Soft in the Middle
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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Andrews, David.
Soft in the Middle: The Contemporary Softcore Feature in Its Contexts.
The Ohio State University Press, 2006.
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The Disorderly Feminization of Classical Sexploitation

Tracing the Genealogy of Contemporary Softcore

Any comparison of the contemporary American softcore feature to its classical precursors is bound to reveal stark differences in repetition and standardization. Relative to its antecedents, softcore is today a fixed postfeminist genre with narrow room for ideological idiosyncrasy and improvisation; this is truest of the genre’s most prolific strain, corporate softcore. Still, that sexploitation was in its classical phase less routinized than it has been over the past fifteen years (and over the past ten in particular) should not obscure the fact that elements of the genre’s contemporary identity were already nascent in sexploitation at the time of classical softcore’s inception in the late 1960s. This genealogy may, in fact, be traced back to the burlesque films of the 1950s. Such elements had an adaptive value that rendered them attractive under the altered political, economic, and technological circumstances of the late 1980s and early 1990s. When in those years American producers and distributors evinced renewed enthusiasm for softcore, they steadily favored postfeminist elements—and what had been a disparate, disorderly, often lowbrow form became a much more static and domesticated one.

Given classical sexploitation’s bewildering immensity—director William Rotsler has, for example, estimated that two thousand sexploitation films were made between 1959 and 1973 (Turan and Zito 228)—my narrow focus on this particular lineage is a critical necessity as well as a useful way of
charting a protocontemporary succession. The three principal elements of this succession are the use of a female protagonist, the emphasis on the female face, and the liberal treatment of female desire. The theme that organizes these devices is female subjectivity. By the time classical softcore emerged around 1967 or 1968, it was common, though not the rule, for exploitation narrative to focus on the psychosexual experience of a single heroine or, less commonly, a group of interlinked women, each of whom was the protagonist of a discrete arc. This convention had its complement in what remains one of the most iconic signifiers of softcore spectacle: the female face expressing or “performing” sexual ecstasy. The foregrounding of these twin elements contributed to the feminization and ideological moderation of the vehicles in which they appeared, yielding a trend toward tolerant, consumerist trajectories in which female subjectivity had increasing room to “play.” Especially in the work of directors like Radley Metzger and Joe Sarno, the convergence of such motifs betrayed the intercession of a European art film tradition in which the “awakening” of female desire was a fixture as far back as the 1933 film Ecstasy. But this classical convergence was also an extension of a homegrown lineage rooted in burlesque films and nudie cuties.

One of classical sexploitation’s most notable tendencies, its stress on misogyny, violence, and excess, complicates and contradicts this liberal progression. Indeed, some of the most significant categories of sexploitation, including roughies, kinkies, and softcore, rely on a crucial rape discourse. The prevalence of these shock tactics points to the genre’s prefeminist character, which is linked to its nonmainstream exhibition. What I find most intriguing, however, is how subtly interwoven such tactics are with the feminization of classical sexploitation—and how often such tactics are thematically justified through the genre’s larger focus on female desire. Nevertheless, the exploitation paradigms that most clearly anticipate the contemporary either frame such tactics in a careful, feminized manner or avoid them altogether. These loose categories include the “awakening sexuality” paradigm, the “suburban” paradigm, and the “empowered babe” paradigm. Coming to the fore in the late 1960s, the third category reflects the impact of second-wave feminism through its assertive, independent heroines who embody a “middle feminism.” Typically depicted in the workplace, such heroines at times adopt action roles. By the mid-1970s, these paradigms had yielded a consistent body of sexploitation films that feature a progressive focus on a postfeminist form of female agency that neither rejects male companionship nor directly challenges the patriarchy—but that does resist male attempts to restrict female potential.
I. NUDIST FILMS, BURLESQUE FILMS, NUDIE CUTIES

As far back as early cinema, female nudity—or its soft, teasing promise—had a place on the screen. Whether through the exposure of a woman’s foot, ankle, and calf as in the narrative featurette The Gay Shoe Clerk (1903; Linda Williams, Hard 65–67) or the draped spectacle of Fatima’s “cooch dance” as recorded at the Columbian Exposition (1893; Lennig 36–37), this imagery excited a desire and a dread that contributed to the pervasive erection of obstacles (local statutes, censorship boards, the Production Code, etc.) blocking the commercial distribution of such material. During the 1910s and 1920s, hardcore stags and various inexplicit products were restricted to the private sphere, where illicit or semi-licit exhibition ensured their low profile. Though Hollywood was at that time notorious for its sexualization (Schaefer, Bold 295), the industry proscribed nudity through the introduction of its “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” in 1927 and its eventual enforcement of the Production Code in 1934. Inexplicit sexual content therefore became a prime attraction of classical exploitation, as screened in questionable theaters outside the aegis of the classical Hollywood distribution net. Contemporary softcore derives most directly from these publicly exhibited feature-length films.

Two exploitation subgenres are of special concern: nudist films and burlesque films. Other exploitation subgenres, including sex-hygiene films, vice films, and exotics, drew a portion of their appeal from fugitive glimpses of nudity (Schaefer, Bold 86–87, 267–71, 290–91). But nudist films and burlesque films placed a more fundamental stress on such spectacle. Accordingly, these subgenres often display the rudiments of softcore’s narrative-number organization; they also provide early instances of still-extant softcore devices. An intriguing aspect of their divergent sensibilities is their divergent treatment of the female body. Relative to burlesque, nudist films are less consumerist in their objectifications of female sexuality and posit a much less subversive idea of female desire.

For the most part, nudist films were documentaries recording the “outré” customs of the nudist movement (or “naturism”) or narratives dramatizing the same. Exploiteers made these films available for American consumption mainly in the 1930s and 1950s. Two features that instantiate each “wave” are This Nude World (1932) and The Naked Venus (1958). Like most of the first wave (see Schaefer, Bold 296–98), This Nude World adopts an “ethnographic” documentary approach, depicting nudist camps in America, France, and Germany. Dominated by shots of nudists engaged in self-consciously healthy activities like tug-of-war and volleyball, the documentary
reinforces nudism’s idea of itself as a salutary, Thoreauvian lifestyle. The Naked Venus, by contrast, is a narrative interspersed with a static, posed brand of spectacle. Unlike the documentaries, it has a (very) loosely dichotomous structure that prefigures the nudie cutie.

The Naked Venus has a fairly simple plot. Bob (Don Roberts), an American painter of nudes, takes his French wife Yvonne (Patricia Conelle) to his native California, where his domineering mother discovers that she has been his model. In the ensuing struggle for Bob’s affections, Yvonne flees with her child to a nudist camp. The plot culminates in a divorce trial in which nudity’s aesthetic utility is used to validate nudity as such. According to the curator who certifies the value of Bob’s work, “art essentially is beauty and as such pure—never morally objectionable . . . everything instrumental in bringing it about must be considered morally clean.” In light of this “expert” testimony, the trial exculpates the French wife, who reconciles with Bob in France.

The Naked Venus’s construction of a system of correspondences interlinking art, nudity, liberalism, and France had ample precedent. As the stir caused by art films like Malle’s Les Amants (1958) verifies, American filmgoers of the day equated Europe, France in particular, with a classy but titillating blend of art and sex (see Lewis 129–33). But the film’s association of artist model and nudist—and the inexplicable thread that has Yvonne turn to a nudist camp for sanctuary—is more peculiar. As Eric Schaefer notes (Bold 302), the nudist film’s tendency to draw on “the discourse of fine art” was related to the nudist movement’s use of ancient Greece to legitimate itself. Because this civilization’s “refined” classical ideals are linked to its liberal attitudes toward the body, “the nudist films were made, although not always received, in a way that aligned them with art” (Schaefer, Bold 316).

This tenuous link was useful in that it allowed nudism to replicate art’s historical feat of insulating itself from the moral stigmas attached to its bodily content via neo-Kantian principles of disinterest. Witness the curator, whose role in the story is to extend this “purity” from art world to nudist camp. Nudist films in this mold, then, neutralize the threat of their passive nudity through two contrary didacticisms: the elitist discourse of fine art and the reactionary discourse of naturism.

Unlike the nudist, the artist model is one of few motifs common to the nudist film and contemporary softcore. As a justification of nudity, this motif has a long history. In the 1933 pre-Code film Another Language, director Edward Griffith used “a totally nude woman” in shooting an art class scene featuring Helen Hayes (Vieira 130; see 142). Now a straightforwardly sexualized device, the artist model is still common in aspirational films like Zalman King’s Delta of Venus (1995) and Anne Goursaud’s Poison Ivy 2: Lily
(1995). That this motif remains a staple is not peculiar, given its fitness for providing the aestheticized eroticism favored by softcore. More telling is the absence of the nudist. With the decline of the nudie cuties, the nudist, understood as an ideological figure and not a mere sunbather, disappeared from sexploitation, and contemporary softcore has not revived her. This absence is conspicuous in that sexploitation has relentlessly recycled any motif that facilitates integration of narrative and nudity; it is for this reason that strippers and nude models are formulaic figures. The nudists’ antisexual rhetoric was, it appears, accurate. Despite the efforts of exploiteers to use the movement for titillation, naturism’s claim “that sexual feelings were drained from situations where everyone was naked [was] a fact borne out by later studies” (Schaefer, Bold 297). Such anti-eroticism was reinforced by the movement’s atavism, with its insistence on nature and childhood. That today’s softcore does not rely on nudism for titillation is no more surprising, then, than the fact that it does not rely on birth-of-a-baby footage, another exploitation staple once exploited as an “educational” source of female nudity.

