

Baring the Soul. Cinema and Society in *Playmen* Magazine (1967–1972) Readers' Letters

Gabriele Rigola

Submitted: March 30, 2019 – Accepted: June 26, 2019 – Published: July 16, 2019

Abstract

This article examines several trends in the Readers' Letters column of *Playmen*, the Italian erotic monthly magazine, during the first five years it was published. In particular, the essay aims to investigate the role of the column and readers' letters in deciphering the change in male and gender roles in Italian society of that time. We will examine the development of a new readership, users of popular magazines dedicated to men, and a complex network of media products related to eroticism and sexuality as we look at themes and trends arising in each month's letters. We will observe in detail the role of films and filmmaking, and fan worship fantasies in this period of social change and intermedia exchanges.

Keywords: Cinema; Erotic Magazine; Letters; *Playmen*; Stardom.

Gabriele Rigola: University of Torino (Italy)

✉ gabriele.rigola@unito.it

Gabriele Rigola teaches History of Popular Cinema and Film Criticism at the University of Turin, and History of Screenplay at the University of Genoa. Currently he is post-doc Researcher at the University eCampus of Novedrate (CO) in the PRIN project "Comizi d'amore. Il cinema e la questione sessuale in Italia (1948–1978)". His researches focus on history of Italian cinema, film analysis, social and cultural history of cinema, history of film acting. He is a member of CRAD (Actor and Star Studies Center) and member of the editorial staff of *La Valle dell'Eden* (University of Turin). He has written several essays on scientific journals, he has edited the book *Elio Petri, uomo di cinema. Impegno, spettacolo, industria culturale* (Bonanno, 2015) and he has written the book *Una storia moderna: Ugo Tognazzi. Cinema, cultura e società italiana* (Kaplan, 2018).

1 Italian erotic magazines and letters to the editor: introduction and methodology

In the 1960s and 1970s, gender-specific publications for men began to circulate, following in the footsteps of famous print experiences like that of *Playboy* magazine in the United States, whose publication started in the 1950s. As a consequence, periodical press expanded to include several magazines specifically for a male target, with erotic magazines such as *Tab*, *Men*, *Penthouse*, *Il King*, and *Executive* playing a key role (Castronovo and Tranfaglia 1976, 2002; Giromini and Roda 2004). Moreover, the arrival of these editorial products suggests that society of the time was interested in exploring through the popular press those issues arising in the male sphere, among other things, taking into account that magazines for female readership were already widespread (Materassi 2006). The aim of this essay is to look into some aspects of this male-oriented debate found in readers' letters specifically in *Playmen* magazine, analysing mainly the topics of cinema and media imagery of the time. There will be a focus on the trends revealed by letters to the editor in the erotic magazine *Playmen*, and to related columns, especially inherent to two central aspects: on the one hand, how the debate around masculinity and changes in society developed, and how these aspects relate to the widespread sexualization of the social and media landscape (Bellassai 2014; Ortoleva 2008). On the other hand, we wish to identify and investigate the role of readers' letters in a male erotic magazine in conveying cinema culture, debate on erotic films, and censorship, the ciphering elements of cinematographic fantasy. We begin with sections of letters in the popular press and epistolary exchange.¹ *Playmen*, like other similar magazines, uses cinema to spread discourses about sexuality and gender roles through readers' letters and nude photography. Cinema is able to connect different aspects of *Playmen* and to illustrate implicit social function of the magazine.

At a preliminary level it is useful to focus on two concepts. On one hand, we must remember that the distribution, diversification and popularity of Italian men's magazines can be placed in a more general and complex scenario of modification, renewed discussion and changing gender roles in society, as well as a scenario for debate on how the male role was altering compared to that of women, and consequently in relation to lifestyle, consumption, attitude, opinions, also with respect to decisive changes in social and cultural structure (dell'Agnese and Ruspini 2007; Miller 2009). On the other hand, it is a good idea to recall the decisive role that readers' letters and epistolary culture had been assuming from the 1950s, both in the dimension of progressive politicization of the private sector, and as the driver for the growing documentation of the social reality of an era (Garofalo and Missero 2017). Readers' letters in the popular press at this specific time express the traits and habits of the bond with a hypothetical reader that was previously only found in women's and in widespread popular magazines, and before that in *fotoromanzi* and *cineromanzi* (Morreale 2007). This, then, is our perspective for trying to analyse some of the tendencies emerging from readers' letters to an erotic magazine as indicators of the debate developing around the male world and the development of renewed reader configurations, to show subservience to or rejection of new codes of behaviour within the socio-cultural scenario. Cinema, as we will see, gathers instances and tendencies explicitly related to the changing mores and to the representation of the body and of sexuality (Sorcinelli 2001; Maina 2018).

