Soft in the Middle

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Introduction

Approaching the Softcore Feature

I. DEFINITIONS, DISTINCTIONS, ANTECEDENTS

“It’s not porn.”
“Pretty darn close, if you ask me.”
—STAR STRUCK (2000)

Unlike its antecedents, the contemporary softcore feature is not the sort of film genre liable to recruit its audience through shock-and-awe sleaze. Nor is it apt to depict the far reaches of sexual experience. That the genre has had a pervasive, if muted, R-rated presence at Blockbuster, the retail hegemon with the disingenuous family policy, testifies to the chameleonic tendencies that have over the past fifteen years been crucial to its success in distribution. Its most prolific forms blend in with the many genres that use sex as a selling point, so a trained eye is requisite to discern their cues in cable listings and on rental boxes. The titles of recent softcore erotic thrillers (or “softcore thrillers”) are telling, with “sexy” phrasings like Dangerous Pleasures (or Dangerous Desires), Wicked Temptations (or Wicked Sins), and Sex, Secrets, and Lies (or Sex, Secrets, and Betrayals) offering reliable hints. But even these locutions manage a seductive innocuousness that is difficult to differentiate from Hollywood formulations like Fatal Attraction and Basic Instinct. A further cue is a blunt descriptor, “strong sexual content,” that accompanies the genre on rental boxes and before airing on premium cable networks like Cinemax. Cinemax’s nickname, “Skinemax,” suggests that cable is softcore’s
most distinctive habitat. There it exists modestly and without advertising in a specialized late-night niche created, it seems, with softcore alone in mind. Integral to the cultivated ambiguity of its pornographic character, softcore’s blandness has been a critical factor in its sub-rosa prosperity. But the actual diversity, idiosyncrasy, and fragility of softcore are evident when it is subjected to the scrutiny it appears designed to avoid—and, in fact, the scrutiny the genre has heretofore almost entirely avoided.

Before surveying the genre, it is necessary to establish softcore’s basic formal and historical outlines. Used generally, “softcore” refers to any feature-length narrative whose diegesis is punctuated by periodic moments (typically between eight and twelve, though more is not exceptional) of simulated, nonexplicit sexual spectacle. This dichotomous mix of narrative and “number” lends softcore its identifying format and rhythm, which resembles the hardcore structure that Linda Williams has so usefully compared to the Hollywood musical in *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (1989). Though its narrative may derive from any genre, the genre’s spectacle has proved less flexible—and rigidly heterosexist. It stresses extensive female nudity and heterosexual encounters with “bumping and grinding.” The genre also leans on standardized forms of pornographic spectacle such as striptease numbers, tub or shower sequences, modeling scenes, voyeur numbers, girl-girl segments, threesomes, orgies, and the like.

A crucial distinction separates spectacle from number. “Spectacle” distinguishes segments that serve visual and affective purposes from those that serve diegetic purposes. But because spectacle and diegesis are relative terms whose referents cannot be fully isolated in narrative cinema, every feature contains spectacle in some form and to some degree—and almost every feature contains spectacle of a specifically erotic nature. But to observe that a film registers periodic “numbers” is to assert something stronger about its spectacle, its structure, and, presumably, its intentions, for this narrative-number structure is a traditional signpost of pornography. Similarly, in denoting this dichotomy, “softcore” is narrower than “sexploitation.” The latter I construe as any narrative feature that, by foregrounding nudity, makes sexual titillation its most credible commercial appeal (see Schaefer, *Bold* 338). Only when such spectacle achieves a certain duration, regularity, density, and activity does sexploitation yield numbers, which manifest the illusion that two inimical structures divide the feature, creating a pluralist whole—and only then does it merit softcore designation. Softcore is, then, a subset of sexploitation just as number is a subset of spectacle; indeed, these distinctions work in tandem.

By flaunting its untraditional structure, softcore takes a crucial step away from mainstream “legitimacy” that nonsoftcore sexploitation has not always
taken. This broad generic evolution has historically accompanied the maturation of alternative distribution networks specializing in sexploitation content. In America, these twin developments have occurred twice, once in the late 1960s and again in the early 1990s, culminating in two golden eras of softcore. For chronological specificity, I refer to the first coalescence of the genre as “classical softcore.” Most prevalent during the four-year period prior to the release of *Deep Throat* (1972) and the advent of porno-chic, classical softcore was one of many overlapping genres that emerged after Russ Meyer produced *The Immoral Mr. Teas* (1959), the “nudie cutie” credited with inaugurating sexploitation. For precision, I refer to this sexploitation era as “classical sexploitation.” The sexploitation texts of this period were exhibited on an alternate circuit of drive-ins, grindhouses, and art-houses that grew out of an earlier “exploitation” circuit that evolved, over the forty-year span prior to the release of *Mr. Teas*, outside the aegis of classical Hollywood.

Since the 1950s, “exploitation” has been an umbrella term subsuming low-budget genres viewed as alternative and déclassé. Employed thus, the term is tantamount to “B-movie,” whose common usage also skirts history.\(^3\) After film historian Eric Schaefer published “Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959” (1999), it became possible to use this category more rigorously. Schaefer construes “classical exploitation” as a genre that “roughly paralleled the rise and fall of the classical Hollywood cinema” (*Bold* 8) as defined by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (1985).\(^4\) In this account, “exploitation” derives from the extreme, often fraudulent promotional techniques of the “exploiteers.” Distinguishing the exploitation film from the Hollywood film was its form, which relied on “scandalous” spectacle and rudimentary narrative; its content, which capitalized on topics proscribed by the Production Code; its low cost, which necessitated a departure from Hollywood production values; and its exhibition and reception, which occurred on the circuit of alternative theaters beyond Hollywood distribution and amid the “carnivalesque ballyhoo” that was the goal of exploitation promotion (Schaefer, *Bold* 4–6). Exploitation’s most distinctive subgenres, Schaefer explains, were classified “by the forbidden topic they exploited,” with “sex hygiene, drug, nudist, vice, and burlesque films . . . among the most frequently produced” (*Bold* 6).