Conversely, the burlesque film actively underscores its sexual potential. Its legacy to softcore includes a teasing yet consumerist attitude toward sexuality; a kinetic depiction of women, including hints of inner desire; and many individual motifs. A case could even be made for classifying burlesque as the first sexploitation form. Classical sexploitation has traditionally been dated to 1959, the year of Meyer’s The Immoral Mr. Teas; this is the chronology handed down from producers to scholars (e.g., see Friedman 164). Yet in several respects, burlesque films like Meyer’s French Peep Show (1952), Jerald Intrator’s Striporama (1953), and Irving Klaw’s Varietease (1954) and Teaserama (1955) form an even more compelling departure than the later nudie cuties.

Schaefer supports his interpretation of Mr. Teas as a “decisive break from classical exploitation” by noting the film’s consumerist insouciance (Bold 338). Mr. Teas ironizes exploitation’s central “critique of modernity,” parodying a reactionary theme formerly dramatized with utter gravity; this light, consumerist tone had become more acceptable during the post-Playboy era. That Mr. Teas and later nudie cuties scuttled the “square-up,” an element crucial to exploitation’s self-legitimation strategy, was in keeping with this ideological departure. According to Schaefer, the “lack of a square-up was perhaps the greatest point of divergence between classical exploitation and sexploitation and a clear indicator of the changed moral climate. . . . If the new sexploitation films did not wax philosophical about consumption in the same overt way that Playboy did, they were still a manifestation of the economic changes that had increasingly expanded the acceptable sphere of...
“desire” (Bold 338–39). The problem with this useful insight is not its validity but its applicability to burlesque. Like later nudie cuties, burlesque films often jettisoned the square-up’s didactic function. And the nudie cutie and burlesque were more open about sexual desire—heterosexual male desire, specifically—than the nudist film, which, like other exploitation forms, relied on classical exploitation’s repressive social-reform trappings as cover for the voyeuristic desire to which its carnal spectacle intentionally appealed.

Witness Striporama, which does contain a square-up. Rather than cloaking itself in anticonsumerist rhetoric, the film’s preface addresses a viewer whom it constructs as male so as to assert the pleasurable solidarity of spectatorship: “So Brother, if you are a connoisseur of the motion picture arts—and come in here to be critical of the production values . . . you better get the ‘Hell’ out to the Box Office right NOW and try to get your money back . . . On the other hand . . . if you came in here to see the GIRLS . . . and enjoy yourself . . . just sit back and relax . . .” Here exploitation’s moralistic self-consciousness and “productivist” ideology have been exchanged for a more consumerist anxiety anent class and taste. What differentiates this demotic entreaty from the middlebrow ideology of most contemporary softcore is its aggressive embarrassment. It freely admits its shortcomings and foregoes any pretense of “respectability” in favor of pure Entertainment. In Bourdieu’s account, this belligerent defensiveness is the hallmark of the low, whose colonized sense of inferiority represents “a dominated ‘aesthetic’ which is constantly obliged to define itself in terms of the dominant aesthetics” (Distinction 41). But despite Striporama’s inability to provide the production values and other indices of taste and class that “dominate” its consumerist sensibility, the fact that the film adopts this amoral posture at all marks it as, in a sense, more liberated and modern than many later exploitation forms.

According to Schaefer, the most salient component of burlesque’s modernity is its use of female performers who express themselves as desiring agents (Bold 310–24). If burlesque was addressed to men, its focus on female desire prefigured later sexploitation genres that attempted to attract mixed audiences. Performers like Tempest Storm and Betty Page upset demure traditions of femininity predicated on the positioning of women as inert objects. Instead, they cast themselves as active exhibitionists, who, complicit with the viewer-voyeur, expressed themselves in unmistakably erotic ways. Through an art “based on a complex relationship among dance, gesture, and costuming,” these burlesque performers also call “attention to the performative aspect of gender” (Bold 315, 314; see Barthes 85–88). Ultimately, their art undermines ideas of fixed sex-and-gender identities, accenting the mutability of femininity and of masculinity. The linchpin of this critical tour de force
is Schaefer’s analysis of the drag passages in Varietease and Teaserama that feature Vicki Lynn, a female impersonator (Bold 317–19).

Nevertheless, as Schaefer notes, it is possible to overstate these arguments (Bold 323). Schaefer, it should be noted, offers a limited challenge to Robert Allen’s thesis, which claims that burlesque curtailed the subversiveness of its performers as a result of its shift from its nineteenth-century middle-class milieu to its twentieth-century working-class environment where it acted “primarily as a vehicle for female nudity” (Bold 304). In building an opposite case, Schaefer seems to minimize the cinematic mechanisms that in the burlesque film contain female agency and eliminate fuller illusions of subjectivity. Allen argues that during burlesque’s twentieth-century devolution, the female performer was all but silenced, and “without a voice it was all the more difficult for [her] body to reclaim its subjectivity” (240). Allen’s reasoning is clearly pertinent to cinematic burlesque, wherein female performers generally do not speak to their audiences. Such voicelessness is in part a function of the genre’s nonnarrative format. The burlesque film has a loose dichotomous structure, which loosely divides between two distinct types of spectacle: mostly female dance routines and mostly male skit comedy. Deprived of diegesis, burlesque performers, unlike their counterparts in later sexploitation forms, do not develop the nonsexualized phases of their agency that might yield a realistic illusion of “personhood”—and thus they cannot fully transcend their mystified, exotic-other status.

The burlesque feature’s more subtle legacies hint at forms of female subjectivity that would sprout in more narrative-oriented contexts. As noted, the female face has long been crucial to sexploitation performance. Though the burlesque feature never directly mimics the sex act, its use of the female physiognomy is its means of evoking sex with the presumably male viewer. Unlike contemporary stripper movies in which dancers interact with staged audiences, burlesque performers recall the early cinema by looking straight into the camera, unflinchingly welcoming the viewer’s gaze. As Tom Gunning notes, early cinema was an openly “exhibitionist cinema” that established a dynamic “contact with the audience” (57). If the burlesque film sacrifices part of the affectivity of the female face by not enmeshing it in a narrative, it in a sense regains a different component of that affectivity by having the female face directly engage the viewer through an eye contact that energizes a whole range of sexual expressions. Witness Teaserama, a film in which the legendary Page, an otherwise hapless burlesque performer, shows a virtuosic mastery of pouty smirks, naughty smiles, and knowing glances.

The closest that burlesque comes to miming sex is its discreet, conventionalized simulation of female masturbation. In Striporama, Varietease, and Teaserama, the dancers often run their hands along their bodies during
numbers, leaving a crucial gap between hand and body. According to Schaefer, autoerotic contact decipherable as such might have elicited penalties (“RE: Thanks,” 20 Mar. 1). The image of the masturbating female was significant not only because it was relentlessly reused by producers who believed in its commercial appeal. It also had a polysemic resonance implying the agency “in” the female other and hinting more specifically that female pleasure always had a performative component. Another contemporary staple visible in ur-form in burlesque is the girl-girl number. In a domestic vignette situated near the start of Teaserama, Page helps Storm, recently arisen from bed, ready herself for the day, dressing her in a merry widow corset, combing her hair, and so on. This inverted striptease is accompanied by the same languorous gestures and eroticized smiles located in the strip sequences. Yet another “active” motif traceable to burlesque spectacle is the venerable tub scene, as exemplified by the “How to Take a Bath” segment of Striporama.10

But this focus on discrete motifs may overlook burlesque’s most salient legacy. Amid an otherwise lowbrow, masculinized, prefeminist form is a stress on the intimate feminine details—what Linda Williams calls the “previously hidden, and often sexual, ‘things’ of women” (Hard 4)—that would become a crux of exploitation’s middlebrow, postfeminist feminization. Burlesque’s glimpses of the woman before her mirror or in her bed, bath, or dressing room anticipate exploitation’s shift from a disorderly, classical genre into a much more domesticated, contemporary one. Given that the burlesque format heavily restricts the agency “in” striptease, it is notable that these glimpses are often a function of vignettes starring performers like Page, Storm, and Lili St. Cyr. If such mininarratives do not result in rounded illusions of personhood, they do at least suggest how difficult it is to dismiss a cinematic genre as “pure” spectacle.

