen as a construction in the mind and a presentation on the

Figure 1. Original context: Design Diva, *Frame Magazine*, #89 (Nov/Dec 2012), p. 154. Photo: Fernando Guerra. Subject: Guta Moura Guedes.

Figure 2. Original Context: Grande Dame of Curation, *Frame Magazine*, #93 (July/Aug 2013), p. 181. Photo: Filippo Bamberghi. Subjects: Rossana Orlandi & Maurizio Cattelan.

site of body. The media and communication platforms create fundamental connections between our concepts of gender and how we might choose to make them manifest on the site if the body.

Neuroscientist Cordelia Fine explores how these concepts are integrated into our cerebral biology. In *Delusions of Gender*, Fine reveals that the idea of gender is not hardwired in the brain. Within the context of neuroscience, Fine deconstructs common perceptions of gender difference though extensive scientific experimentation. She argues that the extent to which social and cultural factors influence our perceptions of gender are almost inexhaustible. Her neurological investigations map how 'the circuits of the brain are quite literally a product of [the] physical, social, and cultural environment, as well as...behaviour and thoughts' (Fine, 2010, p. 238).

What Fine identifies is a limitless series of learned responses to gender. Marking these attitudes as inherently implicit, we see how easily they can shape social perception. Here, it should be reinforced that what is seen in the media is a driving force in the mapping of social perception.

The fact that gender is not a fixed or static notion is a key idea which challenges the way gender is currently framed in design media. The construction of gender can be questioned within the context of design media, because this vehicle is directly linked to the production and reproduction of culture; a culture that produces and reproduces fixed notions of gender through imagery and language. For example, within the visual deconstruction of *Frame Magazine* it was near impossible to find reference (via language, image etc.) to gender positions counter to the established notions of male and female.

Mark Roxburgh discusses the relationship between images and our perception and transformation of the world. Focusing on theories of perception by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and critiques of photography and design by Vilèm Flusser, Roxburgh concludes that 'design is itself a transformative, creative and imaginative inevitability for it is bound up in our perceptual synthesis [and] whilst this process of imaginative transformation is inevitable... it will be conditioned by the images we have access to' (Roxburgh, 2013, p. 12). In this statement, Roxburgh interrogates the power of images to affect the material output of design (objects and communication). He proposes that instead of being a 'problem solving' venture, design is born 'as a matter of perceptual course' (Roxburgh, 2013, p. 12). Relating this theory to the study of design media, it can be observed that if the images that are seen present impressions of conservative human subjects, the ability to imagine more poetic and diverse human conditions, particularly in terms of gender and identity, is inhibited.

However, once these seemingly fixed notions can be revealed as constructions, a fluidity becomes possible. As Butler outlines, a release of gender from sex and into the realm of culture releases our thinking around fixed ideals:

> *If gender is not tied to sex, either casually or expressively, then gender is a kind of action that can potentially proliferate beyond the binary limits imposed by the apparent binary of sex. Instead, gender would be a kind of cultural/corporeal action. (Butler,1990, p. 152)*

Figure 3 (below). Original context:
The Reconstructor, Frame
Magazine, #89 (Nov/Dec 2012),
p. 152. Photo: Fernando Guerra.
Subject: João Mouro.

With this understanding, the possibility of disrupting binary conventions via design is also possible. In this sense, perhaps the media can become aware of its accountability as a cultural agent and accordingly, adjust its role in a system of representation. In order to spark this disruption, design could be positioned similarly to how the architectural theorist, Beatriz Colomina (1996) positions architecture

in *Sexuality and Space*—that is, we should see beyond design as object and understand it fully within a system of representation.

To elaborate, it can be said that 'things' (objects, images etc.) themselves don't mean; meaning is constructed by using representational systems. Therefore, the material artefacts of design cannot be separated from a system of representation and design objects gain their meaning through this representation. Objects cannot be simply functional because they exist within a web of cultural meaning. It is communication design platforms like *Frame Magazine* which assist this web of cultural meaning because, as Slater claims, 'advertising and marketing attach extraneous meanings to basically functional objects (the perfume does not just smell nice, it signifies or promises sexuality, femininity)' (Slater, 1998, p. 140).

Therefore, design cannot simply be read through objects themselves, but rather, an encounter with the meanings these objects project through the vehicle of publicity. Publicity is a structure which functions by transforming objects into something which is given meaning in terms of people. Alternatively, these meanings connect to the creation of identity and to relationships with the body.

