

The Queer History of Films and Filming

By Justin Bengry

It would be hard to exaggerate the sense of repression that many queer men felt in 1950s Britain. Assailed by the press, stalked by the police and disparaged by the state, homosexuals experienced almost universal hostility. In 1952, for example, the *Sunday Pictorial's* infamous 'Evil Men' series ridiculed queer men as "freaks" and "degenerates"; they were, the *Pictorial* warned, a potent threat to British society.¹ In 1953 alone, sensational coverage of charges against Labour M.P. William Field for importuning, author Rupert Croft-Cooke for gross indecency and Shakespearean actor Sir John Gielgud for importuning in a Chelsea lavatory all highlighted the plight of homosexuals. More than any other case, however, the Lord Montagu affair of 1953-4 exposed the dangers posed to homosexuals in Britain. At its conclusion, Lord Montagu, his cousin Michael Pitt-Rivers and *Daily Mail* diplomatic correspondent Peter Wildeblood were all imprisoned. By 1954, the scandals, trials and social disruption had reached such a frenzy, that amid calls for state intervention, the government relented and called the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution (The Wolfenden Committee) to evaluate the state of criminal law in Britain. That same year, Philip Dosse introduced *Films and Filming*.

Long before homosexual activity between consenting men was decriminalised in Britain in 1967, *Films and Filming* subtly included articles and images, erotically charged commercial advertisements and same-sex contact ads that established its queer leanings. From its initial issues in 1954, the magazine sought Britain's queer market segment by including articles on the censorship of homosexual themes in film and theatre, profiles and images of sexually ambiguous male actors like Dirk Bogarde and Rock Hudson and photo spreads selected specifically for their display of male flesh. The magazine's contact ads further helped foster a network of queer men across Britain and even internationally. Discreet 'bachelor' ads from men looking for same-sex partners became a regular feature of the magazine into the 1960s. Taken together, these elements all reinforced, for many readers, that despite its respectable credentials and mainstream accessibility, *Films and Filming* was, in fact, queer.

Even as it increasingly focused on its homosexual audience, throughout the '50s and '60s *Films and Filming* nonetheless remained an internationally respected and successful film journal. It was widely available in mainstream bookshops and newsagents in Britain and abroad. Available monthly and priced at 2 shillings in the late 1950s, and only 3 shillings a decade later, it remained affordable to a broad range of readers. Its writers included important critics like Raymond Durnat and Gordon Gow, and articles appeared from world-famous writers, directors and actors like Ingmar Bergman, Kenneth Tynan, Federico Fellini and even Lillian Gish. This was key to both the magazine's financial success and its

1 Douglas Warth, 'Evil Men', *Sunday Pictorial*, 25 May 1952, pp.6, 15. See also: 1 June 1952, p.12; 8 June 1952, p.12.

appeal to many gay men. Editor Robin Bean once explained his vision for *Films and Filming* to a contributor: “Gay men who were in the closet, especially those who still lived at home with their parents or were married, could openly sit on the tube or a bus or in school or the office and be viewed reading the magazine without fear of anyone suspecting they were gay.”²

Films and Filming began in October 1954 as part of a stable of seven arts titles put out by Philip Dosse’s Hansom Books.³ More sophisticated than fan magazines, but less intellectually demanding than the British Film Institute’s *Sight and Sound*, *Films and Filming* soon became the publisher’s most successful title.⁴ By the early ‘60s, circulation was above 40,000 according to one contributor. By comparison, sales of *Sight and Sound* only reached 30,000 by 1969.⁵ The dance expert Peter Brinson was first to edit *Films and Filming* but was soon replaced by Peter Baker, who would remain at its helm throughout much of the ‘50s and ‘60s.⁶ His assistant, Robin Bean, played a pivotal role in the magazine as its last editor under publisher Philip Dosse from 1968. Described as a “cheeseparing eccentric”, Dosse himself remained an enigmatic figure throughout his tenure as publisher, largely unknown to contributors and even to some of his editors.⁷ But it was Dosse, most contributors agree, whose vision guided the magazine to seek a queer audience, suggesting articles that would allow editors to get more “dolly boys” on the cover.⁸ This made good financial sense, ensuring that *Films and Filming* remained Dosse’s leading title, even subsidising his other publications. One contributor remembered that, “Having Alain Delon [in *Plein Soleil*] on the cover with his shirt off was said to have produced an increase in sales, and having Charlton Heston taking his pants off [in *Big Country*] sent them soaring.”⁹