Playmen certainly represents an interesting case in the publishing scene of the time (Passavini 2016): the first issue of *Playmen. Il mensile degli uomini* [*Playmen. The Monthly Magazine for Men*] came out in June 1967. It was clear from the start that it would stand out as different to other products already present on Italian newsstands: more modern graphics, more upmarket (for example, compared to its "twin" magazine *Men*, published by the same editor from 1966), in-depth film, TV, book, theatre, sciences, and music columns. The monthly magazine alternated culture articles, photo reportages from all over the world, features on sexuality and international eroticism, and short stories by famous intellectuals (from Saviane to Patti, Calvino to del Buono). Right from the first issue there was a regular *Playmen* interview, which engaged figures who were by no means to be taken for granted in the world of culture, literature or film. *Men* and *Playmen* were published by Balsamo Editore (and therefore by the entrepreneurs Saro Balsamo and Adelina Tattilo, who were a farsighted husband-and-wife team who were already the editors of the youth magazine *Big*). Balsamo Editore held onto

1. The time interval identified as applicable for the reflections in this essay refers to the first years of the magazine's life, from its birth (1967 in particular) up to the years of change of some of its spaces and columns, starting from readers' letters. In this text we decided specifically to consider *Playmen* issues up to 1972, prior to the clearly pornographic scenario that opened in 1972, when the first hardcore publications appeared in press and comics. (Giromini and Roda 2004; Ortoleva 2008).

the company until the end of the 1960s, when Saro Balsamo was ousted from ownership and Tattilo remained as sole proprietor of the magazines (Passavini 2016).²

The readers' letters we analyse here were part of the magazine from the very first issue, afforded a special space in the opening pages, called "a *Playmen*" ["To *Playmen*"]. Initially the letters were sent to the address of the Balsamo group's Roman editorial office, in Via Bissolati 54, then to the Lungotevere dei Mellini 17 address (when the column was renamed "Lettere a *Playmen*" ["Letters to *Playmen*"]). Later in the magazine's history, in particular in mid-1971, a further space was dedicated to collecting reader suggestions and requests, with the column "Filosofia nuda" ["Naked Philosophy"] edited by Emmanuelle Arsan. The column was earmarked for proto-philosophical reflection on facts, opinions, debate about social change, and including a sub-column — "L'orecchio della scimmia," "The Ear of the Monkey" — of letters that addressed specifically body-oriented themes, seduction, sexuality, and male-female relationships.³ It appears that this additional space for intimacy, on the one hand exploited the huge success of the erotic *Emmanuelle* novels (the first published in France in 1967), anticipating the lengthy sequence of films based on the works (the first adaptation, *Emmanuelle*, was released in 1974); on the other, the column exploited Arsan's role of cosmopolitan intellectual but also as an emancipated woman beloved by women and desired by men, looming in the fantasies — Italian too — of the time: "a writer and a woman needing no introduction for our readers,"⁴ as she was defined in the presentation of that issue of *Playmen* (Maina 2018).

2 The magazine's positioning in the Italian editorial and cultural system

A magazine like *Playmen* became the role model for a new male narrative, a benchmark for cultured, well-informed, uninhibited, "modern" readers (Benwell 2003; Bellasai 2004). Many elements of the magazine focus on drawing attention to typical Italian male identity, and therefore oriented debate around the assumed characteristics of being male at that particular historical and cultural time in Italy. The magazine was intended as a series of elements of different nature and origin — from readers' letters to advertising, nude photography to interviews — designed to convey strategies for describing the Italian male identity in its transition. At this juncture, *Playmen* tried to carve out a unique position for itself, first of all in the publishing system of the time, but also in social and media contexts, connecting with a complex horizon of socio-cultural change. Readers' letters illustrated the real or supposed attitude of magazines like *Men* and *Playmen* in the Italian cultural system in relation to issues like modesty, sexuality, consumption of erotica and pornography, which reconfigured the magazines' goals and direction over time with regard their readers (Attwood 2005; Grattarola and Napoli 2014). Just a few months after reaching the newsstands, *Playmen* even published a description of these objectives and trends, in reply to a letter citing a request put to parliament for action against erotic and pornographic press. The editor's reply stated:

Playmen has never been challenged. The parliamentary request by Christian Democrat MPs refers to photo-romances and certainly not to our magazine, which has always been considered exactly what it is — a superior publication for the modern, non-conformist but in no way immoral or otherwise censurable man. *Playmen* is also, and above all, a cultural magazine.⁵

The magazine aimed, therefore, to establish a privileged relationship with an audience of readers through a column of letters to the editor, supposing them to be "modern, non-conformist" men, yet it gave voice to the

2. For reasons that were in part private and in part professional, reconstructed in Gianni Passavini's volume, in 1969 Adelina Tattilo took over economic and editorial management of *Playmen*. From issue 9, September 1969 to issue 10 the following month of October the editor changed and the company name changed from Balsamo Editore Spa to Tattilo Editrice Spa (Passavini 2016).

3. In this same period, the magazine began to include pages of small ads, initially as columns for readers seeking objects, books, swapping information, and gradually becoming increasingly erotic or lonely hearts (the "Annunci blu" or "Blue Ads" section in the inner pages, then in the final pages for issues where they were paid ads from the start).

4. "Una scrittrice e una donna che non ha bisogno di presentazione per i nostri lettori", Emmanuelle Arsan, "Filosofia nuda," *Playmen*, V, no. 8, August 1971, p. 14.

5. "Playmen non è mai stata messa in questione. L'interpellanza dei deputati democristiani si riferisce ai fotoromanzi e non certo alla nostra rivista che è sempre stata considerata come è in effetti, una rivista di alto livello: rivolta agli uomini moderni e spregiudicati, ma non per questo immorale o comunque in qualche modo condannabile. 'Playmen', è anche e soprattutto, una rivista di cultura", Editorial, "Playmen e i moralisti", *Playmen*, II, no. 1, January 1968, p. 3.

continuous negotiating, contradictions and resistance of a scenario that was anything but linear. This is how letters of varying degrees of credibility were published while appearing to delegitimize the magazine's role, questioning ideals of freedom and emancipation, or even relying on contradictions in the male identity of the readers, or on their innate compulsions. We cite two examples. In 1967, a Fiesole reader wrote that "the success of *Playmen* can only be explained by the widespread phenomenon of emasculation of men seeking compulsive sexual excitement in erotic stories and photographs of naked women."⁶ Or again, particularly significant because written by a woman and mother, the following letter published in July 1968 in the magazine *Balsamo*:

I found your magazine hidden in my son's clothes. I am angry and disgusted that something like you even exists, and that you too may be fathers and mothers. Shame on you. Shame on you. God damn you, you and your whole family. If you get cancer and you have to suffer, remember that it was wished upon you by a mother's will. And rest assured that a mother's curse, sooner or later, will take effect.⁷

The magazine, along with other popular publications and products, was therefore at the centre of a complex system of changes, and at the centre of a debate between innovation and ethical rules, between tradition and social progress, where the themes of the body, morality, lifestyle, cultural consumption, and private experiences that became collective were continually called into question and debated (Benwell 2003; Boni 2004; Kearney 2012).

From this perspective, even nude photography — and criticism or debate arising about erotic periodicals — allows us to understand the methods of self-definition of magazines like *Men* and *Playmen*, as well as their standing in the cultural context of the time. For example, a letter to the editor of *Playmen* (opening the October 1967 issue, 5), a reader says: "you say that a magazine like yours is breaking into the slumbering world of our smallminded country. But the fact remains that by publishing all those photographs of cheap women, you simply feed the distinctly voyeuristic and masturbatory tendency of Italian men." The answer, drafted by editorial staff was once again indicative of what the magazine wanted to represent in the publishing and cultural panorama of the country, but more subtly, in our essay, assumes the role of a hypothetical X-ray of a typical reader — as we will soon see — when the confines of decency were being negotiated and demolished:

a magazine like *Playmen* is first and foremost a cultural magazine, which does not just show photos of young women. Readers gradually get used to seeing female nudes, so they no longer consider them a "forbidden fruit." At the same time, they can read articles, surveys, interviews: they receive the images in a context with a very precise intention and the intention is precisely to break away.⁸