At the conclusion of his section on burlesque, Schaefer notes that the nudie cutie’s arrival meant that burlesque’s challenging sexual spectacle had been “displaced by more conventional representations of passive female sexuality” (Bold 324). Indeed, far from extending burlesque’s subversions, The Immoral Mr. Teas seems to have reversed them in several respects. This is not to downplay the impact of Meyer’s nudie cutie. Valuable for deflating classical exploitation’s anticonsumerist rhetoric, Mr. Teas would serve as a pivotal transition into more explicit, feminized exploitation forms; it also proved to be a rich repository of exploitation motifs. Such motifs begin with the burlesque performer and her tease, as encoded by the title. (Meyer even provides an early example of “product placement” by having his protagonist pass a marquee under which hangs a self-referential sign promoting French Peep Show and its star, Storm.) Other Mr. Teas devices that were later incor-
porated into sexploitation include the film’s nude photography motif, its extensive bathing emphasis, its prostitution theme, its therapist figure, its assortment of mammary and phallic symbols, and its voyeurism theme.

The last device was structurally decisive. It brought onscreen the voyeur implied by the eye contact of the burlesque performer. In nudist films, male observers are desexualized in accord with naturism’s antisexual claims; thus the genre draws few links between internal and external observers. And while burlesque embraces its sexual content and suggests a male voyeur, it leaves the latter offscreen. *Mr. Teas* transforms the implied observer into its hero. It is no accident, then, that sexploitation’s first stock protagonist is not female but male—and specifically, an oafish, middle-aged white man. Teas is the low “common man,” to use Meyer’s wry phrase, whom grindhouse exhibitors saw as making up the “raincoat brigade” that attended burlesque and, later on, sexploitation screenings. As I have noted elsewhere, the observer figure has traditionally been understood as an audience cipher (Andrews, “Convention” 23); *Mr. Teas* clarifies that this standard reading has a precedent in a crucial industrial transition.

But Meyer’s bold move came at a cost, one that would ripple through later nudie cuties. Though he drew courage from decisions like *Excelsior Pictures Corp. v. Regents of the University of the State of New York* (1957), which ruled that nudity *per se* is not obscene, Meyer did not want to press the sexualization of his film beyond the implicit—beyond, that is, the lowbrow symbols and bawdy double entendres he played for laughs, perpetuating the “naughtiness” of the burlesque skit comedy from which *Mr. Teas* and the nudie cuties derived inspiration. By opting to build his plot around an eroticized voyeur, Meyer created an unprecedented erotic potential. In consequence, he exercised caution in his other tactics, including his judicious use of frame devices. Similar caution informs the film’s imagery, explaining the nudie cutie’s regressive reliance on largely passive female spectacle. Most importantly, Meyer constructed his protagonist’s voyeurism as purely visual hence socially harmless, a model adopted by later producers. Even in fantasy, Teas avoids contact with women, as when he jumps into a lagoon to escape a woman who sits beside him. He also avoids consensual contact with strippers; notice the segment in which he perversely enters a burlesque club from the side, peeping on the action rather than engaging in a consensual exhibitionist-voyeur relationship.

Teas’s peeping does not culminate in masturbation or in signs of arousal. Besides Meyer’s desire to avoid sex, antimasturbatory norms that construct autoerotic gestures as effeminate (and comic) inform this restraint. Later vehicles favoring a visibly aroused observer would opt for a female voyeur, letting her make vague, fluttery gestures or, in more explicit produc-
tions, having her palpate her breasts and genitals while miming climax with her face. As variations on the Teas figure, these eroticized observers show producers modifying the genre so as to augment female display. Such tinkering has reinforced the odd cinematic distortion that masturbation is a specifically female activity. Thus later, more atypical films that depict an autoerotic male observer on occasion do so in epicene terms. A more significant corollary of this tinkering is that the new female observer, though objectified and sexualized, is positioned as a subject within the diegesis. Given the widespread assumption that the observer figure represented the audience, this autoerotic woman implied that exploitation’s audience was at least potentially female. As with other devices, the development of the observer involved a gradual process that, in tandem with the demand for greater female objectification, led to greater female subjectification—with women positioned as potential subjects inside and outside the diegesis (see Linda Ruth Williams, Erotic 341). Though at first tenuous, these implications grew so conventional that, by the 1990s, softcore vehicles routinely targeted female audiences.

II. ROUGHIE-KINKY MISOGYNY

Driven by liberal court judgments and an attendant increase in exhibitors willing to play exploitation product, the 1960s witnessed a helter-skelter diversification of forms that persisted through the arrival of hardcore in 1970. Between the exhaustion of the nudie cutie around 1964 and the arrival of softcore around 1968, two overlapping forms, “roughies” and “kinkies,” came to the fore (Turan and Zito 19–25). As Eithne Johnson and Eric Schaefer note, the “lines of distinction” dividing roughies and kinkies were not always clear (48). Generally, the roughie featured less nudity than the nudie cutie but had a fuller narrative. Thus it enhanced the stress on action, violence, and sexual interaction while limiting active sex. The kinky also had a fuller narrative but tended to accent underground sexual practices, particularly sadomasochism. It thus represented the most sexualized presoftcore form. In this phase, the heroine became a stock protagonist and female desire a stock theme. The combination of exploitation’s new emphasis on drama and its prehardcore, prefeminist emphasis on shock meant that female subjectivity was at this time simultaneously rendered in greater detail and subject to greater violence. Since exploitation was so heterogeneous in its production and exhibition, the realization of these tendencies was patent-ly multiform. A roughie like Meyer’s Lorna (1964) is polished and feminized and takes aspirational pains to reconcile its attention to female nudity with an equal attention to female psychology as unified through the theme of...
female desire. At the “other” end of the spectrum, an ultra-low-budget opus like Michael and Roberta Findlay’s *Flesh* trilogy maximizes the misogyny of the roughie-kinky model by deploying the female desire theme but still marginalizing female subjectivity, an outcome facilitated by a brutal reversion to a male protagonist.

Like *Mr. Teas*, *Lorna* embodies a complex set of impulses whose specific formal realization made an outsize impression on the films to follow. This complex ambivalence is already apparent in Meyer’s inspiration: “‘I said, now I must do something like the foreign films, only it will be Erskine Caldwell and it will be a morality play and we’ll borrow heavily from the Bible and I’ll find a girl with giant breasts’” (qtd. in Turan and Zito 22). Meyer’s reference to foreign films is intriguing, given a neglected aspect of his work: its aspirationalism. Due to a taste for burlesque comedy and “giant breasts,” Meyer has often been classed as Metzger’s lowbrow double, which obscures his accomplishments as a cinematographer who developed a kinetic visual style—and whose work drew on the art film tactics of Ingmar Bergman and Roger Vadim. In *Lorna*, this Metzger-esque feminization registers through soft, arty effects and a related stress on the details of the heroine’s domestic existence, including her bathing habits.

*Figure 4.* Rape as female fantasy in Russ Meyer’s *Lorna* (1964). From the collection of Eric Schaefer.
The focus on the heroine’s desire is the most vital component of this feminization. *Lorna*’s plot is rudimentary: Lorna (Lorna Maitland), a young rural heroine, longs for James (James Rucker), her young inept husband, to “make me feel the way he feels when he—” She experiences this rapture when raped by an escaped convict; the narrative ends when her husband kills her and her lover. Thus the film has something in common with the awakening-sexuality model that Metzger and Sarno adapted from European sources like Mac Ahlberg’s *I, a Woman*. But like the softcore thrillers that reestablished softcore in the early 1990s, Meyer’s aspirational roughie places a greater stress on violence than most awakening-sexuality films. On the other hand, *Lorna* differs from postfeminist vehicles in that it uses violence to free the heroine’s orgasmic desire and to recontain it through the gothic action closing the film. Rendered as a rough schema, then, *Lorna*’s stress on consumerist pleasure is gendered feminine, classed as middlebrow, and located as urban. Its anticonsumerist counterstress on retribution is gendered masculine, classed as lowbrow, and located as rural. Such an antithesis serves as a patriarchal check against the social dangers of unbound female desire.¹⁵ That this dénouement is to be read as a punishment of female “weakness” and of the scapegrace who abets it is articulated by the film’s gothic preacher-narrator (James Griffith), a kind of walking square-up who warns, “Woe to the libertine who preys upon the virtue of the weak!”

*Lorna*’s campy moral fabric insulates the film from censorship even as it parodies the antisexual reformism manipulated to the same end by classical exploitation. This complex relation to exploitation ideology implies that Meyer considered this overheated moralism more than “productivist” cover. It was, in fact, crucial to the film’s consumer appeal. By pushing this exploitation tactic to violent, misogynistic excess, Meyer gears it to function as a supplement to the film’s sexual spectacle, which offers less nudity than *Mr. Teas* and the nudie cuties. This supplementation effect is apparent in the film’s two rapes. Neither depicts much sex, but both gain impressive immediacy through Meyer’s violent theme and crisp, energetic style. A similar tendency toward integration—like many roughies, *Lorna* does not divide into a neat narrative-number structure—is visible in every segment involving Lorna, whose buxom physique provides spectacle whether in or out of clothes, whether washing dishes or acquiescing to a “semiconsensual” rape. Both *Lorna*’s violence and its female orientation may, then, be viewed as methods of offsetting the film’s minimal depiction of nudity and interactive sex.