Depictions of the body in *Frame Magazine* emphasise this point though body language and posturing. Take for example the following image (figure 3) of a designer, photographed for the magazine, whose body is read as male.

This image captures a confident posture with legs and arms wide open, extending the body well into the frame and emphasising visible displays of body hair. There is an interest in this position as captured by the camera. It exhibits a repetitive body language seen in *Frame Magazine* as a pose adopted only by bodies read as male. No bodies read as female or other

genders were posed, captured and printed in such a position. If this was to the contrary, the reading of the body would inherit a different meaning, if not a very unfamiliar image. Therefore, such a position is divisive in representations of social posturing.

According to Colomina, 'the body has to be understood as a political construct, a product of such systems of representation rather than the means by which we encounter them' (Colomina,1996, p. 2). Thus, design is reread in sexual terms and human sexuality is seen as a direct link to how people communicate in society. John Berger (1972/1990, p.139) understands this as a core mechanism used by publicity, which 'uses sexuality to sell any product or service'. But, says Berger, 'this sexuality is never free in itself; it is a symbol of something presumed to be larger than it: the good life in which you can buy whatever you want.'

What this also means is that the sexuality sold is prescribed. It can be seen how narrow visions of acceptable lifestyles are consistently reproduced in the following montage, which was created using images of 'lifestyle' in *Frame Magazine*.

This collection of body images from *Frame Magazine* reflect the life-styling and gender profiling present in the magazine and determine how sexuality is represented. The research of lecturer Paul Frosh on the generic image of stock photography, is cited here, to explain the link between these images and clear stereotypes. He describes generic images as: 'Glossy, formulaic, multipurpose representations of consumer well being and corporate achievement (smiling, white, middle-class families at the beach, well-groomed businessman shaking hands) arranged in catalogues according to general categories, simultaneously reflecting and rein-scribing cultural stereotypes.' (Frosh, 2001, pp. 630 - 31)

These stereotypical images support something of a universal narrative. In other words, design is positioned as a system of cultural production that holds power to dictate idealised, universal lifestyles under the guise of consumerism and the seeking of a 'better life'. Within this universal narrative, the politics of difference are omitted from the scheme—the narrative being one of white heteronormativity. As queer theorist and literary critic Michael Warner states, 'so much of heterosexual privilege lies in heterosexual culture's exclusive ability to interpret itself as society' (Warner, 1993, p. xxi).

Following on from this, design theorist Bruce King Shey describes the universalism of design as a 'self-referential, self-preserving, self-justifying narrative: better design, better products, better life for the universal citizen' (2005, p. 29). By producing itself as the norm, the mechanism of design media thinks of itself as representative, 'but produces a culture for a self-referential community of bodies' (2005, p. 30). The body images in Figure 5 reinforce these notions within *Frame Magazine*—these images collectively

Figure 4. Body is removed from original context to isolate posture, as part of the technique and methods of de_sign.

Figure 5. *Frame Magazine* visual analysis: Montage: The Universal Narrative. By Gabriel A. Maher. This montage is comprised of multiple body images that appear in *Frame Magazine* between Issues 89 and 95. Images were selected and grouped based on representations of lifestyle found in the magazine. The original colours have been altered to greyscale, while size and proportion has been maintained.

depicting an editorial bias by the magazine (conscious or unconscious), towards white, middle class and hetero-normative representations.

The challenge here is that cultural norms are so prolific, and the messages so subtle, that underlying stigmas are barely recognisable. Encounters with cultural representations of human objectification are saturating. So much so that the complexity and intricacy of the human condition is reduced to an image, we 'become' this image and our relationship to this system is mimetic. As Joanne Finkelstein outlines in reference to the industrialised, high technology societies of our times: 'the human body, as if no different from other manufactured objects, can be used as a commodity...like the purchased object, the body can be made a sign' (Finkelstein, 1991, p. 9).

Therefore, a reliable, yet fabricated, construction of reality is projected in design media which omits wider depictions of the human condition, particularly, but not limited to, gender representation. This is monopolised by representations of the comfortable, good, better life. That life is communicated as predominantly white, middle-class, heterosexual and male-dominated; this is considered a universal narrative. Such a projection implies that communication design operates within hidden (almost unconscious) structures which adversely influence the diffusion of knowledge—so much so that it appears natural.