The relationship with the public, firstly through the spaces for connecting — however fictitious they were — directly with the readers, should be understood as a complex, multifaceted way of self-definition on the panorama of communication and culture, activating specific performances to persuade the audience. Conversely, the public's desire to communicate with these magazines was part of a mechanism for approaching the recently emerging universe of users as consumers of new editorial products, new styles of behaviour, new films and TV shows (Fanchi 2014). The premise was to identify the rise of a "new" — intermediate and sexualized — public, a more liberated publication consumer and an active player in a long wave of erotization

6. "Il successo di *Playmen* non si giustifica se non con il fenomeno dilagante della svirilizzazione dell'uomo che cerca nel racconto erotico e nelle fotografie di donne nude una via morbosa di eccitazione sessuale", "Il presente ha un cuore antico", *Playmen*, I, no. 6, November 1967, p. 5.

7. "Ho trovato negli indumenti di mio figlio la vostra rivista. Sono indignata, schifata, che possa esistere una cosa come voi, che siete anche voi, magari, padri e madri. Vergognatevi. Vergognatevi. Che Dio vi maledica, voi e tutta la vostra famiglia. Se vi viene un cancro e dovrete soffrire, ricordatevi che è stato l'augurio delle mamme. E le maledizioni delle mamme, state tranquilli, prima o poi, raggiungono lo scopo", "L'augurio", *Playmen*, II, no. 7, July 1968, p. 5.

8. "Voi dite che una rivista come la vostra rappresenta una rottura nel mondo addormentato del nostro provinciale paese. Resta però il fatto che, pubblicando tutte quelle fotografie di donnine, voi non fate che stimolare la tendenza più spiccatamente voyeuristica e masturbatoria degli italiani"; "una rivista come 'Playmen' è innanzitutto una rivista di cultura, che non si limita a mostrare foto di ragazze. I lettori a poco a poco si abituano a vedere il nudo femminile e di conseguenza a non considerarlo più un "frutto proibito". E contemporaneamente leggono articoli, inchieste, interviste: l'immagine è data loro in un contesto che ha un suo senso molto preciso, un senso, appunto, di rottura", "La paura del sesso", *Playmen*, I, no. 5, October 1967, p. 5.

and incessant social changes (Ortoleva 2008), spurred to a more conscious manner of interaction with specific spaces of rapport and intimacy in the magazines consumed. In this sense, the letters taken as a means of contact, of a culture of connection and method for constructing audience identity,⁹ take on the appearance of a further element of self-representation (or representation tout court) of feelings, changes, desires, seen quite clearly in the debate engaging cinema and media. Ortoleva, reconstructing the fall of taboos between the latter half of the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s, in the transformation of illustrated and film magazines, identifies the progressive opening up of visible and representable devices. In particular, he identifies the transition of previous phenomena into different and complete media experiences. Compared to the theme of this essay, those “uncensored conversations” (Ortoleva 2008: 172) had previously occurred in brothels, alongside freely exposed bodies and expression of sexuality in a space considered intimate and private. They were now transfigured by their conversion to media expression, reconfigured in media locations considered equally free and the public was interacting with increasing frequency as the viewer of sexy and erotic films and consumer of erotic magazines.

3 Readers' letters in *Playmen* and talk about cinema: body, fandom, gender roles

The various drifts in the “To *Playmen*” column are not easy to sum up: in the years in question we find letters asking for advice or offering considerations on sexuality, romantic relationships, medical or physiological issues. Of course, there were also debates central to the social framework of the time, from contraception to divorce, but for history and location, the magazine also addressed social and political (the SIFAR scandal) issues, news stories, contextual elements (from mental illness to the situation in prisons). Among the various references, those concentrating on films play a particularly ample, interesting role, obviously linked to the magazine's other columns, dedicated to the media and cinema universe: critics, features dedicated to stars and starlets usually nude or semi-nude, articles about the release of particularly evocative films for that type of magazine and target audience, etc.

