

## The Phot romance: A Feminist Reading of Popular Culture

by Paola Bonifazio, Cambridge, MA, and London, The MIT Press, 2020, x + 248 pp., \$29.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-262-53928-9

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‘How does participation function in the pre-internet era?’, I take this to be the central question in Paola Bonifazio’s book, a compelling, engaged, and highly personal research into a genre that still struggles for its identity in academic discourse: the phot romance. Emerging from Italy’s postwar culture in 1947 and spreading successfully to France, Latin America, and the United States in the late 1970s, the phot romance is a hybrid artifact that moves across media and visual economies: cinema, literature, magazine culture, advertising, popular music, and celebrity culture. Its literacy is conceptually sophisticated as it draws romance and storytelling from the screen world and a modern culture of *feuilleton*, deploying technical strategies from the comic strips. Its business economy is advanced in the synergy it promotes across publishers, producers, and media industries (TV, music, publicity). Despite the exciting breadth of media, languages, and contents that this genre entails, the phot romance has been denigrated by liberal as well as conservative groups. From the start, Marxist intellectuals in postwar Italy criticised it as a silly and escapist genre, feminising its readers as helpless victims of capitalist culture industries. Catholic groups have, not surprisingly, denounced the seductive photo strips for their potential corruption of traditional family values. These positions, remarks Bonifazio, ought to be revisited in light of the particular context in which the phot romance originated and thrived – Italy’s postwar reconstruction and economic miracle – and the new role of women. Bringing a gendered perspective to this study, Bonifazio argues that ‘backwardness and silliness are actually more aptly the attributes of *representations* of female readership and fans of phot romances, in ways that reveal the underpinning anxieties toward the democratisation of culture, on one hand, and grassroot extensions of the products of the cultural industries, on the other’ (p. 21). This view opens a groundbreaking path to the research, which asks us that we consider this genre as a frontrunner of visual communication, predating the current model of ‘convergence culture’ studied by Henry Jenkins.

The narrative of the book runs chronologically, touching on case studies that involve the engineering of this complex genre. In the first chapter, Bonifazio offers helpful methodological clues that can help us understand the readers’ participation in Mondadori’s *Bolero Film*, proving how advice columns, advertising, and contests are correlated to photo-textual narratives in their unanimous building of celebrity culture – a culture that, she argues, is built from within, through the help of fans and readers. This process, she explains, is conducive to the creation of a community that is tied by its likings and its aspiration to become ‘stars’.

The second and third chapters examine the convergence of genres in the weekly cine-romance, a phot romanced version of a film (also defined as ‘film novelisation’). The discussion here is twofold. It articulates the reasons why the film magazine rather than film became more successful with female audiences, by making the star more

accessible (this is the fascinating case of actress Silvana Mangano, whose role changes from the screen to the pages of cineromances, assuming a more traditional and domestic identity). Secondly, this media convergence illuminates a critical issue that remains understudied: the lack of copyright laws for the photoromance, whose authorship remains blurred. The grassroots and artisanal nature of this genre elicits a (free) space for transgression, as Bonifazio astutely demonstrates in the case of Luchino Visconti's *Senso*. The plot of this film becomes altered and transformed by the cineromance, obtaining a less moralistic version than the one demanded by the Ministry of Defence (but more aligned to Visconti's original plot). Bonifazio finds a new word for this shift of narratives across unclear copyright laws: 'archontic', or 'the retelling that expands the textual archive' from film to paper.

Chapters 4 and 5 take an interesting detour in exploring photoromances published by Communist and Catholic groups, both equally conservative and defensive in their battle against romantic distractions channelled by an evil cultural industry. This discussion is both critical and amusing as we are presented with propagandistic photoromances printed in rotogravure in *Famiglia Cristiana* and by the Sezione Stampa e Propaganda of the Communist Party. Bonifazio's formal analysis is very perceptive as she reflects on the form and content of these conservative and self-censored photoromances. The Communist press, she observes, tamed the melodramatic quality of the genre, keeping the story to a minimal grid with medium shots that reflected a space of ordinary contingency, rather than fantasy. This visual literacy reflected a content that viewed the female subject subdued to a political credo, abiding by the moral values of husband and father. Deploying a visual language that conveyed a more emotional tone than its Communist counterpart, the Catholic photoromance had similar indoctrinating role. Many of its stories revisited popular hagiographies, calling upon female readers to identify with the saints' martyrdom and sacrifice, while reprimanding the message of photoromances for instigating a sexual passion that was detrimental and even deadly to society. As Bonifazio demonstrates, both parties appropriated the photoromance but disallowed the pleasure principle intrinsic to the genre, with the goal of redirecting society to a chaste and austere life.

This compelling treatment is amplified with the study of yet another agency, the AIED (Italian Association for Demographic Education) who used the photoromance effectively towards another kind of educational goal – the rampant campaign for birth control in the 1970s and 1980s. The page samples published in this book demonstrate how the language of desire intrinsic to the photoromance became an ideal vehicle for this communication, involving TV, music, and film stars in performing these modern roles for the page and emancipating their readers.

The last chapter brings these themes to the present and the author reveals, in her contemporary involvement with fandom on social media platforms, how relevant these issues still are as they become amplified in the digital network.

Moving in and out of history and its political repercussions in Italy's postwar era, Bonifazio is successful in redeeming a genre that has been misunderstood by its own culture. This study is invaluable not only for its archival uncovering of significant pages of this hybrid genre but also for its academic spin on the significance of popular genre not as a form of evasion but rather, of collective participation. In our time of global isolation, the Italian photoromance acts as a call to arms, reminding us that reading is about a form of communal sharing, affect, and desire.