Artist Yana Milev summaries how 'the durability of this system operates via semiotic identification and image identifications [and] deviations in system codification will inevitably lead to loss of system ID—and thus to an exclusion from the system' (Milev, 2016, p. 80). However, she also goes on to highlight that 'each exclusion from a system opens up opportunities

to establish new linguistic systems based on modified codes and develop new connections to other linguistic and semiotic systems' (2016, p. 80).

This notion prefaces the methodological approach of de_sign.

DE—SIGN AS METHOD

To break apart the word design is a very important starting point. To take the 'de' from the 'sign', opens up a space for questioning. Because this question interrogates how 'design' has presented a conventional system of gender representation, the study seeks a new vocabulary for how it could be constructed differently.

To de_sign becomes something of an action; to search for the (de) 'sign' or to strip away 'the signs' imbedded in any manner of things. Flusser wrote 'About the Word Design' in 1993. Positioning the word as both a noun and a verb (which it is), he tells us that 'the word is derived from the Latin *signum*, meaning *sign*...Thus etymologically, *design* means *de-sign*' (Flusser, 1993/1999, p. 17). The word was seen by Flusser to imply scheming and a level of deception; 'the word *design* makes us aware that all culture is trickery, that we are tricksters tricked, and that any involvement with culture is the same as thing as self-deception' (1993, p. 20).

This take on the word 'design' becomes particularly interesting when it is looked at it in terms of the construction of gender, identity and the body. The relationships discussed so far, between images, our perception and manifestation of gender, are at the core of semiotic theory. Concerned with the application of meaning, this is a language that can be used by designers to interpret and interrogate the meanings

associated with objects. Alternatively, signs are used as a language by the market to manipulate the meanings behind objects.

This is an interesting cross-road for this study. This language is very culturally specific and it is used to divide up and classify the world according to culture.

Yuri Lotman (1984, re-published 2005) describes the term 'semiosphere' as an ephemeral space of sign exchange. It is within this sphere of continuously functioning processes of signification that the visual analysis of *Frame Magazine* is situated.

The ways in which the content produced by *Frame Magazine* influences constructions of gender norms can be put down to processes of 'naturalisation' (Barthes, 1957/1972). Here, a simple element as it relates to others, connotes certain meanings—for example, when objects are connected to people, perhaps associating a particular thing with a particular type of person. Slater discusses how sign systems,

> *at whatever level, are distinctly cultural in the sense that they are ways in which particular societies divide up and organise the world and they are arbitrary with respect to the real world: there is no more reason for smelly liquids to signify femininity than for bat dung or the evening star to do so…However. signification appears capable of making femininity appear to be the natural property of perfume. (Slater, 1998, p. 140)*

As designers, we are responsible (in collaboration with other stakeholders) for applying meaning to culture. Cultural artefacts indicate and inform social relationships by existing within a system of representation. If representation indicates a system

of signs, the origin of the word de_'sign' becomes important for it's implications. 'Signs' are embedded in the cultural artefacts produced within the framework of design. The signs indicate and inform social relations as well as reinforcing social order. Design media employs this as a strategy to sell certain types of lifestyle to the widest possible audience, namely that of white heteronormativity. So, if all consumption is related to culture and culture constitutes the needs that make up consumption, then as individuals we assume an identity based on the things and the meaning of the things we consume. This identity is reflected and demonstrated within a complex system of codes—codes that relate to the things we consume for ourselves. This identity and meaning is shared using the cultural resources of language. Thus, personal identity is continually reproduced and shared within culture, until it constitutes a certain lifestyle. Roland Barthes makes this point in *Mythologies*, 'by treating "collective presentations" as sign-systems, one might hope to … account in detail for the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois culture into a universal nature' (1957/1972, p. 9).

The method of de_'sign'ing is used in this study, to decipher inherent meanings that link basic objects with higher aspirations of cultural meaning. For instance, in the visual analysis of *Frame Magazine*, specific examples of how objects have been linked to traditional and nostalgic cultural associations are highlighted. Many of these associations were found to be problematic.