Meyer’s parodic, excessive reversion to the exploitation ideology mocked by *Mr. Teas* clarifies that sexploiteers fashioned and refashioned their ideological visions in accord with a disorderly imperative toward consumer novelty. This bias toward the immoderate, which leads to as much violence as
sex, is apparent among the grindhouse products categorized by the fetish-oriented “kinky” designation. Such films are no less likely than Lorna to focus on female desire—and, as the Olga series (1964–65) confirms, are more likely to manifest this focus through self-consciously unsettling ideas of gender. Produced by George Weiss and directed by Joseph Mawra, the black-and-white Olga franchise fuses the underground allure of Klaw’s 8mm bondage loops starring Page with the feature-length traditions of the drug film and vice film (Landis and Clifford 12). The Olga films thus involve white slavery, prostitution, and drug rings. But the Olga films diverge from earlier exploitation paradigms in framing the crime boss as a woman whose monstrous “otherness” is a function of her transgressive gender identity.

As the literal and symbolic boss of the series, Olga (Audrey Campbell) is an early exemplar of the dominatrix femininity that sexploitation marketed right through the porno-chic era, as confirmed by the 1974 production, Ilsa, She Wolf of the S.S. (Landis and Clifford 9–21, 218–22). Equally interested in sexual pleasure and criminal wealth, Olga is a sadist who, as the head of a syndicate, satisfies her desires by torturing female “employees” in a pervasively squalid milieu, upending the nurturing-womanhood concept that undergirded exploitation ideology. Olga’s fetish for dominance is already set in White Slaves of Chinatown (1964), the first installment in the series, so the franchise does not delve into her psychology, as is common in films depicting a transformative “awakening.” A low, prefeminist fantasy of evil, Olga’s inscrutable self-possession ensures the stability of her otherness, which is crucial to the screechy moralism of the voice-overs that provide this inexpensive franchise with the majority of its dialogue.

But if this campy and decidedly masculinized formula treats its protagonist as pure spectacle, it leaves no doubt that she is an active subject, for she constantly treats women as objects, encouraging others to do the same. In the course of Olga’s House of Shame (1964), seminude women are whipped, spanked, electrocuted, punctured, and literally treated like animals by other women. As this list indicates, Olga’s brutal sexual consumerism favors other women, with most of the active sex scenes exuding a bisexuality that is a vital element of her transgressive dominance. Its most meaningful element, however, is her lack of containment. Unlike Lorna, Olga will not be reined in (i.e., victimized thus feminized) by patriarchal forces. This ongoing pattern is signaled at the close of White Slaves when Olga arranges her submissives by imperiously snapping her fingers in a photo session “that encapsulates the film’s dominance/puppet-master theme” (Landis and Clifford 15). Like Olga’s bisexuality, which has the benefit of maximizing female spectacle, this element is motivated by utilitarian purposes, particularly the decision of Weiss...
and his grindhouse distributor, Stan Borden of American Film Distributing, to serialize the Olga story.

Olga’s lack of containment influenced Michael Findlay, who also worked with Borden, and contributed to the misogyny that dominates his first kinky, *Body of a Female* (1965), and his kinky opus, *The Touch of Her Flesh* (1967), *The Curse of Her Flesh* (1968), and *The Kiss of Her Flesh* (1968). Familiar with the *Olga* series, Findlay and his wife Roberta redesigned the sadistic camp of Weiss and Mawra to punish wayward women, an anticonsumerist posture suited to Findlay’s “sex is bad, you are gonna be punished” sensibility as reported by friend and colleague John Amero (qtd. in Landis and Clifford 37). Amero verifies that Findlay “was absolutely influenced by the old Klaw style” (qtd. in Landis and Clifford 25), implying his reactionary nostalgia for the reliable containments of the older, less threatening tradition of burlesque films and bondage loops.

Played by Findlay, Richard Jennings, the protagonist of the *Flesh* trilogy, is outraged by women, whom he refers to as whores, animals, and monsters. Consider the exemplary sequence of arch double entendres that *Curse* deploys to underline the protagonist’s castration anxieties (e.g., “this little pussy is really a primordial carnivorous beast waiting to tear apart anything it can touch”). *Touch* explains this misogyny through a scenario in which Jennings discovers his wife, Claudia (Suzanne Marre), cheating on him with another man. Stunned, he flees to the streets of the Lower East Side, where he is struck by a car, losing an eye. He is thereafter unhinged and alcoholic, blaming all women for his wife’s betrayal and his injury. Throughout this lo-fi trilogy, Jennings uses his knowledge as a weapons expert to gain revenge by killing society’s most sexualized females, strippers and prostitutes, in addition to his wife. Women are threatened and murdered with baroque gadgets that include a poisoned flower, a blowgun, a crossbow, a circular saw, a cat’s poisoned claw, a sabotaged dildo, a harpoon, a blowtorch, a poisoned ointment, and electrified earrings. The Findlays make no effort to generate sympathy for this murderous misogynist. But because the perspective is so often aligned with this excessive figure, the Findlays also do little to humanize the sketchy female “others” who are in effect relegated to minor roles by dint of Jennings’s droning place in the foreground. This prefeminist element is, perhaps, the trilogy’s most misogynistic attribute, for it indirectly supports Jennings’s rhetoric by positioning women as the objects of its sexual and sadistic spectacle while denying them subject status in the diegesis.

Unlike earlier roughies and kinkies, the *Flesh* films approach a narrative-number dichotomy and contain fairly explicit spectacle. And by 1968, clearly softcore films like William Rotsler’s *Mantis in Lace* and Doris Wishman’s *Love Toy* had arrived. Though not always easy to differentiate from their antecedents, these films are expansive in their sex, occasionally ranging like
Love Toy into a “wall to wall” category that minimizes diegesis. The idea that
sexploitation needed to compensate its viewer for minimal sex no longer
made sense. This point is significant, for shock tactics “justified” in part by
a widespread compensation idea contributed to the negative female por-
trayals discussed above. Film genres, of course, are neither reasonable nor
centralized, so it would have been unaccountable had producers suddenly
sacrificed their reliance on misogyny, violence, and shock in 1968. Certain-
ly, the Findlays did not do so, as low, porny productions like Janie (1970),
The Slaughter (1970),\textsuperscript{20} and Altar of Lust (1971) confirm. But by the end of
the 1960s, a softcore had emerged that was less shock-oriented and less vio-
 lent and thus distinct from new forms specializing in violence and gore as
well as from those specializing in hardcore sex. Like their precursors, these
softcore films registered conflicting impulses that complicated their moder-
ation of the misogyny and violence typical of roughies and kinkies. This
complexity is especially instructive when examined in terms of softcore’s
shifting rape discourse.

Figure 5. An ad-mat for Mantis in Lace (1968), a fully softcore
production that emerged from the roughie-kinky tradition.
From the collection of Eric Schaefer.

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shifting rape discourse.
III. RAPE DISCOURSE IN CLASSICAL SOFTCORE

“You only get to know women via rape.”
—ROMANCE (1999)

Though budgets remained below Hollywood standards across sexploitation in this era, individual producers employed diverse fiscal models. Some relied on microbudgets, with the Findlays making some films for under $7,000 (Landis and Clifford 25). The norm was higher. According to Schaefer, sexploitation films were “produced and exhibited in 35mm for $15,000 to $25,000, with ‘a fair number’ coming in at $40,000 . . . a few of the more elaborate color productions made in 1969–70 cost more than $100,000” (“Gauging” 6). Entertainment Ventures Incorporated (EVI) and Boxoffice International Pictures, outfits headed by David Friedman and Harry Novak, were among the most prolific and lavish producers of classical softcore features. These studios represented the “softcore mainstream” inasmuch as such a thing could be said to exist during sexploitation’s unruly heyday—which in 1969 yielded between 135 and 150 features (Schaefer, “Gauging” 6). As “the biggest [studio] in the sexploitation field” (Rotsler 51), Boxoffice released more than two dozen films between 1968 and 1973, most qualifying as softcore, while Friedman has reported that EVI softcore occasionally cost more than $70,000, with the costume-epic The Erotic Adventures of Zorro (1971) coming in at $72,000 (Rotsler 179).

