

Placing Sex: Sexuality, Taste and Middlebrow Culture in the Reception of Playboy Magazine

Mark Jancovich

Playboy magazine is generally acknowledged to be one of the most successful and influential magazines of the post-war period. It has not only won 1,600 prestigious awards and more general respect for its interviews, articles and overall design, the corporation is proud to declare that it is 'the only publishing entity that has become a major global consumer brand'. The corporation also quotes a 1989 article in Financial World which called the Playboy Rabbit 'the second-best recognised logo in the world', a logo which was only kept out of first place by Coca-Cola. Even today, despite frequent claims that the magazine is moribund or anachronistic, Playboy continues to sell in phenomenal numbers with a total international circulation of 4.5 million. At its height, in September 1972, the magazine sold 7,012,000 copies and regularly sold 6-7 million copies per month. These figures, however, do not adequately reflect the size of the magazine's readership, which is greatly increased when one takes into account the ways in which the magazine is passed along from reader to reader after purchase. As a result, it is estimated currently to have a readership of 12 million men, more 'than GQ, Esquire, Rolling Stone and Details combined.' Even then, added to the above figure are another 1.3 million women, a group that currently comprises 14% of the magazine's total readership (Playboy Enterprises Inc. 1998).

Each month this readership is presented with a range of materials from the nude pictorials, through life style articles on clothing, food, design, film, music, sport and travel, to literature and commentary by some of the most prestigious figures in American culture, politics and economics. While it is often acknowledged that the magazine has therefore provided an important forum for debates within American society, and one that has often been deeply influential, there is little detailed discussion of the magazine itself. References are made to specific contributions, contributors or debates within the pages of the magazine, but these are not discussed as a part of the magazine as a whole. Those discussions which do move beyond individual pieces usually eschew any detailed study of the magazine in favour of either personality profiles of Hugh M. Hefner, and/or his associates, or else quickly dispense with the magazine in favour of a more detailed consideration of the corporation's trials and tribulations (See for example Byer 1972; Miller 1984; and Weyr 1979). This is not to suggest that the corporation's broader strategies and crises are not of interest or significance, nor is it to suggest that the internal conflicts between personal within the Playboy empire have not had their effects on either the corporation as a whole or the magazine in particular. Rather it is simply to imply that the magazine as a cultural object has rarely received serious critical attention, and that such a focus has much to tell us about American culture, politics and economics, and of the operation of gender and sexuality in relation to them.

This article, however, will focus not on the magazine itself, but rather on discussions of it within a range of different publications: newspapers, magazines, books and even academic journals. In so doing, it draws on work that Janet Staiger has called reception studies. This work shifts the focus of

attention from the analysis of specific texts to the tertiary texts that surround them, and it does so on the basis that there is no 'immanent meaning in the text' (Staiger 1993: 143; see also Staiger 1992). For these critics, meaning never resides in the text itself, but is rather produced through the encounter between texts and readers, and on the basis of the knowledges, expectations, and dispositions which specific readers bring to that encounter. As a result, Staiger argues that 'receptions need to be relation to specific historical conditions as events' so that the job of reception study is to identify and analyse the discourses which produce these events (Staiger 1993: 143).

Much of this work focuses on the analysis of reviews and articles, on the grounds that other evidence is often unavailable. For example, we have little access to the original audiences for Birth of a Nation (1915). However, even with more contemporary texts, such as The Silence of the Lambs (1991), Staiger still chooses to rely on published materials, even though she acknowledges that their public status requires one to treat them with caution.

It is here, however, that certain types of reception studies themselves need to be treated with caution (for work that represents alternative tendencies within reception studies, see Klinger 1994; and Uricchio and Pearson 1993). For example, despite her warnings about the status of these materials, even Staiger uses them in problematic ways. On the one hand, she refers to these texts as 'traces' of events that enable one to gain access to these events, but she also wants to use them as a means of identifying the discourses that produce such events.

The question is whether one can straightforwardly read either the events of reception or the discourses that produce these events off from these texts. As Robert C Allen and Douglas Gomery have argued, for example, these materials might be better seen as having an agenda-setting function. Rather than straightforwardly producing events, they are part of a process through which intertexts are constructed and readings are framed. As they put it, these texts may not tell 'audiences what to think so much as ...what to thing about.' (Allen and Gomery 1985: 90)

Indeed, these reviews and articles determine readings no more than the texts that they discuss and, as a result, certain sections of society can and do reject their terms of reference. Furthermore, they not only fail to give us unproblematic access to the discourses that produce readings, but may not even be unproblematic as 'traces' of events of reception. It is not simply that audiences' tastes may determine whether they accept or reject the terms of these materials, but these texts are also bound up with the politics of taste in other ways. Positioned within hierarchies of taste, these texts may not provide access to the reception of texts, but rather to the different ways in which audiences discuss these events of reception. In other words, we need to distinguish between the activities of consumption and the activities of discussing consumption. For example, in her work on the television show, Dallas, Len Ang found that most of the people who wrote to her were well aware of the ways in which their responses to the show could be judged by others. They were therefore constantly positioning what they wrote about their responses in extremely complex ways. Their statements were in no way simple descriptions of their reception of the show (Ang 1985).