Some businesses soon recognised the magazine as a place to access a specifically queer market; ads for Vince Man’s Shop, a notoriously queer Soho men’s boutique, began appearing in December 1954, only the magazine’s third issue. They appealed to homosexual men with coded language and suggestive images that many would have recognised.¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, the aesthetic of these ads, male models posed in revealing swimwear and tight garments, bore a striking resemblance to the physique photography Bill Green (a.k.a. Vince) had produced during his period as a beefcake photographer. This aesthetic, already coded as queer by virtue of its appearance in physique magazines and erotic prints, immediately spoke to homosexual men with a familiar visual language.

2 Michael Armstrong, correspondence with author, 13 October 2010.

3 Little has been written of the history of *Films and Filming*. Two short articles have appeared in the UK queer and film press. On its deliberate appeal to queer consumers, rise and ultimate decline see: Haydon Bridge [David McGillivray], ‘Seeks Similar’, *QX International*, 30 June 2004; David McGillivray, ‘Goodbye To All That’, *Films and Filming*, March 1990, pp.4-5. Haydon Bridge is the pseudonym of film critic and screenwriter David McGillivray, who wrote for *Films and Filming* for 25 years beginning in 1966. David McGillivray, correspondence with author, 5 November 2009. A more extensive discussion does, however, appear in Italian. See Mauro Giori, ‘Una rivista equilibrata per spettatori intelligenti’: Appunti per una storia di *Films and Filming* (1954-1990) [‘A sensible magazine for intelligent filmgoers’: Notes for a history of *Films and Filming* (1954-1990)], *Paragrafo V* (2009), pp.57-88.

4 Hansom Books’ other titles included: *Art and Artists*, *Books and Bookmen*, *Dance and Dancers*, *Music and Musicians*, *Plays and Players*, and *Records and Recording*.

5 Barry Pattison, correspondence with author, 14 September 2010. On *Sight and Sound* see Anthony Slide, ed., *International Film, Radio, and Television Journals* (London, 1985), pp.327-329.

6 Ken Robinson, ‘Brinson, Peter Neilson (1920-1995)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/59783, accessed 16 Sept 2010].

7 Peter Roberts, ed., *The Best of Plays and Players, 1953-1968* (London, 1987), p.7.

8 David McGillivray, interviewed by Justin Bengry, 2 April 2010.

9 Barry Pattison, correspondence with author, 11 September 2010. Charlton Heston appeared on the August 1958 cover, while Delon in *Plein Soleil* appeared in October 1960. Delon, a favourite with the magazine’s queer audience, appeared regularly.

10 On photographer turned boutique owner Bill Green (Vince) and his influence on the development of Swinging London’s Carnaby Street revolution in menswear see Justin Bengry, ‘Peacock Revolution: Mainstreaming Queer Styles in Post-War Britain, 1945-1967’, *Socialist History* 36 (2010), pp.55-68. Special issue on Gender and Sexuality.

FIRST TIME IN BRITAIN!

Capri style Jeans in Black & White Striped Denim

55/- Per pair
Plus 1/6 post

Expertly tailored in DURO tough Sanforised Shrunk Denim. Fast colours. Zip front. 2 inset frontier style pockets, 2 hip pockets, drop belt loops. Please state waist size.

LEISURE SHIRT in Sanforised Cotton. In Black and White shadow check with Continental cuff sleeves and one breast pocket.

32/6 Plus 9d. post
and packing
Please state chest size

Washable
Fabric BELT
to match shirt

8/6 Plus 6d. post



Our NEW 1955 illustrated leisure wear catalogue sent on request

VINCE MAN'S SHOP

(F & F) 5 Newburgh St., Foubert's Place,
Regent St., London, W.1. GERrard 3730.