To describe one alarming cultural association, we see how the' Monster Chair' by Marcel Wanders as photographed by Erwin Olaf (figure 6 [overleaf])
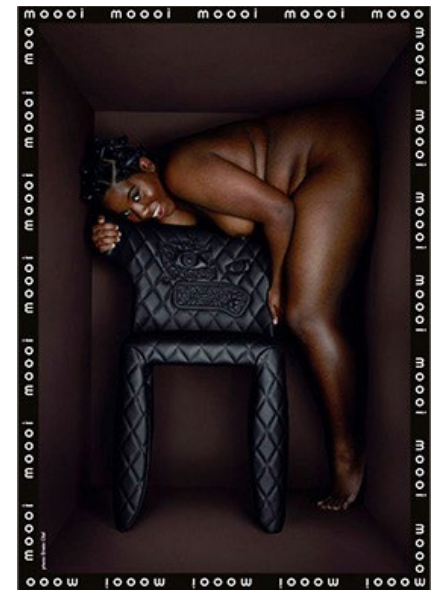

Figure 6. Original context: *Frame Magazine*, #90 (Jan/Feb 2013). Advertisement for Moooi, 'Inside the Box' campaign. Photo: Erwin Olaf.

indicates an exoticism as well as an eroticised relationship between a chair and a body.

In this advertisement for Moooi, the depiction of a woman in a box with a chair can be seen. The chair is black leather and features a grimacing, assumed to be primitively abstracted, face embroidered into the leather. The female body featured with the chair is a person of colour, nude, and mimics the facial abstraction of the chair. Her body is wrapped around the chair, not sitting on the chair. The relationship indicates this body as an object. We can read this relationship as strongly colonialist. A woefully redundant cultural ideal is used here to imbue the chair with certain exotic qualities. It is a stereotypical image of an anonymous subject which harks back to when colonial powers transformed African women into icons of racial inferiority and female sexuality. This illustrates a racist mindset common in nineteenth-century Europe and an image that has become a lasting symbol of Western colonial appropriations of culture.

Kim Sichel, in a 2002 essay on the colonialist documentary photographer Germaine Krull, cites Krull's 1943 portrait of a Banda Woman in Fort Archambault, Chad (figure 8). Sichel compares the similarity of the still image to a section of the 1948 film *L'Amitié* noire (on which Krull was a collaborator) by François Villiers, as a firm example of European eroticisation and exoticisation of Africa and Africans:

In this frontal view, the woman looks directly at us, her head framed by the hanging straw of her hut, and her upper torso encased in row upon row of beads and jewellery. The direct gaze allows her a certain dignity, although Krull represents her as a different cultural type from any European woman. In the film, Villiers adopts a closer view that is

more voyeuristic, and the viewer is confronted with her sexuality rather than her ornamentation (Sichel, 2002, pp. 443 - 445).

A re-reading of design from this perspective is vital in order to decipher how the body is used in the media to shape concepts of gender and identity as well as a range of intersectional preconceptions. Our goal is to destabilise these established cultural constructions by considering them from a predominantly feminist, queer, trans perspective. Within this framework, design media is positioned as a sociopolitical and cultural platform that can simultaneously inform and inhibit subversive positions of identification.

The continuing visual analysis of *Frame Magazine*

Figure 7 (left). *Frame Magazine* visual analysis: Montage: Monster Chair. By Gabriel A. Maher

Figure 8 (right). Germaine Krull, Banda Woman, Fort Archambault, Chad, August 1943. Reproduced in Sichel (2002), p. 446.
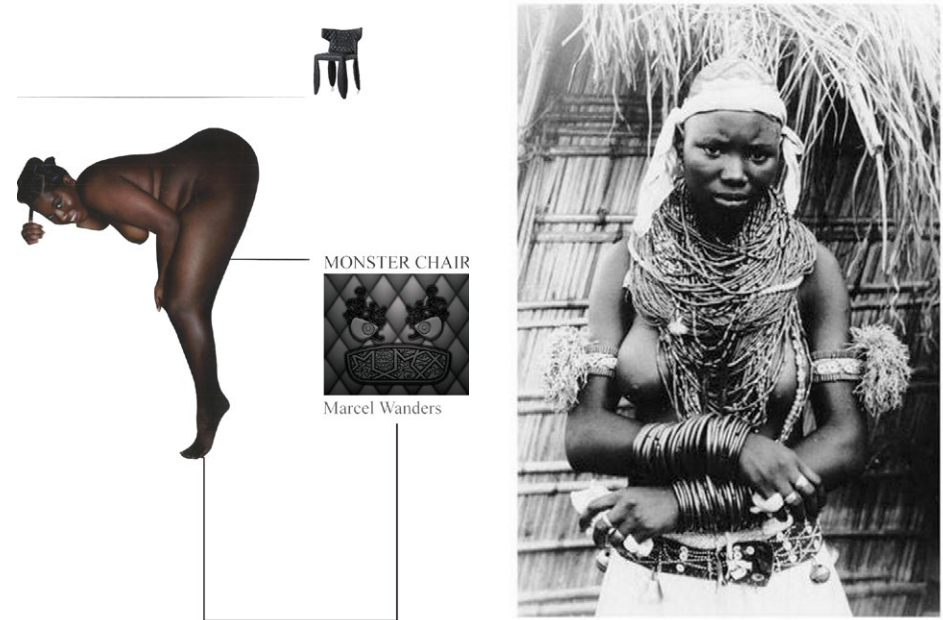
concludes how the media contributes to such cultural limiting. It also demonstrates how the media can be held accountable. Opportunities for the media to re-evaluate its practices and processes of cultural production make way for an informed transformation of representation.

