Soft in the Middle
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“Spicy, but Not Obscene”

Industrial and Formal Retooling in 1980s Sexploitation

For sexploitation, the 1980s marked a critical transition from public, theatrical modes of exhibition to private, nontheatrical ones. In this contemporary phase, “sexploitation” named a timorous genre and a diffuse, decarnivalized industry reliant on comparatively masculinized Hollywood paradigms; perhaps the best index of the genre’s diminished fortunes was the recession of softcore, its most pornographic “outpost.” In hindsight, what 1980s producers had to do to engender sexploitation’s current softcore identity seems plain. They had to learn to harness the new modes of distribution and exhibition; they also had to differentiate their spectacle from the kind of sexual imagery available from other industrial sources. Ultimately, they achieved these ends by trending upscale; by favoring a feminized, middlebrow sexual spectacle that was relatively dichotomous but always inexplicit; and by securing the decisive support of the cable industry. At the end of the decade, two noir-inflected nontheatrical paradigms, the Zalman King romance and the softcore thriller, proved singularly capable in forwarding these purposes. Sexploitation gained wider distribution and acceptance, then, even as its sexual spectacle grew more extensive and specialized—as it emerged, in other words, as a specifically softcore industry. Yet these retoolings and redefinitions occurred gradually. As a result, the 1980s were littered with “cult” sexploitation cycles whose visual timidity and downscale impulses appear to mark them as “dead ends.”
But this teleological idiom obscures the considerable continuity that interlaces these diverse forms. Such continuity is clearest in the gender formations typical of 1980s sexploitation. Though the postfeminist disposition of the _noir_-romance hybrids popularized at the end of the decade is obvious—which is one reason I devote chapters 5 and 6 to King and to the producers of softcore thrillers, respectively—it is less clear-cut in the decade’s more chaotic, video-oriented strains, whose cult masculinization and visual timidity suggest a regression to the lowbrow, prefeminist mannerisms of burlesque, the nudie cutie, the roughie, and so on. If, however, these downscale forms broadly recall classical sexploitation, they diverge from the latter in that they rarely resort to overt misogyny as “compensation” for sexual coyness. Given that such coyness was specifically encouraged by antiporn feminism, it makes sense that the “remasculinization” of the decade’s sexploitation was superficial at best, “diluted” as it was by broad postfeminist notions of female empowerment that often doubled as notions of male disempowerment. Indeed, in cycle after 1980s cycle, heroines are portrayed as voyeuristic, nonmasochistic agents whose synthesis of hard and soft qualities marks them as superior to their male opposites. Even when such heroines lack full protagonist status, they are often promoted to protagonist in sequels, most likely because producers realized that they offered something the heroes did not: the opportunity to maximize female display and to unify narrative and spectacle in postfeminist fashion.\(^1\)

The chapter that follows develops this account of the decade’s postfeminist continuity by looking at 1980s sexploitation from several angles. The first section, which surveys the collapse of sexploitation’s theatrical market and the emergence of its nontheatrical markets on cable and video, concentrates on the industrial pressures that favored postfeminist forms and led sexploitation to routinize production of a feminized, aspirational form of softcore in the 1990s. Because this softcore paradigm first appeared in the classical era, the second section analyzes an unusual “Janus” text that bridges softcore’s two golden eras. As one of few fully softcore films shot in the 1980s by an American, Alan Roberts’s _Young Lady Chatterley II_ (1985) is sequel to a 1970s softcore classic and forerunner to a pivotal strain of 1990s softcore. But this is also to say that the film’s middlebrow feminization and overt pornographic thrust were in its own time anachronistic. For that reason, the chapter’s final sections focus on the nonsoftcore cycles whose restricted masculinization and lower-brow tendencies were most representative of the decade—and were rooted, unlike Roberts’s film, in Hollywood paradigms. The first of these examines the intersection of female (sexual) empowerment and male (sexual) disempowerment in the teen sex comedy. The chapter’s final section critiques a number of sex-action vehicles made by Roger Corman and Andy Sidaris. Such films situate “empowered babes” in violent
scenarios that include rape and bondage. But these films typically elect to defuse the misogynistic, roughie import of such imagery. This strategy is in accord with postfeminist anxieties that motivate the feminist rhetoric of the Corman films and the glossy visions of female mastery that pervade the Sidaris films. But it is crucial to note that a postfeminist logic also motivates the films’ most traditional elements, including the rigid patriarchal thrust of Corman plotting and the soft paternalisms of the Sidaris style. Though paradoxical, the ambivalence of these approaches to female agency would prove common both in contemporary softcore and in the wider postfeminist culture of which it was a part.

I. INDUSTRIAL PRESSURE AND POSTFEMINIST REFORMATION

To understand sexploitation’s metamorphosis into the feminized softcore of today, one must first look to the 1970s. As classical sexploitation’s sexual outpost, classical softcore was peculiarly responsive to its new competitors, 16mm simulation films and hardcore features, and grew more explicit between 1969 and 1972. But this new frankness was revised by the Supreme Court’s 1973 decision in *Miller v. California*, which gave states and Communities power to proscribe material that they deemed obscene. Though *Miller* had its most direct impact on hardcore, it also worried exhibitors of R- and X-rated films, for it contained a clause hinting at the potential regulation of simulation films (Lewis 267). Once it became clear that the R-rating was safe, exhibitors became less receptive to X-rated films (Lewis 268), modifying a long-standing, panindustrial trend toward explicit cinema. The mobility of softcore, so evident in the breakout success of a Danish import like *Without a Stitch* (1968), was henceforth restricted, with the most sexualized movies limited to grindhouses in skid row areas where they faced direct competition with hardcore. Softcore collaborations by Perry Dell and Manuel Conde like *The Dictator* (1974) and *Deep Jaws* (1976), X-rated comedies with the look and feel of the hardcore comedies of the day, attest to this pressure and to the equivocal identity it conditioned. Indeed, many sexploitation producers—including such luminaries as Radley Metzger, Roberta Findlay, Joe Sarno, and, despite his earlier protests, David Friedman—had to varying degrees embraced hardcore practices by the mid-1970s.

