

Death of the Playboy: Hugh Hefner's World

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Featured image: Hugh Hefner (Source: [The Gazette Review](#))

"The style he created wasn't just about women, it was about connoisseurship." – Camille Paglia, Playboy, May 1995

A dream factory based on flesh; a vision packed with sexuality, sharp commentary and a specific taste. A publication for the successful capitalist of a certain persuasion, keeping company with the scantily clad, a fantasy of the affluent and the desperate. But the founder of Playboy magazine wanted more.

"I never thought of it as a sex magazine," Hugh Hefner would reflect. "I always thought of it as a lifestyle magazine in which sex was one important ingredient." [1]

Hefner would reiterate this point on several occasions, though he would always speak of the dangers not creating his caste of bunnies and playmates would have led him to embrace.

"Without you," he told his assemblage of Playmates on the occasion of a party to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Playboy, "I'd have been a publisher of a literary magazine." [2]

Hefner caught the waves of sexual prodding pursued in the work of Alfred Kinsey, who insisted on fornicating early, often and in every possible way. Kinsey gave sex a scientific carapace, even though his statistics were decried by such individuals as W. Allen Wallis of the American Statistical Association as adventurously "appalling".

Hefner was confident that he had the cerebral ammunition to spread a gospel of sex. "Kinsey was the researcher," he claimed, "I was the pamphleteer." Both profited, in a sense, from a strong sense of the voyeur, and with that came the conviction of crusader emancipation.

Hefner made sure to punt on various social agendas, juggling the sumptuousness of celebrity centrefolds with biting commentary drawn from exemplary writing talent. It could not be any other way in a society precariously perched between the dictates of the bible and the allure of mammon. Hefner, explained bombing throwing critic Camille Paglia, created "a whole motif, a style for men that was a departure from the World War One rough-and-ready type – the kind in the action magazines." [3]



The front cover of the first issue
of Playboy, December 1953
(Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

New York litterateur August Comte Spector sky was charged with matters of the mind, twinning Hefner's porn press with high-brow, or at the very least upper middle-brow, digestion. Through the 1960s, the magazine would run issues skirting over 200 pages, featuring writers of heavy weight persuasion: James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, Vladimir Nabokov. Reading and consumerism, surmises Taylor Joy Mitchell, was given a masculine sprucing, a form of reclamation from the female world.

Hefner did not stop at the impact of image, the pictography and the magazine. His project was beyond script. He supplied more than a demagoguery of pleasure and ambition. It wound its way into an architectural legacy – bachelor pad escapism; porn structured design; eternal production of fantasy within changing and shifting stages. The central theme here: opening, exposing and revealing the interior world of bachelordom in which there was only one true resident: the playboy, king of the modern castle.

In the words of long time *Playboy* editor Gretchen Edgren, such an inhabitant might be “a sharp minded young business executive, a worker in the arts, a university professor, an architect, or engineer. He can be many things, provided he possesses a *certain point of view*.”

Life is not to be considered miserable, but a moment of happy engagement. It is *engaged* affluence. A Hefner explained in “The Playboy Philosophy” (1964),

“Playboy was not planned as a publication for the idle rich, so much as in recognition that with the prosperity of post-war America, almost everyone could have a piece of what we described as the playboy life – if he were willing to expend the necessary effort.”

Two years before *Playboy* made it to the shelves, Hefner had vainly sought to convince the *Chicago Daily News* to feature his own apartment as exemplar of a certain point of view. His proposed headline was elementary: “How Does a Cartoonist Live?” Despite the paper's cool response, he clung to the idea with school boy stubbornness.

In May 1959, Hefner found inspiration in the home of bachelor Harold Chaskin. The magazine ran a piece on it. Such a place situated intimacy, authenticity, the appropriate setting. The gaze, latched to undressed flesh, could be set in place. Invitations galore enticing women to disrobe and display abounded. (Chaskin's own contribution to the Hefner vision of bachelor paradise was a glass-walled room paired with an interior pool.)

Those examining the Hefner contribution in that sense can sound rather glum, deterministic, total. Beatriz Preciado in *Pornotopia: An Essay on Playboy's Architecture and Biopolitics* (2014) is most representative of this view.

“The bad news is that Playboy's pornotopia is dying. The good news is that we are all necrophiliacs.”

Such power, if we are to believe this; such persuasiveness.

The Hefner world, this view of connoisseurship, was bound to sit uneasily with women who, after all, supplied the vision rather than shared in it. Gloria Steinem felt that a “woman reading *Playboy* feels a little like a Jew reading a Nazi manual”.

A far more subtle appraisal was provided by former editor of *Esquire*, Rosie Boycott. It was Hefner’s insistence on women having desire and more to the point “that we had the right to desire, just as society assumed men had” which entrenches a very specific, if peculiar legacy of the sexual revolution.[4]

The *Playboy* empire adapted with various degrees of success. Rougher competitors in the market drove away market share after the heyday of high circulation during the stale 1970s; readers began deserting the publication in the 1980s. Daughter Christie Hefner took over the reins, pushing the enterprise into the world of cable television. Hefner, in the meantime, retreated into a galaxy of pneumatic blondes and Viagra.

The nude centrefold would eventually be scrapped from *Playboy*. Such are the times: no longer can its editors rely on fleshy figures allied to delicious and wicked prose. Like the way of other projects, including Hefner himself, *Playboy* risks going the way of all flesh.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-11642188>

[2] <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n08/christopher-turner/if-you-dont-swing-dont-ring>

[3] http://maxxwolf.tripod.com/paglia_interview.html

[4] <http://www.stylist.co.uk/life/playboy-feminist-icon>

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