One index of this mainstreamness was sexploitation’s tendency to displace its abjection. “Displaced abjection” refers to the process through which nonelite genres seek a middle status by deflecting their felt inferiority onto lower forms (see Stallybrass and White 53). Schaefer draws on this idea to explain Hollywood’s denigration of classical exploitation (Bold 14), a trend Jack Valenti and the MPAA perpetuated through implacable attacks on exploitation after the lapse of the Code (Lewis 135–91; Schaefer, “Gauging” 19). The idea is also relevant to the antihardcore sentiments exhibited by softcore producers even prior to Mona’s arrival in 1970. Though shock-oriented grindhouse producers like the Findlays often narrow the distance between soft and hard forms—consider the “Squash Fever” segment of The Curse of Her Flesh, which culminates in a misguided attempt to restore a stag actress’s virginity—they usually do so to exploit hardcore’s outré status as Pure Trash. By contrast, producers like Friedman underscore hardcore’s abjection so as to emphasize softcore’s relative legitimacy and thus to reinforce the same. Though financial pressures eventually drove Friedman to hardcore, he was in the early 1970s an outspoken critic. Witness the 1973 interview with Rotsler, in which he declares, “I have no desire nor any inten-
tion of making a porno, because I have no respect for any of the people who make ’em” (175; 172–87). In the course of this diatribe, he compares hardcore to classical exploitation, the genre in which he got his start under Kroger Babb—but his point is to suggest hardcore’s “carnival” debasement and to underscore his own rise in status. (Such sentiments also reveal his anxiety regarding the fragility of his new status amid a collapsing sexploitation market.) But softcore’s embodiment of the displaced-abjection concept was apparent before the soft-hard dichotomy achieved its porno-chic clarity. In 1969, the Adult Film Association of America, an organization over which Friedman long presided, opposed lower-budget competition from 16mm simulation films, a protohardcore subsector produced by “heat artists, ’who went ‘too far’ and [gave] the exploitation industry a bad name” (Schaefer, “Gauging” 19). But like Friedman’s antihardcore attitudinizing, this view obscured the fact that sexploitation gave itself a good name primarily through opposition to other devalued forms.

As Starlet! confirms, classical sexploitation also displaced its abjection through formal mechanisms. Inspired by “the great Hollywood epics” (Rot-sler 184), Starlet! uses a self-conscious plot that concentrates on the softcore industry to promote its own studio, “the mighty EVI,” which it presents as a sexploitation variant of the major studios with which it shared a Hollywood address. A realistic drama written and produced by Friedman, Starlet! deflects exploitation’s cultural inferiority onto another genre, the stag film—which, within a year of the film’s release, emerged from underground reconfigured as a feature-length form. Though this perspective has the benefit of providing the film with inexplicit portrayals of both hard and soft production practices, in the end, the dual focus reinforces the anxiety that permeates this otherwise incoherent film: industrially and culturally, softcore was on the whole nearer to the underground world of stags and loops than to the mainstream world of Hollywood.

Though most acute in its rape sequence, incoherence pervades Starlet! The film’s promotion, title, and opening segment imply a focus on the heroine’s aspirations. But Starlet! wanders from this focus, complicating its attempt to distinguish itself from male-dominated stags. Starlet! gives its fullest attention to producer Kenyon Adler (Stuart Lancaster) and director Phil Latio (John Alderman), with their new starlet, Carol Yates (Deirdre Nelson), playing a subordinate role. Latio is a softcore producer who in his spare time directs “specialty” shorts for his boss, Adler. The pair contrive to repackage Yates, a stag actress, as a “softcore skinflick superstar” whom Adler renames “Starliss Knight” and casts as the lead in “A Youth in Babylon” (a title that Friedman later recycled for his autobiography). In their way is Maxine Henning (Kathi Cole), the fading starlet whom the rising Yates consigns to spaghetti westerns. Henning seduces Allison Jordan (Sharri Mann),
Yates's nymphomaniac roommate, who reveals Yates's “tarnished past.” Henning's attempt to use this information backfires, speeding her to Italy. By making Latio a director of “specialty films” and Adler his producer/consumer, the script undermines its effort to place a respectable distance between sexploitation and stags. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that Starlet! poisons the figure of the hardcore director. It first establishes this “poison” as a visual sleaziness. A sex film veteran, Alderman lends his role his usual disreputable air, as underscored in a scene in which Latio's moist, leering grin is framed in tight close-up as he directs a penetration sequence. That Latio soon pressures Yates to sleep with him reinforces this effect. Desperate to rise, Yates acquiesces—and has sex with Adler for similar reasons. Latio's sleaziness is lent more gravity when he rapes the virginal and drunken Linda Ford (Chris Mathis). This, the film says, is the kind of man who directs hardcore. The problem with such tidy moralism, of course, is that he is also the kind of man who directs softcore. Friedman has no desire to press this moralism into self-deprecation, so it is dropped. There are no consequences for Latio, who is soon “normalized” as a comic figure in boyish league with Adler against Henning, the contained “lesbian” villainess. Though the corrupt hardcore director later became a stock type—and a standard mechanism through which posthardcore sexploitation films like The Naughty Stewardesses (1973) displaced their abjection—the device is too incoherent in Starlet! to impart indirect legitimacy.

Starlet!'s spectacle has similarly incoherent implications. Like the Friedman-produced Zorro, Starlet! features a girl-girl scene whose “tenderness” is reinforced by an aspirational stylization apparent mainly in that type of number; the Henning-Jordan lovemaking is thus differentiated by its “tasteful” soft focus. But the positive implication of this stylization is nullified by a patriarchal plot that critiques Henning and Jordan more steadily than it critiques a rapist. Unsurprisingly, then, the rape itself delivers the most befuddling attempt at artistry. As Latio forces himself on Ford, the cinematography alternates between over-the-shoulder shots that portray her on a bed and impressionistic point-of-view shots filmed from below, as if the victim were on a glass table. This effect ruptures the continuity and with it Friedman's Hollywood aspirationalism. But the moral equivocation implicit in this incoherence is what is most telling. Though possibly meant as hallucinatory, the rape’s stylization comes off as an attempt at “sexy” sophistication; a more clinical treatment might have framed the horror more effectively. But given that the plot later dismisses the rape, it is likely the scene was not meant to be disturbing, at least not very. Indeed, the stylization seems designed both to convey horror and to corroborate Latio's remark, “Honey, you'll never have it so good.”
This equivocation parallels that of the larger plot. It is not clear which character the camera identifies with, so it is not clear whose desire, or lack thereof, the audience is to sympathize with, that of the male rapist or that of the female victim. It is not, then, the likelihood that this nonconsensual scene is just another number that makes this scene peculiar. After all, this type of rape is "just another number" in many classical films. Witness Bob Cresse's Love Camp 7 (1968), an Olympic release in which Friedman has a rape-oriented cameo—or EVI's Zorro, which opens its spectacle with a male-identified nonconsensual rape capped by a "shocking" gross-out. In her chapter on rape-revenge films, Carol Clover argues that the decrease in nonconsensual rape scenes that conform to sadistic male stereotypes correlates with the 1975 publication of Susan Brownmiller's Against Our Will and the "feminist discussion of rape," after which rape is "seen not just as an individual act but as a social and political act as well" (144). "Although earlier cinematic rapes allow for a large measure of spectator identification with the rapist," Clover contends, "films from the mid-1970s go to increasing lengths, both cinematic and narrative, to dissociate us from that position" (152; see Projansky). Starlet!'s oscillation between male and female identification and its normalization of its heterosexual rapist as a sleazy but not irredeemable "guy" merits consideration in this framework. The film's incoherence is not mere incompetence. It is also an antique of a prefeminist perspective that considered rape a distasteful extension of sexual harassment but not a crime akin to murder, a development that made the identification mechanisms of the rape-revenge film more possible (Clover 152). In turn, feminism's emphatic critique of rape and the cultural processes that support it made sadistic male fantasies of rape, incoherent or otherwise, less possible.

But the rape scene has not disappeared from sexploitation, where it manifests today in highly mediated, feminized forms. Classical softcore's use of semiconsensual rapes—which, as in Lorna, begins with the man forcing himself on the woman but ends with her epiphanic pleasure—may even be situated as a stage in sexploitation's move to the female-identified rape fantasies still common in aspirational softcore. This sort of scene was perhaps most famously realized in Sam Peckinpah's major-studio project Straw Dogs (1971), where it was juxtaposed with a nonconsensual rape (Projansky 35). But the semiconsensual rape has a long and very diverse cultural history. Steven Marcus (213) notes its presence in erotic literature like The Lustful Turk (1828), and Leon Hunt notes that it was a staple of British sexploitation (125). Though this category of rape scene has been criticized by feminists as patriarchal and "inauthentic," variations on it are central to the masochistic sexuality of romance fiction, which is mostly produced and consumed by women. Though such scenes do have, as The Notorious Cleopa-
tra (1970) proves, regressive implications, they represent a salient idea of female desire and a significant (if ironic) phase in sexploitation's feminization.