Sexploitation was being squeezed on all fronts. Hardcore’s arrival hindered its ability to market itself as the most “sexcessive” cinema available, and Hollywood’s post-Code emphasis on spectacle, including sex, hampered its ability to position itself as the “classiest” purveyor of sexual imagery. *Miller* compounded this difficulty by compelling a broad retreat from the soft X
middle ground that might have afforded sexploitation a stable softcore purchase. Classical Hollywood had been defined by the narrative priorities of the Production Code, which, in proscribing a range of “indecent” spectacle, mandated the abandonment of sexual material to lower-budget film producers in America or abroad. But after 1968, the new MPAA system allowed Hollywood to reassert many aspects of its primeval sexuality. Hollywood co-opted, or reannexed, even more of sexploitation’s traditional material when the MPAA hardened the R in 1970 (Sandler 206; Lewis 188). Suddenly, even network television was encroaching on sexploitation territory.

On the other hand, Hollywood’s new interest in sex held advantages for some sexploitation producers, especially those specializing in postfeminist and/or aspirational formulae. As Jon Lewis notes, the majors preferred the model that led to Columbia’s success with the X-rated Emmanuelle. By “purchasing their soft core fully shot,” Lewis contends, the studios stayed “out of the soft- and hard-core development and production business” (224–25). Ergo, sexploitation films with strong heroines, polished values, and developed narratives occasionally secured Hollywood distribution during the porno-chic era. This was the path of Cannon’s The Happy Hooker (1975), a rather inexplicit, R-rated film starring Lynn Redgrave that was distributed by MGM. Such practices amounted to win-win propositions for the majors, which could always drop a sexploitation “pickup” if it proved too controversial or unprofitable. Such deals were far riskier for independent sexploiteers, who were even more vulnerable without them.

In the long run, sexploitation could not compete with Hollywood’s prowess in effects, advertising, and distribution. Specifically, it could not compete with spectacle-based films like The Exorcist (1973), Jaws (1975), Carrie (1976), and Star Wars (1977). This new breed of Hollywood blockbuster further marginalized R-rated sexploitation. Even adroit studios like Roger Corman’s New World, which survived by shifting among various low-budget genres, could not compete with the majors, which “dominated the exploitation genres with budgets ten times higher than ours” (Corman xi). As a result, by the late 1970s, New World was compelled to seek nontheatrical markets in home video and on “pay TV,” where the competition with Hollywood was less acute (Corman xi). The major studios also eliminated sexploitation competitors by tightening their grip on theatrical distribution. As George Mair details, many theater owners had retained close ties with Hollywood studios throughout the postwar period despite the Paramount Decrees that after 1948 forced the majors to divest their chains (102–3). When Reagan-era deregulation allowed the studios to repurchase theaters, revisiting the “vertical integration” of Hollywood’s classical heyday, the disadvantage that exploitation producers had faced all along was newly exacerbated.
The most severe distribution crisis facing sexploitation was, however, the collapse of its own circuit of arthouses, grindhouses, and drive-ins. Though there is anecdotal evidence that “a considerable portion of the country, especially the South . . . provided a stable [theatrical] market for softcore materials well into the 1980s” (Bowen, DVD), it is nevertheless clear that a pattern of distribution problems had begun eroding sexploitation production long before that. Starting in the early 1970s, urban renewal projects, suburban sprawl, and rising land values all contributed to a steady contraction of the sexploitation circuit. For example, by 1980, the drive-in circuit had declined to roughly three thousand venues; by 1990, that number had dwindled to one thousand (Schaefer, “Triumph” 24; Stevenson 48). This process did not have to play itself out to disrupt fragile sexploitation networks and eliminate susceptible producers. Even a small but reliable outfit like Sam Sherman’s Independent-International, producer of The Naughty Stewardesses, folded in the face of seemingly minor disruptions:

[In] the late 1970s and early 1980s there developed a shortage of drive-ins to play the product. Due to rising real estate values, outdoor theaters began to fall to land developers and pictures like Game Show Models, The Chorus Girls, and Teammates, which dealt with equal rights for women (even on the high school football field), found it increasingly difficult to find play dates. As the drive-ins tumbled, the independent subdistributors began to tumble with them. Late and nonpayments from the ailing subs started putting a financial crunch on independent distributors like I-I [Independent-International]. It became more difficult and expensive to produce new movies, where large sums of money needed to be recouped in order to break even, and older pictures with newfangled titles were pushed back into the marketplace to scrounge up what little revenue was left. Those remaining subs were now turning down pictures that did not fit their own market criteria and I-I chose not to sink their own money into new pictures. With a company whose prime market was the drive-in, Sherman realized that the future of I-I was dwindling into secondary markets he had little interest in. . . I-I moved away from the theatrical end of things and into the export end of distribution, television, cable, and even their own home video label, Super Video. (Ray 132–33)

Sherman’s ability to transition “away from the theatrical end of things” has led Fred Olen Ray to describe him as a “survivor in the graveyard of [his] contemporaries” (133). Other producers like former Corman protégé Larry Woolner of Dimension Pictures proved much less adaptive (Ray 161). As gentrification took its toll on grindhouses, most of which vanished long
before those of Times Square (Landis and Clifford 5–6), the last of America’s softcore producers went hardcore or left the business. At the same time, older sexploiteers with experience in classical exploitation were retiring or dying.

Such changes were part of a pervasive shift in film consumption, which was being privatized—or *decarnivalized*—in ways that television experts had long predicted. A prime determinant of the general falloff in moviegoing was the growth of Home Box Office (HBO), which experienced its “golden era” from 1978 to 1983 (Mair 37, 42). This lucrative phase was followed by a decline in HBO’s growth linked to the expansion of home video. For sexploitation, then, the irony was that it fell apart for lack of distribution at the same time that nontheatrical technologies opened broad new markets desperate for product—and suited to its products. Consider cable, whose programming needs multiplied after HBO adopted a twenty-four-hour format in 1979 and spawned a twenty-four-hour affiliate, Cinemax, in 1980. Showtime then shifted to a twenty-four-hour format in 1981 and merged with the Movie Channel in 1983. With so many channels and so many time slots—and with Hollywood producing a limited slate—it was natural that programmers would resort to “cableporn,” allowing viewers to “see tits and ass on cable” (Mair 88, 83). As Ginia Bellafante puts it, “the ability to show bare female nipples—and to get endless mileage out of low-budget R-rated movies—has been one of the prime attractions of pay cable ever since its birth in the 1970s” (76). Cable historians Thomas Baldwin and D. Stevens McVoy concur, observing that it “has always been accepted that uncut, R-rated movies are a major appeal of the big pay networks” (135).