In readers' letters, cinema became first and foremost a preferred means for reviving the debate on the eroticization of society and development of a new type of audience. In the latter months of 1969, reader Camillo Saraceni of Avellino, recalled the past themes of pornography, freedom of expression and censorship:

I see in many newspapers and hear on the radio of the outright campaign against so-called “pornographic” cinema. Now to tell the truth, I am certainly not what could be called a moralist [...]. However, I must admit that most of the films currently in circulation are truly shocking: because they are badly made, they aim for the basest impulses of the audience [...]. So, I wonder if, in certain cases, censorship and seizure may be justified. Obviously, we must not [...] take indiscriminate measures [...], but a certain severity, if only for the preservation of good taste, seems logical to me.¹⁰

The reader's considerations offered the magazine the opportunity to reiterate that, even though “we do not like certain films, and we are convinced they do eroticism and sexual liberation no favours, in principle, we

9. Several scholars of epistolary culture and readers' mail in popular periodicals have highlighted the extremely hybrid nature of these spaces of interaction: first of all, letters columns must be understood as a space for compromise, where real (or realistic) needs of readers meet the magazine's needs for self-representation and symbolic positioning. Secondly, the chatty exchange typical of letters' columns takes on a connotation of significance in relation to the orientation of these magazines, as mentioned. For this reason, it is better not to prefer a reading based on the search for plausibility, but rather the symbolic value of the column (and, of course, the themes raised in the letters) on an “imaginary and desirable horizon,” to understanding the “attempt [...] to build, above all, an idea of the public (and, ultimately, of society) with which the anonymous real reader could somehow identify” (Maina 2018: 97; Jolly 2008; Benwell 2003).

10. “Ho letto in molti giornali, ho sentito alla radio, una autentica campagna contro il cosiddetto cinema ‘pornografico’. Ora a dire il vero io non sono certo quello che può essere un moralista [...]. Tuttavia devo riconoscere che la maggior parte dei film attualmente in circolazione sono veramente scandalosi: in quanto sono fatti male, cercano soltanto di sollecitare i gusti più bassi del pubblico [...]. Allora io mi domando, se, in certi casi, le censure e i sequestri non possono essere giustificati. Ovviamente non bisogna [...] prendere provvedimenti indiscriminati [...], ma una certa severità, se non altro per la salvaguardia del buon gusto, mi sembra logica”, “Censure e buon gusto”, *Playmen*, III, no. 10, October 1969, p. 5.

are against prohibitions.”

We mean that a citizen — not minors, of course — has the right to enter a venue after paying for their ticket and watch even a bad and vulgar film [...] films represent a “catharsis” that allows certain instincts to be liberated, steam is let off innocently. [...] The moral health of society is preserved not with prohibitions, but with education, with [...] a liberalization that removes the temptation of the forbidden and therefore allows a greater consideration of aesthetic, cultural and — precisely — good taste factors.¹¹

Proceeding in this way, the magazine emphasizes the educational and libertarian character of this stance, connecting with that previously mentioned framework of renewal. These aspects can also be traced to other dynamics seen in the column which interacts with readers, in this case relevant to gender roles, to their modification, and the position of a magazine like *Playmen* as a mediator and vehicle for debate. Marcella Bassini from Milan wrote:

I was interested to read the debate between Mia Farrow and Dustin Hoffman about painful love affairs. A debate suggesting that Mia Farrow has come out the “winner,” in my opinion. I mean it seems to me that she has shown herself to be much more “liberated,” much more capable of understanding and facing life that he is. She. The woman. In short, I have the impression that women, who have always been considered as second in line, are now overtaking men and teaching them many things.¹²

The answer must necessarily consider the privileged audience that the magazine addresses, but also take advantage of topics like these — filtered by the element of the renown of the actors involved — to underscore a position of permissiveness and openness, while playing on mild compromise and negotiating aspects. While admitting that “in Italy women are still kept in a state of cultural underdevelopment,” there was a tendency to affirm that “when a woman manages to understand, to overcome her complexes, to free herself of atavistic slavery, then she shows an equilibrium and a capacity for vision far superior to that of men. However, [...] there are few who believe in the effective superiority of women.”¹³

For obvious reasons a mediation between gender roles is central to those letters touching on stardom, actors and actresses. Audience practices are brought into play in a particularly innovative way, intertwined with fandom rituals (Duffett 2013). Specifically, these epistolary forms make the female body and models of femininity the crux of the matter, in a new debate at a vital time for these dynamics, taking inspiration from the magazine’s nude photography and articles about prima donnas. Take the case of Maria Grazia Buccella, admired by several readers in these terms:

in this age of women said to be beautiful and who look like skeletons covered in leather, ungainly girls with cellulite [...], you published an article featuring a real woman, beautiful in the most exact sense of the term, with a real body. [...] Your photographs of Maria Grazia Buccella really impressed me: I like this anachronistic young woman, who has the courage to be all woman in this unisex age.¹⁴

11. “Vogliamo dire che un cittadino ha il diritto di entrare in un locale per vedere, pagando regolarmente il biglietto e tutelata la difesa dei minori, anche un film brutto e volgare [...]. I film rappresentano una ‘catarsi’ che permette a certi istinti di liberarsi, di ‘scaricarsi’ innocentemente. [...] La salute morale della società si preserva non con i divieti, ma con l’educazione, con [...] una liberalizzazione che tolga il sapore del proibito e quindi consenta una maggiore considerazione di fattori estetici, culturali e appunto di gusto”, Id.