THE MEDIATED BODY OF *FRAME MAGAZINE*

For the purpose of our study, the analysis is in two parts. The first examines content from advertisements in *Frame Magazine* and the second compiles body images of designers.

Demonstrations of gendered power relationships prevail within the advertising. Take, for instance, the

Figure 9. Original context: *Frame Magazine*, #92 (May/June 2013). Advertisement for Modular Lighting.

Figure 10. Frame Magazine visual analysis: Montage: Modular Lighting & Pan Pursuing Syrinx. By Gabriel A. Maher

following image by Modular Lighting (figure 9), which is supported in the pages of the magazine. We see a dominant masculine figure who holds a dead chicken and a knife and who stares directly at the camera He appears to be walking in the direction of the feminine figure in the foreground. She is positioned in the frame below him, her eyes are averted and she displays a concerned expression and a hand to her face. The remnants of an earlier activity show that she was the subject of a knife throwing entertainment technique. While it is framed as a carnivalesque moment, this is a violent image in what it seems to anticipate.

In this montage (figure 10), an image reference is included to *Pan Pursuing Syrinx* (circa 1615), by Hendrick Van Balen the Elder and Follower of Jan Breughel the Elder.[1] With reference to Berger, who compared *Pan Pursuing Syrinx* with a media image, this connection emphasises a nostalgia towards the

1 – National Gallery, London.

2 – Musée du Louvre, Paris.

visual language of allegorical painting The Modular Lighting image almost mimics the messages and visual structure of *Pan Pursuing Syrinx*. In turn, *Pan Pursuing Syrinx* can be similarly read as problematic because it speaks of an unwanted pursuit of Syrinx by the mythical Greek God, Pan, and promotes this relationship through allegory and within the traditions of oil painting.

In addition to this imagery, a nostalgia of the female gaze is observed, again, in an advertisement for Moooi, 'Inside the Box' series. A comparison is made in the following montage (figure 11) between (again with reference to Berger) the image of *La Grande Odalisque* (1814), by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres[2] to the image in the Moooi campaign. The expressions are similar, despite the gap in time. Ingres was depicting an odalisque, or a female concubine in the Ottoman sultan's harem. Her gaze is assumed to be for the male viewer. The Moooi image draws upon this idea of the male spectator by presenting the gaze and objectifying the female subject (figure 11).

Coupled with this imagery, representations of conventionalised bodies are discovered in the following advertisement for Moooi, 'Inside the Box' campaign (figure 12). The advertisement features two male-presenting bodies, one is a person of colour, the other is white. One dominates the other by their position on top of a table, while the other is wrapped around the base. This black and white chess table was designed in 2009 by Sofia Lagerkvist and Anna Lindgren from the Swedish design group Front. The description of the object by the designers reads, 'the decoration on the side table can be used for playing games. A table for past time, rivalry and cleverness'.

This relationship could be said to allude to competitive notions of black versus white. While it

is not the strongest example, it still subtly indicates particular types of binary social relationships, like racial opposition.