It is hardly shocking, then, that recycled sexploitation turned up on cable during the late 1970s. Indeed, low-budget “drive-in movies”—which scholar Gregory Waller has dubbed “softcore sexploitation”—had by the early 1980s settled into their new habitus “as late-night filler on Cable TV movie channels” (135). Though HBO and Showtime generally shunned X-rated films, the 1970s had generated a plenitude of timid, R-rated sex films like *Superchick* useful to their purposes. Some early services like Quality Cable Network and Warner Amex’s Qube pay-per-view system offered “toned-down softcore X films” (Baldwin and McVoy 135–36; see Mair 84), with the latter providing descriptions in 1980 that would not appear unusual on the premium channels of today:

PASSIONS OF PLEASURE. When a man dreams about a beautiful blonde, it leads to the ultimate fantasy—a man, his wife and his mistress. $3.50.

MUSTANG, HOUSE OF PLEASURE. A unique look at the infamous Mustang Ranch, Nevada’s legal brothel. $3.50. (qtd. in Baldwin and McVoy 135)
At this time, few of the giant services risked airing hardcore (Mair 84; Ford 2). Even the Playboy Channel, founded in 1982 as a joint venture with the Cablevision unit Escapade, almost never showed hardcore and avoided X-rated simulations.

Given cable's interest in sexploitation, why did HBO's golden era coincide with the contraction of sexploitation and the disappearance of softcore? The answer hinges on economics first and class, taste, and gender second. While many services could buy the rights to old sexploitation films, only the most capitalized concerns could afford the risky practice of “prebuying” (what from a producer perspective Corman calls “preselling” [xi]) films from Hollywood or from independents. This practice was critical to production in that it gave sexploiteers something to show a bank, allowing them to finance the rest of a picture—and circumventing Hollywood investment, which put them at a disadvantage. In one common arrangement, cable or video entities fronted 50 percent of a film’s production cost in return for negotiable distribution rights, with the balance financed by a bank. Also common were arrangements in which cable services prebought the rights to a block of films (Baldwin and McVoy 133; Corman 207). With its huge backer (Time), HBO has since its inception had the resources to subsidize production, which it began doing in the mid-1970s (Mair 13, 78). By 1987, HBO had become one of Hollywood’s largest customers and the largest producer of movies in the world (Mair xviii). But HBO has long favored Hollywood fare. In financing independents, it has tended to promote middlebrow values, reflecting the concerns of its early operators, who worried that HBO might alienate subscribers with “junky or offensive movies” (Mair 6). Golden-era HBO was therefore more likely to spend tiny sums to air old sexploitation films than risk larger expenditures on unknown quantities. With a rich parent of its own (Viacom), Showtime mimicked HBO. Playboy also had ample resources. Under its twenty-nine-year-old president, Christie Hefner, the service dove into production agreements in 1982. Unlike HBO, it evinced an immediate readiness to finance sex comedy and occasional softcore by the likes of Chuck Vincent and Alan Roberts. Playboy funding was, in fact, the main reason American softcore was produced at all in the 1980s. But this sponsorship came too late to sustain an entire form. By 1982, the age of video was upon the industry, but even this large and democratic—albeit unstable and decentralized—source of revenue arrived too late. HBO’s early dependence on recycled sexploitation was decisive.

Ironically, HBO soon signaled that a feminized softcore paradigm, one that classical sexploitation had pioneered fifteen years earlier, matched its emerging adult strategy. Consider the arthouse sensibility that HBO imposed on Cinemax. Due to adverse conditions—competition from video,
pressure from other cable operators, a shortage of Hollywood films with buzz, a decline in construction—HBO revamped Cinemax in 1984 through a renewed stress on adult fare (Mair 108). According to HBO programmer Bridget Potter, Cinemax would be “spicy, but not obscene” (qtd. in Mair 109). By indicating that films like Young Lady Chatterley (1977), The Happy Hooker Goes Hollywood (1980), and Intimate Moments (1981) exemplified this “new” approach, Cinemax implied that it would favor a traditional art-house stress on female protagonists, inexplicit facial imagery, and light, consumerist narratives. Given that these films were all produced at an earlier time, HBO was clearly not yet spotlighting its own jointly produced sexploitation. But it was demonstrating that neither it nor its affiliates were afraid of sex. Young Lady Chatterley is a highly sexualized film directed by Roberts, who also directed The Happy Hooker Goes Hollywood for Cannon and Young Lady Chatterley II for Playboy. (The latter film would run on Cinemax as well.)

By adhering to the spicy-not-obscene ethos, HBO was also certifying that it would not subsidize the lowbrow excess associated with the grindhouses and, to a lesser extent, the drive-ins. Too much bad publicity was at stake. Old-school producers like Friedman embraced the view that all publicity was good. By the 1970s, this willingness to risk public censure had stimulated a reaction from antiporn groups affiliated with feminists and the Christian right. Such groups claimed that porn bred violence, especially against women. Eithne Johnson and Eric Schaefer have identified the anti-snuff campaigns of 1975–76—which focused their wrath on Snuff (1976), a risible sexploitation hoax—as crucial in galvanizing these coalitions and in replacing the liberalism of porno-chic with the conservatism of porno-fear (40). In the wake of these campaigns, groups like Women Against Pornography (WAP) and Morality in Media targeted cable sexploitation (Mair 86–88; Jaehne 10). The latter even sponsored mailings from Roger Staubach that warned of “smut peddlers,” who, aided by the “great medium of cable TV,” could “now explode into your living room” with images of “[h]omosexual acts, women being brutally molested and raped” and with “explicit movies of women tied and beaten, raped with guns and other deviant sexual acts, all of which claim to be entertainment” (qtd. in Mair 88). Staubach’s paternalistic, homophobic rhetoric was not mere hype, for violent, misogynistic films like Snuff did exist in profusion. But unlike the distributor of Snuff, who profited smartly from theatrical receipts inspired by the affair (Johnson and Schaefer 43–46), the new breed of nontheatrical distributor rarely cultivated controversy. This aversion to negative publicity—which factored in the emergence of the softcore thriller—marked a major divide between classical and contemporary sexploitation. Most often, this aversion
was driven by the needs of the larger pay services, which had the most centralized networks and the most corporate alliances to consider. But by 1984, cable operators working with a multitude of pay services had a history of seeking a “balanced” sexual approach so as to mute outcry from advocacy groups. According to Baldwin and McVoy, in the early 1980s, operators in rural areas often coupled a premium channel “with a Christian channel to counterbalance the effect of the R movies” (136). Similarly, corporate giants like Cablevision and Comcast designed “the original pairing of lowbrow Escapade with highbrow Bravo, the cultural program service . . . partly as a response to questions of taste likely to be raised by franchising authorities” (Baldwin and McVoy 136). HBO and Showtime achieved similar balance—and did their operators a significant favor—through the feminized, aspirational disposition of their sexploitation content.