Similarly, published materials may be seen not as traces of actual readings, but rather as traces of the terms within which texts were publicly

evaluated and as one of the ways in which people learn to position themselves within hierarchies of taste. As Barbara Klinger argues:

reviews also represent materials that signify cultural hierarchies of aesthetic value reigning at particular times. As a primary public tastemaker, the critic operates to make, in Pierre Bourdieu's parlance, "distinctions." Among other things, the critic distinguishes legitimate from illegitimate art and proper and improper modes of aesthetic appropriation (Klinger 1993: 70).

Here Klinger is largely discussing publications that represent legitimate taste, but it could equally well be applied to the ways in which popular publications that represent popular tastes (see for example Brunson 1997).

Finally, another problem with reception studies is that, as Klinger has pointed out, it has a tendency to ignore the ways in which the meanings of texts change over time as they are consumed in different ways by different social groups, and to concentrate on the original moment of the texts construction, publication or release as the point at which its meaning is definitively constructed and defined. In this way, reception studies can sometimes amount to a historically concrete version of Reader-Response Criticism in which the task of the critic is to unearth the 'appropriate' competences necessary for the interpretation of films; that is, to discover how audiences were 'expected' to fill in gaps within texts and what knowledge they were 'required' to bring with them to the interpretation of texts.

However, while it is important to stress that meaning can and will change over time, it is equally important to remember that there can also be strong consistencies as certain strategies and interpretations recur time and again. Even when the terms may change in some ways, one often finds the same structure of oppositions underpinning certain readings, particularly as they relate to the ways in which a particular cultural object are positioned within broader cultural hierarchies. Certainly, texts can and frequently do change their position within these hierarchies, but it is also the case that certain texts may be repeatedly consigned to a specific position over an extended period, and it is the contention of this article that such is the case with Playboy magazine.

The following article will therefore look at public commentary on Playboy, and the ways in which these materials have tried to position it within hierarchies of taste. However, it will also illustrate the problematic status of Playboy within these debates. In short, Playboy is largely positioned as a middlebrow publication, and responses to it can largely be understood in terms of the problems that the middlebrow poses within and for hierarchies of taste. Nor are these issues unrelated to the magazine's sexual content. On the contrary, the reception of these sexual materials is inextricably bound up with these hierarchies of taste, hierarchies that position Playboy not simply as pornography, but middlebrow pornography.

The Place of Sex and the Problem of Playboy's Identity

The issue of sexuality is, of course, the main reason that the magazine as whole has received so little attention. Most accounts of the magazine specifically reject the idea of focusing on the magazine in its entirety because they are concerned either to present the magazine's sexual preoccupations

as an unfortunate embarrassment which distracts from the publication's more 'worthy' aspects, or else to insist that these 'worthier' non-sexual elements are a mere 'gloss' or 'window-dressing' that is designed to legitimate the magazine and divert attention away from the 'pornographic' materials. In both cases, the magazine's identity is seen as residing in one of these aspects, an identity that defines the other aspect as a mere distraction from the magazine's 'real' concerns.

In both of these cases, however, the issue of taste and cultural legitimacy are clearly in play and, in both cases, it is the sexual materials that are seen as illegitimate with respect to the more 'worthy' non-sexual materials. As a result, it has become not only a common place but a cliché for people to claim that they 'buy the magazine for the articles',¹ and for others to claim that such claims are merely deceptive excuses. Both claims are made with an awareness that if, as Bourdieu puts it, 'taste classifies the classifier' (Bourdieu 1984: 6), a taste for Playboy's sexual materials is seen to classify people negatively, to define them as lacking in cultural legitimacy and authority.

Indeed, in certain cases, a taste for 'pornographic' materials is used not only to rank social groups, and to define them as an inferior or even dangerous Other, but in so doing, to justify the right of certain social groups to order and control them. As Andrew Ross has put it, it is through categories of taste that 'cultural power, at any one time, is able to designate what is legitimate, on the one hand, and what can then be governed and policed as illegitimate or inadequate or even deviant, on the other.' (Ross 1989: 61)

However, it is not simply a taste for sexual materials which is seen to classify a person as inferior, but a taste for specific types of sexual materials. The field of sexual materials is itself cross-cut by a whole series of distinctions which are used to simultaneously legitimate or denigrate cultural forms, distinctions such as art versus pornography, erotica versus pornography, soft-core versus hard-core pornography, health education versus entertainment, etc. All these distinctions operate to legitimate one term at the expense of the Other, but it must be remembered that these terms are not defined by the content of these categories but vice versa.