Advertisements are notorious for depicting outmoded representations. However, when these advertisements are understood within the context of a publication that also presents images of designers, a strange image emerges. The collected image of designers reflects the reinforced social and power relationships present in the advertising.
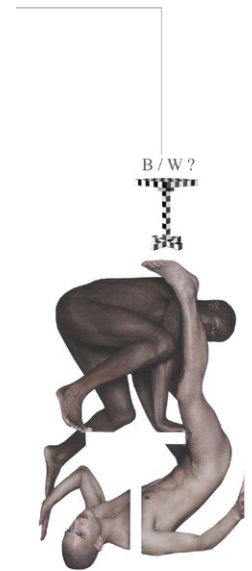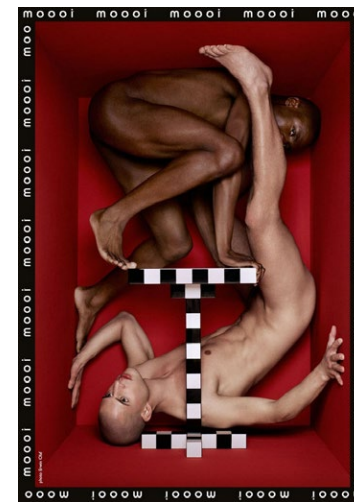
In the visualisation of women and men in their role as designers a visual weight of 80% male presenting bodies to 20% female presenting bodies is included in *Frame Magazine*. This does not suggest that there are exceptionally more male designers than female, but instead indicates how the industry and the media's attention is dominated. Additionally, to

view this in light of the advertising, a conservative reinforcement of social dynamics is visible. Here, it should be noted that it is not the intention of the research to divide designers into 'female designers' and 'male designers'. Instead, this study uses the visual and textual language of the magazine, which is explicitly gendered.

What is notable is the posturing of the designers when posed for photographs. The body language of the designers was easily grouped into several standard positions. These positions also indicate certain established patterns of behaviour related to the construction of gender. We refer back to the previous montage example of 'Mr Chair' (figure 2), to note that any 'sexual posturing'—as in legs open, crotch forward—is only adopted by the bodies read as male. If gender is understood to be a repeated stylisation of the body, these arrangements make such an idea explicit.

Certain conclusions can be drawn from this visual material. There is an attempt made by the media to manipulate and seduce consumers through cultural representations where gender is a dominant social ordering principle. This implies that approaches to gender can be regulatory, exclusive, fixed, manufactured, taught and learned through the imagery of the media. Additionally, it raises questions of autonomy and the body, of conventionalised bodies, pathologised bodies and fear of bodies.

The analysis indicates that design media frames objects to sell by using traditional and nostalgic relationships. Outdated power relationships and binary ideas of 'man' and 'woman' are still used prolifically to create ideologies around objects. The female and male form is objectified in this media (more frequently, the female form). As such, publicity uses this prescriptive

Figure 14. *Frame Magazine* visual analysis: Montage: The Designers. By Gabriel A. Maher

and conservative sexuality to sell products or services. This clearly 'framed' publicity is not solely about objects but, rather, indicates and reinforces social relationships. In this sense, gender and identity remain bifurcated through such representation.

Following the conclusions and presentation of this visual analysis, *Frame Magazine* was contacted directly and the editors were invited to respond to the findings of the analysis. This exchange took the form of a design debate which was held at the Design Academy Eindhoven in The Netherlands. The forum saw a presentation of my visual analysis, which was followed by a discussion about the content with *Frame Magazine* editor, Enya Moore. The audience for the debate was made up of young designers from the academy. The debate revealed vehement responses to the topic by audience members as well as some strong critiques to the media. Broader issues were highlighted as a result.

When asked to comment on the visual analysis, Moore responded by saying:

The way Frame was dissected—placing visuals and headlines plainly on one page—really struck me, especially when I looked at the wording of the titles. Together, words and visuals immediately influence readers' opinions of the person in question and give people a certain conception of what the article is about prior to reading it. I would definitely reconsider how the words I use might lead the reader. (Moore, 2014, p.179).

One audience member responded to this strongly by saying:

It is interesting that you were struck more by the titles than the numbers. I was shocked by the ratio of 80% males to 20% females…I think the predominance of male designers creates a context that shows women aiming for something they might not necessarily achieve. (2014, p.179)

To which Moore commented:

I wasn't overly shocked by the ratio because that imbalance exists, regardless of how we portray it. If we were to enforce any kind of quota, we would be showing bias as we include work based solely on its merits. (2014, p.179)

At this stage, the editors seemed most struck by the repeated body language of the designers and the wording of the headlines. They declined to discuss the effect of the advertising imagery, for the reason that the advertisers are essentially clients of the magazine. It was suggested, as a critique, that the magazine had the power to set conditions for advertising imagery and could assert what is appropriate or not when it comes to imagery.