How might this look in actual practice? In her 1983 *Film Quarterly* article “Confessions of a Feminist Porn Programmer,” Karen Jaehne details her early 1980s experience selecting pornographic films, including recycled sexploitation, for play on the late-night service of a pay cable station in Washington, D.C. Given her location, Jaehne was perhaps more sensitive to FCC restrictions than most programmers (11–12). There is, though, no reason to think her sensitivity to and distaste for “special interest groups like Morality in Media and WAP” was unusual (Jaehne 10). More telling is that she saw her audience as 60 percent female and gives evidence suggesting that she perceived cable as a whole as having “a dominantly female home audience” (Jaehne 15). Thus Jaehne and her peers, all of whom were women and some of whom were feminists (“albeit *sans* radical rhetoric” [10]), took “women’s sensibilities into account”:

The actual increase in fantasy and decrease in brutality in adult movies has been found to be in a direct relationship to the increase in female viewers.

. . . One immediate observation was that women preferred less fragmented shots of sexual acts (fewer shots of isolated genitalia), slow rhythms in the editing of such sequences, and legitimate motivation for erotic relationships (obviously rape was eliminated as a “legitimate” motivation). To the programmers, it also meant incorporating more plot-oriented, complex films with an emphasis on the male/female erotic relationship as a cause for sexual contact. (15)

Jaehne saw her nonviolent programming choices as gendered feminine. Moreover, she perceived them as situated in a distinctly middlebrow position within a hierarchy of erotic films. Though her director “was eager to have what she called ‘classy classics,’” Jaehne had to be careful not to pick
too complex, for “no matter how carefully done, no matter how psychologically sound the motivation, the classification ‘high-brow’ eliminated [certain sex films] as potential programming” (11; 12).

Cable’s emerging taste for the tamest drive-in fare and for Europhilic art-house content suggested, then, a postfeminist, middlebrow strategy that negotiated controversy and evaded boycott by situating a spicy, feminized eroticism as a decorous alternative to a “living-room explosion.” What differentiated premium cable from a service like the one for which Jaehne worked was that the former used its very similar programming biases to subsidize production. By 1991, this strategy had led HBO and Showtime to forge licensing agreements with discreet, cable-oriented studios like Cinema Products Video (CPV), and by 1994, this market trend had stimulated the emergence of a specialized softcore industry “between” the hardcore market and other mid- to low-budget sectors of the nontheatrical film market. For an idea of the production potentials driving the formation of this industry, consider that between 1991 and 1995, CPV—a studio that is notable here only because it was the forerunner of Marc Greenberg’s Mainline Releasing Group (MRG), which has remained a top softcore purveyor—supplied premium cable with thirty staid softcore films like Novel Desires (1991) and about seventy feminized featurettes for softcore serials like Love Street (1994–95).

Contemporary sexploitation’s cable-sanctioned feminization is not, as Jaehne’s article demonstrates, a self-defensive sham that has only pretended to appeal to women. As Jaehne notes, her programming choices were driven by a postfeminist consciousness grounded in customer surveys (15). And premium cable has since its inception targeted women more consistently and far-reaching than channels like Jaehne’s, with its sexual content growing feminized as it has become more familiar with its own demographics. On cable, even small subscriber bases are valuable because they indicate disposable income—and women are among the broadest of cable’s bases (Baldwin and McVoy 282). The advent of “narrowcasting,” that is, the process of targeting specific market segments, meant that women would become the target of many channels. For instance, by the 1990s, Lifetime was openly marketing the “female” attitudes that it had flaunted since its introduction in 1984. Fostered by Reagan-era deregulation, such strategies have led to the “multiplexed” networks of today, through which distinct HBO and Showtime entities target specific consumer types. The subgroup that cable covets most is the “upscale working women” category, which Nielsen has charted since 1976. Such women “attract advertisers not only because they remain the primary household consumers, in the tradition of women historically targeted by radio and TV, but also because they have considerable money to spend on their own pleasures” (Juffer, Home 200; see Gomery 1).
Given that “[m]ost of the profits in contemporary cinema [have been] generated in video stores” (Naremore 163), it is worth questioning why the softcore industry has reflected cable biases more than video biases. The answer is that home-video distributors have tended to be more diverse, democratic, and class-blind than cable (Naremore 163). They have seldom, in other words, embodied coherent bundles of tastes. It has been even rarer for them to combine such “bundles” with centralized distribution schemes and large revenue streams. Consequently, though home video has since the 1980s underwritten many areas of sexploitation, it has not encouraged the same level of routinization as cable. Of course, Blockbuster, which still represents the enormous exception to this rule. But it is clear that the softcore industry did not form in response to family-oriented Blockbuster so much as learn to accommodate it after the industry had adopted a default corporate softcore sensibility in the mid-1990s (see Juffer, “No Place” 55–56). Also implicit to home video’s unpredictable sexual palate is that it is a private format but not a broadcast medium. For that reason, the rape metaphors that antiporn paternalists like Staubach have aimed at televisual sexuality have not lent themselves to video, which requires people to perform an act of consent by transporting a consumer choice into the home. By contrast, cable is a “high penetration” (as it is truly called) medium” that is easy translated into assaultive and paternalistic terms (Jaehne 10). Cable transmission has therefore remained more likely to generate controversy than home-video exhibition despite the fact that there is greater sexploitation diversity on a Blockbuster shelf than a Cinemax schedule. Given the far greater sexploitation diversity that has been available through mom-and-pop outlets—and that has recently proliferated through online means—it is clear that home video has supported a generic range loosely approximating the whole of the classical sexploitation circuit, while cable has subsidized tame variants on arthouse and drive-in fare, eschewing the more visceral, masculinized forms of the grindhouse. Throughout the 1980s, such diversity was implicit to the cult sexploitation category, whose producers relied mainly on video distribution, and it would continue to be evident there once this category spawned cult softcore labels like Torchlight, Surrender, and Seduction during the 1990s.