Boxoffice International stressed the semiconsensual scene as part of a larger rape discourse that was calibrated to its strategy of appealing to “discriminating” filmgoers who wanted “to see sex pictures but at their better theatres, not some sleazy house” (Rotsler 52; Rotsler’s emphasis). More than EVI, Novak’s studio tempered the violence and kinkiness of its imagery by stressing a burlesque-style comedy that referenced male and female desire and mediated shock. Two of the studio’s most lavish productions, The Secret Sex Lives of Romeo and Juliet (1969) and The Notorious Cleopatra, embody this discourse. Besides the semiconsensual scene, such discourse includes a ludic “dirty talk” linked to a tame sadomasochism; this unrealistic, comic banter muffles the impact of the rape discourse by implying consent. Boxoffice’s rape discourse is not, then, essentially different from the more feminized and middlebrow discourse available in contemporary softcore, wherein rape’s fantasy quality is carefully accented.

Directed by Peter Perry (“A. P. Stootsberry”), Romeo and Juliet and Cleopatra both qualify as softcore. Like Zorro, these costume spoofs feature articulated numbers with extensive bumping and grinding as organized by a thin narrative tissue that foregoes development so as to deliver populist skit comedy that relies on sexual double entendres, scatological remarks, homophobic jokes, sight gags involving body fat and necrophilia, and so on. As part of this low, masculinized formula, the heroines actively suggest that the language of force is a means of satisfying their desire. Juliet’s spirited “Sock it to me”—a phrase whose link to NBC’s Laugh-In (1968–73) confirms that this prefeminist idiom was also a mainstream idiom—is the refrain of Romeo and Juliet. And Cleopatra (Sonora) encourages Mark Antony’s “threat” (“I will take you like I take my enemies, leaving you torn, weak, and ravished . . . leaving you feeling as if you’ve been raped 100-fold”) by crying, “Oh rape me, rape me!” In Romeo and Juliet, such “rapes” are more ambiguous but still accompanied by the woman’s expressions of ecstasy, as unmediated by pain or nonconsent. Thus, when a maid is flogged—with the cast chanting “whip her! whip her!” like a Euripidean chorus—she greets the lash with delight.

At its most violent, this discourse is realized through semiconsensual rapes that delay consent and complicate the fantasy. Uneven power divisions that cast females as submissives—a tendency that postfeminist softcore inverts—here seem most incoherent, ambiguous, and objectionable. Though Cleopatra focuses on a powerful black heroine who would be “queen of the world,” it nevertheless contains two semiconsensual rapes,
with the second implying that masochistic bliss acts as a “natural” check on female ambition. The film’s fourth number begins as a virgin’s ritual sacrifice—but rather than her life, the priest takes her virginity instead. Just as the promise that “she will shed much blood” comes true, the promise that “she will enjoy her sacrifice” is borne out when she succumbs to rape pleasure. This “joke” is reconfigured in the crowning ninth number, which serves as a dénouement. Here Enobarbus (Mason Bakman) rapes Cleopatra in the tub. Cleopatra fights but gradually asks for “more, more” in a parody of the film’s earlier dirty talk. When Mark Antony finds them, he slaughters Enobarbus and brandishes his weapon. Cleopatra tries to save herself, claiming, “he raped me! I couldn’t help it!” Unmoved, Mark Antony kills her but regrets his deed, killing himself. Thus the film delivers the ritual murder promised by the earlier number.25

That these films mix progressive and regressive sentiments lends classical softcore a consumerist heterogeneity that is today available mainly in cult softcore. In tandem with market shifts that impelled softcore into mainstream niches, the seepage of feminist ideas into pop culture suppressed exploitation’s most objectionable depictions, making the tolerant forms explored in my next section the future of softcore. Though this postfeminist trend has yielded a respectful bearing toward women, it has also restricted their depiction, mandating moderate femininities rooted in paternalistic “softness.” By contrast, classical exploitation’s shock-oriented, prefeminist consumerism alternated between corroding and reinforcing fixed ideas of gender and sexuality. Thus exploitationers depicted women not only as feminized submissives but also as masculinized dominatrices like Olga and Ilsa. Even in the “mainstream” films of EVI and Boxoffice, regressive meanings existed side by side with progressive ones. EVI’s Zorro, for instance, features a gory nonconsensual rape geared to a sadistic male fantasy, but it also contains more liberal spectacle that deconstructs regressive identity fixities.

Zorro owes debts to previous incarnations of Johnston McCulley’s story line, especially Douglas Fairbanks’s screen original, The Mark of Zorro (1920). But Zorro is also indebted to burlesque. The punning swordplay, the homophobic yet subversive gay jokes, the imagery of “saucy senoritas”: all play to a carnival machismo that mocks itself even as it revels in its own indecency. The film’s most intriguing aspect—Douglas Frey’s dual portrayal of Don Diego, encoded as a “queen,” and of the hypermasculine Zorro—exemplifies this bivalence. Schaefer argues that burlesque may be read as leveling ideas of sex and gender (Bold 322). In this “spectacle of sameness,” he notes, “the marks of gender difference—whether a veil and brassiere or an attitude of passive femininity or masculine power or bravado—were stripped away to reveal only desire.” When “re-manned” by Helena (Penny...
Boran), the effeminate Diego echoes this point: “Strip away all the linen and lace and the only difference between a queen and a whore is time and place.” Given this figure’s facility at performing the signs of the queen and those of the superhero, it is hard to see Zorro’s masculinity as less discursive, as less of a masquerade, than Diego’s effeminacy. This epicene depiction might, then, be framed as a step toward Birken’s idea of consumerist “genderlessness” (111) or as a return to the ancient “one sex” ideology discussed by Clover (13–17) and Thomas Laqueur. In any case, its fluidity contrasts with exploitation’s protocontemporary trend, which favored postfeminist or “neotraditional” sex-and-gender formations.

IV. THE ADOLESCENT, THE HOUSEWIFE, THE EMPOWERED BABE

As the 1960s gave way to the 1970s, exploitation’s embrace of the female protagonist increased, yielding not just spectacle but more bourgeois depictions of femininity as well. Eventually, the modest, Europeanized liberalism of the awakening-sexuality model found a more American expression in the empowered-babe movies that, in the wake of the success of The Stewardesses (1969), proliferated in the early 1970s, projecting a middle feminism. More than the image of the housewife of exploitation’s “suburban” cycle, this modestly progressive image of the working woman has served as a model for contemporary softcore. Admittedly, these trends existed amid a classical supergenre still replete with male protagonists and with violence, misogyny, and rape (e.g., see EV1’s The Adult Version of Jekyll & Hide [1971], a softcore sleazefest replete with grisly rapes and castrations). But the structuring presence of postfeminist anxieties in even the lowest, most masculinized softcore of the 1970s (e.g., Female Chauvinists [1975]) predicted the genre’s larger course, which was to sacrifice shock in favor of a more genteel consumerism rooted in gender traditionalism.

Bart Testa has noted the impact of Mac Ahlberg’s I, a Woman (American release, 1968) on Metzger’s Therese and Isabelle. According to Testa, in the “short interval before I Am Curious (Yellow) . . . broke down legal barriers [in 1969], I, a Woman defined the erotic film by jettisoning exploitation plots and assuming an art-film model. The expedients seem simple: implant erotic experience in the subjectivity of its protagonist” (47–48). Testa’s point is mostly valid. This feminized, aspirational film inspired verisimilitude, tolerance, and artfulness in exploitation depictions of awakening female desire. But by concluding that “the most important code Ahlberg isolated from art-cinema was sex performed by a woman’s face” (48), Testa overreachs,
implying that this stand-in for explicit imagery came to the sex film via an overdetermined Bergman-Ahlberg-Metzger chain. Such a view neglects the significance that this sexploitation motif already had in the early 1960s (see Intrator’s Satan in High Heels [1962]) and overlooks American influences on the same (from classic noir, burlesque, and so on). Nor was Metzger alone in adopting this paradigm. By 1967, Sarno was in Sweden working on his black-and-white film Inga, whose historical place is comparable to that of Metzger’s Therese and Isabelle. As one might expect, Inga is timid and not fully softcore. But Butterflies (1974), Sarno’s much harder-core German film, confirms that the awakening-sexuality film could accommodate explicit display without sacrificing feminization. Indeed, as bookends to classical softcore’s last successful theatrical period (and thus expressly evocative of

Figure 6. Aspirational stylization in Joe Sarno’s Butterflies (1974).

Used courtesy ei Independent Cinema.
hardcore’s emergence during the same interval), Inga and Butterflies make more telling companions than Inga and its Sarno-directed sequel, The Seduction of Inga (1969/72).