12. “Ho letto con molto interesse il dibattito sugli amori difficili fra Mia Farrow e Dustin Hoffman. E da questo dibattito mi sembra che Mia Farrow sia uscita diciamo ‘vincitrice’. Voglio dire mi sembra che lei si sia dimostrata molto più ‘libera’, molto più capace di comprendere e affrontare la vita di lui. Lei. Cioè una donna. Insomma ho l’impressione che alla resa dei conti le donne, che sono sempre state considerate alla retroguardia, stiano sorpassando gli uomini e insegnando loro molte cose”, “La ‘vittoria’ di Mia Farrow”, *Playmen*, III, no. 7, July 1969, pp. 3–4.

13. “Quando una donna riesce a capire, a superare i propri complessi, a liberarsi delle ataviche schiavitù, allora essa dimostra un equilibrio e una capacità di visione assai migliori di quelli degli uomini. Comunque [...] noi siamo fra i pochi a credere a una effettiva superiorità della donna”, Id.

14. “In questa epoca di donne che passano per belle e sembrano degli scheletrini rivestiti di pelle, di ragazze cellulitiche e sgraziate [...], avete pubblicato un servizio su una donna vera, bella nel senso più preciso del termine, con un corpo consistente. [...] Le vostre fotografie su Maria Grazia Buccella mi hanno veramente entusiasmato: mi piace questa anacronistica ragazza, che in tempi di unisex,

Alongside requests for someone who is “all woman,” in the early 1970s *Playmen* began to take increasing interest in photography featuring men. In this respect, it was the male body and the male star to be the subject of debate in letters to the editor, starting from a new space dedicated to “undressed” stars, called “Gli Eroi Nudi,” “The Nude Heroes.” The space reserved for male stars, characters and figures in erotic periodicals is still to be investigated, first of all as a form of identification and relationship with the diversified and complex readership mentioned above, and then as a reason for debate and discussion of male and female bodies, starting from a reformulated delineation of masculinity (Cohan and Hark 1993; Attwood 2005; Ruspini 2009). The interest in the body and in male nudity in *Playmen* reveals a different relationship with the audience and it takes into consideration readers’ sexual identity and homosexuality. The erotic monthly marks the start of a neutral space where the negotiation between heteronormativity and non-heteronormativity is increasingly explicit (West and Lay 1994; Beasley 2005; Giori 2017).¹⁵

In November 1971, a letter in *Playmen* outlined the problem very clearly: “I read your magazine because my husband buys it. [...] You forget that husbands buy magazines and their wives read them. I really miss photos of a fine purebred horse or of Gary Cooper. I studied biology and anatomy at university, several years ago.”¹⁶ And the answer was: “Just for you, dear lady, our feature entitled ‘Helmut of Bavaria,’ in this issue. And if Helmut Berger does not look too much like Gary Cooper, we are not to blame. Each era has its purebreds.”¹⁷

The symptomatic importance of this kind of feature and ensuing debate is proved by the letters published in subsequent issues. Alongside the compliments from men and women for the Berger feature, a very interesting letter appeared offering a viewpoint aligned with a well-defined socio-cultural framework, revolving around topics such as press, female emancipation and body exhibition:

as a woman, the photographs of Helmut Berger naked leave me completely cold. I’ve long since passed the age when handsome boys are exciting. As a long-time supporter of the movement for the liberation of women, however, I find that assigning to the male body a function hitherto reserved only to the female nude — namely for mere pleasure — is an act of progress and civilization. Nothing wrong with admiring a beautiful female body. As long as you can do the same with a male one.¹⁸