As Bourdieu has shown, the meaning of specific objects is not eternally inscribed within their form but changes as they are positioned or repositioned within different categories, as they are consumed according to different competences and dispositions. For this reason, it is important to resist seeing the categories as the inherent properties of specific cultural texts, and to acknowledge that they are a product of the ways in which the tastes of specific social groups are always based on a rejection of the tastes of other social groups. As Bourdieu puts it,

Tastes (i.e., manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes. In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation, and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance ('sick-making') of the tastes of others ... Aesthetic intolerance can be terribly violent. Aversion to different life-styles is perhaps one of the strongest barriers between the classes... (Bourdieu 1984: 56)

Distinctions are therefore ways of not simply distinguishing oneself, but of Othering others. In this process, it is not the contents of the categories of taste which is significant but rather 'the capacity to draw the line between and around categories of taste; it is the power to define where each relational category begins and ends, and the power to determine what it contains at any one time.' (Ross 1989: 61)

The problem that Playboy raises, however, as is made clear by the attempts to identify the 'real' identity of the magazine, is that it threatens such distinctions. Again and again, commentators on the magazine display frustration and disgust at the magazine's broaching of distinctions; its refusal to accept established positions and its resulting ambiguous status.

For example, while some try to disavow the sexual content of the magazine in favour of the other elements of the magazine or vice versa, Hefner himself has consistently refused to do so. Indeed, the first edition of 'The Playboy Philosophy' is a clear response to the magazine's critics in which he takes exception to any attempts to oppose these elements of the magazine. As a result, he quotes an article in Newsweek from 1960:

In efforts to maintain Playboy's sophisticated patina, Hefner and Associate Publisher A. C. Spector (author of The Exurbanites) have given the magazine a split personality. By paying top rates to top authors (\$300 for a lead story), they have bestowed on it a double-dome quality. On the other hand its daring nudes ("Playmate of the Month") have catered to peep-show tastes (Quoted in Hefner 1962: 169).

Hefner, of course, rejects this opposition as yet another example of the mind/body dualism that, he claims, the magazine has been challenging since its inception: 'this nonsense about the body of man being evil, while the mind and spirit are good, seems quite preposterous to most of us today.' (Hefner 1962: 169)

However, such responses are only used as evidence to support the major criticism of the magazine, a designation of it as 'pretentious'. Its nudes, it is argued, are not art and yet the editors refuse to treat them as pornography pure and simple. Critics repeatedly attack the magazine's 'obsession' with the 'quality' of the nude photographs, and accuse the playmates of being 'idealized', 'sanitized' and 'plastic', terms that define them as artificial and lacking in authenticity. This is also seen to contradict the supposedly everyday wholesomeness of the pictorials. As Frank Brady puts it:

Hefner felt that the Playmate was the "discovery of the All-American beauty, based on the concept of the girl next door." [But] Hefner's position is ironic when one considers that his Playmates have over the years become the most stylized pinups in the history of art. The not-so-subtle airbrush retouches almost all of the Playmate photos to remove blemishes where body makeup could not effectively do the job. The result is a sanitized, hairless, and plastic look, most like the mannequin-next-door (Brady 1974: 106-7)

As a result, Hefner's proudly 'anti-puritan' publication is frequently charged with Puritanism, while the magazine which preaches the messianic message that sex is natural and healthy is accused of fearing both sex and nature.

These criticisms have dogged the magazine from the beginning and Hefner takes issue with them in 'The Playboy Philosophy'. In particular, he

takes issue with Harvard theologian Harvey Cox who had claimed: 'Playboy and its less successful imitators are not "sex magazines" at all. They are basically anti-sexual. They dilute and dissipate authentic sexuality by reducing it to an accessory, by keeping it at a safe distance.' (Cox 1961: 60) However, one of the most sustained and developed examples of this criticism is to be found in an article by Anthony J Lukas. Lukas draws an extended parallel between Hefner and Disney in which he quotes Peter Shrag's claim that both of these men exemplify the 'puritanical compulsion to order the world, to control, to clean up.' (Lukas 1972: 72) For Lukas, Playboy's problem is not that it is a 'girlie magazine', but that it 'never really [was] one' (73)

From the start Playboy has shunned lingerie (occasionally a girlish white nightgown or slip, but never anything "kinky"). In the early days, when it was hard to get a decent girl to pose in the nude, a few of the Playmates looked as though they might feel at home on a barstool in the Place Pigalle. But Hefner has always sought the "virginal cheerleader" look (the first Playmate was called "Sweetheart of the Month"), and today there is no shortage of snub-nosed cheerleaders, stewardesses and nursery-school teachers dying to be Playmates (73).