In its lowest, most “cultish” vehicles, video sexploitation has, then, been more masculinized than cable sexploitation, daring feminists and cultural conservatives to take umbrage to its “classical” synthesis of objectification and violence. But this impulse was curtailed by opposite postfeminist anxieties—with the result that 1980s sexploitation never matched the diversity or disorder of classical sexploitation. Films of the 1980s in the cult sexploitation rubric align their heroines with implacable strength and
appropriate a feminist idiom more reliably than 1970s vehicles. Witness
Academy Entertainment’s *Blue Movies* (1988), which foregrounds characters
displaying feminist sympathies, including one doing research on “mass
media’s influence on sexual identification.” And these films often temper
their objectionable traits through a lower-middlebrow comedy that muffles
their violence—and through ironies that place a crucial distance between
them and the grindhouse products that they knowingly parody. This parod-
ic historical continuity indicates a familiar strategy of 1980s sexploitation,
which has qualified as a “cult” area not only insofar as coterie audiences have
favored it but also insofar as its producers have commodified their own par-
simony, turning lo-fi necessities into nostalgic distinctions. Even the name
of Fred Olen Ray’s 1986 start-up, American Independent Productions, is a
camp homage to Samuel Arkoff’s teen exploitation outfit, American Inter-
national Pictures (also AIP), where Corman cut his teeth.

Before moving on, I should make three points about these video-
oriented sectors, which comprised the majority of sexploitation produced
in the 1980s. First, in this period, sexploitation relied on ultra-low budgets
and thus had ultra-low values. In an exemplary arrangement, Ray presold
*Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers* (1987) to Camp Video, allowing him to raise
half of the film’s budget of $50,000 in return for American video rights
(188). This left him the option of licensing the film elsewhere, so he nego-
tiated a richer pickup with the more established distributor Vidmark (Ray
195). (Along with Vestron, Vidmark was a major financier of low-cost
direct-to-video genres in the 1980s.) But such financing restricted his
budgets to the ultralow $60,000–$125,000 range, which yielded campy, lo-
fi values. Second, though producers like Corman and Ray clearly made sex-
ploration films—besides *Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers*, Ray was
responsible for *Beverly Hills Vamp* (1988) and *Bad Girls from Mars*
(1989)—they seldom specialized in sexploitation alone. This survival-
oriented flexibility ensured that sexploitation would remain diffuse in this
era, indistinct from other low-budget sectors of the nontheatrical market.
Finally, like their classical forebears, the new sexploiteers depended on lurid
plots, titles, and promotions. Over-the-top video box art was a requisite for
inexpensive cult films whose monsters, chainsaws, and breasts had to com-
pete on retail shelves with much slicker contemporary Hollywood fare sell-
ing the same spectacle.12 This youthful promotion, whose excessiveness is
ironic and hence unthreatening, marks another constitutional divide
between a video-oriented cult sexploitation aesthetic and sexploitation’s
emerging cable aesthetic, which favored more restrained signals and
required less promotion. Such restraint would be most completely realized
by corporate softcore, whose bland video box art offers one proof that
home video was not its primary market.
II. YOUNG LADY CHATTERLEY II, A JANUS TEXT

As one of a handful of fully softcore American films shot in the 1980s, Alan Roberts’s Young Lady Chatterley II (hereafter YLCII) is automatically intriguing, and its interest deepens on examination. In its complex Janus function, YLCII is meaningful to any survey of 1980s sexploitation. On one hand, the film is emblematic of the spicy-not-obscene aspirationalism to which premium cable was yoking its identity as early as 1984. On the other hand, YLCII is emblematic of sexploitation’s theatrical past, for it was sequel...
to a classical film in the *Emmanuelle* mode. Such multivalence implies that *YLCII* was an anomaly among the masculinized, downscale, timid films that dominated 1980s sexploitation. But even here there is complexity, for the film’s Playboy-style comedy links it to the era’s most prevalent and masculinized form, the teen sex comedy. These impulses, at once alluding to exploitation’s past, present, and future, coincide neatly in the film’s careful, conflicted, highly discursive depiction of rape.

*YLCII* is not faithful to D. H. Lawrence’s novel. Though Roberts envisioned his first *Chatterley* film in the same reverential terms as later adapters, including Jaekin and Ken Russell, he could not interest investors in such a concept. But because “*Emmanuelle* was the rage and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* had the same classic quality” (3), Roberts did manage to adorn each installment with literary trappings. To that end, he secured ritzy, Euro-style locations (including the Bernard Cornfeld estate in Beverly Hills) and deployed fractured allusions to Lawrence (both plots revolve around a wealthy married landowner [Harlee McBride] who pursues her gardeners). As a result, *YLCII* resembles the softcore imports of the 1980s, many of which were dubious adaptations driven by erotic names like Lady Chatterley, Emmanuelle, Fanny Hill, and O. The 1980s alone spawned four Chatterley vehicles, with dozens of Emmanuelle (or “Emanuelle”) films appearing in the same interval. But unlike Roberts’s films, imports like Lorenzo Onorati’s *The Story of Lady Chatterley* (1989) were dramas. By transforming his first *YLC* film into a latter-day comedy, Roberts took advantage of a mid-1970s vogue for heroine-driven sex comedy. He retained this scheme in *YLCII*, though sex-com fashion had by 1985 shifted toward the frustrated teenage male, a trend Roberts acknowledges through a secondary figure. The sequel was made after Playboy approached Roberts during the early 1980s to shoot a 16mm serial using the same actress and location; eventually, the concept was redesigned as a 35mm feature with a final cost of $310,000 (Roberts 1). After playing on the Playboy Channel, *YLCII* aired on Cinemax and Showtime. The film was also licensed to Vestron and even appeared in a narrow, R-rated theatrical release under the alternate title *Private Property*.

*YLCII*’s peculiar sensuality derives from its *Emmanuelle*-style liberationism and its Playboy-style materialism. Though forced to translate *Emmanuelle*’s metaphysical aesthetic into comic terms, Roberts mimicked the film’s ostentatious sensuality, including its gauzy soft-focus, hedonistic *mise-en-scène*, and slick values, in his *YLC* films. Indeed, American audiences might have recognized the *Emmanuelle* stamp before viewing the first *YLC*, whose promotion featured a “Beautiful X” tag line that alluded to Columbia’s famous “X was never like this” line (see Lewis 228). In *YLCII*, this sensuality shades into a Playboy aesthetic, a blurring that is evident in the
sequel’s tendency to fabricate sensuous imagery from luxury goods. A drift toward materialism is also apparent in YLCII’s sexual consumerism. Like Emmanuelle, Roberts’s Lady Cynthia Chatterley is a liberated, sex-positive quester. But because YLCII is a comedy, it lacks the gravity of Emmanuelle. Roberts’s light hedonism—which prefigures the “weightlessness” of corporate softcore, especially that of the Playboy variety—is striking in its handling of adultery. Antisexual, anticonsumerist anxieties have often manifested in classical and contemporary sexploitation genres through the figure of the bored wife, whose wayward desire portends destruction; this formula has a notable place in the erotic thriller. But in YLCII, Cynthia’s adultery is not just guilt-free, à la Emmanuelle; it is not an issue. Even amid porno-chic, YLCII’s liberationism would have seemed self-indulgent. In the antiporn 1980s, it was, like the film’s softcore structure, an anachronism.

YLCII introduces an anticonsumerist theme as a source of comic tension that must be dispersed for the narrative to regain its consumerist equilibrium. A common pornographic trajectory, this arc is not in itself remarkable. What is notable is that this tension is associated with Judith Grimmer (Sybil Danning), who evokes both sides of the antiporn coalition that contributed to the wane of porno-chic, a development that coincided with the release of the first YLC film. In a sense, then, Judith functions as an anti-antiporn device. Styled as a devout Catholic, Judith is also a false feminist whose misandristic repressions imply a complex misogyny that is revealed as such through the intercession of Cynthia, whose postfeminist liberationism is situated as a “truer” feminism. In reacting to a bad marriage—as she puts it, the “lust and feral desires of my husband seduced him away to other women”—Judith has become a repressive-purity stereotype whose self-loathing manifests in her notion that “the evil beast lurks” in female sex organs. She thus coerces her male relatives to join the priesthood and views Cynthia (whose estate she, her brother Robert [Steven Kean Matthews], and son Virgil [John St. Angelo] visit in the course of the diegesis) as an enemy. Cynthia neutralizes the narrative tension implicit to Judith’s antisexual stance via an array of numbers culminating in Judith’s semiconsensual rape. Cynthia begins by co-opting Judith’s relatives. Her seduction of Robert is the least exceptional element of this pattern, though it does require her to nullify his “productivist” belief that sex “is meant to be enjoyable, but for a purpose.” Cynthia’s more consumerist idea of sexual pleasure as an autotelic good is integral to her nurturing femininity, which the film defines as maternal during her seduction of the teenaged Virgil.

Virgil is an intriguing figure. His age- and gender-specific frustration links him to the low-budget sex-coms that proliferated after Porky’s and Fast Times at Ridgemont High. But since YLCII is softcore, his frustration has lit-
tle chance of enduring. This point is clarified by the film’s opening pattern of *coitus interruptus*, which places Cynthia in a comic role traditional to men. Just as her frustration “lapses” into pornographic surfeit, Virgil’s frustration yields to satiety, first with Cynthia and then with interchangeable servants. Such abundance is rare in all but the most sexualized teen sex-coms—but when it does appear, it is accompanied by clear feminization tactics. A case in point is *My Tutor* (1983), a Crown project sponsored by Playboy and featuring the cinematography of Mac Ahlberg and the acting of a young, credibly frustrated Crispin Glover. A film that still runs on cable, *My Tutor* is a traditional teen sex-com except for its postfeminist stylization, which softens the disempowered hero (Matt Lattanzi) as a condition of satisfying his lust. The hero’s older female tutor (Caren Kaye) educates him in French, sex, and manners. Like Cynthia, this figure is a nurturer whose tutelage has a feminist dimension: it is an altruistic expression of solidarity with the hero’s girlfriends. In *YLICII*, Cynthia’s role is more intricate in that she must first disabuse her charge of a hurtful ideology by using maternal tones to coax him into obeying “male” desire (“your mother’s not here, Virgil, and there are no evil beasts, just soft and moist and warm”). Only then can she guide him in satisfying “female” desire (“go slower, slower, no hurry”). Like the entire scenario, this advice has been standardized by contemporary softcore, which depicts liaisons between teen males and older females in the warm, fuzzy terms of student-teacher metaphors. Such metaphors are most evident in softcore’s most feminized subgenre, the softcore serial. By linking the liberationist comedy of the classical era to the “frustrationist” comedy of its own era, *YLICII* anticipates the contemporary.

Cynthia seduces Judith by way of Thomas (Brett Clark), the gardener who is her consistent sexual object. Her interactions with Thomas represent another way in which *YLICII* looks back and forth in time. The gaze that Cynthia levels at Thomas’s buff, semiclad body inverts the traditional gendering of porn’s subject-object relation. As the object of Cynthia’s gaze, Thomas is configured as an other whose fetishized difference vis-à-vis the female subject is further “exoticized” by class difference. (Adam West’s bare chest is also the object of Cynthia’s ogle, but the exotic-other accent is absent because West plays a campy professor—and because he is Batman.) Later in the decade, this distinctively gendered and classed dynamic would become the crux of Zalman King’s appeal. Thomas also anticipates the King hero through his antifeminist conviction that sex is the key to revealing a woman’s essential femininity, which may be obscured by careers, pieties, and other acculturated “illusions.” Thomas thus resolves to “help” Judith through coerced sex that he expects will “become” consensual, for he believes she has “more fire beneath her skirt than ice.” Though his “backlash” attitude is
incorrect—which Cynthia confirms in labeling him “a chauvinist”—this aspect of his postfeminist construction is not discordant given his low social background and his comic narrative function. What is discordant is that the middlebrow heroine agrees to his “remedy.” An anomaly even then—or, in a post-Brownmiller, post-Dworkin decade, especially then—Cynthia’s rape complicity is an ironic extension of her female solidarity.

Of course, YLCII has no intention of depicting a nonconsensual rape, and in this respect, it is of its time. Though Judith’s violation offers an opportunity to adapt Lawrence through an allegorical display of brute “phallic reality,” the film is too proper to seize this opportunity, offering instead the softest of semiconsensual motifs. After Thomas tricks Judith into meeting him in his hut, Judith, Bible in hand, spurns his coarse advance. But he does not respond with roughie violence. Instead, he shifts to a discursive approach, asserting that she is “primarily a woman. You hide her very well, but I know she’s in there.” After a pause in which no coercion is suggested, Judith yields, melting into his embrace. This “rape,” then, pivots on two quick exchanges: Thomas cedes power to Judith, who cedes it back to him. Thomas does not take “no” for an answer, but neither does he force Judith’s pleasure. Thus the sequence blends romance-novel surrender with a scrupulous maintenance of consent. Here YLCII is far softer and more postfeminist than Emmanuelle, which subjects its heroine to a nonconsensual rape. In today’s softcore serials, the convention is to underscore a rape’s unreality or to stipulate the mechanisms through which the female “victim” ritually controls her “rape.” But because Cynthia does not know that Thomas will desist at Judith’s behest, her role in this rape conspiracy is out of sync with the more cautious aspects of its presentation.