Meyer’s *Mr. Teas* and its imitators supplanted older exploitation forms, which could not match the sexual daring of the nudie cuties. In turn, this development sparked an explosive diversification, with subgenres like “roughies,” “kinkies,” and “ghoulies” succeeding the nudie cuties by the mid-1960s (Turan and Zito 10–25; Schaefer, *Bold* 337–39). Classical sexploitation’s
most sexualized subgenre, “classical softcore,” emerged around 1968. Though films like Harry Novak’s *The Secret Sex Lives of Romeo and Juliet* (1969) generated substantial profits in 35mm (Rotsler 55), classical softcore’s vogue was brief, with the industry that produced it susceptible to internal and external pressures. As Schaefer avers in his article “Gauging a Revolution: 16mm Film and the Rise of the Pornographic Feature” (2002), 35mm sexploitation was by 1970 competing with low-end, youth-oriented 16mm features whose narrative-number structures blurred the still-nascent boundary between hardcore and softcore explicitness (12–22). These 16mm films represent a crucial interval in the development of the classical hardcore feature, which became sexploitation’s most significant commercial rival.

The arrival of *Mona* (1970), the first hardcore feature, did not signal the immediate demise of classical softcore or of the larger sexploitation genre. Sometimes referred to as “softies” or “soft X,” softcore films in 35mm and 16mm continued to be manufactured in the 1970s, with classical sexploitation hanging on in diverse forms until late in the decade. Softcore even experienced a brief new chic due to the popularity of *Emmanuelle* (1974), the French import directed by Just Jaeckin. Nonetheless, this was a decade of decline for sexploitation. That Columbia distributed *Emmanuelle’s* American release indicates a salient factor in this decline. Not only was classical sexploitation competing with hardcore, it was jockeying with post-Code (or “New”) Hollywood, which sought to marginalize the sexploiteers by stressing simulated, inexplicit sexual spectacle in its own projects. The Supreme Court’s ruling in *Miller v. California* (1973) contributed to this decline (Lewis 267–70), as did rising real-estate values spurred by urban renewal and suburban sprawl, which adversely affected the grindhouses and drive-ins, respectively (Schaefer, “Triumph” 23–24; Ray 132–33, 160; Stevenson 48).

The passing of the old exploitation circuit marked the end of sexploitation’s reign as a theatrical force. But the emergence of new markets in home video and on pay cable meant that low-budget sexploitation would persist throughout the 1980s. Though softcore was during this period all but absent as an American film genre, new sexploitation cycles and subgenres appeared. No longer did sexploitation differentiate itself from Hollywood as classical genres once had. Instead, “contemporary sexploitation” (post-1980) has been marked by its tendency to imitate theatrical blockbusters like *Porky’s* (1981) and *Fatal Attraction* (1987). By 1991, the maturation of sexploitation’s nontheatrical markets—as measured by the new willingness of HBO and Showtime to finance upscale softcore—along with a moderation in the culture’s antiporn attitudes led to softcore’s renewal. Though the Axis softcore thriller *Carnal Crimes* (1991) spearheaded “contemporary softcore,” the success of the genre’s reconfigured paradigms triggered a diversification
within the genre. For example, the triumph of director Zalman King’s stylishly feminized *Red Shoe Diaries* program (1992–99) spurred the crystallization of a distinctive late-night cable subgenre: the softcore featurette aired in serial format.

Because its routinized production and broad, centralized distribution have been facilitated by corporate America, contemporary softcore has in its socioaesthetic temper proved more static and staid than its progenitors. The genre has nevertheless been subject to economic pressures that have occasioned steady modifications throughout this period. The most salient change has been economic: budgets have fallen drastically in both adjusted and actual dollars. As Linda Ruth Williams verifies, it was not uncommon for companies like Axis and Prism to put out 35mm softcore thrillers costing in excess of a million dollars (*Erotic* 8, 285, 292, 323). Since then, shifts in distribution stimulated by competition have eroded budgets, at once forcing labels out of business and remolding the genre. By 2005, contemporary softcore’s major player, Mainline Releasing Group (MRG), could no longer afford to make the homogenized 16mm thriller that it had been churning out since 1998, most recently at a cost of about $130,000. Instead, MRG and companies like New City Releasing have shifted to shot-on-video vehicles that cost $80,000 or less; most of these features are intended for pay-per-view. MRG and New City compete with even lower-cost, more youth-oriented “cult” producers like Seduction Cinema, which often shoots its softcore on video for less than $50,000. Aside from truncated shoots and reduced production values, the most significant concomitant of this deflation has been an accelerating flirtation with the hardcore industry. Though hardcore players have always enjoyed a place in softcore, only over the last six or seven years have they landed starring roles with regularity. This crossover talent is willing to work for relatively low pay and is reportedly comfortable with the increasing sexualization that has been mandated by producers (Lombard, “Casting” 2–3)—and that has been driven in part by a desensitization process that cable programmers have called the “satiation factor” (Jaehne 12). Though softcore remains a simulation genre, its spectacle is thus “harder-core” than in the early 1990s. Since 1996—when Surrender Cinema, a studio that openly emulated hardcore, released its cult hit *Femalien*—softcore has placed a greater stress on labial close-ups or “beaver shots,” and the ratio of narrative to number has decreased across the genre. Additionally, within individual numbers, myriad hardcore mannerisms are apparent. These motifs have been imported from hardcore along with the players themselves.

In some respects, contemporary softcore’s deflationary interaction with hardcore is reminiscent of the classical era. But it would be a mistake to press...
this analogy too hard. Classical softcore arose amid a distinct sexploitation industry that had itself arisen from a distinct exploitation industry; in turn, it provided a significant impetus in the formation of the nascent hardcore industry. By contrast, before 1990, it is difficult to refer to “sexploitation” as a discrete industry in the classical sense, for its post-1980 manifestations were tightly interwoven with low- and midbudget producers that supplied other segments of the nontheatrical market—and, of course, during this interval hardcore was itself an established industry. Contemporary sexploitation formed its own “middle” industry only after lower-budget producers using nonunion players undermined the production models of crossover studios like Axis Films, which had originally used Screen Actors Guild (SAG) talent. By 1994, the lines of demarcation between softcore and other segments of the film industry had clarified. The softcore industry at that point comprised a reliable group of comparatively low-cost labels (e.g., Playboy’s Cameo Films) specializing in 35mm softcore and an equally reliable coterie of executive producers (e.g., CPV/MRG’s Marc Greenberg), directors (Kelley Cauthen), composers (Herman Beeftink), talent managers (Creative Image’s Robert Lombard), players (Monique Parent), and so on. Contemporary softcore is thus far more significant relative to contemporary sexploitation than classical softcore was to classical sexploitation. What is more, that softcore was deflationary from the start means it would be imprecise to classify its current downscale nature as a straightforward “degeneration.” Though cost competition has indeed blurred the industry’s identity—and is now fracturing its hold on mainstream markets, including premium cable—this dynamic, it should be recalled, was also responsible for softcore’s initial isolation and generation as a distinct middle industry.

As a middle industry, softcore has produced a body of texts that habitually conform to “middlebrow” expectations. Though I discuss the middlebrow at length in chapter 2, it is worth noting here that the term designates a diverse and relative taste regime that is no less complex when used as a tool for understanding softcore than when applied to other cultural contexts. In any framework, the term “middlebrow” situates its referent in a classed hierarchy. The middlebrow person or object identifies with the values of elite categories but bears attributes associated with “lower” ones for which she, he, or it expresses a fascinated disgust. In a softcore context, this dynamic has yielded a conflicted textual character that without transgressive intent threatens to subvert cultural hierarchies, eliciting a distinctive and distinguishing criticism from highbrow quarters. But just as the middle class is not a monolithic grouping, neither is the middlebrow—and neither is softcore. Though my definition holds true for most areas of softcore, distinct segments of the industry, its texts, and its public have registered this middle-
brow identity in different forms and to different degrees at different times.

Three rough categories are helpful in identifying and theorizing discrete aesthetic formations within contemporary softcore’s middlebrow identity. The most important criterion linking softcore to the middlebrow is its pervasive feminization, which as I argue throughout this study acts as a kind of distribution “grease.” It is thus notable that one of the principal variables differentiating these areas is the degree to which they target women by endorsing postfeminist ideas of the feminine. “Aspirational softcore” may be viewed as the genre’s “upper middle” category. As a crossover form, aspirational softcore was most influential during the softcore industry’s formation in the early 1990s and remains the genre’s most expensive, stylized, and feminized category. Producers and texts in this category evince the greatest anxiety over pornographic classification and thus adopt tactics to blur the art-porn distinction. A common tactic is to mimic a feminized, nonadversarial art film model. Though upper-middlebrow directors at times romanticize transgression, their usual soft-focus idiom—first developed in a sexploitation context by classical “auteurs” like Radley Metzger, Joseph Sarno, and Jaeckin—betrays their basic traditionalism. Another blurring tactic is to avoid clear-cut, narrative-number formats. Crossover directors like King are known for fully softcore vehicles (the Red Shoe Diaries serial) as well as for sexploitation vehicles that fall short of softcore designation (the Red Shoe Diaries feature [1990]). The response to this category also provides identifying cues. Defenders of canonical standards reject this category as “pretentious,” but as I note in chapter 7, contemporary feminists often laud its feminization. Nonacademic respondents divide more evenly. Some accept the aspirational producer’s elitist strategy of situating his or her work as “erótica,” while others disparage this effort as tantamount to elevating “arty pornography” above its “proper” station.

The contemporary era’s most characteristic flavor is “corporate softcore,” which is the dead center, so to speak, of softcore’s middlebrow identity. Studios that specialize in this “middle middle” have generated the most prolific and routinized body of softcore texts, which have found their widest and most distinctive distribution in the late-night slots of premium cable channels such as Cinemax, Showtime, and the Movie Channel. Influenced by the erotic thriller and by King’s reinvention of it, corporate softcore emerged around 1994, with its heyday lasting through 2001. Though this paradigm survives in diminished form today, several prolific labels (e.g., Playboy’s Indigo and Full Moon’s Surrender) halted production early in this decade while others (MRG, New City, etc.) curtailed their budgets. Corporate softcore is at once more conservative and more openly pornographic than the aspirational softcore that inspired it. Though corporate softcore does not disguise its
narrative-number dichotomy, it does embrace an often contradictory fusion of pieties in a “semiadvertent” attempt to defuse its structuring impropriety. A Hollywood-based aesthetic, corporate softcore is distinctive for bland stylistics that favor smooth jazz, flat lighting, and posh milieus located somewhere-in-Los-Angeles. The middling values implicit to its corporate production and distribution register most overtly in its business mise-en-scène, which often focuses on heroines who confront sexual and professional obstacles in the workplace.

The third category, “cult softcore,” may be framed as contemporary softcore’s “lower middle.” Cult softcore is the most masculinized, youth-oriented, populist, and openly pornographic softcore area. It is also the one area of contemporary sexploitation in which softcore is outstripped, as it were, by nonsoftcore exploitation forms, for cult exploitation labels like Roger Corman’s Concorde–New Horizons outnumber cult softcore producers. But cult softcore is a growth area. Seduction Cinema is one of the few labels to accelerate production in the past five years, which points to the competitiveness of its 16mm and video formats. Cult softcore is the most inexpensive, heterogeneous, and promotion-oriented segment of softcore, in part because it is geared to home video rather than premium cable, which favors more upscale vehicles. The “cult” designation is apt in that cult softcore has, in contrast to corporate softcore, inclined toward story lines that adhere to the subgeneric distinctions (horror, sci-fi, spoof, stripper, strangulation, etc.) encouraged by the cult nexus as described by Jeffrey Sconce in his landmark 1995 Screen article on “paracinema.” As chapter 10 argues, cult softcore studios like Seduction have profound links to the “world of ‘low-brow’ fan culture (fanzines, film conventions, memorabilia collections, and so on)” surveyed by Sconce (373). Cult softcore has also expressed its masculinized, grassroots character via flirtations with transgression, excess, and sadism. In this respect, it represents a throwback to classical sexploitation, a nostalgic identity that Seduction has exploited with particular vigor.

These masculinized qualities are relative. Insofar as it represents a mainstream formation, cult softcore is still in the postfeminist “middle.” It still evinces feminized qualities that moderate its insistence on excess and underscore its middlebrow character. Cult softcore labels like Seduction and Surrender (as well as Torchlight, Surrender’s precursor at Full Moon) exemplify this duality. From its inception, Seduction’s signature has been to balance low, masculinized forms of comedy against a “classier” girl-girl spectacle. In moving toward a more upscale, aspirational model, Seduction is perhaps repeating the maneuver that led to Surrender’s demise earlier this decade. Various factors influenced Surrender’s halt in production, including an inability to slash costs and a muddying of its paradigm. After its success
with Femalien, the label’s films became less distinguishable from corporate softcore. This convergence demonstrates a fact worth stressing: these “middle” categories are useful but imperfect tools. Surrender is difficult to categorize because aspects of its Hollywood-based aesthetic have always suggested the tactics of corporate softcore. Similarly, early manifestations of the corporate softcore aesthetic like Cameo’s Play Time (1994) and I Like to Play Games (1994) and Axis’s Friend of the Family (1995) are difficult to distinguish from the aspirational vehicles of King and Alexander Gregory Hippolyte (a.k.a. hardcore director “Gregory Dark”), Axis’s influential softcore pioneer. Still, the imprecision of these categories is a function of their utility, for they are defined by socioaesthetic liminality. At one end of the spectrum that they bracket, aspirational softcore blurs into the direct-to-video art film; at the other, cult softcore blurs into “specialty erotica” and hardcore videos. It is apt then that both categories blur, “mid-middle,” into corporate softcore.

Another strength of these categories is the framework they provide for theorizing softcore’s registration of a complex Bakhtinian motif: the carnivalesque. Though the image of carnival is mostly absent from the staid world of corporate softcore, it is pervasive in both aspirational and cult softcore, just as it was in classical sexploitation and, before that, classic Hollywood noir (see Naremore 224–29). But these categories of contemporary softcore envision and classify carnival distinctly. In aspirational softcore, low carnival imagery is exploited and “exoticized” for the contrast it provides with the middlebrow spectator-protagonist, who is as a rule a white, heterosexual, middle-class female—an identity meant to evoke the upscale audience of this cable-friendly mode. In the work of King and Elisa Rothstein, this manifestation of the exotic is often realized through scenarios in which the heroine is eroticized by her interactions with a sculpted, lower-class male who guides her through a masculinized “otherworld,” which, like the hero himself, disgusts and attracts her in a classic middlebrow dynamic. What makes this dynamic a clear expression of the exotic is that it specifically locates the erotic mystique of the male sexual object in his class and gender differences vis-à-vis the heroine. This aspirational use of the exotic may be traced to Metzger and Jaeckin—but the processes that inform “exoticization” are analogous whether discussing the racism of exploitation’s “Goona Goona” vehicles (Schaefer, Bold 267–82) or the now more acceptable “classism” long integral to King’s vision. An aspirational stance seems to suppress feminist criticism of exoticization if (1) the middlebrow heroine’s principal object is a lower-class white male, as in King films such as Two Moon Junction (1988), Red Shoe Diaries, and Lake Consequence (1992), and/or if (2) the vehicle in question is promoted as the creation of an all-female production team, as is
true of Rothstein’s serial *Women: Stories of Passion* (1997), which was in the late 1990s a darling of feminist critics.

A distinct expression of the carnivalesque is manifest in the masculinized, lower-brow softcore vehicles that pervade the cult nexus. In these self-consciously “naughty” features, carnival is not simply portrayed and othered but embodied and exuded. Like cult sexploitation in a larger sense—witness the films of Troma—cult softcore does not just depict carnival, it *is* carnival. In this world, men still “ogle” women, and both observer and observed figure as low cultural “others” unified by a ludic populism. This tendency toward populist excess is not, however, fully unrestrained by postfeminist propriety. Even Seduction, a company notorious for its ad-hoc scatology, betrays a postfeminist nature, which is most overt in aspirational projects like *The Seduction of Misty Mundae* (2005). Though it exploits gay and lesbian jokes, Seduction avoids ethnic slurs and positions its heroines as more refined and empowered than its heroes. As the next section clarifies, this accelerating feminization recapitulates the postfeminist, middlebrow transformation of softcore as it moved from the classical to the contemporary.

II. TWO THESES

*“They said it was pretty bad, even for a nudie.”*  
— *STARLET!* (1969)

The definitions, distinctions, and antecedents glossed above create a framework for interpreting contemporary softcore as a collection of neglected histories, a set of industrial practices, a system of audience orientations, and a body of self-conscious texts. In the pages that follow, I propose two broad theses, one of which is historical and straightforward, the other theoretical and deceptive. The first is that contemporary softcore is an exemplary postfeminist genre. This character evolved from consumerist tendencies manifest in classical sexploitation, whose frequent misogyny reflected its decentralized distribution and prefeminist identity. The second thesis is that softcore has long been a self-conscious, anxiety-ridden genre steeped in negation.

“Postfeminist” is so central to *Soft in the Middle*, and its academic usage so varied and contested, that a précis of my construction of the term is in order. (See also chapter 7.) Besides invoking the era that followed the emergence of feminism’s second wave, “postfeminism” alludes to the sex-and-gender norms that have long informed and enmeshed softcore. Here Carol Clover supplies a crucial definition. Drawing on Tania Modleski, she defines
postfeminism as “the appropriation of feminist thought for non-feminist purposes” (Clover 153; see Modleski, Feminism 3–22 and Projansky 20). The softcore industry is “postfeminist” in this sense in that it has embraced depoliticized elements of second-wave ideology. Like other pop culture industries, softcore performs this ideological operation because it deems feminism as a movement outside the commercial mainstream. It also deems feminism sex-negative. Thus softcore redeploy feminist ideas in reliably mainstream forms that just as reliably foment heterosexual female display. This postfeminist “appropriation” is mostly limited to an advocacy of female agency, choice, and self-respect. Rather than developing such rhetoric into a coherent critique, softcore uses it as one of several tools to “feminize” the genre—to construct it, that is, as an apolitical, “female-friendly” space that conflates untraditional ideas of female empowerment with traditional feminine stereotypes and ostensibly feminine idioms. Vis-à-vis contemporary softcore, then, “feminization” refers to a mode of textual construction or stylization that co-opt feminism’s broadest appeal while using conventional motifs to render said appeal unthreatening.

One impetus behind this gambit is that it allays a quintessentially “postfeminist anxiety” that is manifest at the producer level—and that is especially prevalent among men. Time and again, male softcore producers ward off figmentary attacks from antiporn feminists by pointing to their preference for strong heroines; to their “respect” for actresses; to their use of a soft, “refined” stylistic idiom; to their prioritization of romance over “pure fucking”; and to their commitment to narrative. Such assertions rarely embrace feminism even when they agree with feminist critiques. It is not entirely contradictory, then, that softcore texts register an opposite postfeminist anxiety through “backlash” scenarios that undermine feminist advances by depicting independent women as unhappy women. Because softcore is largely non-violent and antimisogynistic, excessive instances of this type of antifeminist backlash are rare, appearing mainly in nonsoftcore erotic thrillers. But a more moderate backlash depiction—one equating female career success with gender insecurity, sexual frustration, and “bitchiness”—is a common softcore trope. Despite its backlash motifs, however, the genre remains most apt to critique male characters. A mild misandry is, in fact, a normalized component of softcore’s presentation of itself as a female-friendly mode. In sexual matters, this misandristic disposition has led to a pointedly postfeminist bundle of double standards: whereas softcore adopts a permissive stance vis-à-vis female adultery, same-sex contact, masturbation, and rape fantasy, it places anticonsumerist restrictions on male adultery, same-sex contact, masturbation, and rape fantasy. The effectiveness of softcore’s postfeminist feminization may be measured by the genre’s consistent ability over
the past fifteen years to secure a place in mainstream outlets. This effectiveness may also be measured by the absence of sustained feminist criticism of the genre—and by the congenial feminist response to softcore's most feminized subgenre, the softcore serial. The latter response is a small but salient phase of a “post-feminist milieu” in which, as Jacinda Read puts it, “the opposition between feminism and femininity is becoming decidedly less distinct” (61). What this vanishing distinction suggests, it seems, is that “postfeminist feminists” are growing increasingly amenable to the feminization strategies of softcore and other exemplary postfeminist forms.

Feminization is a fixture of both postfeminist culture and a broader consumer culture that advances its “consumerist” values through “commodity aesthetics” (Lury 42, 60). In Consumer Culture (1996), Celia Lury argues that a “process of stylization is what best defines consumer culture” (4; Lury's italics), wherein specialized commodities use aestheticization tactics to target discrete consumer desires and identity groups. As a case in point, Lury draws on Dick Hebdige's discussion of feminization in the British scooter industry (22–25). Of course, feminization also has a specifically American history, as Ann Douglas verifies in her book The Feminization of American Culture (1977). This history was transformed by feminism, which lent feminized styles new meanings. Transformations of this sort are at once postfeminist and consumerist in that they imply a liberalization of attitudes toward female consumer desire, including sexual desire. (It is no accident that culturalists often elide postfeminism and consumerism under a “commodity feminism” rubric [Goldman et al. 333–51; see Projansky 79–83].) In Lawrence Birken's account, consumerism (or post-fordism) erodes cultural hierarchies, sponsoring social fluidity and democratization through a subversive “complex of values” that, unlike older “productivist” values stressing “work, gender, and need,” stresses “pleasure, genderlessness, and desire” (111; see also Lury 72–75, 94).

That Birken specifies that consumerism’s antihierarchical impulse includes a slow drift toward genderlessness indicates that postfeminism and consumerism are not identical concepts, for postfeminism implies a “counterrevolutionary” insistence on gender. My term for the ideological overlap of these ideas is “postfeminist consumerism.” As the default posture of the mainstream media, postfeminist consumerism signals modestly progressive values that maintain the gender system. This is, of course, the type of consumerism exuded by today’s softcore. The heterosexism implicit in postfeminist consumerism is in a sense “the cost of admission” to the centralized distribution schemes like Cinemax and Blockbuster that have sanctioned softcore’s growth and diffusion. A freer, more diverse, and potentially more radical consumerism was apparent in the shock tactics of classical…
tion, whose producers were hardly averse to undermining fixed notions of sex and gender. Sexploitation was freer to explore such material due to its decentralized, nonmainstream distribution schemes. It is instructive that when "sexploiteers" crossed into mainstream theaters, they tended to revert to a neotraditional sex-and-gender regime—and to rely on early prototypes of softcore's current feminization strategies. Still, one should not sentimentalize the anarchic consumerism of classical sexploitation. If the genre was obsessed by sex-and-gender sabotage, it was even more fascinated by violence and misogyny. The mainstream aspirations that have determined contemporary softcore's postfeminist consumerism may thus be viewed as moderating forces that have filtered off the liberal and illiberal extremism of classical sexploitation.

In her closing remarks, Lury argues that consumer forces do not "flatten" value and inequity so much as "rework" and "redraw" them: "questions of difference, struggle and inequality will not disappear, but will surface in struggles between social groupings in different ways, including the politics of identity" (256). My reading of softcore history supports Lury's point. Classical sexploitation never made any broad move toward egalitarianism, and its successors have been less bold. This underlying traditionalism has culminated in a contemporary industry that seldom challenges heterosexuality, and its modus operandi remains less bold. This underlying traditionalism has culminated in a contemporary industry that seldom challenges heterosexuality, and its successors have been less bold. This underlying traditionalism has culminated in a contemporary industry that seldom challenges heterosexuality, and its successors have been less bold. This underlying traditionalism has culminated in a contemporary industry that seldom challenges heterosexuality, and its successors have been less bold. This underlying traditionalism has culminated in a contemporary industry that seldom challenges heterosexuality, and its successors have been less bold.

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structuring demand of antiporn rhetoric: that pornography stop objectifying men and women unequally (Russell 49). While aspirational and corporate softcore do objectify the male body, softcore spectacle is geared to expose the female body. As Axis executive Walter Gernert puts it, “you need to keep the women in front of the camera. The guys are incidental, the guys are appendages” (Linda Ruth Williams, Erotic 65). But far from inflaming social criticism, this bias has quelled it. Softcore’s broad acceptance has been conditioned not by a curtailment of the exposure and objectification of the female body but by a rigorously feminized expansion of the same. The implicit industrial assumption is that women will tolerate a sexist brand of spectacle if it is complemented by a diegesis that exudes an opposite inequity. This development likewise assumes that women are more offended by the integration of female nudity with motifs like sadomasochism, misogyny, violence, and transgression than by nudity per se.

It is no wonder, then, that so many different sexploitation strains have moved at an early stage to foreground female characters in the narrative. Most often accomplished by use of a female protagonist, this tactic maximizes female spectacle while enhancing a film’s status (Linda Ruth Williams, Erotic 333, 352). Already apparent in burlesque, this development recurs at a number of significant sexploitation junctures, as when Russ Meyer transitioned in the mid-1960s from the male protagonist of the nudie cutie to the female protagonist of the “roughie” or when the midbudget softcore thrillers of the early 1990s began to shun the traditional noir hero in favor of the heroines common to later softcore. This maneuver is also discernible in insular corporate developments; consider Seduction Cinema’s shift in 2002 from its early emphasis on buffoonish, nudie-cutie–like heroes toward more “refined” and even empowered heroines. An ironic consequence of the urge to objectify the female body more pervasively has, then, been to subjectify her character more pervasively as well. Look at a woman long enough, this sexist evolution almost says, and she can hardly avoid sprouting a personality.

Stock elements of softcore numbers reinforce this consistent expansion of female subjectivity. Just as softcore narrative has inescapable visual functions, so do the numbers have inescapable diegetic functions. Softcore’s central visual signifier is surely the female breast. Though this icon often carries thematic resonance, other visual staples offer more reliable psychological dimensions. Most crucial is the female face, which, as a performative focus of the spectacle, is a legacy of classical sexploitation and other genres (burlesque, early art films, etc.) linked to the exploitation tradition. Psychological import may also be located in other motifs with similarly extensive histories. These include domestic images of a woman before her mirror or
relaxing in her tub. Both motifs hint at what is, after the breast and face, soft-core’s most important image, not to mention one fraught with psychosexual resonance: the masturbating woman. Manipulated with craft, these and other stock elements, all of which imply degrees of agency, easily integrate with plots centered on female subjectivity and female desire.

Contemporary softcore has adopted a consumerist treatment of these motifs, allowing female desire free play both in the narrative and at its end. This postfeminist tolerance dovetails with the genre’s depiction of women either empowered from the start or arcing toward such a state. The genre’s antecedents never matched this routinization. Prone to prefeminist and anticonsumerist inflections, classical sexploitation was more likely to resort to devices that restrict and punish free expressions of female agency and desire. That said, certain classical producers had by the late 1960s established middling paradigms that made such tolerance commonplace. The awakening-sexuality model adapted from European art films by aspirational sexploiteers like Metzger (e.g., Therese and Isabelle [1968]), Sarno (Inga [1967]), and Jaeckin (Emmanuelle) is conducive to female desire and the development of female agency. Other protocontemporary elements may be discerned in the suburban or “swingers” subgenre and the women-in-the-workplace cycles that portray nurses, stewardesses, teachers, and so on. When softcore reemerged in the 1990s, distributors followed King in selecting for the feminized devices that had helped earlier sexploiteers achieve “breakouts” from the sex circuit, signaling the mainstream viability of their forms. Apart from feminism, then, the central factor in the development of self-consciously female-friendly forms was the emergence in the 1980s of nonteatrical distribution networks ready to air middlebrow sexploitation. It is no accident that the programming of premium cable, the centralized scheme most identified with the revival of softcore in the 1990s, has traditionally reflected a tolerance of female desire (e.g., Jaehne 10–15). After all, cable’s corporate ownerships have had little interest in offending a subscriber base that skews upscale and female.

It might be surmised, then, that female sexual desire is to postfeminist softcore what male sexual desire was to prefeminist sexploitation: a consumer impulse to encourage then indulge rather than to encourage then critique. To understand this hypothesis, it helps to have a rough concept of the ideological shifts implicit in the transitions from classical exploitation to classical sexploitation and from classical sexploitation to contemporary soft-core. Drawing on Birken’s terminology, Schaefer describes classical exploitation as deeply conflicted in that it regularly conveyed a “productivist” message that demonized the titillation that the genre was designed to foment (Bold 15, 41). In its lighter, more consumerist treatment of male
desire, Mr. Teas signified a break with exploitation that was indicative of a broad, middle-class rejection of archaic anticonsumerist anxieties. If, as Schaefer claims, exploitation “embodied the tensions between the older economic system rooted in the ideology of productivity and the developing consumer-based economy,” then sexploitation reflected the new climate of the early 1960s, in which “sexual desire, especially male sexual desire, was economically legitimate” (Bold 15, 339). Naturally, this deep tension did not dissipate overnight. Though sexploitation was geared to indulge a voyeuristic stereotype of male desire, it often did so by demonizing the liberation of female desire in the diegesis. But in contemporary softcore, this anticonsumerist bias has either been downplayed or reversed in a postfeminist, cable-friendly manner. As a result, if today’s softcore positions any sexuality as a threat, it is usually male sexuality. Indeed, the classical era’s intentional indulgence of male consumers through an expanding objectification of the female body led logically albeit ironically to more recent depictions that cater to women by glorifying female stereotypes while censuring male stereotypes. It might even be said that the male softcore viewer often backs into a masochistic identification scheme, buying “an erection,” as Linda Ruth Williams puts it, “at the expense of having to listen to a diatribe against the average guy's sexual neglect of women” (Erotic 352).

Male masochism offers an apt segue into my second thesis, which is that softcore is a self-conscious genre steeped in abjection, pervasively defined by what it is not—and quietly enjoyed for what it is. Cultural, industrial, and structural realities reinforce this negative dynamic, which encompasses all aspects of the genre, here defined to include producers, consumers, and critics as well as texts. Culturally, the residue of the antisexual, anticonsumerist anxieties glossed above has combined with the hegemony of an elite, aesthetic ideology biased toward neo-Kantian ideas of disinterest to delegitimize forms viewed as narrowly or “secretly” sexual in their utility. Industrially, the dubiousness ascribed to implicitly masturbatory forms has been reinforced by softcore’s deflationary economics, yielding a singularly contemptuous producer-product-consumer interrelation. It is instructive that I have never come across a person in softcore production who claims to have aspired to that industrial stratum. Instead, producers almost always view softcore as a transitional middle, as a path, that is, to something else. Aspirational producers aspire to “indie” art films, corporate producers aspire to major studio films, and cult producers aspire to nonsoftcore horror films. Still and all, softcore’s specific textual realities have most fully conditioned its abject, negative position even among sexualized forms like the theatrical erotic thriller or, alternately, the hardcore video. That softcore has a dichotomous, narrative-number structure is decisive here—but as we shall see, the
The fact that softcore sex is simulated and nonexplicit is also significant.

Two ideas are helpful—in discussing these tendencies. One is Linda Williams’s theory of “compensation” in hardcore representation, which she adapts from David James’s ideas on striptease. According to Williams’s construction of James, in striptease, “the art of dancing is played off against the non-art of the sexual act that the dance suggests. The artistry of performance comes to compensate for what is missing in discursive exchange between performer and audience” (Linda Williams, Hard 77). Williams expands on James’s point by arguing “that each historically successive form of the representation of sexual acts using living, moving bodies must compensate its viewers for the formal limits of the medium.” The stag film’s total-visibility aesthetic and exaggerated amateurism assure the viewer that the sex is unsimulated and are ultimately offered as “compensation for the spectator’s physical and temporal separation from the sexual performance he observes. . . . The hard-core sequences of the stag film are thus like a magnified and amateurized striptease in which the spectator sees more of the real sexual act as compensation for the loss of his own direct sexual relation to the performing body” (Linda Williams, Hard 78). The other noteworthy idea is Richard Dyer’s nuanced albeit subtly essentialist construction of the term “structuring absence.” According to Dyer, the “notion of a text’s ‘structuring absence’ is a suggestive, even beguiling one, which is also much open to abuse. It does not mean things which are simply not in the text, or which the critic thinks ought to be in the text. . . . A structuring absence on the other hand refers to an issue, or even a set of facts or an argument, that a text cannot ignore, but which it deliberately skirts round or otherwise avoids, thus creating the biggest ‘holes’ in the text, fatally, revealingly misshaping the organic whole” (Matter 105). These two ideas are not exactly parallel. “Compensation” is an attempt to explain the interaction of producer, text, and viewer, while “structuring absence” has a more formalist bent. Nevertheless, Williams’s idea resembles Dyer’s in its negative workings. If we accept Williams’s slant, such negations relate not just to texts, as Dyer argues, but to entire genres. And certainly, softcore and other “soft” sexploitation forms seem on first glance peculiarly apt candidates for this species of theorization.

Indeed, compensation seems to fit softcore sexploitation even better than stags and hardcore. As a simulated, peekaboo form emulating the mechanisms of striptease—which is also a standard softcore number—softcore posits a greater representational distance from actual sex than hardcore and thus seems to have more to compensate for. The idea is, then, applicable to the soft-focus tactics that “refine” the spectacle of aspirational films by decreasing their explicitness. In alluding to the stylization of Met-
zger’s spectacle, Elena Gorfinkel has theorized that “the soft-core predicament” is a “prohibition of the explicit sexual act” that conditions an array of viewer compensations, including aestheticization but also encompassing production values often missing from hardcore (39). That a well-developed narrative may figure as one of these “absent” values suggests a common perception of how softcore narrative compares to the more slender narratives of hardcore or of how nonsoftcore sexploitation narrative compares to the more slender narratives of fully dichotomous softcore (e.g., Hardy 68–69). Take the standard reading of the roughie, which preceded both classical softcore and hardcore. As articulated in an early study like Sinema (1974), this reading describes the roughie’s dramatic emphasis on action and violence as compensations for an absence of sex (Turan and Zito 19–25). The legal anxieties of the prehardcore era offer a rationale for reading sexploitation in this manner. As Schaefer puts it, “[b]ecause sexploitation movies could not bring up the curtain on the last act (they were busted often enough for nudity as it was), they were forced to sublimate sex into other activities” (“Triumph” 22). This legalistic explanation of why “the last act” (David Friedman’s euphemism for active sex) is often absent is reasonable in classical contexts. Applied to contemporary texts, it is an anachronism—albeit a conventional one—that distorts discourse on sexploitation genres, which, like hardcore, remain largely unhindered by the law. The end result of this interpretive trend is that the manifest qualities of a sexualized text are perceived as “substitutes” for the greater explicitness of a more sexualized form, creating the illusion of a chain of abject genres each deferring its “real” or “desired” identity to other forms.

The utility of Dyer’s notion of the “structuring absence” parallels that of Williams’s notion of compensation. Because softcore so persistently yet so implicitly invokes sex, the genre’s tactics for aestheticizing, obscuring, or cutting away from sex seem to indicate “a set of facts” that softcore texts shun, lacunae that indirectly “structure” the presences onscreen. These omitted “facts” are presumed to be hardcore sex and genital close-ups. Consider, for example, that one of softcore’s most striking omissions is the erect penis, which American culture has traditionally construed as uniquely indecent if not obscene. Despite the fact that neither the law nor the MPAA places greater restrictions on depictions of unaroused male genitalia than on depictions of female genitalia—and despite the fact that avoiding the penis altogether disrupts the realistic illusion—the flaccid penis is also largely absent from softcore. Such an absence is hardly surprising. The ingrained prohibition against phallic imagery is unlikely to be challenged by a middlebrow genre like softcore. But this straightforward acceptance of a broad taboo gains new significance when filtered through psychoanalytic reading
styles that readily frame the unseen as determining the seen. After all, the idea that the penis—or, to be precise, the phallus, its more symbolic analogue—acts as a secret “overseer” is pervasive in discourses critical of “phallocentrism.” It is little wonder, then, that this hermeneutical habit informs Linda Williams’s reductive dismissal of softcore: “Hiding the penis merely yields ‘soft core’; the phallus’s power and dominance are still reproduced, only now in more indirect ways” (Hard 247).

What makes these intertwining concepts so tempting is that they seem to explain not only obvious internal trade-offs and glaring omissions but also more intricate biases and subtle silences, thus presenting the beguiling potential for an all-encompassing thesis. Though I have neither the space nor the inclination to detail this “ideal” thesis, its deterministic outlines may be touched on. Drawing on these concepts, the narrative-spectacle trade-off noted above might be extended to the sex-violence continuum that enmeshes most sexualized genres, such that violence is explained as a “structuring compensation” that varies in accord with the absence of hardcore sexuality. The emphasis on the female face would compensate for a similar absence. In turn, all the feminized details of softcore—from the fantasy emphasis to the literary devices, soft-focus effects, and current recourse to misandry—might be connected and dismissed as a postfeminist method of “bribing” female viewers into neglecting the sexism of the spectacle, which remains biased toward its idée fixe of male desire. Certainly, this theorization could be applied to the absence of children from softcore as well as to the genre’s suppression of overtly racial and political themes. It could also be extended to corporate softcore’s contradictory integrations of pornographic imagery and cultural piety. More impressive, this thesis might be delicately applied to the ironic internal absences and dubious external silences that attend the issue of autoerotic reception. Though male viewers have confirmed that they masturbate to softcore, the masturbating male is all but absent in softcore. Conversely, though softcore texts overflow with images of masturbating women, female consumers are peculiarly silent, thus obscuring their reception of the genre. Both omissions are fomented by the comparative invisibility of the softcore viewer in a nontheatrical era of private, domestic consumption. Notions of structuring absences and “compensatory presences” might be used to explain these interlocking gaps as the genre’s complex manner of obscuring the “real” story of why it is produced, who consumes it, and how.

The supreme difficulty of discussing this shadow thesis, so to speak, is that each of its parts has some qualified utility and some qualified logic. Producer perspectives are marked by negation, and to some extent, such attitudes do condition the abjection of softcore texts from Starlet! (1969) to Star Struck (2000). Moreover, the compensation account of interlocking motifs
like stylization, feminization, violence, and misandry is not only popular but in restricted respects persuasive. But ultimately, these negative accounts, no matter how pervasive or supple, do not provide a seamless understanding of softcore—and are convincing in neither their logical nor their historical extensions. Witness one permutation of the compensation account as registered in online responses to softcore: the idea that producers cram their films with spectacle because their plots are shoddy. This is a silly idea, but is it really less logical than the compensation account that suggests that softcore has a story because it lacks hardcore sex? If the latter is logical, why has
hardcore ever had any narrative? And for that matter, why do hardcore auteurs like Candida Royalle and Andrew Blake frequently resort to soft-focus tactics? Wouldn’t it be “better” if their works were more amateurish, as Linda Williams seems to imply? Here it is plain that realistic narratives and soft-focus styles confer the same distinctions in both hardcore and softcore.

In focusing on softcore, it would be myopic to view “prestige” elements as sexual compensations in any inflexible sense.

These genres are too complex, and the responses they elicit too variable, to brook such brittle readings; no thesis as ahistorical and as overdetermined as the one outlined above can unify their diversity. For scholars, the danger of such a thesis is obvious: it encourages them to dismiss major textual elements. Such a method may even shade into one of softcore’s most distinctive responses: interpretive amputation. As chapter 8 shows, it is common for consumers to treat the softcore dichotomy as if one part of its narrative-number unit either does not exist or does not contain the “essence” of the text, which is located in the other part. This pressure to amputate hails from myriad sources, including the assumption that all narrative genres yearn toward Hollywood paradigms or, contrarily, that all sexual genres yearn toward hardcore paradigms. More salient is the intercession of elite aesthetic ideologies that delegitimize genres perceived to have affective and utilitarian purposes. In softcore, this dynamic is exacerbated by the genre’s masturbatory uses and misandristic meanings, which stimulate anticonsumerist anxieties among consumers. Especially among male viewers, such mechanisms have culminated in a distinctive tendency toward bad faith. Consumers often locate the essence of the text in its numbers, dismissing the narrative as in effect not “really” there, and then consistently belittle their own manifest preferences. Tellingly, these softcore “advocates” seldom use sacralizing terms, at most praising a film in practical terms that invoke craftsmanship but rarely artistry—as if to suggest that softcore is intrinsically inartistic. This middlebrow taste formation is singular, then, in that it renounces essentialist terminology but only as a qualified gesture of “good taste” in deference to the more proper claims on such terms made by consumers of elite genres. What could be a radical antiessentialist posture is no more, then, than the self-effacing cover for elitist mystifications.

By contrast, in their responses to aspirational softcore, consumers often focus on narrative to the exclusion of number. Despite these anxious reactions, softcore has thrived because producers and consumers prefer its base model as it is and not simply as a perverse compensation. What softcore “is” is a dichotomous form of sexploitation that relies on a synthesis of elements—all of which, from a scholarly perspective, are equally there. It is crucial to understand why producers and consumers often adopt opposite
views, but neither these responses nor an “ideal” thesis grounded in theories of negation should encourage scholars to engage in similar reductions.

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The chapters that follow explore the above ideas by tracing the history of softcore; by contextualizing it as an evolving “middle” in a postfeminist matrix; by examining its exemplary cycles, texts, and figures; and by analyzing its current reception. The second chapter considers the softcore-hardcore distinction from three perspectives: the history of the porn debates; the history of the middlebrow concept; and the history of soft-focus feminization. My third chapter looks at the classical genres from a current standpoint, focusing on industrial and generic trends relevant to softcore’s contemporary identity. The fourth examines the 1980s as a transitional period in which technological, economic, and political shifts led to softcore’s recession; when the form reemerged in 1991, it had a contemporary bearing, especially in its feminization and modes of exhibition. The fifth chapter looks at King, a crucial popularizer, focusing on the interplay of gender, genre, and class in his *noir-romance* hybrids. Chapter 6 focuses on the softcore thriller, an area in which the erotic thriller and contemporary softcore overlap. Chapter 7 looks at a fantasy-oriented subgenre, the softcore serial, analyzing the mostly affirmative responses that it has elicited from feminist critics. The eighth chapter analyzes segments of the softcore public so as to contextualize current softcore reception, which is distinguished by anxiety and bad faith, in terms of the scholarship on cult audiences. My ninth chapter proposes that the contradictory pieties of Playboy Enterprises’ now-defunct corporate softcore model were a function of the company’s corporate history. This chapter’s second section focuses on director Tom Lazarus, whose “dissidence” illustrates the obstacles to auteurism emplaced by corporate softcore practice. Chapter 10 looks at cult softcore through a case study of Seduction Cinema, which mostly shoots on video. The transformations of this youth-oriented label recapitulate film history; exemplify salient distinctions between cult and corporate softcore; and provide contrasts with other softcore subsectors, many of which are trending downscale.