It was extremely challenging to direct the discussion beyond traditional binary understandings of gender. One audience member asked: 'Is this dichotomy—always reverting to male and female and the ignoring the rest—easy to avoid?' This indicates how current cultural understandings of gender are still connected to a conservative history even within an audience of young designers. My response to the question was 'Absolutely. Once you find words outside this binary position, you can start looking at an identity beyond it' (2014, p.179).

To conclude the debate, another member of the audience stated: '*Frame's* role should not be

to encourage a greater balance between men and women, but to take the next step and look past gender' (2014, p.179).

In the months proceeding the debate, *Frame Magazine* conducted an independent survey of their readers, which looked at gender politics in the design industry.

The major question they posed focused on the following statement:

Men have dominated the design industry in the last 20 years. Which statement best describes the situation for the next 20 years?

1. The industry will be dominated by women.
2. The industry will still be dominated by men.
3. The gender of the designer is irrelevant.
4. There will be more of a balance between genders.

Their survey found that 29 per cent of respondents believed the future will bring a greater gender balance to the profession, while 65 per cent consider gender irrelevant.

This study articulates that to 'look past gender' as one audience member suggested or 'to consider gender irrelevant' as the survey suggests, may be, at this stage, an idealistic vision. To offer an approach to the expanded idea of gender within design, is to ask the media for a certain consciousness and attitude. If gender is to become irrelevant in this context it must be questioned why gender (even by default) has been given so much relevance in the structure of publicity. It becomes clear that an accountability which becomes part of publicity ethos could update how we are visualised.

As part of a communication cycle, this debate

was important. It revealed an effective method for holding various stakeholders culturally responsible for the tools and artefacts it produces.

The method of de_sign used the language and structure of the magazine against itself. The techniques of montage were used to reveal a different condition, one that was perhaps hidden. The re-framing or co-opting of *Frame Magazine's* visual information articulated clear counter interpretations and visualised underlying structures in an obvious way.

Effectively, a shared space of questioning was entered into as the analysis became participatory and interactive via the debate. This shared space and collaboration continued when *Frame Magazine* decided to include the findings of the analysis and highlights from the debate in an article for the *Frame #*100 issue 2014 (figure 15). As this article explores a critique of their publication, it is testament to the openness of the magazine to be reflective. In

Figure 15. From Frame Magazine #100 (Sep/Oct 2014).

this way, the publication gave recognition to cultural critique, which inevitably developed their approach to cultural production. They were surprised to see their publication presented in that way and made concerted efforts to address that reading/interpretation in a transparent way.

This study has attempted to make way for an awareness and accountability in the industry and actively influence the process of selection and production by the media.

A final statement by Slater concludes a potential to shift the way meaning is determined, 'humans are still entirely constituted within semiotic processes but these are now understood less as solid and reified structures than as boundless, endlessly fluid and indeterminate flows, networks and libidinal economies' (Slater,1998, p.143).

Gender and identity, as a cultural constructs, are captured in a similar way—as Butler comments, 'gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as a female one' (Butler,1990, p.9).

A communication cycle which actively responds to transforming cultural phenomen is already functioning. When this cycle is further challenged to look beyond itself, things get interesting. Design media is presented with both an opportunity and a cultural responsibility to envision greater possibilities for our lived identities in its material output. This shift charts new territory for our concepts of gender and identity to expand and transform.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabriel A. Maher /
Design Academy Eindhoven /
Netherlands /
gabriel@gabrielannmaher.com

Gabriel A. Maher is a designer with a background in interior architecture who is currently living and working in the Netherlands. Maher's practice is essentially focused on relationships between body and structure and an interest in objects and systems. Questioning design practices through queer and feminist frameworks has become a core position and approach. Until 2012, Maher practiced and taught interior architecture and design in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia—during this time being awarded the SIDA Foundation Mary White Memorial Scholarship from the University of New South Wales, nominated for the Vice Chancellors Distinguished Teaching Award while teaching at RMIT University and lastly, in 2011, becoming the recipient of the SIDA Foundation Travelling Scholarship. In 2014, upon completion of a Master's degree in Social Design at Design Academy Eindhoven, Maher received the Keep An Eye Foundation Grant and Gijs Bakker Award— and in 2015 became the recipient of a Stimuleringsfonds Creatieve Industrie Development Grant for the Netherlands.