For these critics, the problem with Playboy was probably best summed up by William Hamilton who claims that while the magazine 'missed something in sex ... the power and the mystery of sexuality' (Hamilton 1963: 18).

If, for some critics, Playboy was obscene in the sense that it made public that which was profane and should be hidden from view – as Linda Williams points out the term obscene means literally off-scene, that which should not be represented (Williams 1993) – others like Hamilton reversed this claim. It was the very sacred and sublime nature of sex that made it unrepresentable. By commercialising sex, Playboy may have 'decontaminated' it, as Hefner has claimed so often, but, in the process, it had robbed it of its mystery and power. It had contained it and so rendered it safe, comforting and unthreatening.

These criticism of the commercialisation of sex have also led others, like Mark Gabor, to not only attack the magazine for its sexual exploitation of women,² but also for not being explicit enough. Like many other critics, Gabor wants to prove that his credentials as a man who is sympathetic to feminism. However, he also presents Penthouse's attempt to challenge Playboy's market dominance, though the use of greater sexual explicitness, as a more 'realistic' depiction of women than its rival's 'airbrushed idealisation'.

Guccione also resisted the perfecting and idealization of his models. Unlike Playboy, Penthouse's pictorial subjects were not unrealistically unblemished or "cleaned up." (Perhaps their imperfections made them believable.) Generally speaking they were more natural-looking and were often geared to their own sexually active interests. While the Penthouse image of femininity was far from synonymous with Women's Liberation, it did reflect an upbeat, independent, modern woman – not a servant to the men in her life (the viewers) (Gabor 1984: 121-2).

However, if commentators such as Gabor present themselves as articulating a feminist position, their criticisms can often be seen as a confirmation of masculinity and male dominance rather than a criticism of them.

Maturity and its Metaphors

Gabor claims that to 'exponents of Women's Liberation, Playboy's image of women has come to epitomize the worst features of male chauvinism.' (Gabor 1996: 78) For Gabor, pinup images such as those presented in Playboy are problematic because they function as the focus of 'erotic fantasy' in which males 'can treat the pin-ups as they wish they could treat their wives – buy them, seduce them, pamper them, rule them.' (24-5) However, this description seems to suggest that the magazine does not appeal to males who are able to dominate and control women, but rather that it provides compensatory fantasies for those males who are frustrated by their inability to assume such a position of authority. As a result, implicit in most criticisms of the magazine is not an attack on masculinity but an accusation of failed masculinity.

As Gabor argues: 'Real life demands a sense of responsibility; the magazines do not. They are, therefore, a man's most compelling and pervasive form of escape from the reality of sex.' (Gabor 1984: 12) However, the 'reality' referred to here sounds suspiciously like the quality of 'maturity' which, as Barbara Ehrenreich has pointed out, is little more than an 'acceptance of adult sex roles' (Ehrenreich 1983: 17) or in the specific case of men, an acceptance of the position of patriarch and breadwinner. Furthermore, as Ehrenreich argues, 'If adult masculinity was indistinguishable from the breadwinner role, then it followed that the man who failed to achieve this role was either not fully adult or not fully masculine.' (20)

As a result, the repeated accusations that Playboy is based on a 'fear of involvement', and that the Playmates are therefore both unthreatening and undemanding, is less a critique of masculinity per se than the suggestion that the readership is in some sense immature. It is implied that this readership is either literally composed of teenagers or that it is composed of failed men who cannot deal with real women, an implication which is made explicit when Mungo describes the Playboy Mansion as 'creating just the sort of seductive atmosphere an eighteen-year-old might consider sophisticated.' (Mungo 1996: 113)

As the above quote makes clear, these associations are frequently played out in depictions of Hefner himself. For example, as Brady points out, an 'often stated rumor [is] that Hefner is a practising homosexual or, if not that, a "closet queen"' (Brady 1974: 19). In these accusations, of course, homosexuality is simply seen as a failure of masculinity, a theme which is also repeated by Mungo in his claim that Hefner suffers from what is 'known as the Casanova Syndrome, sometimes explained as an over-compensation for an early deficit of love.' (Mungo 1996: 112) Other critics stress that he was largely brought up by his mother in a house from which his father was to a great extent absent, and this evidence is used to imply that Hefner is a 'momma's boy' who has never really grown-up and broken free of her apron strings. Indeed, for some, this accusation is associated with virtually all aspects of his life. For example, an implicit criticism lies behind the repeated comments upon the controlled and isolated environment within which Hefner chooses to live, and one which is made manifest by the final lines of Russell Miller's book on the Playboy empire: 'But despite Christie's [Christie Hefner, Hugh's daughter who now runs the empire] confidence about the future, the company faces formidable problems. One of them, unquestionably, is a recluse in silk pyjamas who believes he is able to stay in touch with the real

world from within the pampered womb of the Playboy Mansion in Los Angeles.' (Miller 1985: 391. My emphasis)

The repeated suggestion is therefore that Hefner has failed to grow up and exists in a state of arrested development. However, what these insinuations fail to take into account is that, as Ehrenreich has pointed out, Playboy was a self-conscious rebellion against 'breadwinner ethic' and the notions of maturity that underpinned it. Even when, as often happens in interviews, Hefner explicitly comments on his rejection of the social roles associated with maturity, many critics seem unable to recognise these comments as a positive statement of refusal and dissent and only able to understand them as the sign of some failure. For example, as Heller states: 'At no point does it ever seem to have occurred to Hefner that remaining true to one's adolescent fantasies might be a rather limiting exercise for an adult.' (Heller 1994: 16)

These metaphors of development also manifest themselves in another way. Several articles distance themselves from the magazine by presenting it either as something which is now simply outmoded or anachronistic or as a taste for which the writer has grown too mature. The first tactic distances the magazine from the critic, and presents the latter as representative of the enlightened present against the magazine, which comes to represent of the ignorant and unenlightened past. This tactic refuses to recognise the magazine and its readers as constituting a presence within the present, and merely consigns them to the rubbish bin of history. They become the Other of the present, everything that the present must repudiate to establish itself as self-conscious and legitimate.

The second tactic is rather more complex and is largely limited to male writers for other men's magazines. These disavowals usually acknowledge an investment in the sexual fantasies associated with Playboy, but try to present that investment as something which belongs to the writer's younger self, when he didn't know better. In this way, the writer negotiates one of the most problematic aspects of writing about Playboy for the heterosexual, male critic. On the one hand, if one writes about the magazine as a heterosexual male, many people automatically assume that one cannot have a real critical distance and that one is impossibly implicated by the object of study. To put it another way, these people assume that one has a secret, prurient interest in the magazine's sexual materials. On the other hand, any attempt to assert a sense of critical distance is met with equal suspicion. If you aren't implicated, then there must be something wrong with you. In other words, you are either dead from the neck up, or from the neck down.

In this situation, the writers in the men's magazines frequently have to both acknowledge and disavow an investment in the sexual materials. Thus, one encounters the rather unpleasant and duplicitous tendency of writers such as David Ritz who claims: 'I'm wildly ambivalent about meeting Hugh Hefner. On the one hand, I've been bad-mouthing his magazine for a good part of my life. On the other hand – the right hand, to be precise – I devoted a good part of my youth beating off to Hefner's bunnies.' (Ritz 1994: 59)

Like Gabor, Ritz wants to have it both ways. He wants to be seen as superior to Hefner, the magazine and its readers while still proving his 'red-blooded' masculinity. He associates himself with feminism – 'When he was attacked by feminists in the early Seventies, I was with the ladies' (60; my

emphasis) – and yet he suggests that his antagonism to the magazine is based on a resentment born of exclusion:

Instead of harlots, he undressed perky Pepsodent-smiling Suzy Creamcheese cheerleaders, those tight-sweatered all-American sweethearts who sat next to you in school, cross and recrossing their legs. The fantasy of seeing Suzy naked was thrilling. But the reality, given the times and mores, was that Suzy would sooner marry Nikita Khrushchev than give you sex. The result, at least for me, was resentment (59).

In this scenario, he presents himself as someone who is not dead from the neck down but who is not taken in by the magazine's fantasies.

He proves his credentials by criticising Hefner for turning 'women in to sexual objects' and yet the suggestion is that, of course, any 'healthy' male would like nothing better than to fill Hefner's shoes. As Ritz muses:

I've heard that Hef is writing his autobiography and, having gone through a number of writers, may need a collaborator. As a veteran of the "as told to" form, I'm intrigued by the prospect of helping Hef write his book. That would mean, in a literary sense, becoming Hef's 'I', pretending that I'm Hef himself. For a few months, do I want to live inside the skin of the man who got all the girls, and all the goods, the man I've dismissed with such disdain? I believe the answer is yes (60).

None the less, such musings are carefully distanced through humour, and through the reassurance that, as a professional, the writer is not going to let Hefner off lightly simply so that he can fulfil a fantasy which is so obviously unobtainable in reality.

Hedonist or Moralist: the Problem of Hefner's Seriousness

In these critiques, then, Playboy's association with immaturity is presented as one in which anxiety ridden teenagers, who have not yet reached the maturity in which they know how to deal with real women, are given comforting fantasies which seem to offer them an introduction into the adult world.

However, the magazine's role as a guide, instruction manual and educator to an anxiety-ridden readership is not simply limited to the case of teenagers.

From the start, critics such as Cox have presented the magazine as a 'Guidebook to Identity', a publication that not only presents 'the insecure young man' with unthreatening nudes, but also acts as an instruction manual for the man

with newly acquired time and money who still feels uncertain about his consumer skills ... It tells him not only who to be; it tells him how to be it, and even provides consolation outlets for those who secretly feel that they have not quite made it ... Playboy speaks to those who desperately want to know what it means to be a man, and more specifically male, in today's world (Cox 1961: 57).

However, this function is not presented positively. Cox accuses the editorial staff of being 'dictatorial taste-makers', while Thomas Weyr claims that a contradiction exists between Hefner's view of Playboy as 'an open book that always championed alternative ways of living' and the 'didactic and opinionated' writers associated with the magazine (Weyr 1979: 57).

For Weyr, despite the magazine's stated opposition to conformity and its championing of personal freedom,

Authority permeates the magazine. All the upwardly mobile had to do, the magazine suggest at every level, from the explicit to the subliminal, was to follow its advice (57).

Cox, however, was not simply concerned with the magazine's internal contradictions. For him, the magazine represented a threat to the legitimate cultural authority of religion. It is not simply that Playboy was materialistic, but that it offered a 'heretical doctrine of man' and one that was 'at radical variance with the biblical view' (Cox 1961: 60).

Behind all these criticism, then, lurks a more fundamental one: Playboy refuses to simply confine itself to the concerns of its sub-title, 'Entertainment for Men', and to present pure, mindless fun. It refuses to accept its proper place in the existing cultural hierarchy and therefore threatens the terms of that hierarchy. As early as April 1956, for example, Playboy was concerned to distance its definition of the 'playboy' from one of mere hedonism:

What is a playboy? Is he simply a wastrel, a ne'er-do-well, a fashionable bum? Far from it. He can be a sharp-minded young business executive, a worker in the arts, a university professor, an architect or an engineer. He can be many things, provided he possesses a certain point of view. He must see life not as a vale of tears, but as a happy time, he must take joy in his work, without regarding it as the end of all living; he must be an alert man who – without acquiring the stigma of voluptuary or dilettante – can live life to the hilt. This is the sort of man we mean when we use the word playboy. Does this description fit you? If so, we imagine you will agree that Playboy belongs in your life. And we suggest that you enter your subscription at the first opportunity (Hefner 1956).

Once again, Hefner and his magazine refused to distinguish sex from other aspects of life, and in the process, they gave pleasure a sense of seriousness and moral purpose.

Instead of a commercial pornographer and hedonist, Hefner presented himself as publisher in the liberal humanist tradition of the Enlightenment. As Hefner puts it: 'The sexual revolution began with the Kinsey Report. I've said many times that Kinsey was the researcher and I was the pamphleteer.' (Hefner quoted in Mungo 1996: 115) 'Seen in this light,' Zoe Heller writes mockingly, 'Playboy ceases to be just another market driven porno-mag and becomes a humanist handbook.' (Heller 1994: 16) Such comments obviously present such 'pretensions' as, at best, self-deceptive, but as Thomas Weyr has pointed out, Hefner had adopted a position of sexual dissent and radicalism long before he ever had the idea for Playboy.

While in college, he had written a glowing review of Kinsey's Sexual Behavior in the Human Male (1948) for the University of Illinois humour magazine, Shaft, and a term paper on Kinsey and U.S. sex laws for a criminology course. In this latter piece, he called for major revisions to the penal code on the grounds that, as he noted, following Kinsey: 'If successfully executed, they would have virtually everyone in prison.' (Hefner quoted in Weyr 1979: 197) As Weyr therefore comments: 'Sexual freedom for everyone became a social cause [for Hefner] long before [he] turned into a freewheeling

man about town “making out” with the girls ... The crusader was born before the libertine, the teacher before the cause.’ (Weyr 1979: 197)

The ‘pretensions’ of Hefner and his magazine also drew criticism from another direction. While some dismissed the magazine as something that was, in ‘reality’, just another ‘market driven porno-mag’, Penthouse launched its attack on Playboy’s market dominance with the promise that it would provide ‘the pictures without the lectures.’ If Hefner, the crusader, saw himself as fighting American sexual ‘hang-ups’, Penthouse suggested that his need to crusade was itself the product of just another set of ‘hang-ups’, a fear of vulgar pleasure and the need to cover sex in the vestments of respectability. In contrast to Playboy, Penthouse claimed, it would offer ‘pinups without the hang-ups. Writers yes, philosophizers no.’ (Advertisement for Penthouse which appeared in the New York Times, the Chicago Tribune, and the Los Angeles Times in 1969. Reproduced in Miller 1985: 207) If some critics attacked Playboy because it was really porn but pretended to be more, others attacked it because it wasn’t really pornographic enough: that the other elements of the magazine got in the way of the stuff that ‘really’ mattered.

As a result, critics repeatedly focus their outrage on the ‘pompousness’ of Hefner and his magazine. Paul Mungo, for example, continually presents Hefner as obsessed with his own importance and as terminally dull due to his inability to speak plainly: ‘Oh, get on with it. What Hefner means is that he got laid a lot at this point.’ (Mungo 1996: 113) At another point, he writes: ‘This seems like awfully heavy sociological baggage for a magazine like Playboy to carry. Another way of putting it is that Hefner realised men would pay money to see pictures of girls with their tops off.’ (113) Ian Katz, on the other hand, complains that Hefner ‘prefers to talk about “romantic interconnections” than sex and avoids the word “masturbation” in favour of “fantasy”.’ (Katz 1994: 3)

As a result, critics often complain about Hefner’s lack of irony. As Zoe Heller comments, ‘there is something too complacent, too utterly devoid of irony about Hefner’s account of himself’ (Heller 1994: 16). Interestingly, this complaint does seem to be a tendency in more recent criticisms. At least until the late seventies, interviewers were usually prone to admit to being surprised by how much they actually liked Hefner, and in these accounts, his ‘complacency’ was more usually read as ‘ease’ and ‘congeniality’. As L. Rust Hills, comments. ‘I’ve never liked Playboy, but I did like Hefner, and I rather fancy he liked me’. (Hills 1970: 141)

One of the reasons for this change may be that Hefner’s seriousness is at odds with a generation for which irony has become a way of producing a sense of distinction. While Hefner has had to fight for himself and his magazine to be taken seriously, the strategy in many contemporary publications, particularly many men’s magazines, is to adopt the ironic detachment still best summed up by the slogan for the magazine Loaded: ‘for men who should know better’. In this strategy, irony is used to disrespect ‘educated’ or ‘politically correct’ tastes and to indulge in the ‘uneducated’ and ‘politically incorrect’, while simultaneously asserting a knowing distance from both these indulgences and those who are unselfconsciously ‘politically incorrect’. They simultaneously reject the seriousness of educated taste and the naiveté of uneducated taste, and assert their superiority to both.

In this situation, Hefner becomes a problem. While he has been converted, at times, into a nostalgic and heroic myth of a pre-feminist

masculinity by these publications, their 'refusal of any serious agenda' (Hunt 1998: 7) makes Hefner's seriousness and sense of moral purpose a potential embarrassment from which they have to distance themselves. The attacks on Hefner's lack of irony are reactions against his seriousness, and in that sense they are similar to the attacks made by Penthouse.

Conclusion

This is not to position the magazine as a radical deconstructor of cultural hierarchies, but rather to identify the ways in which it is positioned, both by itself and others, within struggles between taste formations and over cultural distinctions. Playboy does not reject cultural hierarchies but, on the contrary, its pursuit of 'quality' is an attempt to distinguish itself from, and present itself as superior to, other magazines and other taste formations.

If Bourdieu's Distinction was, as he claims, a 'barbarous reintegration of aesthetic consumption into the world of ordinary consumption', the analysis of Playboy requires a similarly 'barbarous reintegration'. Bourdieu sets out to abolish the sacred frontier which makes legitimate culture a separate universe, in order to discover the intelligible relations which unite apparently incommensurable 'choices', such as preferences in music and food, painting and sport, literature and hairstyle (Bourdieu 1984: 6).

In much the same way, the study of Playboy needs to 'abolish the sacred frontier' which makes sexual tastes 'a separate universe', and to establish the relationships which unite these sexual tastes with life-styles, 'the system of dispositions (habitus) characteristic of different classes and class factions.' (6)

These reactions to Playboy therefore need to be understood not simply in terms of sexuality and/or gender, but also in terms of classed tastes. In other words, these reactions to Playboy can be seen as replaying and reproducing a long running critique of the middlebrow: that which Dwight Macdonald called 'a peculiar hybrid bred from the ... unnatural intercourse' of the highbrow and the lowbrow (Macdonald 1963: 37). Indeed, as Macdonald's description makes clear, the middlebrow is hated by the cultural bourgeoisie specifically because it not only creates 'a blurring of this line' between the high and the low, but is also seen as threatening to abolish the line altogether and to 'absorb' them both into itself (37). For Macdonald, the middlebrow was an 'ooze [that] is spreading everywhere' (54). While the popular forms of the past were simply 'a parallel formation to High culture' which 'knew their place', he feared that the middlebrow was 'becoming the norm of our culture.' (55) In blurring the line between High culture and Low culture, the middlebrow threatened to obliterate them both.

As a result, as Bourdieu has argued, the cultural bourgeoisie's revulsion at the middlebrow is founded on the threat that to their cultural authority that is posed by this taste formation, but it is a threat that is entirely unintentional. Rather than overtly challenging cultural authority, the petite bourgeoisie, whose tastes produce the middlebrow, pose a threat as a result of their reverence for high culture, not their hostility to it. Existing on the border between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, they desire to move out of this position of social insecurity and to establish their bourgeoisie credentials more securely. They therefore display an admiration for high culture that is

founded upon their sense of exclusion from it, but they pose a threat to it because their very aspirations blur the very distinctions on which its cultural power depends.

Playboy's middlebrow status is therefore signaled by its very desire to establish its cultural credentials. The more Hefner refuses to present the magazine as 'pornography pure and simple', the more he is seen as a cultural interloper who threatens to blur the distinctions on which cultural authority is based.

Bibliography.

- Allen, Robert C. and Douglas Gomery (1985) Film History: Theory and Practice New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Ang, Ien (1985) Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination London: Methuen.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1984) Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste London: Routledge.
- Brady, Frank (1974) Hefner: An Unauthorized Biography New York: Macmillan.
- Brunsdon, Charlotte (1997) Screen Tastes: from Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes London: Routledge.
- Byer, Stephen (1972) Hefner's Gonna Kill Me When He Reads This: My Incredible Life at Playboy Chicago: Allen-Bennett.
- Cox, Harvey (1961) Playboy's Doctrine of the Male, Christianity and Crisis: A Christian Journal of Opinion, May.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara (1983) The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment London: Pluto.
- Evans, J. Claude (1964) The Playboy Philosophy, Catholic World, Oct.
- Gabor, Mark (1984) The Illustrated History of Girlie Magazines, London, Futura.
- Hamilton, William (1963) Motive, May.
- Hefner, Hugh M. (1956) Subscription Page, Playboy April.
- Hefner, Hugh M. (1962) The Playboy Philosophy, Playboy, Dec.
- Heller, Zoe (1994) King Rabbit in Retirement, The Sunday Review, The Independent on Sunday, 1 May.
- Hills, L. Rust (1970) Esquire Interview: Hugh M. Hefner, in Esquire, December.
- Hunt, Leon (1998) British Low Culture: From Safari Suits to Sexploitation London Routledge.
- Katz, Ian (1994) Playboy's Greying Pains, The Guardian, Monday 15 August.
- Kinsey, Alfred et al. (1948) Sexual Behavior in the Human Male Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders.
- Mark Jancovich, Naked Ambitions: Pornography, Taste and the Problem of the Middlebrow, in Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies, June, 2001, <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/film/journal/index.htm>
- Klinger, Barbara (1994) Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture and the Films of Douglas Sirk Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Lukas, Anthony J (1972) The 'Alternative Life-Style' of Playboys and Playmates, New York Times Magazine, June 11.
- Macdonald, Dwight (1963) Against the American Grain London: Gollancz.

- Gabor, Mark (1996, originally 1972) The Pin-up: A Modest History Koln: Evergreen.
- Miller, Russell (1984) Bunny: The Real Story of Playboy London: Corgi.
- Miller, Russell (1985) Bunny: The Real Story of Playboy London: Corgi.
- Mungo, Paul (1996) 'The Man who Loved Women', GQ July. Playboy Enterprises Inc. 'Information Pack'.
- Packard, Vance (1959) The Status Seekers: An Exploration of Class Behaviour in America, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Ritz, David (1994) Right-Hand Man, Arena November.
- Robinson, Paul (1976) The Modernization of Sex: Havelock Ellis, Alfred Kinsey, William Masters and Virginia Johnson London: Elek.
- Ross, Andrew (1989) No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture New York: Routledge.
- Staiger, Janet (1992) Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema, Princeton University Press.
- Staiger, Janet (1993) Taboo and Totem: Cultural Meanings of the Silence of the Lambs, in Jim Collins et al., (eds), Film Theory Goes to the Movies New York: Routledge.
- Uricchio, William and Roberta Pearson (1993) Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films Princeton University Press.
- Weyr, Thomas (1978) Reaching for Paradise: The Playboy Vision of America New York: Times Books.
- Williams, Linda (1993) Second Thoughts on Hard Core: American Obscenity Law and the Scapegoating of Deviance, in Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson, (eds.) Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power, London: British Film Institute.

¹ This has become such a cliché that Playboy Enterprises Inc. has even gone so far as to issue tee-shirts which has this slogan ironically emblazoned across the chest.

² This article is not concerned with feminist debates over the magazine. For an analysis of how these issues relate to feminist debates over pornography, see Jancovich, 2001.