In the end, Judith’s narrative arc conforms with convention by supporting Thomas’s antifeminist misogyny. It does so, however, not through hardcore frenzies but through softcore scanties: beneath Judith’s prim attire, she has all along been wearing the fiery signifiers of “true” womanliness. Her antisex trappings banished, she is exposed as a vivacious cliché with wild hair and revealing clothing. That YLCII at this point signifies Judith’s “essence” through fashion rather than action is consistent with its softcore vision, which always stresses eroticism’s mediated nature. Indeed, that Thomas captivates Judith with language, not force, reflects one of YLCII’s steadiest patterns. For example, the film also underscores language’s power to captivate during Cynthia’s seductions of Robert and Virgil. This allure is further accentuated by the instructive sequence in which Cynthia describes her fantasy man during a slow, languorous massage. In the aforementioned segment, Cynthia’s masseuse (Barbara Stewart) works her clitoris as the camera lingers on her face and breasts—and all the while, Cynthia narrates
a fantasy about a “sensitive and yet manly” stranger, whom the film later realizes as, naturally, a Frenchman. The excitement registered by Cynthia’s theatrical face, the film’s central image, is as much a response to the act of public fantasy as to the masseuse’s manipulations.

YLCII’s contemporaneity is most evident when the film’s literary frills combine with dense oral textures to suggest that “authentic” female desire is tantamount to verbal fantasy. Like the surrender theme, this idea is common in romance and other “female” genres, including the woman’s film. It has also retained its place in the art film; Jean-Jacques Annaud’s just-shy-of-softcore *The Lover* (1992) offers a fairly recent case. It makes sense, then, that King also embraced this sort of literariness, most influentially through the epistolary framework of his *Red Shoe Diaries* serial.

III. MALE DISEMPOWERMENT IN THE TEEN SEX COMEDY

In the 1980s, few sexploiteers followed Roberts in lending their projects dichotomous structures. At that juncture, softcore procedures were rare even at Playboy, which, like other mid- to low-budget studios, financed more hero-driven teen sex-coms than heroine-driven sex-coms. It was more common for teen sex-coms to imitate YLCII’s feminization than its pornographiciation. It is no accident, then, that even sexploitation’s downscale, masculinized sex-coms emphasize female empowerment, often countering antiporn ideology in the process. If such comedies at times revert to the tame, adolescent voyeurism and low double entendres of the nudie cutie, they also blend such attributes with “safe” postfeminist proprieties. Typically, this middling ethos was as crucial to their licensing for cable distribution as the fact that they mimicked theatrical paradigms in the first place. Here it bears reiterating that unlike the old sexploitation market, whose formation was contingent on the nudie cutie’s stark contrast with Code-era Hollywood spectacle, the new nontheatrical markets relied on voyeuristic, post-Code sex-coms that often were Hollywood spectacle. HBO and Showtime, it seems, needed the confidence of experience before pioneering their own distinctive softcore. But because these films were for half a decade the raciest new releases on cable, they deserve mention as a pivotal phase in the development of more specialized forms of sexploitation.

The social sensitivity of films like *My Tutor* was influenced by blockbusters like Bob Clark’s *Porky’s* and Amy Heckerling’s *Fast Times*. Though pointedly low in its comedy and imagery, *Porky’s* includes a strong racial tolerance theme, while the more middlebrow *Fast Times* contains joint male-female protagonists, a format that allows it to explore the gender-specific
effects of teen sex, including abortion. In a typical gambit, later vehicles like Universal’s *Private School* (1983) adapted the joint-protagonist schema popularized by *Fast Times* as a device for yielding greater female display—reminding us that, after the lapse of the Code, Hollywood was not above trends previously ascribed to low-budget sexploiteers alone. Hence the subjectification-via-objectification dynamic that in the classical era culminated in feminized biases may be observed in teen forms. Recent big-budget projects like *American Pie* (1999) and particularly *The Girl Next Door* (2004) perpetuate this trend, yielding strong women who socialize men by imparting sensitivity lessons—much as they do in softcore cable serials.

The teen sex-com openly panders to ideas of female superiority. This bias is an organic though oblique expression of the core theme of much contemporary sex comedy, which is the absurdity of male heterosexuality and its inflated claims to power and status (Dyer, *Matter* 114–17). Even the nudie cutie—whose women are typically flattened objects—tends to situate women as higher beings. Still, the analogy with the nudie cutie should not be overdrawn. The deflations and frustrations of the two forms are distinct. If the hero emblematic of the nudie cutie is Meyer’s Mr. Teas, the maladjusted voyeur who flees active contact with women, the hero emblematic of the teen sex-com is Clark’s Pee Wee (Dan Monahan), whose tireless pursuit of such contact provides *Porky’s* with comic tension. Thus the teen sex-com’s peephole voyeurism, iconically realized in the *Porky’s* shower spectacle, figures as a frustrating deferment, not a liberating end-in-itself, as in *Mr. Teas*. Further, the postfeminist women of the sex-com are rounder, more humanized figures than the passive, prefeminist objects of the nudie cutie.

To verify how basic postfeminist female agency was to 1980s sex comedy, it helps to focus on Chuck Vincent, whose low-budget sex-coms pursue the teen-frustration paradigm without the niceties of more mainstream films. As a gay man who began by making straight sexploitation films like *Voices of Desire* (1970), Vincent was an early convert to hardcore, starting his own production label, Platinum Pictures, in 1981 (Gerli 198). He edited his narrative-heavy films to suit foreign and cable markets, with his soft-X cuts of hardcore films offering one of the era’s steadiest varieties of softcore. Known for arthouse hardcore like *Roommates* (1981) and *In Love* (1983), he was among the first directors to negotiate multipicture deals with the Playboy Channel (Ford 2), which produced *Preppies* (1982). Besides *Preppies*, Vincent’s filmography features many teen sex-coms, including *Hollywood Hot Tubs* (1984), *Sex Appeal* (1986), *Wimps* (1986), and *Student Affairs* (1987). Though they focus on young men, these comedies supply forceful supporting women who dominate and manipulate the male characters. Typically, this “male disempowerment” theme is sexualized, as indicated by the
films’ lowbrow, self-conscious references to female orgasm, male masturbation, and porn.