The avalanche of letters arriving after the feature dedicated to actor Helmut Berger — an icon of problematic gender identity compromise through the early 1970s and beyond (Giori 2017) — also captured the changes in *Playmen* already mentioned, tending to redevelop towards an openness and an eroticization mediated increasingly by the emerging pornographic market. Thus, readers’ letters once again intertwined with fan practices, exacerbating demands, attracting ever-more explicit confessions, almost surpassing lonely hearts, merging intentions and objectives of the more intimate spaces. Proof of this is the umpteenth letter on the Berger case, paying first the usual compliments then suggesting a list of possible names which “will surely impress women” to be immortalized in the magazine:

next (sic) month let us see Tomas Milian, completely naked, with full-nude photos, then Raymond Lovelock (sic), Lino Capolicchio (no beard!), Giancarlo Giannini, Alain Delon, Peter Lee Laurence (sic), and many, many other young actors. [...] There are three important things, however: 1) the

ha il coraggio di essere donna senza mezze misure”, “Finalmente la Buccella”, *Playmen*, IV, no. 3, March 1970, pp. 3–4.

15. Omosexual — or non-heterosexual — themes in *Playmen*’s pages have a leading role in this context, both in terms of the target and the audience, and the queer themes in the readers’ letters. This issue has been only touched upon in this paper because a more complete dissertation goes beyond the objectives of this work.
16. “Leggo la vostra rivista perché la compra mio marito. [...] Vi siete dimenticati che le riviste le comprano i mariti e le leggono le mogli. A me manca molto la foto di un bel cavallo di razza o quella di Gary Cooper. La biologia e l’anatomia l’ho studiata all’università, vari anni fa”, “Cavalli di razza”, *Playmen*, V, no. 11, November 1971, p. 3.
17. “Eccola accontentata, signora: guardi il foto-servizio intitolato ‘Helmut di Baviera’, in questo numero. E se Helmut Berger non somiglia molto a Gary Cooper non dia la colpa a noi. Ogni epoca ha i suoi cavalli di razza”, Id.
18. “Come donna, le fotografie di Helmut Berger nudo mi lasciano del tutto indifferente. Ho passato da un pezzo l’età in cui ci si eccita per i bei ragazzi. Come seguace, e non da oggi, del movimento per la liberazione della donna, trovo invece che l’assegnare al corpo dell’uomo una funzione finora riservata soltanto al nudo femminile — cioè quella della ragazza-piacere — sia un atto di progresso e di civiltà. Nulla di male che si ammiri il bel corpo femminile. A patto che si possa far lo stesso per quello maschile”, “Le foto di Helmut”, *Playmen*, V, no. 12, December 1971, p. 3.

“hero” has to be thin, very lean and young; 2) the photos have to be full length, even feet; 3) they have to be shot in sunlight or with good lighting, not poorly lit.¹⁹

In addition to giving an account of the (changing) female and male tastes of the time, re-proposed in a men's magazine, a letter like this shows the importance of readers' letters. Strategic importance, as we have said, not only for making topical a column of intimacy, rapport and freedom where a reader can *bare their soul* — amidst true articles that show and thematize nudity — talking, commenting, intervening with questions and requests, but above all to showing its significance as a place of continuous re-formulation of codes of behaviour and relationships, of outdated models and forms of negotiation, in a privileged scenario like that of a magazine inherently prepared to gather tensions and instances of change. In conclusion, it's interesting to note that *Playmen's* discourses on cinema are functional to the understanding of the different aims of the erotic monthly, and they are also able to recognize and spread gender roles, sexuality, lifestyles and social performances between the 1960s and the 1970s.

