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Bonifazio, Paola. *The Photoromance: A Feminist Reading of Popular Culture*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2020. Pp. 248. ISBN 978-0-262-53928-9. \$ 29.95 (paperback).

Paola Bonifazio has proven that one person's trash is indeed another person's treasure. In her book, *The Photoromance: A Feminist Reading of Popular Culture*, she examines what has historically been considered to be the "rubbish" medium of the photoromance. With diligence and acumen, Bonifazio shines invaluable light onto the history of this essential product and provides us with a contemporary, interdisciplinary lens through which we can view the entirety of Italian popular culture. Though her stated goal is to demonstrate the local and global relevance of the oft-denounced photoromance, and to challenge the traditional image of its most often female reader, the result of her work is exponentially more enlightening. Bonifazio identifies significant lacunae in prior scholarship on the photoromance, such as a lack of attention to the reader in meaning making and the feminization and thus victimization of the audience. She fills these gaps by focusing on the critical role of the reader in systems of production and consumption of photoromances and by effectively demonstrating how the multi-media platform model of the medium has informed Italian popular cultural production over the past half century. The power of Bonifazio's work stems primarily from her particular theoretical approach, which offers long overdue insights that promote a richer understanding of the symbiotic relationship between cultural production and the shaping of individual and collective histories. *The Photoromance: A Feminist Reading of Popular Culture* is a spectacular contribution, not just to Italian gender and sexuality studies, but also to the greater field of media studies, especially with regard to intermediality and participatory culture.

*The Photoromance* contains six chapters, plus an introduction and epilogue. From the very first pages, Bonifazio declares that we *cannot* dismiss the role of the reader in meaning making, thus separating herself and her approach from past scholarship. Instead, she refreshingly aligns herself with media studies scholars, like Henry Jenkins, who insist on conceiving the reader as an active agent in a dynamic process of production, distribution, and reception. Our understanding of cultural processes, then, is based not solely on an interpretation or judgment of the text, but also on a more nuanced reading of the amalgam of forces that continuously shape each other. As Bonifazio writes:

[W]e cannot simply read photoromances as tools of capitalist and patriarchal domination while knowing that the women who read them actually enjoy them.... we need to understand the importance of a common identity and a shared culture in relation to individual responses to mass-produced cultural texts. Finally... we are bound to review the active role that fans have played and continue to play *vis* not only the texts but also the industry (p. 13).

Throughout her analysis, Bonifazio inserts an active, dynamic female reader into the various processes of popular cultural production. By doing so, she inevitably shifts the perspective and outcomes of her reading of the photoromance. It can no longer be considered an abject medium that victimizes its clueless female readers, but instead should be viewed as a transmedial cultural product that engages readers as individuals and communities in the navigation and evolution of feminine identity.

In the first chapter, the author uses the case of *Bolero Film* in the Fifties and Sixties as a prime example of how photoromance publishing strategies both exploited and privileged consumers. She shows how the Italian women who made up more than 90 percent of *BF* readership "simultaneously challenged the patriarchal status quo while actively embracing the culture of consumerism, giving way to ambiguities never completely solved in the dynamics that tied them to the publisher, the editor, and the advertisers" (p. 27). She also begins her exposition of how the Italian photoromance is at the dawn of convergence culture, a bold assertion that she proves convincingly throughout the book by showing

how multiple media platforms both stemmed from the demands of readers and ensured reader loyalty. In chapter two, Bonifazio explores the transmedial aspect of cineromances, or photoromances that use storylines and images from films. She analyzes consumers as active elements of production and distribution of these works, and explores the gendering of the cineromance audience as constitutive of its business.

The author also provides a fascinating analysis of the function of celebrity culture and “the relationship between a star’s images across platforms and her role as gender model for an increasingly modern female audience” (p. 62). Her detailed investigation of the manipulation and transformation of Silvana Mangano’s image both on- and off-screen is convincing, though a mention of the short film “La strega bruciata viva” (The Witch Burned Alive, Visconti, 1967) might have rendered her argument even more compelling, since its storyline engages with the very same issues of stardom and image as they pertain to the character of Gloria, played by Mangano. Nevertheless, Bonifazio’s analysis of the transmedial and convergent processes intrinsic to the *Bolero Film* production and consumption models is persuasive in its revelation of the continual interplay and interdependence between readers, stars, storylines, and media in the photoromance industry.