A coproduction of Cannon and Inskafilm, Inga is the tale of Inga (Marie Liljedahl), a newly orphaned teenager. Reversing Dreiser’s Sister Carrie (1900), the story begins with Inga traveling by rail from city to country. There, her financially and emotionally insecure aunt, Greta (Monica Strömmerstedt), attempts to capitalize on her sexuality. The plot effects an elaborate turnaround: the passive Inga learns to make her own decisions, fleeing the country with her aunt’s lover, Karl (Casten Lassen), a budding writer. Butterflies picks up where Inga leaves off. The narrative of Denise (Marie Forsa), a farm girl initiated into sex by Fred (hardcore star Eric Edwards), Butterflies begins with its heroine’s trek to the city. In Sarno’s realistic cinema, sexual initiation is not a world-shattering event, which is why Inga ends wiser but not transformed—and why Denise does not grow up until after she leaves her bumpkin lover. Indeed, Sarno underlines that Denise is still “natural” when he has her first encounter not only lingerie but underwear while hitchhiking to the city, where she learns to adorn herself in femininity’s signs. But Denise does end her tale more cynical than Inga, having met a man (Harry Reems) who has deepened her education through abuse and affection, demonstrating in ways that Fred did not sexuality’s emotional range. At the end, Denise is hitching again—less innocent, perhaps, but still a subject in transition. This nonclosure creates the illusion of female potential beyond the frame that is crucial to Sarno’s optimistic vision. (See The Seduction of Inga.) Such open-endedness dispenses with the violent containments common to Lorna and other patriarchal awakening-sexuality variants. It also dispenses with the addiction metaphors and pseudoscientific explanations that pathologize female desire in melodramas like Alley Tramp (1966), a Herschell Gordon Lewis project that extends and exaggerates Ahlberg’s pessimistic references to nymphomania.28

Sarno’s take on female subjectivity is more than just a tolerant open-endedness. Like Metzger, he establishes his aspirationalism through polished values and regular allusions to auteurs.29 But his main way of establishing it is through an overt feminization adapted from films like Bergman’s Summer with Monika (1953) and Wild Strawberries (1957). In this respect, Sarno’s soft focus is most obvious; consider his use of this tactic in the tender montages that conflate wildflowers and romance in Butterflies. Also notable here are Sarno’s self-consciously “sensitive” beach motifs in Abigail Lesley Is Back in Town (1975). Other feminized effects are less transparent and more meaningful. In their spectacle, Inga and Butterflies include segments that suggest the importance of apparel to the formation of sex-and-gender identity; that
accent psychosexual stirrings as registered by the heroine’s self-inspections in mirrors; that feature depictions of cunnilingus, implying male reciprocity in pleasure; and that contain moments of rapture as performed by the heroine’s face, a device that in Butterflies has lost its obscuring function.

Inga’s masturbation sequence is Sarno’s most iconic use of the female face. This scene, in which the camera remains fixed on Inga’s inverted face as she slips head first from bed to floor, uses its odd floor angle not to disguise the spectacle’s fakeness but to obscure its authenticity. In his commentary for Inga’s Retro-Seduction rerelease (2001), Sarno claims that neither this scene nor the one in which Karl performs cunnilingus on Inga was simulated. The director reportedly wanted his close-ups of Inga’s orgasmic face to be as realistic as possible to generate narrative depth. Because explicitness might have invited censorship, both passages were shot from “soft” angles; neither breasts, nor hands, nor genitals are evident in the masturbation scene. In other words, an aspirational desire for psychological realism led to hardcore tactics that culminated in an ironic timidity. Butterflies is interesting in this respect in that it shows how hardcore influenced specific sexploitation effects. As when filming Inga, Sarno encouraged his actors to “go all the way” (qtd. in Hallenbeck, “Sixties” 19), again hoping to enhance the psychology. But hardcore’s arrival meant that he could finally capitalize on the graphic nature of his realism. Sarno’s approach yielded a seamlessness seldom matched in porno-chic hybrids that supplemented softcore spectacle with hardcore inserts filmed separately (cf. Joe D’Amato’s Emmanuelle in America [1976]). But if Butterflies’s almost-hardcore ethos does not disrupt the feminization of Sarno’s awakening-sexuality model, it does modify the imagery through which this feminization is conveyed. Though the facial motif is still conspicuous in Butterflies, it is not as striking as in Inga. The later film also opts for medium shots where Inga opts for tight close-ups, and its cinematography is more straightforward, presumably because artifice and indirection were no longer necessities.

Sarno has recently said that he “concentrate[d] on faces” so as to construct “strong women” who were important “as people, not just as sex symbols” (qtd. in Hallenbeck, Inga 22). This empowerment rhetoric indicates a feminist sympathy that Sarno’s oeuvre suggests but never fully develops. Inga is extremely passive. Denise is a more active subject and has a kinetic image in the spectacle—but there she is most often defined by men. These traits are in accord with the fact that the awakening-sexuality model has never been a radical form. In its contemporary resurgence, it has effected a modest progressivism at most. For producers, the advantage of this model is the low expectations it creates by dint of its use of an unformed, adolescent heroine. Even a minor reduction in this character’s passivity may at the end of a film
be read as signifying offscreen empowerment. Relative to films like *Inga*, *Butterflies* weaves a “round” example of this illusion in that it portrays a figure who weans herself from male dependence with the aid of other women, a diegetic transformation that is crowned by a masturbation number symbolic of self-sufficiency. Nevertheless, the fact remains that most of the narrative is devoted to Denise’s phallic pursuits. The awakening-sexuality paradigm is, then, unlikely to yield films that deeply offend the left or the right. Along with its aspirationalism, the calculated inoffensiveness of this paradigm is one reason that it was recycled by contemporary sexploitation—and was particularly pivotal to softcore’s rebirth in the early 1990s, a moment still politicized by antiporn sentiment.

The awakening-sexuality model looks downright seditious, though, when compared to the suburban model, which was another feminized strain pioneered by Sarno and others during classical sexploitation’s presofcore phase. A loose category, the suburban film may feature awakening-sexuality motifs, but its principal heroine is the housewife and its dominant subject adultery. This material is often realized through plots that center on “swingers” and “swapping,” as in Rotsler’s *Suburban Pagans* (1968). *The Agony of Love* (1966), another film made by Rotsler for Boxoffice, exemplifies a less frequent tendency to integrate these motifs with thriller arcs—and, in this case, with a temporary-prostitute device that anticipates a device later
favored by softcore thrillers like Secret Games (1991). It is also notable that the adultery theme has been responsible for the sex-negative pessimism of the theatrical erotic thriller; that such pessimism was already apparent in the suburban films of a patently “liberated” era suggests this theme’s negative potential. When sexploiteers “crossed” suburban adultery with awakening sexuality, the former often trumped the latter, yielding dark, illiberal products—which is why I consider Sarno’s Sin in the Suburbs (1962) and Lewis’s Alley Tramp suburban films though they contain dual mother-daughter heroines and notable awakening motifs.

But like awakening-sexuality films, suburban films have affected contemporary softcore by supplying a blueprint for placing an eroticized heroine in a domestic setting and by reinforcing the misandristic tendencies of postfeminist forms. Leon Hunt contends that the suburban cycle offered a “feminine’ space” such that the British variant constituted “a way of talking about female sexuality, or rather, specific types of female sexuality—thus the emphasis on the housewife” (105). This milieu maximized female display. Producers could also capitalize on its juxtapositions, with “the blandness and banality of the location offer[ing] a counterpoint to the activities going on there” (Leon Hunt 105). In American exploitation, the most optimistic suburban films are those that view this “shocking” disjunction as a negative function of male desire, which may be overcome through the persistent benevolence of femininity (Turan and Zito 57). Unlike Lorna, such films do not frame the heroine’s adultery as an expression of “bad” female desire but as a function of her temporary internalization of a “bad” male desire. A positive resolution depends on her rejection of this inappropriate desire and on her reformation of her mate “through an injection of femininity,” as Moya Luckett puts it (151). Domestic female desire is thus constructed as essentially good and as antitransgressive.

Marsha, the Erotic Housewife (1970) exemplifies such a scenario. Marsha (Marsha Jordan) is a housewife whose bland exterior matches her habitat and contrasts with the “all-night session of drinking and sex” into which she descends once she discovers her husband’s infidelity, which she self-destructively mimics. A happy ending is salvaged by her rejection of this gender-inappropriate contrast. It is no coincidence that it is a female friend, Phyllis, who helps her regain her virtuous blandness. Indeed, Phyllis is single not because she rejects “the love and tenderness” that Marsha prioritizes but because she believes that monogamous heterosexuality may only be maintained outside marriage. The most liberated attitude this softcore woman’s film can muster is a cynical conservatism. Marsha conquers cynicism by publicly (and deceptively) humiliating her husband, which chastens him into returning to the domestic sphere. That this power play is necessary implies that her husband’s middlebrow transformation signifies submission
and emasculation; he has, as Luckett might say, been forcibly “injected” with femininity. The double standards implicit to this resolution prefigure similarly misandristic attitudes that have proved more pervasive in contemporary softcore.

The suburban film’s legacy persists in contemporary softcore thrillers as well as in major theatrical films like Ang Lee’s *The Ice Storm* (1997) and the network television megahit *Desperate Housewives* (2004 on). Nevertheless, the suburban film’s synthesis of domesticity and gender traditionalism has proved retrograde even by the standards of contemporary softcore. In a sense, the “empowered babe” of the contemporary working-woman film begins with the more progressive “middle feminism” that is the diegetic destination of awakening-sexuality films. As a result, the tolerant, optimistic inflection linked to this outcome is spread through the working-woman narrative. Though evident in aspirational softcore, such narratives have proved most prevalent in corporate softcore, which often follows the romantic and professional travails of career women.