Bibliography

- Adamo, Pietro (2004). *Il porno di massa. Percorsi dell'hard contemporaneo*. Milan: Cortina.
- Attwood, Feona (2005). “‘Tits and Ass and Porn and Fighting’: Male Heterosexuality in Magazines for Men.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 8(1): 83–00.
- Beasley, Chris (2005). *Gender & Sexuality. Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers*. London: Sage.
- Bellassai, Sandro (2004). *La mascolinità contemporanea*. Rome: Carocci.
- Bellassai, Sandro (2014). “La storia invisibile. Aspetti interpretativi, culturali e politici degli studi sulla mascolinità.” In *Genere e Storia: percorsi*, ed. C. Casanova, V. Lagioia, 277–287. Bologna: Bononia University Press.
- Benwell, Bethan (2001). “Male Gossip and Language Play in the Letters Pages of Men's Lifestyle Magazines.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 4: 19–33.
- Benwell, Bethan (ed.) (2003). *Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Boni, Federico (2004). *Men's help. Sociologia dei periodici maschili*. Rome: Meltemi.
- Castronovo, Valerio, Tranfaglia, Nicola (ed.) (1976). *Storia della stampa italiana. Volume V – La stampa italiana del neocapitalismo*. Rome-Bari: Laterza.
- Castronovo, Valerio, Tranfaglia, Nicola (2002). *La stampa italiana nell'età della TV. Dagli anni Settanta ad oggi*. Rome-Bari: Laterza.
- Crewe, Ben (2003). *Representing Men. Cultural Production and Producers in the Men's Magazine Market*. Oxford: Berg.
- Cohan, Steven, Hark, Ina Rae (ed) (1993). *Screening the Male. Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*. London-New York: Routledge.
- dell'Agnese, Elena, Ruspini, Elisabetta (ed.) (2007). *Mascolinità all'italiana. Costruzioni, narrazioni, mutamenti*. Turin: UTET.
- Duffett, Mark (2013). *Understanding Fandom. An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Fanchi, Mariagrazia (2014). *L'audience*. Rome-Bari: Laterza.

19. “Il prox. (sic) mese fateci vedere Tomas Milian, completamente nudo con foto 'integrali', poi Raymond Lovelock (sic), Lino Capolicchio (senza barba!), Giancarlo Giannini, Alain Delon, Peter Lee Laurence (sic) e tanti, tanti altri giovani attori. [...] L'importante, comunque, sono tre cose: 1) che lo 'eroe' sia magro, molto snello e giovane; 2) che le foto siano integrali, non private neanche dei piedi; 3) che siano fatte alla luce del sole o delle lampade, ma non in penombra”, “Gli eroi senza veli”, *Playmen*, VI, no. 2, February 1972, p. 3.

- Garofalo, Damiano, Missero, Dalila (2017). “Tra spettacolo e documento. Rotocalchi, piccola posta e inchieste di cronaca nei documentari italiani sull'amore dei primi anni Sessanta.” *Imago. Studi di cinema e media* 15(1): 145–61.
- Giori, Mauro (2017). *Homosexuality and Italian Cinema. From the Fall of Fascism to the Years of Lead*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Giromini, Ferruccio, Roda, Roberto (ed.) (2004). *Gli anni che svestirono l'Italia. Tentazioni e desideri di carta 1962–1973*. Mantua: Editoriale Sometti.
- Grattarola, Franco, Napoli, Andrea (2014). *Luce rossa. La nascita e le prime fasi del cinema pornografico in Italia: cronaca, registi, attori, film*. Guidonia: Iacobelli Editore.
- Jolly, Margaretta (2008). *In Love and Struggle. Letters in Contemporary Feminism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kearney, Mary Celeste (ed) (2012). *The Gender and Media Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Maina, Giovanna (2018). *Corpi che si sfogliano. Cinema, generi e sessualità su “Cinesex” (1969–1974)*. Pisa: ETS.
- Materassi, Letizia (2006). “Stampa periodica e stile di vita.” In *Il campo giornalistico. I nuovi orizzonti dell'informazione*, ed. Carlo Sorrentino, 123–40. Rome: Carocci.
- Miller, Karen (2009). *Male and Female Roles*. Farmington Hills: Greenhaven Press.
- Morreale, Emiliano (ed.) (2007). *Gianni Amelio presenta: lo schermo di carta. Storia e storie dei cineromanzi*. Turin–Milan: Museo Nazionale del Cinema-Il Castoro.
- Ortoleva, Peppino (2008). *Il secolo dei media. Riti, abitudini, mitologie*. Milan: il Saggiatore.
- Passavini, Gianni (2016). *Porno di carta. L'avventurosa storia delle riviste Men e Le Ore e del loro spregiudicato editore. Vita, morte e miracoli di Saro Balsamo, l'uomo che diede l'hardcore all'Italia*. Guidonia: Iacobelli Editore.
- Ruspini, Elisabetta (2009). *Uomini e corpi. Una riflessione sui rivestimenti della mascolinità*. Milan: Franco Angeli.
- Sorcinelli, Paolo (2001). *Storia e sessualità. Casi di vita, regole e trasgressioni tra Ottocento e Novecento*. Milan: Bruno Mondadori.
- West, Russell, Lay, Frank (ed) (1994). *Subverting Masculinity. Hegemonic and Alternative Versions of Masculinity in Contemporary Culture*. Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi.