Over the past four decades, the word “softcore” and its relatives, “soft porn” and “soft focus,” have become common pejoratives. One has only to peruse the title of Ann Douglas’s essay “Soft-Porn Culture” (1980) to predict with confidence that it will belittle its subject, Harlequin romance. Implicit to this put-down is that soft genres and techniques are devalued because they are pornographic. Yet this idea tells but half the story. Though some conjunction of “soft” qualities has allowed such media to flourish in the mainstream markets barred to more explicit media, references to the former are more uniformly derogatory than references to the latter. Soft forms are also, then, mocked for not being pornographic enough. Such a dismissal is evident in many reviews of recent American films that do not rise to the “hardcore” trend of European art films like Intimacy (2001) or 9 Songs (2004), which feature unsimulated sex. It is more evident yet in academic discourse, where expressions like “softcore” and “soft focus” are attended by “mere,” as in Linda Williams’s phrase, “[h]iding the penis merely yields ‘soft core’” (Hard 247). Softcore really is, as the “other” Linda Williams puts it, “the Cinderella of sexual theory,” for it “always com[es] second.” Though hardcore has its defenders, few outside a small “cult” of online fans are willing to defend softcore as such—and even they do so in a halting, embarrassed idiom that suggests bad faith.

The ultimate reason for this pattern of derogation is that soft forms are considered “hybrids” whose “impurity” represents a failure to conform to
harder, purer, more masculinized ideals. This failure may be framed as a pre-
tentious confusion, a mistake, or as a willful vulgarization of standards—but
deemed intentional or not, it has usually been interpreted as tantamount to
“crass” commercialism. There is something to such views. Producers have
ensured the commercial maneuverability of soft forms through a distinction
strategy that combines Porn’s allure with Art’s elevation. In this sense, then,
the hybrid label and charge of commercialism are equally apt. What is irri-
tating, though, is that such critiques obscure that all forms have a hybrid
aspect and that even the most elite and ascetic forms have economic bases.
At bottom, then, this pattern of derogation reveals the presence of patently
ideological mechanisms that falsify history by masking the contingent impu-
rity of all texts, codes, and values.4

This is not to say that soft forms should be lauded. Naïve modes of eval-
uation, pro or con, only reinforce dominant cultural hierarchies; they do so
first by naturalizing the very idea of hierarchy, which depends on illusions of
intrinsic value. For that reason, none of the defenses of “softness” that have
gathered over the years has dented the larger bias against soft forms. These
defenses have instead inclined toward status-quo ends because they accept
our culture’s most dubious premises, namely that certain aesthetic forms
contain an ahistorical value; that certain ideas of gender linked to biological
sex have an essential reality and value; and that there is something “in” sex
that demands that it be treated in certain aesthetic fashions or risk becom-
ing intrinsically degraded, degrading, or obscene. Without demystifying
these foundational essences, which naturalize privilege and sexism, even aca-
demic approaches devoted to transgression seem as likely to bolster domi-
nant hierarchies as to subvert them.

The following chapter exposes the essentialist assumptions that have
informed the pejorative usage of “softcore,” “soft porn,” and “soft focus” in
three different historical frameworks. (This approach has the advantage of
introducing events and concepts to which I will refer throughout Soft in the
Middle.) The first section compares the softcore-hardcore distinction as it
crystallized during the advent of the sexual revolution to its altered condi-
tion following the rise of antiporn feminism and the wane of porno-chic.
The next two segments traverse even broader ground. The second section
focuses on the middlebrow taste concept, while the third surveys the history
of that visual tactic once called “the soft style.” In each context, elements
deemed feminine and middlebrow have been so closely identified as to
become virtual synonyms. Together, they have yielded an aspirational pos-
ture that has enlarged the distribution of softly sexualized texts while ulti-
mately reinforcing “elite” perceptions of their inferiority.
I. PORNO-CHIC, ANTIPORN CRITIQUE

Erotica is soft core, soft focus; it is gentler and tenderer . . . than . . . pornography.

—ANN BARR SNITOW (256)

“Softness” is just people saying that women only like “soft” things, and that’s ridiculous. That’s ghettoising women.

—ALEXANDER GREGORY HIPPOLYTE

The softcore-hardcore distinction was preceded by the erotica-porn distinction, which it closely resembles. In The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture (1987), Walter Kendrick observes that “erotica” and “pornography” gained their current inflections only during the middle of the twentieth century:

Like “pornography,” “erotica” is a modern coinage with a specious aura of antiquity. The OED dates its first English usage 1853 (just three years, that is, after the first published use of “pornographers”), as a category heading in a bookseller’s catalogue. . . . “Erotica” seems to have entered the general vocabulary only in the 1950s and 60s, as “pornography” became increasingly tainted with low-class associations. A word was needed to designate the increasing number of books that, though they dealt with sex, somehow did so in a safe and classy way. (244)

As classifiers, “pornography” and “erotica” have not historically been rooted in concrete generic criteria. Instead, their usage has been dependent on patently subjective indices. The Unabridged Random House Dictionary, for example, defines “pornography” as “obscene writings, drawings, photographs, or the like, esp. those having little or no artistic merit,” but construes “erotica” as “literature or art dealing with sexual love.” Applying such terms, then, requires not just interpretation but evaluation as well—and it is notable that these terms suggest distinct approaches to authorial intention. Works deemed “erotica” are usually framed as having complex, heterogeneous intentions that combine the aesthetic (or literary) and the sexual (or pornographic). In this hierarchical economy, erotica is partly redeemed by its aesthetic aspirations but partly debased by its sexual intentions, which violate neo-Kantian principles of disinterest. By contrast, works devalued as “pornography” are viewed as having sexual intentions alone (Kendrick 206). As a result, cultural historians like Steven Marcus have often dismissed “erotica” and its cognates as “little more than euphemisms” (36n2). In making such a claim, Marcus is not casting doubt on the intention-based evaluation
that informs this brand of classification. Nor does he reject the term “eroticca” insofar as its middlebrow elitism aspires, however unsuccessfully, to a learned Canon that cloaks its contingent being in dubious ahistorical concepts. Marcus cannot, of course, attack the term on antessentialist grounds because his scholarship is informed by highbrow principles. Instead, he dispenses with “erotica” because he thinks it disguises the “secretly” unified intention basic to all pornography. In this reductive view, it is all Porn and, as such, “really” has one intention irrespective of the diversity that only “seems” to inform its disparate vehicles.

“Hardcore” and “softcore” date to the 1950s and 1960s, respectively. More than “porn,” “hardcore” initially invoked a purely negative referent. According to Kendrick, “hard core” came to prominence via the Supreme Court’s 1957 Roth decision (196–98). “Hard-core” was linked adjectivally to “pornography” to construct a legal category of utterly worthless or “obscene” material, ostensibly giving the federal antiobscenity statute a stricter focus. Falling into this essentialist rubric were unsimulated sexual depictions whose only intention, the government’s solicitor general smugly insisted, was to express the idea “that there is pleasure in sexual gratification,” the “social value” of which was, “of course, nil” (qtd. in Kendrick 197). Fully explicit stag films were assigned to this category, as were unvarnished materials that emerged from an illicit underground in the 1960s and early 1970s. But it was not until the luminous success of Deep Throat (1972) had inaugurated the “porno-chic era” that “hardcore,” like “porno,” entered the linguistic mainstream. The usage of “softcore” has been dated to 1965. This term also gained prominence by dint of porno-chic, which engendered a wider cultural awareness of how hardcore forms related to softer, less explicit genres—including “classical softcore,” which had appeared on the sexploitation circuit prior to the arrival of hardcore in 1970. (That these relations were clear within the sexploitation industry as early as 1968 is indicated by commentators like William Rotsler and self-referential softcore films like Starlet! [1969].) The softcore-hardcore distinction achieved a new cultural clarity after the 1974 release of Just Jaeckin’s soft-focus blockbuster Emmanuelle, which gained wide American distribution through a major Hollywood studio, Columbia, thus yielding a softcore analogue to Deep Throat (Willemen 13; Lewis 227–29).

Porno-chic suggested that the purely negative idea of hardcore—and, by extension, of sexual gratification—that was constructed under Roth did not reflect emergent attitudes. Given that Playboy founder Hugh Hefner had been preaching a “fun morality” since 1953 (Ehrenreich 45), there was little chance Roth’s anticonsumerist assumptions would go unchallenged in an era that made the Playboy model look staid. Starting in the 1960s, hardcore forms were perceived as a principal component of the culture’s rapid embrace of a revolutionary sexuality. According to hardcore’s proponents,
explicit porn was a path to Reichian liberation (which neglected that Wilhelm Reich considered porn symptomatic of repression). This new viewpoint inverted Roth’s derogatory construction of hardcore “purity,” lending “dirt for dirt’s sake” an affirmative intonation. Conversely, as a function of its fully relative etymology, “softcore” gained a more ambivalent meaning. Whereas “hardcore” has connoted purity and unyielding commitment, “softcore” has connoted moderation and, more pejoratively, dilution and half-measures.

That divergences of this sort existed in the early 1970s is not surprising, for such contrasts had been implicit to the erotica-porn distinction for decades. From a current standpoint, though, it is surprising that these discourses did not substantiate the traditional understanding that women “[prefer] the ‘erotic’ over the ‘pornographic,’” to use Linda Ruth Williams’s words (Erotic 25). As it happens, the politics of gender identity governed the hard-soft distinction only after second-wave feminism had generated an outspoken critique of porn in the mid-1970s, as signaled by a concatenation of events, including the publication of Susan Brownmiller’s Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape (1975), the formation of Women Against Pornography (1976), and the antisnuff campaign (1976; see Johnson and Schaefer 40–57). Before that juncture, hard and soft films competed for female consumers. Hardcore gained its first wide access to female audiences via three 1972 films—Deep Throat, The Devil in Miss Jones, and Behind the Green Door—and porno-chic’s countercultural rhetoric was as likely to be evinced by women as by men. This fact was particularly apparent in the sex film industry itself.

Published in 1974, Kenneth Turan and Stephen Zito’s Sinema: American Pornographic Films and the People Who Make Them is valuable for preserving the essentialist discourses that enmeshed the hardcore-softcore distinction at the height of porno-chic. Part porno-chic effusion, part scholarly tome, Sinema adopts a journalistic stance toward the sex film industry, disseminating the industry’s ideas of itself to a wider audience. These evaluations often come from female sources; neither the authors nor the performers imply that they view one’s sex as a significant ideological limit on the expression of sexual tastes. Instead of dividing the industry through gender concepts, then, Sinema partitions it along hard-soft lines, with women on both sides.

In an interview section entitled “The Hard and Soft of It,” Turan and Zito sum up the industry’s divided perceptions of itself by referring to softcore’s ostensible “tastefulness” and to hardcore’s uncompromising moralism:

It may seem, as populist firebrand Tom Watson said of poor whites and blacks in the rural South, that hard- and soft-core pornographers are all in
the ditch together. Those involved, however, don’t see it quite that way, and in most cases a clear demarcation line can be drawn between the soft- and hard-core folk. The former view themselves as perfectly respectable, if a little risqué, and see hard core as far too clinical and explicit to be tasteful. The latter, meanwhile, feeling an Old Testament moral rectitude about what they do, dismiss the people who mess with soft-core sex as hypocritical, if not worse. (94)

Turan and Zito’s initial interviews—the first with Marsha Jordan, the “Queen of Soft Core,” the second with Mary Rexroth, bohemian daughter of writer Kenneth Rexroth—embody this ideational divide. Jordan evinces a genteel perspective, rejecting hardcore on traditional grounds while embracing softcore as a “vital,” romantic alternative (Turan and Zito 99–100). The more radical Rexroth counters Jordan by aligning the explicitness and straightforwardness of hardcore with health, nature, and truth (surely among Ideology’s most basic keywords). By the same token, Rexroth critiques softcore for its structuring obliquity, which she frames as perverse and even pathological:

“[I]t’s the taunting and the lewdness and the striptease—I can’t understand it.” And as a corollary to this, Mary feels that for her “there is a kind of morality” about making a hard-core film as opposed to a soft-core film. “I won’t do a soft-core film, and I won’t do sort of standard beaver films because, as I said, I don’t understand the tease trip. I think there’s something lewd and dirty and sick and so on and so forth about soft-core films, I really do. You gotta know how to do that. I mean, I know how to fuck, I don’t know how to do that.” (qtd. in Turan and Zito 106)

Turan and Zito’s subsequent interviews with Pat Rocco, a pioneer of gay sexploitation, and John Holmes, a sexploitation vet legendary for his hardcore performances, reinforce the nonsexist orientation of this essentialist debate. Like Jordan, Rocco views hardcore as antiromantic, preferring softcore for its greater capacity to portray “the beauty of male love” (qtd. in Turan and Zito 113). By contrast, Holmes idealizes hardcore by linking it to free speech principles and pure affective emotion (Turan and Zito 116, 118).

Through these prefeminist juxtapositions, Turan and Zito imply that the hardcore-softcore debate was in the early 1970s framed according to flexible consumer tastes. Given the emphatic feminization of contemporary softcore, this implication may seem counterintuitive. Alternatively, it may clarify what Linda Ruth Williams calls “obvious”: that the contemporary softcore audience is defined not by gender but by consumer preference (Erotic 265).
This reality has been masked by gender essentialisms that position “softness” as a nexus of “female” concepts and “hardness” as a nexus of “male” concepts. Antiporn feminism mostly reinforced such stereotypes. Hence, but a few years after *Sinema*’s publication, the hard-soft distinction had fractured along gender lines, a development attributable to the intervention of antiporn ideology. At that point, the consumer diversity that had once been implicit to the hardcore-softcore debate was overwhelmed by reductive ideas of sex and gender.

The antiporn era was inaugurated by a coalition of cultural conservatives, who would later be identified with Reaganism, and social progressives, including second-wave feminism’s antiporn wing (Kendrick 228–39; Frug 254–63; Linda Williams, *Hard* 16–23; MacKinnon 137–38; Segal 59–70; O’Toole 26–60). These groups had a mutual interest in reversing aspects of the sexual revolution, and both contributed to the Meese Commission Report of 1986. To conservatives, the entire liberationist turn in American life was a grievous moral error, while feminists embraced such liberation except where patriarchal forces within the revolution appeared to exploit female bodies for profit or pleasure. Lawrence Birken might argue that the counterrevolutionary logic of this coalition was that both groups relied on fixed ideas of gender to critique an emerging consumerist “system of values stressing pleasure, genderlessness, and desire” (111). In this account, antiporn feminism represents an anticonsumerist departure from that revolutionary, antiessentialist strand of second-wave thought that would eventually argue “that gender should be overthrown, eliminated, or rendered fatally ambiguous precisely because it is always a sign of subordination for women” (Butler xiii).

Within feminism’s antiporn wing, prominent figures like Gloria Steinem, Susan Griffin, and Diana Russell lionized “erotica” as a safe, nonpornographic alternative to hardcore. Through this middle concept, feminists could sanction erotic forms, dodging an antisex label and attracting the support of women who had reservations about hardcore excess and the antiporn excess of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. The erotica concept, whose gender intonation had been secondary, gained a gender-specific rationale: erotica was safe and “classy” because it was feminine. Antiporn endorsements of “erotica” thus tended toward the sexist and ahistorical, reflecting fantasies of reform rather than realities of form. That said, feminist definitions of “erotica” did include notable variations. Whereas Steinem and Griffin stressed love, Russell stressed dignity and equality, defining “erotica” as “sexually suggestive or arousing material that is free of sexism, racism, and homophobia and is respectful of all human beings and animals portrayed” (48; Russell’s italics). Though in some respects ludicrous, Russell’s
formulation is also attractive in that it is based neither on inexplicitness nor on feminization. Under her egalitarian rubric, many hardcore videos would qualify as erotica but R-rated softcore films, which never expose male and female bodies equally, would not (see 69). This willingness to forego gender essentialism and the privileges sanctioned by it was at odds with traditional and untraditional orthodoxies alike. It is unsurprising, then, that feminism’s default tendency was to valorize a counterrevolutionary “erotica” that was closer to Steinem’s logic in that it equated the term with soft, feminized forms structured by gender inequity. Thus, in embracing “softcore erotica,” pro-erotica feminists embraced concepts not far from traditional femininity. The hardcore-softcore schism soon emerged as a sexist division within feminism shunting women away from “bad” hardcore. This division was fortified with mostly groundless suppositions apropos the “natural” differences between male and female sexuality and, by extension, male and female porn (see Modleski, Feminism 151). Linda Williams sums up this trend by noting that “anti-pornography feminists have used this hard/soft distinction to label men’s sexuality as pornographic and women’s as erotic,” with such “polar oppositions” linked to a “soft, tender, nonexplicit women’s erotica and a hard, cruel, graphic phallic pornography” (Hard 6; see “Porn Studies” 6; see also Linda Ruth Williams, Erotic 39–40).

These counterrevolutionary ideas were co-opted by a neotraditional, postfeminist culture amenable to oppositions that maintained the gender system. By reinforcing gender stereotypes, such ideas helped reinstitute restrictions on female tastes typical of American culture before the sexual revolution (e.g., Henry Jenkins 2). Suddenly, revolutionaries like Mary Rexroth who did not favor soft prescriptions were informed that their tastes were not only “low” but a betrayal of their gender. In cinema, these biases contributed to the routinization of sexploitation as it morphed into contemporary softcore. In the late 1970s, shifts to private technology created a potential female audience for sexploitation that dwarfed porno-chic’s “couples audience.” Following Columbia’s example, the conservative conglomerates who controlled cable distribution tailored their sexploitive offerings to the Emmanuelle model, which favored a limited rhetoric of female agency as integrated with an upscale, sensual grammar—all to make soft, unthreatening products that adhered to what some antiporn feminists described softcore erotica as having always been. Of course, the emphatic feminization that regulates the softcore concept is not isolated to the softcore genre. The processes that have led postfeminist culture to persistently reduce complex sexual tastes to soft, feminized imagery are as evident in the “romantic,” heterosexist stylistics of erectile dysfunction advertising—and even in Bridgestone tire advertising—as they are in softcore serials like Red Shoe Diaries.
In going mainstream in the 1990s, softcore cinema became even more vulnerable to imprecise pejoratives. After the porn debates, a new stigma, “politically correct porn,” became affixed to it. This was and is absurd. Softcore narrative is dominated by white, middle-class, heterosexual women, and its spectacle is molded by fixed sex-and-gender inequities. If “correct” connotes a commitment to sex-and-gender equality and to social diversity, then “correct” is precisely what softcore is not. Such pejoratives might have been more applicable had producers espoused Russell’s notion of erotica, but that was not the case. Equally ironic is that feminists like Williams and Laura Kipnis, who yoke their interest in feminist transgression to hardcore explicitness, have dismissed softcore as a function of their interest in hardcore cinema. Viewers who do not identify themselves as feminists have, then, disdained softcore as too feminist, too correct, to be erotic, while those who do identify themselves as feminist have disdained it as too timid, too mainstream, to be “authentically” feminist (see Linda Ruth Williams, Erotic 270). But a growing number of feminists have adopted opposite tacks. As a function of their postfeminist embrace of an antitransgressive, “domesticated” femininity, critics like Jane Juffer evince an affirmative view of softcore and other soft forms. But insofar as Juffer seems to have returned to the old antiporn tendency to draw counterrevolutionary links between “tender” genders and “tenderer” genres, her neotraditionalism is as likely to augment the perception of softcore’s second-rate status as to subvert it.

II. THE STIGMAS OF THE MIDDLEBROW

Having stressed that feminization became central to the softcore concept during the antiporn period, I should now stress that said concept was implicitly gendered from the outset. A similar shift is apparent in the evolution of “erotica.” Works classified as erotica have long connoted a secondary feminization via their middlebrow status. What changed after antiporn feminism was that erotica’s feminization came to seem more essential than its middling rank, despite the fact that both qualities were accepted signs of erotica’s relative “safety”—and of one another.

Given that softcore porn has, like erotica, come to be classified as middlebrow porn (Jancovich “Placing” 2–4, “Naked” 4–5), it makes sense that many traits of the contemporary softcore feature, including its feminization, are hallmarks of middlebrow taste formations. (Other traits include the genre’s realism and narrative emphasis; its moderation; its pluralistic conflation of structures and styles; and its literariness.) Here the salient commonality is second-rate status. The term “middlebrow” specifically signifies such
status and is therefore a tool of exclusion and condescension; hence my thesaurus even lists “boob” among its synonyms. Among highbrows, the middlebrow is more threatening, dubious, and dull than lowbrow “entertainment,” a counterintuitive valuation that Jancovich (“Naked” 4) and Leon Hunt (160) have noted—and one that hardcore advocates have reflected. A historical critique of the middlebrow concept thus offers insights into softcore’s derogation, which is part of the phenomenon that Modleski has called the “pervasive scorn for all things feminine” (Loving 13).

The great problem of the middlebrow concept is that it is almost impossible to invoke it without becoming a highbrow—without slipping, that is, into a graceless elitism naïve to its own contingency, essentialist in its ideas of purity, and smugly certain of the intentions behind mainstream production and consumption. Apropos softcore, highbrowism leads to reductions like the assumption that softcore forms represent “mistakes” and that softcore consumers “really” want something other than softcore. Subtly evident even in Pierre Bourdieu’s antiessentialist writings on the middlebrow, this elitism is a traditional way in which highbrows have identified themselves, valorizing their own tastes by deploying a reductive “expertise” to belittle alternative regimes. Because explicit “aesthetic choices are often constituted in opposition to the choices of the groups closest in social space” (Bourdieu, Distinction 60), highbrow distaste falls heavily on the middlebrow—or in my analysis, on the upper-middlebrow category of aspirational softcore—for such taste most resembles its own. Besides a Rortian fallibilism, the belief that guides my usage is that no intrinsic, noncontingent value resides in any taste regime, so middlebrow sensibilities and forms are never automatically mistaken. The “real” mistake of softcore consumers is to be seduced into bad-faith postures that signal acceptance of highbrow essentialisms that delegitimate their manifest preferences. They not need be embarrassed by their own tastes—though they would hardly recognize this from digesting the literature.

This pejorative slant, whereby a historicist survey subtly reinforces a historical devaluation, is perceptible in the terms in which Bourdieu and his interpreters construct the irony of the highbrow-middlebrow relationship. As they point out, the middlebrow has been misperceived as a threat by the defenders of the high despite the fact that the middlebrow is rarely adversarial (see Carroll 232). Drawing on Bourdieu’s class-based analyses, Jancovich explains that, from an elite perspective, the “sin” of the middlebrow is not a premeditated effort to overthrow the values of high culture but its “premature” acceptance of those values as grounded in an incomplete understanding of the same:
The petite bourgeoisie become a threat precisely because of their reverence for legitimate culture, not their hostility to it. Aspiring to enter the bourgeoisie proper, they display an admiration for legitimate culture that is founded on their sense of exclusion from it. If they threaten to blur distinctions between high and low culture and so undermine the authority of the cultural bourgeoisie, it is because they are too eager to become a part of legitimate culture, a culture to which they are alien. ("Naked" 6)

That the middlebrow, according to Bourdieu, seeks to achieve a “legitimate” place “on credit” points to a characteristic often identified with middlebrow expression (Distinction 365): it uses terms and ideas without having absorbed them, running them together in a “confused” or “pretentious” way that threatens to dilute the “purity” of elite forms and values. Such confusion, often equated with a self-conscious name-dropping, reportedly exemplifies a middle-class phenomenon referred to by sociologist C. Wright Mills as “status panic,” which Marianne Conroy has defined as “a deeply felt unease over the expression and recognition of prestige claims” (117). In this account, the middlebrow’s nontransgressive posture is one registration of befuddlement. As a legacy of romanticism, the conflation of beauty and cultural distinction with transgression was institutionalized by modernism and has dominated the academy (Bourdieu, Distinction 47). The middlebrow’s “panicked” desire for cultural respectability, the ultimate reason for shunning transgression, is an obstacle to that respectability—a fact the middlebrow, lacking insight into high culture by definition, cannot fathom.

Before a critique of the middlebrow could be formulated, the highbrow-lowbrow distinction had to crystallize. In The Making of Middlebrow Culture (1992), Joan Shelley Rubin explains that in English-speaking contexts the distinction’s physiological character “derived from phrenology and carried overtones of racial differentiation. Transformed into a description of intellectual caliber, ‘highbrow’ was, in the 1880s, already synonymous with ‘refined’; twenty years later, ‘lowbrow’ came to denote a lack of cultivation” (xii). Because these formations were first associated with reading tastes, the middlebrow was initially identified as an aspirational “female” space dominated by literary women bent on self-improvement. After Van Wyck Brooks called for a “genial middle ground” between highbrow literature and lowbrow entertainment, Margaret Widdemer in 1933 applied the term “middlebrow” to “the majority reader,” whom she situated between the “tabloid addict class” and the “tiny group of intellectuals” (qtd. in Rubin xii–xiii; see also Levine). Thereafter, the term was invested with its lasting derogatory meaning by highbrow critics like Virginia Woolf, Dwight Macdonald, and...
Clement Greenberg (see Carroll 16–49). Uniting these seminal critiques of the middlebrow was the idea that interchange between “high” and “low” represents a violation of the purity of both. Associated with folk art’s “authenticity,” the low supplants the middle in this hierarchy of cultural value because the middle is framed as a uniquely “inauthentic” fusion of high and low impulses driven by commercial purposes (see Wilinsky 84–86). As a result, in the alarmist rhetoric of these mid-twentieth-century diatribes, the middlebrow was depicted as a “slime” or “jelly,” a soft, feminized “ooze” that threatens to blur or erase “natural” differences in class and taste (see Woolf 180–84; Macdonald, 54). In the postmodern era, these critiques have gained urgency as high-low distinctions have been dismantled, fomenting regular counterattacks by conservatives bent on retaining hard, masculinized standards that guarantee their institutional prestige. Distinguished by an elegiac tone, such jeremiads lament the loss, as James Twitchell notes, of the clear middle “border between Lower Aesthetica and Upper Vulgaria” (23).

At the same general moment that critiques of the middlebrow emerged in other fields, cinematic tastemakers, proponents of auteur theory in particular, began articulating the belief that a taste for the kind of mainstream storytelling that classical Hollywood was so good at was symptomatic of a middlebrow sensibility whose impurity was gendered feminine. Throughout the twentieth century, sacralization processes across the arts had favored a pure, modernist abstraction that (ostensibly) resisted commercial vulgarization, so it is logical that Hollywood’s commercial and technical mastery of narrative realism would complicate postwar efforts to elevate cinema to the elite status accorded painting, music, and even photography. For this masculinized idea of cinematic purity to take hold, tastemakers also had to distinguish Cinema from classical exploitation films, which had replaced low nineteenth-century fictions and then early Hollywood films as the target of reformers—but only in their most aspirational incarnations did films in this low tradition represent a threat to highbrow taste formations. An auteur-based idea of film as elite Cinema did not gain wide acceptance until the 1960s. Ironically, film’s fine art status was immediately rendered insecure by two other events of that tumultuous decade: the sexual revolution and the advent of postmodernist dehierarchization.

This complex of factors has informed the striking virulence with which highbrows have greeted producers like Jaeckin, Radley Metzger, Joe Sarno, and Zalman King, who have specialized in feminized, upper-middlebrow forms of sexploitation like aspirational softcore. Bent on protecting Cinema’s hard-won, relatively recent, ever-insecure status, cinemophiles have denounced these middlebrow auteurs as “interlopers” who threaten to dilute the medium’s masculine purity. This distinctive invective is not applied to
straightforwardly commercial films that “know their place” but has instead been reserved for vehicles whose synthesis of sexual spectacle and auteurism has yielded a provisional cachet. During the classical era, this cachet—and, by extension, this highbrow vitriol—often resulted from sexploitation’s crossover distribution on the arthouse circuit, where sex films could gain the coveted and elastic “art film” designation.

Here Metzger’s straddling of the high-low border between arthouse and grindhouse is instructive. According to Elena Gorfinkel, Metzger distinguished his work from that of his more lowbrow rivals, Russ Meyer most famously, by specializing in a feminized “art-porn hybrid” that “took advantage of the slippages, misrecognitions and overlaps between the grind-house and the art-house to maximise audience attendance” (28, 29). In the early 1960s, Metzger imported and distributed European art films (a term then even more synonymous with “sexy” foreign films than now) through his New York label, Audubon Films. Metzger edited these films to satisfy distinct audiences. Arthouses got the tamer spectacle, the unhappier endings, and the subtitles, while grindhouses got racier sex, “Hollywood endings,” and dubbed dialogue. He also shot his increasingly female-oriented sexploitation films, which he referred to not as “exploitation” but as “class specialty films,” or ‘class sex” (qtd. in Gorfinkel 30). He thus implied that his main appeal was to the “sophisticated filmgoer, not to the skinflick audience” (qtd. in Gorfinkel 30). Gorfinkel’s estimate, these overtures created the “alibi of a middlebrow spectator who wants, presumably, to be educated and edified more than entertained and aroused. . . . In an attempt to make arousal ‘elegant,’ Metzger’s films can be seen as part . . . of a middle-class pornography, a niche market expanded to include less the maligned all male ‘raincoat brigade’—envisioned as the true audience of sexploitation—but more the newly targeted ‘date crowd’” (30–31). Gorfinkel concludes that “Metzger promoted an aspirational project . . . classing his films in terms of the already available and upper-middlebrow tenets of the art-house patron” (32). It is worth noting that even as Metzger’s rhetoric of distinction worked to dissociate his films from the grindhouse audience, he still marketed his films to that group, drawing crossover audiences to arthouse and grindhouse alike. Though seemingly exclusivist, the director’s elitist terminology was inseparable from his commercial object, which was to create films that could move freely through multiple venues.

Metzger’s insight, then, was to discern the multivalent distribution possibilities of the art film. Since 1934, when the Czech film Ecstasy (1933) was released in the United States, Americans had equated this rubric with a titilating, “Eurosex” blend of nudity and sexual symbolism. As my next section indicates, this association could emerge only after Hollywood began enforc-
ing its Production Code in 1934. Because pre-Code Hollywood was notoriously “sinful,” until then no firm distinction could be drawn between salutary domestic “entertainment” and scabrous-yet-classy foreign films. By the late 1950s, the exploitation circuit had diversified to such an extent that certain theaters specialized in art films while others specialized in much less rarified material. The prosperous vehicles, Metzger realized, appealed to more than one segment of the circuit. In this respect, Roger Vadim’s Brigitte Bardot art film, . . . And God Created Woman (1956), offered Metzger a useful model, for its arty, heroine-driven sexualization enabled it to move “from art house to grindhouse with no alternation” (Schaefer, Bold 336).

It should not, though, be assumed that Metzger’s aspirationalism—which yielded the soft, deflective surfaces of literary adaptations like Carmen, Baby (1966), Therese and Isabelle, and Camille 2000 (1969)—was a “purely” mercenary pretense. In tandem with his industrial niche, the sexualization and feminization of Metzger’s work made him vulnerable to this reduction, which is a variant of Marcus’s rejection of erotica. Such critiques rest on three anticonsumerist myths. These writers imagine that there is something inherently dirty “in” commerce. They assume the existence of more-or-less “magical” Artists who secure distribution while evading market pressures. And they decide that art molded by commercial intentions cannot have been guided by other sincerities, specifically aesthetic ones. The last myth is clearly inapplicable to Metzger, who was subject to a middlebrow elitism that caused him to agonize quite unnecessarily over commercial compromises. In “Twice As Elegant,” his interview with Turan and Zito, Metzger deploys an array of allusions that verify his taste and place him in the company of Ingmar Bergman and Stanley Kubrick; he also evinces sensitivity to a species of criticism that categorizes via reduction (69–70). The interview’s subtext is his unhappiness at having been pigeonholed as “just another dirty filmmaker” supplying the raincoat brigade with masturbation material (Turan and Zito 68). It is no wonder that such dismissals bothered Metzger. They implied his violation of neo-Kantian principles of disinterestedness, which Bourdieu and others cite as the foundation of aesthetic ideology (Distinction 488–90), and his exclusion from elite culture as well (Turan and Zito 68–69).

Highbrow vitriol continues to greet revivals of Metzger’s work. Bart Testa’s 1999 Spectator article, “Soft-Shaft Opportunism: Radley Metzger’s Erotic Kitsch,” exemplifies such vitriol. This long essay is a peculiarly informative synthesis of insight and invective in which Testa subjects Metzger’s films to elaborate analysis, all to situate the filmmaker as “the late-Sixties’ preeminent charlatan of soft-shaft kitsch-eroticism” and as an airy “interloper” whose “critical recuperation should [not] be sought” (41, 52, 43).
Testa’s caustic article is unusual in the detail that it devotes to Metzger’s work, but it remains arbitrarily reductive in that it cannot admit that the director was perhaps motivated by sincere and heterogeneous intentions. Instead, Testa pretends to know that “Metzger was an erotic charlatan with no mission but securing his market niche” (45). Testa’s elitist terminology specifically recalls the language of Greenberg’s classic treatise “Avant-garde and Kitsch” (1939) and other influential highbrow critiques. (Indeed Testa even cites Greenberg to “prove” his devaluation of Metzger [46, 57n17].) In these pieces, the middlebrow artist is always a feminizing “vulgarizer,” who, as Macdonald puts it, “pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact [he] waters them down and vulgarizes them” (37).

It is telling that Testa deploys the term “soft” to reinforce his snooty formulations and singles out Metzger’s softest, most feminized devices to illustrate the filmmaker’s pretentiousness and the particular worthlessness of his nonhardcore films (46–49, 54–55). Testa’s derogatory uses of “soft” point to the high-middle dynamic that still informs the gendered connotations of “softcore.” They also disclose the links that these mechanisms share with softcore’s most distinctive and, from a highbrow vantage, diluted and diluting mode: soft focus. The history of this mode is my next subject.

III. THE DISTINCTION “IN” SOFT FOCUS

Thus, when D.W. Griffith began to use his soft-focus lens to give added beauty or mystery to a shot and the idea was hailed as an advance in art, we had an era of fuzzy pictures which I am afraid did more to irritate the fans than to charm them. If a cameraman didn’t have a real soft-focus lens, he merely threw his regular lens a bit out of focus and felt artistic for the rest of that day.

—WILLIAM DEMILLE (qtd. in Bordwell et al. 96)

Soft-focus cinematography is softcore’s most familiar distinction strategy. This tradition derives from a long symbiosis. The soft effects still visible in the cheapest, shot-on-video softcore can be traced to the aspirational gestures of photographers and cinematographers in diverse genres and media. Leon Hunt reminds us that sexploitation’s “cultural affiliations and modes of looking” diverge saliently from those of hardcore, a fact he attributes to sexploitation’s genealogy, which represents “the convergence of two aesthetic/cultural traditions—the dubious ‘respectability’ of art photography and forms of lowbrow popular entertainment” (92). This history points all the way to impressionism, whose stylistics helped inspire photography’s
pictorialist movement. Photographers then disseminated the “soft style” to cinematography, where it manifested in the Hollywood films of the 1920s and 1930s. The soft style later became a middlebrow expedient liable to emerge in any cultural context. Its trademark glow has been closely linked to the 1960s and 1970s and is recalled as one of the sexual revolution’s primary “looks,” as implied by the phrase “the soft-focus seventies.” During that period, aspirational sexploiteers like Metzger, Sarno, and Jaeckin widened their distribution by using soft focus to lend their imagery crossover appeal; similar tactics were used by softcore magazines like Penthouse and Playboy. When softcore films resurfaced during the postfeminist nineties, they did so under the middlebrow auspices of King, a soft-focus innovator.

Contemporary softcore still exploits the conceptual import of this genealogy. That is, the soft style still functions not as an autotelic aesthetic but as a fully conventional signifier of softcore’s interest in romantic fantasy, female eroticism, and “sin”; it also suggests the genre’s aspiration for a middlebrow seriousness and a spiritualized sexuality. Furthermore, soft focus has a practical benefit in that it limits explicitness. There has, however, been a penalty for “siphoning” impressionism’s aura. Since the early twentieth century, soft-focus practitioners have been scorned for exploiting a middlebrow aesthetic that is shallow, derivative, pretentious, and far too feminine. Highbrows have, moreover, been singularly disdainful of soft focus qua sexploitation style, framing it as an endlessly recycled effort to “dress up” middlebrow porn as high art.