The working-woman vehicle clearly manifests the intercession of second-wave ideology. Here I am not referring to the hypersubversive figure of “the angry woman” that Clover calls “[o]ne of the main donations” of the women’s movement to horror and to popular culture (17; see 4). This mili-
tant type did make appearances in the classical genres. In a sense, she represented a variation on the subversive women of the roughies and kinkies, politicizing the sadism of Olga, Ilsa, and the top-heavy nightmares of Russ Meyer, who located power in breast size. But given that Clover’s point is to confirm that feminist ideas and motifs were broadly appropriated by low-budget genres, it is perhaps predictable that this implacable woman was outnumbered by female types that registered more ambivalent feminisms. Indeed, the equivocal and ultimately yielding character who begins a narrative as an angry feminist but who comes to see “the error in her ways” provides one instance of such ambivalence. These figures have remained standard to sexploitation throughout the postfeminist era, unifying vehicles as widely disparate as The Swinging Cheerleaders (1974) and House of Love (2000).

The empowered babe supplies an even softer, more traditional expression of this feminist influence. That this heroine’s independence constitutes no social threat is accented by her tendency to step outside the home only to step into a traditionally female career. Hence she serves as the focus of a slew of sexploitation cycles that fetishize historically female professions like stewardessing, nursing, teaching, modeling, and, in a figurative sense, cheerleading. Even in Crown International’s Superchick (1973), which develops its liberationist rhetoric far more than most sexploitation films, the superwoman heroine is “disguised” as a stewardess, curtailin her transgressive potential. Affording a broad opportunity for passive nudity and active sexual spectacle while specifically disarming feminist critics, this quintessentially postfeminist figure ultimately served what became an overarching goal of sexploitation once its reliance on shock and transgression had ebbed: to maximize distribution in part by minimizing controversy. As a result, the empowered babe was not, like the angry woman discussed by Clover, a vindictive, alienated figure. If she offered modest critiques of exploitive aspects of the patriarchy, she never rejected the patriarchy as a whole, typically maintaining a normalized situation in mainstream society. Popular as drive-in fare (Waller 135), this sexploitation strain was stimulated by the $25 million gross of The Stewardesses (1969), a figure so compelling that it was still inspiring the production of knock-offs like Independent-International’s The Naughty Stewardesses in the mid-1970s (see Turan and Zito 64).

Roger Corman’s New World Pictures routinized the empowered-babe paradigm, producing The Student Nurses (1970), Private Duty Nurses (1971), Night Call Nurses (1972), The Young Nurses (1973), Candy Stripe Nurses (1974), The Student Teachers (1973), and Summer School Teachers (1975). Corman’s New World formula integrated nonsoftcore spectacle with a liberal story line: “Exploitation of male sexual fantasy, a comic subplot, action and violence, and a slightly left-of-center subplot . . . and then frontal nudity from the waist up, total nudity from behind, no pubic hair” (qtd. in
Morris 3; see Corman 181, 184). The Student Nurses was the first New World film to realize Corman’s vision of “fetishized feminism.” In this $150,000 melodrama, four young women confront a variety of male-oriented problems, including sexual harassment at work and romantic disappointment at home (see Pam Cook 126–27). The Student Nurses dramatizes one of second-wave feminism’s founding precepts: the patriarchy operates in oppressive ways even within society’s most liberal areas. Hence, Lynn (Brioni Farrell), the film’s most socially conscious character—as demonstrated by her ultimate refusal to wear the nursing garb she considers politically co-opted—gets involved in Hispanic street protests only to find that sexism abounds even in this radical subsector. The film’s most sexualized character, Priscilla (Barbara Leigh), is impregnated by a falsely “sensitive” biker, who, as an exploitation emblem of radical individualism, predictably abandons her. She attempts to get a legal abortion but is turned down by the unsympathetic all-male review board, prompting a companion to ask, “what do you expect from a bunch of men?” Later, a conservative male doctor performs her illegal abortion, illustrating that even men with regressive attitudes may embrace a middle feminism. Despite their use of female production talent—like many Corman films, The Student Nurses was directed by a woman (Stephanie Rothman)—New World films never endorse a separatist critique of the patriarchy. Instead, Corman’s heroines work with their male opposites, adopting nurturing roles that effect a gentle, postfeminist enlightenment.

As a refinement of the haphazard Stewardesses (Turan and Zito 64), the Corman model was adopted by producers in films like The Naughty Stewardesses, which also critiques men of all persuasions. A significant variant on this empowered-babe formula is visible in comedy. Gregory Waller argues that sexploitation comedy was the period’s “dominant and most interesting trend” (135). Superchick represents this trend at its peak postfeminist consciousness. American sexploitation comedy then grew less political and more youth-oriented, as indicated by titles like Cherry Hill High (1977) and Cheerleaders’ Beach Party (1978). The major sexploitation vehicle of the early 1980s, the teen sex comedy, thus required only a slight toning down of the spectacle as supplied by a reversion to the voyeur hero—and the incentive supplied by mainstream blockbusters like Animal House (1978), Porky’s, and Fast Times at Ridgemont High (1982). In Superchick, however, mild social protest still shares the foreground with mild spectacle.

This synthesis of what Corman considered equally exploitable cinematic elements is conspicuous in Superchick’s depiction of sexploitation icon Uschi Digart as Mayday, a militant “lesbian” feminist who seems to despise men because she works in misogynistic subgenres like the kinky. Upon finishing a nude scene in which she has been bloodied by a low-budget lashing,
Mayday enacts a humorous and sympathetic reversal by turning on her masked assailant to give him a tongue-lashing of her own. But Mayday’s misandristic militance is pointedly differentiated from the gentle ethic of the “superchick” heroine, Tara B. True (celebrity astrologer Joyce Jillson). A stewardess trained in martial arts who in the climax foils a hijacking, True carries on affairs in several hubs, embodying her belief that “you can live as many different lives as you choose.” Though her liberationism subverts marriage, it does not challenge heterosexual love—for True is “true” to each boyfriend. And though a (post)feminist, she advocates termination of the gender wars: “Why do men always have to win against women? Why compete? When we both give each other what we both want, we can’t do anything but win.”

True exemplifies one final trend worth noting. As a superheroine, she is an empowered babe in a masculinized action role. Other classical films exemplifying this trend include Andy Sidaris’s $100,000 Stacey (1973), which represents the director’s first attempt to place a heroine—in this case, “a very private detective” (Sidaris and Sidaris, Bullets 33; see 15)—in a crime-fighting vehicle. Produced with New World backing, Stacey is a precursor of the many 1980s vehicles, including Sidaris’s own, wherein “soft” women adopt “hard” personae. It also prefigures 1990s softcore in which gender has little to do with the heroine’s career, for by that point, women’s advance into the workplace had lost much of its exploitable anxiety. In the early 1970s, however, this progress was so fraught with fear that women in nontraditional roles were demonized even in films sensitive to the sexual harassment of career women. This equivocal posture is evident in proto-erotic thrillers like Centaur’s Invasion of the Bee Girls (1973), a sci-fi vehicle in which Dr. Susan Harris (Anitra Ford) is a queen bee posing as a scientist. Though clearly harassed by male colleagues, she is ultimately too “hard” to be sympathetic. Like the drug-addled heroine of Mantis in Lace, Harris literalizes the threat that identifies the femme fatale: she kills her lovers by fucking them. A similar ambivalence is evident in the stock types of the women-in-prison film, a subgenre populated by strong, attractive women who often engage in repellent behaviors. Still, this subgenre is notable here for encouraging the development of a progressive, action-oriented, empowered-babe heroine as a function of sexploitation’s larger tendency toward female objectification.32

Classical sexploitation was, in sum, a disorderly supergenre whose exhibition on an alternative yet very public circuit of theaters revealed the anxieties
of a revolutionary culture in which sex-and-gender mores were under review. Its first cycles conformed to stereotypes of male heterosexual desire, but its diversification yielded new combinations that made gestures toward female desire as a function of a mandate for female display. Though this consumer expansion did yield misogynistic motifs and often demonized subversive expressions of female desire, its longer term trend favored empowered heroines, some of whom diverged radically from traditional femininity. The sexploitation market declined after 1973, with many producers switching to hardcore. Coupled with the emergence of second-wave feminism, whose impact on sexploitation was clear by 1970, this decline attenuated the diversity of the genre and favored a more genteel, evolutionary model that, relative to the transgressive excess of sexploitation’s heyday, seemed rooted in gender traditionalism. This retreat into the homogeneity of postfeminist consumerism set the stage for sexploitation’s distribution through more domestic and centralized media in the 1980s and resulted in softcore’s reemergence as sexploitation’s most reliable form. The cultural, technological, and formal adjustments that fomented this renaissance are the subject of my next chapter.