Soft in the Middle

Andrews, David

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My most formidable challenge in writing *Soft in the Middle* was the paucity of prior theorization on contemporary softcore itself. When I began this project in 2002, good work was at hand on the “classical” genres. Comparatively little research, however, was available on post-1990 softcore cinema—and if valuable, the work that was available was limited by narrow sampling and narrower agendas. I filled this vacuum as I could by studying the generic matrices that have enmeshed softcore and its precursors. Thus I inspected the literature on classical exploitation and sexploitation; examined the research on other low-budget forms, including “cult” films and hardcore videos; and delved into the scholarship of theorists working in related media like noncinematic pornography (hard and soft), romance fiction, and soap opera.

The bulk of my research was, of course, devoted to softcore texts and the industry that produced them. Unlike colleagues working on older forms, I did not find it difficult to screen a representative sample of the genre. Nor was it onerous to view this material in appropriate formats. Though now in decline, softcore is nevertheless a current genre and an almost exclusively nontheatrical one. As a result, in my research, I watched more than 350 contemporary softcore features and nearly one hundred featurettes in all. (In addition, I examined scores of films from earlier strains of sexploitation.) Most of this material was purchased or rented on VHS or DVD, with a smaller segment taped onto VHS from premium cable channels like Showtime, Cinemax, and so on. The smallest body of material was recorded from
Playboy TV on a pay-per-view basis. Learning to recognize the genre before renting, purchasing, or taping it has had its comedy—yet as my remarks on genre cues indicate, such trial-and-error has also proved enriching.

This textual plenitude underscores one of the soundest rationales for a study like *Soft in the Middle*. Over the last fifteen years, softcore producers have disseminated a vast body of works. Insight into the genre fills in neglected sectors of film history and extends the reintegration projects of scholars working on other marginalized cinemas. My crude and no doubt conservative estimate places the total number of American softcore features produced after 1990 at no fewer than 1,500; this total would be doubled or trebled were featurettes added. These figures remain hazy because the self-conscious industry that spawned this “indecent” genre has maintained an evasive, under-the-radar stance that is reliant on a strategic refusal to refer to itself consistently. Unlike more mainstream fields (Hollywood) and less mainstream ones (hardcore), softcore has no trade magazines devoted to it and appears only elliptically in forums like *Variety* or *Adult Video News*. Outside the Internet forum Softcore Reviews, industry data is not readily accessible, and what is available is scattered, incoherent, and often unreliable.

My research has nonetheless yielded more detail than this space can possibly accommodate. Such profusion is partly the result of softcore’s byzantine nomenclature. Because this deliberate multiplicity defies communication, the reader should bear in mind that pseudonyms are rife among softcore producers, players, and even critics. “Susan” is “Marie,” and don’t be surprised if she is “Jen” and “Michelle” as well. While this type of diversity is motivated by an urge for career preservation, a different sort of diversity has been conditioned by an industrial urge for maximum profit. Softcore films are routinely edited into variants that conform to the market specifications of disparate distribution channels. These films have also been retitled or recredited in transfer from one market to another and may appear under multiple titles in the same context at the same time. Softcore films have, further, been recycled under new titles years after their release, and their “numbers” have been scavenged by producers intent on fleshing out “compilations” in which the identities of the performers are insignificant. Straitened projects have even been known to replay their own numbers, as in Torchlight’s *Beach Babes 2: Cave Girl Island* (1995). Sequeling adds another layer of multiplicity. Though difficult to convey, a sense of this diversity is indispensable to any account of the genre—and insofar as it suppresses the notion of the immutable aesthetic object, a mirage that still distorts areas of film studies, it may serve as a kind of critical corrective.

Which brings me to antiesentialism. One justification for studying softcore is that such a venture may be construed as a part of a wider cultural proj-
pect of demystification and dehierarchization. Aesthetic ideology has in the main had a negative impact on softcore, contributing to the inferiority complexes that have shaped this middlebrow form of pornography. To observe these mechanisms with clarity, I have remained as neutral as possible regarding softcore “value,” despite the myriad pressures to belittle or denounce. Hence, I seldom play to easy elitist prejudices by cataloguing softcore “incompetence.” One reason to avoid this smug practice is that it tends to obscure what the genre is saying through its stylistic habits and thematic emphases, many of which are devalued by elite culture and thus too readily classified as “mistakes.” Of course, a major obstacle to critical neutrality is the pejorative value that is more or less implicit to necessary terms like “softcore,” “middlebrow,” “pornography,” and “bad faith.” Where feasible, I have resisted an incipient highbrowism by engaging in frequent historical inquiries and by deploying disclaimers and a veritable legion of quotation marks. But in the end, one goes to press, so to speak, with the value-laden language one has.