Come and see our range of leisure wear

EXCLUSIVE Leisure Wear by VINCE

The New Vince CAPRI SHIRT

Adapted from the colourful garb of the Capri Fisherman

A new and comfortable shirt with broad shoulders, inset breast pocket, **ZIPPED** side opening and snug hip fitting in Black and White Striped **DENIM** as illustrated, or in **BUTCHER BLUE, FRENCH GREY, NUTMEG,** or **WHITE.**

JEANS SHORTS

Italian style with zip front and two front pockets. In **WHITE DRILL,** as illus., or in "Faded" **Blue DENIM.** (State waist size)

25/- Plus 9d. post

NEW 1956 24-page catalogue will be sent on request

Open Mon. Tues. Wed. Fri. 9 to 5.30 p.m. Thurs. 9 to 7 p.m. Sat. 9 to 3 p.m.

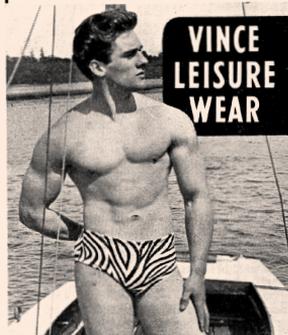
VINCE MAN'S SHOP (F & F)
5 Newburgh St., Foubert's Place, Regent St., London, W.1. GERrard 3730

Come and see our NEW range of leisure wear



52/6
Plus 1/6 post.
Please state chest size

VINCE Continental style 2-way stretch SWIM BRIEFS



Style 401. **EXTRA BRIEF** with **15/-** approx. 1 1/2" depth waist-line. In **BLACK** or **WHITE.**

Style 400. **PERFECT FITTING BRIEF** with 4" sides and ample seat room. In **BLACK** or **WHITE.**

Style 427. In Rich **SATIN ELASTIC** with 4" sides and front lining. Cols.—**BLACK, DEEP SEA BLUE, DESERT GOLD, ICE BLUE, TURQUOISE, COSSACK RED.** (Please state 2nd choice of colour).

Style 428. (As above). The last word in Swim Wear. In **ZEBRA SATIN ELASTIC** with 4" sides and lined front. Cols.—**DEEP BLUE** with **ICE BLUE, BLACK** with **DESERT GOLD, BLACK** with **JUNGLE RED.**

All briefs with waist cord and available in sizes 26 to 36 in. waist. Add 6d for post and pkg. C.O.D. extra

Our NEW 1955 illustrated leisure wear catalogue sent on request

VINCE MAN'S SHOP (F & F)
5, Newburgh St., Foubert's Place, Regent St., London, W.1. GERrard 3730

Come and see our range of leisure wear



Vince

Man's

Shop

New Striped Swimbrief

in quick-drying nylon, two-way stretch,
lined front and waistcord.
Continental style with 4" sides.

Black/White, Royal/Ice. Sizes 28" to 38"

Price 27/6.

Postage and packing 8d.

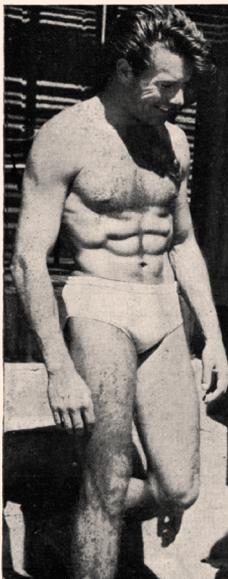
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Specially designed for sunlit beaches by

vince



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4" sides. Waist sizes 26" to 34" only.
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vince

Vince's April 1955 ad for 'Capri style jeans' focused as much on the model as the product. He was posed looking away from the viewer, inviting unselfconscious gazes at his bum, which was deliberately placed at the very centre of the advertisement. Besides the jeans, the ad also advertised his 1955 leisurewear catalogue, sent on request, presumably showing more of the model in less. Queer journalist and playwright Peter Burton remembers that Vince's "catalogue of swim- and underwear could *almost* be classified as an early gay magazine."¹¹ In Vince's June 1958 ad, all subtlety was gone. Displaying the cultivated bodies of physical culture and wearing only the small briefs for which Vince was by then known, images of the ad's two men were cropped for fullest effect. The two models were positioned looking only at each other, now the objects of each other's gazes, offering potential sexual tension between the men within the ad itself. By July 1959 Vince's ad for the 'New Striped Swimbrief' showed a model more like a homoerotic physique print than ever before. Here Vince's brief left none of the model's anatomy to the imagination, his genitals discernible beneath the fabric of the brief swimming costume.¹²