Chapter three discusses the legal question of the cineromance as an example of how copyright is relevant in the context of convergence. The legal question raises issues of intellectual and creative property, the rights of stars and authors, as well as whether or not a cineromance should be considered a distinct work with respect to the film that inspired it. Bonifazio claims that an inquiry into the legal issues regarding the cineromance is important for the study of the Italian film industry and is critical for the study of European film history at large. In Chapter four, the author utilizes case studies of photoromances produced by the Italian Communist Party and the Catholic church to show how this cultural product was used strategically to win the favor and the vote or worship of women. Though the magazines may not have been particularly progressive or successful, Bonifazio argues that they may have created “micro-social change” and shows how the use of the medium as propaganda by such forces, and the attempt to educate women through affective mobilization rather than simple indoctrination, is significant (p. 125). Chapter five demonstrates how the photoromance was used as a medium for educating Italians about family planning and the pill. Though the rhetorical strategies of these publications were not new, the way in which they engaged with “Italian celebrity culture... [ ] demonstrated a deep understanding of what made the medium so successful among the masses” (p. 143). Bonifazio also successfully underlines, once again, that while the narratives of these photoromances may have been radical in how they addressed sexuality (for example, promoting free love, detaching the sexual act from both procreation and marriage), they nevertheless perpetuated the gendered hierarchy of Italian society in their narratives as well as in the ways they addressed their audience.

Chapter six is a monumental contribution to the field of Italian studies, pop culture studies, and media studies. In this section, the author pieces together fans’ own memories, along with an expert interpretation of information collected from a variety of digital platforms. She sees digital media as a “safe space” where fans can come out and no longer feel ashamed or be reprimanded for what they read and like (p. 172). She uses a collection of readers’ own accounts, interactions, and various forms of fan-made extensions—a “*netnography*”—as her sources for better understanding female fandom as both a collective and an individual activity that contributes to a voluntary and dynamic construction of the feminine self. By utilizing this technique, Bonifazio significantly and authentically acknowledges the impact of fans’ participation in cultural production. She intentionally engages with and illuminates the very argument that she underscores throughout her book, concretely proving the critical aspect of fans’ agency and the reciprocal nature of cultural production in a way that effectively deposes the image of the helpless, voiceless, indoctrinated female reader.

A seemingly minor, but nevertheless refreshing, aspect of Bonifazio's overall approach to photoromance analysis is her refusal to submit to a binary reading of the relationship between the photoromance and its female readership. She repeatedly emphasizes that the texts can simultaneously threaten the status quo and perpetuate a preexisting gender hierarchy. She highlights these ambiguities without forcing a resolution, and uses concrete examples to demonstrate the nuances of the production-reception system of forces. She notes the coexistence of both ends of various dualities, such as how "political freedom and industrialization allowed working class women to gain economic power while continuities in gender and social dynamics limited their emancipation" (p. 47). In the end, Bonifazio successfully demonstrates that the photoromance was not simply a tool of domination or indoctrination of its primarily female audience. Rather, the active involvement of its readers and the dynamic structure of the magazine revealed both empowerment and re-imagining of female identity that did not necessarily disrupt the existing patriarchal system.

Bonifazio's research is particularly commendable for its rejection of readers as merely universal subjects, and its nuanced attention to *both* individual and communal experience. The author takes care not to homogenize readership and accentuates, particularly in her last chapter, the need for acknowledging "the nuances and contradictions in previous accounts that understood readers as universal subjects" (p. 169). Consequently, Bonifazio is able to further deconstruct some of the common notions of the typical fan, again revealing a complex interplay between the creation of a product that responds to and promotes a strong collective identity while leaving space for the variegated opinions and identities of individual readers. In her epilogue, Bonifazio adds yet another singular contribution to the field by denouncing "the hierarchical perspective with which Italian criticism...has approached mass culture and, more specifically, has dismissed the active roles of audiences and the relevance of habits of consumption and fandom" (p. 187). By calling out critics and scholars for a hypocritical perspective that reiterates the "quality" of texts and ignores the very act of reading or the collective experience of fandom, Bonifazio illuminates a path towards a fuller understanding of Italian cultural production that is more inclusive of a diversity of processes and identities, an approach that is currently followed by too few in the field of Italian studies.

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