My interpretive posture is somewhat more ambivalent. Antiesentialism implies the reception-studies view that meaning is an event, not an essence. As Mark Jancovich puts it, the “meaning of any text is not eternally inscribed within its form but changes, as it is positioned or repositioned in different categories, as [it is] consumed according to different competences and dispositions” (“Naked” 1). However, because my aim is to survey a “virgin” genre—one whose individual works have not, by and large, generated a critical response—I have sacrificed the rigor of a doctrinaire reception-studies approach so as to immerse the reader in texts and, to a lesser extent, to make my language flexible and thrifty. Consequently, I ask the reader’s forbearance if I occasionally adopt phrasing that anthropomorphizes softcore as a univocal form whose meanings exist apart from its interpreters. (A useful critical shorthand, such a practice is in its extensions incompatible with my antiesentialist stance.) Besides yielding copious data, a willingness to engage the devalued text counters one of the more insidious expressions of elitist bias. Scholars in film studies, as in other popular fields, at times dispense with individualized interpretation and with such textual and industrial basics as the director’s name under the rationale that these practices and details are tainted by essentialist ideas of artistic intention, the auteur, and the aesthetic object. Though sympathetic to such premises, I am wary of them because they may reinforce an elitist bias by implying that only “higher” genres “merit” interpretation. They may also support the myth that there is little “going on” in softcore (O’Toole 318). From a pragmatic perspective, then, the advantages of engaging the softcore text empirically as well as theoretically outstrip the disadvantages. Such a persuasion informs my consistent interpretive thrust.
Other rationales come across, I trust, in the pages that follow. Rather than outline them here, it is incumbent that I now salute the individuals and organizations that have aided me. First, I thank my wife Chris, whose library privileges, editorial skills, and even keel made this curious project feasible. (Recent habits notwithstanding, I love you and our tyrannical Young People more than I love solitude.) I also thank my father, William Andrews, and my sister, Melinda Abraham, for reasons that I am sure they can guess. Major thanks go to Playboy’s Tom Lazarus and ei Cinema’s (now POPcinema’s) Michael Raso, whose diligence and generosity yielded the interviews that enrich my final chapters. Eric Schaefer was munificent in sharing insights and providing images; I also thank Eric for the example of his scholarship. Robert Lombard was helpful and exceptionally patient in providing visual materials and crucial glimpses into restricted areas of the softcore industry. Jerome Klinkowtiz, an old friend, provided comments on the manuscript that were as discerning as they were unexpected—and Linda Ruth Williams, a new friend, supplied words of encouragement and a variety of resources, including a wonderful book. Others who shared insight, material, and time include Brian Marshall, Alan Roberts, Tony Marsiglia, and Timothy McCarthy. Of the organizations that helped me, ei Cinema merits praise for showering rich materials on an economically challenged academic. Others that deserve mention include Creative Image, Softcore Reviews, Playboy Enterprises, Comcast, and the University of Chicago Library. (I also thank the fans who shared their ideas in the Softcore Reviews forum.) By publishing early forms of the pieces compiled here, several refereed journals molded this book. Thus my thanks go to Jon Lewis and Cinema Journal’s outside readers; Gary Hoppenstand and The Journal of Popular Culture’s readers; Gerald Duchovnay and Post Script’s readers; and Rebecca O’Connor and Television and New Media’s readers. Bridge and Hunger also deserve mention in this connection for publishing small chunks of this project. Last but far from least, the editors, readers, and staff members of The Ohio State University Press—including Malcolm Litchfield, Laurie Avery, Dan O’Dair, Lori Rider, Kathy Edwards, Jennifer Shofey Forsythe, Heather Lee Miller, Constance Penley and especially Sandy Crooms and Maggie Diehl—merit gratitude and recognition for their creativity, expertise, labor, and unstinting patience. Thank you one and all.