Films and Filming appealed to its queer market segment in still other ways. Producers rarely missed an opportunity to print film stills of naked torsos or steamy glances between men. But in addition to the men who regularly peppered the magazine, a July 1960 article also stands out. 'The Money in Muscles' described at length a 'Beefcake Invasion' among recent Italian-made films.¹³ Tellingly, homoerotica could also be bought in the classified ads. In one 1965 issue, an ad requested "A.M.G. 8mm Films new or used."¹⁴ Likely referring to materials produced by the Athletic Model Guild, Bob Mizer's California beefcake production company, the poster was in luck; conveniently, just a few ads below, C. Baxter offered a "Large Quantity of A.M.G. and similar material for disposal." The magazine's small ads were a veritable queer marketplace.

Extending well beyond consumer goods, however, *Films and Filming* became most renowned for its contact ads.¹⁵ Throughout the '50s and '60s an increasing number of same-sex personal ads suggest the stability, even the growth, of the magazine's queer market segment. Indeed, by the late '50s and throughout the '60s most of the magazine's Market Place section comprised ads from men, carefully coded and suggesting homosexual desires, seeking same-sex companionship. Commenting on *Films and Filming*, John Stamford of Brighton, founder of the physique magazine *Spartacus* and later the *Spartacus Gay Guide*, remembered the classified section growing from just a few adverts to one and a half pages of them by the mid-'60s.¹⁶

Michael O'Sullivan, who worked for *Films and Filming* in the '70s, remembers first finding the magazine in 1962 at the age of 16. He made sure to get copies monthly after that, soon recognising the magazine's queer slant and opportunities to make contact with other men. O'Sullivan even sent in an ad himself at 17 while still living with his parents in Ireland. Replies arrived from all over the

11 Peter Burton, *Parallel Lives* (London, 1985), p.30.

12 A similar ad from Vince in April 1956 showed a young Sean Connery modeling the 'New Vince Capri Shirt', as well as very slim and very short 'Jean Shorts' that left little doubt that Mr. Connery dressed to the left.

13 John Francis Lane, 'The Money in Muscles', *Films and Filming*, July 1960.

14 *Films and Filming*, December 1965.

15 See Bridge, 'Seeks Similar' for an overview and examples of ads from *Films and Filming*. Bridge attributes to *Films and Filming* the first examples of modern gay contact ads. H. G. Cocks, *Classified: The Secret History of the Personal Column* (London, 2009), however, shows such ads appearing across publications throughout the century.

16 Pat [John Stamford], Interviewed by Tom Sargent, 10 February 1991. Brighton Ourstory Oral History Collection, Brighton, UK.

world. When O'Sullivan moved to London in 1965, as a young gay man he again turned to *Films and Filming*, knowing he could use its contact ads to find friends and shared accommodation in the city. "It did have a considerable influence on my life" he remembers.¹⁷

The magazine's queer network even extended overseas. In May 1965, Peter Bonsall-Boone was already familiar enough with the British magazine to place a personal ad knowing it would reach its intended audience. A self-described "active young bachelor" from Victoria, Australia, Boone's ad described him as "interested in most things." He was also interested in finding similar young men. Two "bachelors" living in Ealing placed an ad in the same issue. Not surprisingly their interests included cinema – but also wrestling! They sought "male friends", aged 25 to 30, who were encouraged to respond with photos. This last condition was declared "essential". A "Young, Versatile Ex-Matlot", a "Presentable young designer", an "Unconventional Bachelor" and "A Nice warm, sensitive male", among others, all sought the same thing in the back pages of that issue. Still others, like that of a "gay and versatile" young man who sought "interesting, remunerative" work, were less circumspect – "anything legal considered" he added.

When Robin Bean took over the reins in 1968 the magazine changed substantially. He had little concern with the magazine's articles, but as a photographer was most interested in its visual content. Through his contacts, Bean had exclusive access to film sets, securing stills and photos that appeared nowhere else, then or since. *Films and Filming's* photo spreads at this time were internationally renowned. For a time, the magazine's critics still secured interviews with cinema's brightest stars.¹⁸ But under Robin Bean's editorship, the magazine also became infamous for more explicit homoerotic imagery. Many film enthusiasts began to lose interest and the publication's sales sagged through the '70s. No longer satisfied with bare chests and suggestive poses, the magazine included increasing amounts of nudity, even including full-frontal male nudity on some covers. At the same time the quality of its film content diminished precipitously.

In its final years, the magazine alienated the three key markets that had made it both respected and successful. Film buffs lost interest as the strength of its cinema commentary waned. Gay men interested in *Film and Filming's* erotic content no longer needed the magazine as explicit erotic publications became more available in the '70s. Finally, its readership of discreet or closeted gay men who had been a mainstay of the magazine's readership in the '50s and '60s could no longer read *Films and Filming* at the office or on the tube, as Robin Bean had once claimed. It was simply too compromising. David McGillivray remembers other *Films and Filming* writers no longer even wishing to be seen reading the magazine in public, instead hiding it among the pages of *The Guardian*. One even grumbled "I don't know why they don't call it *Queers and Queering* and have done with it."¹⁹

Hansom Books had always been in a precarious financial position, but as *Films and Filming* declined so too did the entire enterprise. By the late '50s, the office had already moved three times in two years, presumably to reduce over-

17 Michael O'Sullivan, correspondence with author, 16 September 2010.

18 McGillivray, 'Goodbye To All That', p.5.

19 McGillivray, 'Goodbye To All That', pp.4-5. In an interview with Justin Bengry (2 April 2010) McGillivray attributes the quote to Allen Eyles, a long-time contributor to *Films and Filming*, who became editor on its relaunch under new publishers after the suicide of Philip Dosse. Like many, Eyles was frustrated with the magazine's decline under the editorship of Robin Bean.

heads.²⁰ Operating on a shoestring out of a Belgravia basement just a few years later, office staff reportedly had to buy their own paper clips.²¹ Debt further plagued Hansom Books throughout the '70s. Philip Dosse had managed to keep the entire operation going for years on the back of *Films and Filming* and his own determination, but in the end it proved impossible even for him. He had founded Hansom Books with only £100 of initial capital in 1950. Later, the entire enterprise was increasingly financed with his own bank overdraft. By 1979, Dosse was over £200,000 in debt and by August 1980 he was forced to close the magazines.²² In tears he told his staff "I can't pay you. The company is finished." Two months later, and with mounting debts, he killed himself, aged 56.²³ *Films and Filming* was resurrected in 1981, but never resembled its former self. It was neither an important publication nor a queer one. It too finally collapsed in 1990.

Across three decades, *Films and Filming* offered discussions and reflections of desires and experiences available almost nowhere else and became a key feature in the sexual development of many queer men. In *Strip Jack Naked: Nighthawks II* (1991), director Ron Peck identified the magazine as an important "signal" from the outside world that entered his childhood home in Merton Park long before a girlfriend finally encouraged him to experiment sexually with other men. "I never had any sex education at school," Peck explains. Everything he learned about sex came from his girlfriend, cinema and *Films and Filming*.

Films and Filming was a remarkable publication, and even today it regularly appears in the reminiscences and memories of men recalling Britain's queer past. It was the longest-running pre-decriminalisation magazine to gain success and respect in the mainstream while actively courting a queer market segment. It offered a nationally, and even internationally, distributed opportunity for men to find public discussions of homosexuality, suggestive commentary and homoerotic imagery from contemporary films; it even opened up a space for them to find each other. But it was precisely because of its widespread accessibility in a time of repression that queer men also used the magazine to encode specialised services and private desires. Surrounded by the victimisation of queer men by the state and press in the early 1950s, Philip Dosse had recognised both a thriving subculture and a potential market.

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If you would like to share your memories of reading *Films & Filming*, please contact Justin at jbengry@gmail.com

"The Queer History of Films and Filming," Little Joe: A magazine about queers and cinema, mostly, No. 2 (April 2011), 31-41.

20 Stanley Stewart, correspondence with author, 18 September 2010.

21 Barry Pattison, correspondence with author, 14 September 2010.

22 These figures are all taken from the Official Receiver's 1981 report of his investigations into the insolvency of Hansom Books. See McGillivray, 'Goodbye To All That', p.5.

23 'Arts Publisher Found Dead', *The Guardian*, 9 September 1980, p.26.