As a decisive influence on Hollywood’s use of soft focus, pictorialist photography exemplifies an important early case of this dynamic. By the 1900s, impressionism had become an academic style with elite credentials and mass appeal. Hence it is logical that pictorialism—which is primarily identified with the first two decades of the twentieth century—attempted to establish its own aesthetic cachet through “an impressionistic soft focus and aestheticized poses” (Shiner 231). More notably, as the “most advanced and self-consciously artistic photography of the day” (Keith Davis 55), the pictorialist movement was the principal engine behind photography’s timid move toward eventual acceptance as a fine art (see Bordwell et al. 292). Its manipulation of low-contrast developing, shallow focus, and idealized or spiritualized material contrived a moody, artificialized atmosphere that diverged sharply from the young medium’s more typical naturalism. That photography’s first broad fine art movement would capitalize on the medium’s potential qua artifice made perfect sense, for it was photography’s mechanized naturalism that had rendered it a suspect art in the eyes of influential critics like Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, Benedetto Croce, Charles Baudelaire, and George Santayana (Shiner 230).
Though respected artists like Edward Steichen, Gertrude Käsebier, and Clarence White contributed to the movement, pictorialism has in retrospect proved something of “an embarrassment” to photography critics intent on promulgating modernist and realist agendas (Keith Davis 55; see Sontag, *Photography* 119–20). As Keith Davis relates, “Even appreciative critics, who applaud the beauty of the images, tend to consider the movement as a whole intellectually shallow. At its least sympathetic, modernist criticism has judged pictorialism to be wrong-headed and retrograde, a willful violation of the medium’s essential nature and shamelessly imitative of second-rate painting. For such critics, the pictorialist era represents a futile—if mercifully temporary—deviation from the historical path of ‘real’ photography” (55). The “real” is defined here as a hard-edged naturalism—thus the “straight photography” salon aesthetic is often viewed as a rejection of pictorialist aestheticization (Keith Davis 130)—and gendered as a masculine entity. It is unsurprising, then, that pictorialism, which was known for its inclusiveness of female artists, was rejected “as entirely too ‘feminine’” by the modernists of the predominantly male Stieglitz circle (Keith Davis 124).

A similar interplay is visible in Hollywood’s use of the soft style, but with new intonations of depravity. According to Kristin Thompson, cinematographers were, much like photographers, “eager to prove that cinema, too, was an art” (Bordwell et al. 292), so it makes sense that the soft style was one of film’s early sacralization strategies. Hewing closely to pictorialism, directors like D. W. Griffith duplicated the soft effects of still photography in their cinematography (Bordwell et al. 287). While a soft, shallow focus was considered useful for foregrounding a figure, the primary “justification for using the soft style was beauty—not simply feminine beauty, but beauty of the whole composition” (Bordwell et al. 288). But “feminine beauty” was not to be discounted. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, the soft style proved popular in “glamour” portraiture, which was favored by Hollywood actresses eager to enhance their pulchritude by obscuring their blemishes. Typically called “gauzy,” these and other soft shots were often literally filmed through gauzes (Bordwell et al. 290–91).

Mark Vieira’s *Sin in Soft Focus: Pre-Code Hollywood* (1999) demonstrates that this conjunction of soft focus and femininity was thoroughly sexualized during the silent and early talkie eras. This sexualization was a function of a more pervasive Hollywood eroticism that was either sublimated or banished after 1934. Indeed, motifs that later became stockexploitation elements—tub scenes, bondage motifs, orgies, even “lesbian” numbers—found their first expression in these Hollywood productions. Because of the cinema’s mass allure and specific appeal to the young, this sexualization was met with hostility by a familiar mix of conservatives and reformist progressives, which
culminated in Hollywood’s enforcement of the Code. But before that moment, the soft style had a very complex utility. The cinema’s heightened eroticism led to an equation between soft focus and female immorality, an appeal that Hollywood openly exploited amid the difficult conditions of the Depression. Indeed, this equation was so central to the period that Vieira—who often refers to the soft style as “sinful soft focus” and to actresses like Clara Bow and Alice Faye as “sin in soft focus” (212, 75)—employs it as his titular paradigm. Intriguingly, the soft style was also used as an obscuring tactic that kept the censors at bay without diminishing a film’s appeal, for it allowed studios to soften and disguise potentially objectionable female elements with the same “mysterious” élan that it deployed to soften and disguise female blemishes.

Of course, it was because of this overt commercialism that soft-focus sensuality was ultimately less successful at lending fine art cachet to film
than to photography, which was one of many reasons Cinema had to wait until after midcentury for the auteur movement to complete its “official” hierarchization. What is more, in its own time and/or in retrospect, the soft style in Hollywood productions of the 1920s and 1930s was criticized for its deviation from a strict, hard-edged realism—and from the use of related techniques like deep focus and the long shot—which influential theorists like André Bazin posited as Cinema's essential province. Just as pictorialism was critiqued by modernists as middlebrow, the Hollywood soft style was assailed for its feminizing pretensions, which, as critics pointed out, could lead to major problems in continuity (Bordwell et al. 292). William DeMille’s flippant take on the soft style thus represents the common view that the style sacrificed much “in the name of superficial art.” What this view does not admit, though, is that through this style the industry gained fan appeal through sex.

Figure 3. The paradigmatic image of soft-focus fantasy: Sylvia Kristel in a production still from Just Jaeckin’s Emmanuelle (1974). ©Tri-
Through Hollywood usage, the soft style made a broad yet seamless transition from fine art strategy to distribution-savvy sexploitation technique. This segue influenced later, more openly pornographic forms, which were often content to use the established appeal of soft focus to position themselves as middlebrow and thus respectable enough to remain in the public eye. Postwar publications like *Playboy* and *Penthouse* differentiated themselves from déclassé porn through a pluralistic juxtaposition of sexual materials and “serious” nonsexual materials, with *Playboy* in particular earning accolades for its fiction and reportage. By the late 1960s, these publications sought to enhance their legitimacy by featuring pictorials that aspired to be just as serious as their articles. Such aspiration was apparent in the pictorials’ use of soft focus, which blended Hollywood’s pre-Code penchant for soft eroticism with pictorialism’s still-photo techniques. Indeed, Hefner was notably unwilling to concede that *Playboy* pictorials were any less elite than the rest of the magazine, insisting that its nudes had intrinsic artistic value—a stance that by turns incensed and delighted his more elitist critics (Jancovich, “Placing” 4). In recent decades, *Playboy* and *Penthouse* have reduced their reliance on soft lenses, but both continue to equate quality with stylization. *Playboy* is now known for idealizing its nudes through heavy airbrushing and a high-gloss finish, while *Penthouse* uses a broader range of techniques that includes grainy black-and-white photography.

After midcentury—and especially amid the “soft-focus seventies”—the influence of the soft style became too pervasive to plot individual legacies with precision. Indeed, by that point, this cultural cross-pollination was so pervasive and involute that Roger Ebert’s notion that Jaeckin’s porno-chic style imitated *Penthouse* imagery is entirely plausible. As the examples of *Playboy* and *Penthouse* indicate, soft focus became a fully conventional cultural signifier of feminized sensuality that retained its upper-middlebrow hint of “serious” aesthetic interest. These significations were operative as well when soft focus made incursions into classical sexploitation by dint of the linked aspirations of Metzger and Jaeckin, and they would again be operative during the late 1980s when King redeployed soft focus as a post-feminist style that corporate softcore could subsequently adopt as a newly meaningful prototype. Since I have already looked at Metzger and devote my fifth chapter to King, it is appropriate that I focus briefly here on Jaeckin’s porno-chic blockbuster, *Emmanuelle*—a film that, in addition to spawning dozens of official sequels and unofficial rip-offs, quite literally set the “template for 1,000 soft-focus softcore fantasy sequences on film and paper” (Cox 2).

An X-rated French import, *Emmanuelle* functioned during porno-chic as a high-profile exemplar of the softcore concept. The film’s solemn soft focus created an obvious contrast with the lowbrow comic realism of *Deep
Throat, its hardcore doppelgänger (see Lewis 227). Like many other sexploitation directors, Jaeckin imported his soft style from fashion photography. Known for “lavish set designs shot in soft-focus” (May 148–49), the Jaeckin style is so extreme that the shimmer that pervades Emmanuelle often threatens to swallow its heroine (Sylvia Kristel) whole; witness, for example, the girl-girl sequence that takes place on a squash court. A dreamlike soft focus is also apparent in the erotic still photos that motivate the heroine’s initial descent into adventurism. This link to the protagonist’s central motivation suggests that Jaeckin views soft focus as more than “frosting,” more than a commercial glamour tactic. By linking his theme of metasexual discovery to aesthetics and soft-focus aestheticization, the director instead intimates that his trademark style is an ethereal effusion of feminine beauty and a complement to the pious sexual education that Emmanuelle seeks, which resembles what Michel Foucault has called the ars erotica view of sex as experiential truth (57).

Jaeckin’s earnest focus on his heroine’s psychosexual transformation recalls the tactics of Mac Ahlberg in I, a Woman (1966) and harks back to heroine-driven art films of the 1950s and early 1960s. Sexploiteers like Ahlberg and Jaeckin might have been blamed for exploiting their actresses’ physiques but could hardly be blamed for slighting their heroines’ psychologies. Such “subjectifications” would prove crucial to softcore’s efforts to insulate itself from censure and thus to expand into mainstream markets. What Emmanuelle does more plainly (and ponderously) than other antecedents is to underscore a postfeminist link between the soft style and female subjectivity. Such modestly progressive implications were absorbed into softcore's discursive vocabulary, establishing a soft-focus resource that directors like King, whose influence by Jaeckin is noted by Linda Ruth Williams (“Oldest” 25), could tap as a standard implication of this venerable legitimation technique.

This reasoning should not imply that Emmanuelle is free of regressive motifs. As critics have increasingly pointed out, the narrative, which is set in Thailand, has a paternalist and specifically colonialist logic (Willemen 13–14; Linda Ruth Williams, “Oldest” 26). The heroine’s education is dominated by misogynists like the libertine philosopher Mario (former New Wave star Alain Cuny), who urges her to “step into a forbidden land of eroticism”—and then subjects her to a gang rape and makes her the “prize” in a brutal kickboxing match. The film’s sexism is therefore closely linked to its “racist excursions into exotic domains” (Koch 152), where upper-class foreigners use lower-class natives as playthings. Jaeckin’s earnest use of soft focus may, in short, be situated as a postfeminist feminization strategy that works not only to justify the film’s pornographic effects but also to lend a metaphysical seriousness to its colonialist worldview.
Given that a subdued form of “the exotic” remains a stock motif of aspirational softcore, it is no accident that King and other producers have remained reliant on soft-focus feminization. But what I find most depressing about this is that critics still tend to dismiss “soft-shaft” directors like Metzger, Jaeckin, and King simply for using soft focus. These directors are, in other words, most often impugned for making an a priori “mistake,” a middlebrow mistake—and not for using soft focus in a politically dubious fashion. (It should be remembered, though, that soft focus is one of many popular techniques criticized for being somehow essentially “non-participatory,” so by that rather thin reasoning, it has been considered a political mistake.)

Indeed, that Jaeckin, like Metzger, continues to elicit highbrow invective confirms that soft-focus feminization is still (wrongly) perceived as a threat to aesthetic values and to the cultural distinctions that they seem to warrant. From a broad cultural perspective, then, Jaeckin’s remarkable success has, sadly, only reinforced the vague sense of inferiority that has long interlaced a “debased” style (soft focus), an “impure” genre (softcore), a “diluted” class ethos (the middlebrow), and a “second-rate” gender (femininity).

This nexus of presumed abjection explains the negative slant of “softcore,” “soft porn,” and “soft focus.” Their derogation is rooted in the essentialist illusion that soft, feminized, middlebrow forms are watered-down entities. Though such impurity marks their sexual nature as unthreatening and thus salable, they remain at best “easy pleasures” devoid of the redeeming purities, excesses, and transgressions of harder forms. What this dynamic also indicates is that, barring some unaccountably radical shift in cultural beliefs about sex, class, gender, and aesthetics, a genre like contemporary softcore is unlikely to ever have its cake (its niche in the commercial mainstream) and eat it, too (earn substantive cultural respect and, in a sense, self-respect). Though softcore has been distinguished from hardcore by its presence in the broadest outlets, its toleration there is predicated on its tacit acceptance of the elitist, antiseual, masculinized value system that constructs its principal textual qualities—including sexualization and feminization as well as “middlebrowness” and softness—as marks of inferiority. As we shall see, contemporary softcore almost invariably indicates that this formula not only institutionalizes cultural inferiority but also encourages self-consciousness, contradiction, and bad faith. It is unsurprising, then, that slighting references to “softcore,” “soft porn,” and “soft focus” have even pervaded the softcore genre itself.