That this master theme and its supporting motifs pertain to Vincent’s hardcore background is clear. But they may also be linked to Vincent’s sexual identity. Drawing on Richard Dyer, Jake Gerli has examined Vincent’s hardcore output through the lens of his homosexuality. Gerli argues that Vincent’s interest in bad sex and lack of interest in sexual representation as a whole “constitute queer strategies of representing heterosexual sex,” the function of which is to displace and destabilize “the fantasy of utopian heterosexual intercourse as encountered in pornography” (199; 198–215). Gerli does not discuss the director’s heterosexual sexploitation, but his approach implies that Vincent may have kept returning to sexploitation comedy because he felt it suited his talent and vision more straightforwardly than heterosexual hardcore. For whereas the qualities that Gerli situates as queer work against the emerging conventions of hardcore, the same qualities work with the emerging conventions of the teen sex-com, which mandates a timid, self-reflexive spectacle and an often dystopian perspective on straight sex and masculinity.

Female orgasm is a dystopian staple of Vincent’s work and the teen sex-com broadly because it is a reliable device for underlining male futility. Linda Williams has argued that pornographic genres identify female “frenzy” with female orgasm (Hard 50). But the teen sex-com is self-conscious enough to acknowledge that this “evidence”—which in soft genres is often limited to facial conventions and noisy “M&G’s”—may be fraudulent. In mocking men, the sex-com underscores the intentional, performative nature of female orgasm. Men can neither predict nor direct female pleasure; nor can they be sure of the motives informing its dramatization. A converse impotence is indicated by films that suggest that female frenzy is credible enough but that men are ancillary to it—or that men cannot squelch it once they start it. The first device registers a basic male anxiety. The second is an unintended consequence of male fantasy. By exploring both male shortcomings, most memorably via Kim Cattrall’s turn as “Lassie,” Porky’s helped cement these ecstatic motifs as standbys of the teen sex-com.

Vincent’s richest comedy utilizes these standbys. In Preppies, three college freshmen are manipulated by two sets of women divided by class but united by mercenary intent. Both the preppy women and the working-class women hope to secure the freshmen’s bank accounts. Gold-digging is the sex-com’s main motive for “faking it.” (In contemporary softcore, which explores this motif from the vantage of female subjectivity, love is the culprit.) This truism is borne out in Katt Shea’s droll performance as Margot, the domineering girlfriend of the trust-fund designee, Chip (Dennis Drake).
Margot advises her dim friend Trini (Linda Wiesmeier) to regard virginity as a “time deposit.” Margot retains Chip's interest while preserving her “capital” by letting him palpate her naked flesh through a glass door. She treats orgasm as a similar exchange. Shea's finest thespian moment may be the scene in which Margot, dressed in bra, panties, and frou-frou knee socks, models for her friend the performative flattery of a preppy wife, teaching Trini to “swirl the head from side-to-side and wave the arms in gentle motion.” Margot climaxes this recital with M&G's that she refers to as “slow purring, guttural moans.” By contrast, in Sex Appeal, Monica (hardcore icon Veronica Hart), one of the working-class hero’s more upscale lovers, comes to orgasm so rapidly, uncontrollably, and authentically that the hero's input is diminished—and with it, his self-esteem. This ludic outcome represents a double twist. Prior to sex, Monica indicates the impossibility of satisfying her. Initially, her volcanic responsiveness disrupts this expectation in accord with male fantasy—but in the end, such hyper-sensitivity reinforces this expectation in accord with male futility. In the context of the teen sex-com, female orgasm, authentic or otherwise, is a teasing signifier of failed masculinity; it is also a motif that Vincent seamlessly integrates with class anxieties.

A related and even more distinctive element of the teen sex-com’s construction of male sexuality is its acknowledgment that men as well as women masturbate. Such an admission would be refreshing were it not for the sex-com’s fortification of traditional sex-and-gender biases. From its inception, classical exploitation tended to valorize female masturbation. Such a bias became more static and predictable after feminism’s politicization of female masturbation during the early 1970s (see Laqueur 74–80, 400–413). By the mid-1970s, exploiters were intentionally endorsing this liberation of clitoral sexuality in films that include Joe Sarno’s Butterflies—which, by concluding with a masturbation number, symbolizes the heroine’s new freedom from phallic domination. Ever intrigued by the feminine “mystery” of auto-eroticism, exploiters have since then lent female masturbation a middlebrow seriousness as expressed through postfeminist motifs that connote self-sufficiency and choice. This affirmative valence has remained fixed even as the politicization of female masturbation has receded in post-1996 soft-core, occasionally returning to full view in aspirational vehicles such as Elisa Rothstein’s Nancy Friday–inspired serial Women: Stories of Passion.

But as Thomas Laqueur notes in Solitary Sex (2003), masturbation was never rehabilitated for heterosexual men. Especially in pop culture, male masturbation remains unredeemed and irredeemable, marked by “fear, embarrassment and abjection” (Laqueur 417–18). In making this argument, Laqueur alludes to late 1990s blockbusters like the teen-sex variant There's
Something About Mary (1998) as well as American Pie (82, 418). The teen sex-com formed this negative stance toward male masturbation during its first vogue in the early 1980s. Female masturbation was at that point still politicized by liberationist sentiment, so the teen sex-com focused its negativity on male masturbation, generating a structuring contrast with later softcore convention, which has lavished pro-sex positivism on female masturbation while ignoring male masturbation. Only insofar as it, too, ignores male masturbation does the teen sex-com treat its hero kindly. The teen sex-com is sexploitation’s closest “male” equivalent to the awakening-sexuality model, and it is notable that it is most positive in its valuation of “budding” male sexuality when its hero is most feminized, as in My Tutor. But what male sexuality can never do is bud in homosexual or autoerotic directions—a point as true of the films of a gay director like Vincent as of those of heterosexual directors. Though explorations of “lesbianism” and onanism have been standard in awakening-sexuality films since the 1960s, teen sex-coms of a similar style avoid motifs that still bear traces of Freudian stigma, as if this evasion were a condition of their affirmation of male sexuality.

Teen sex-com depictions of male masturbation are low, ludic, and nonerotic, suiting them to Vincent’s tastes. They are, in fact, yoked to the subgenre’s taste for gross-outs. (Here American Pie and There’s Something About Mary are to the point.) Such depictions are also expressive of male disempowerment. Driven by bodily necessities he cannot control, the adolescent hero is compelled by sexual scarcity and social ineptitude to seek solitary relief, the ritual exposure and interruption of which underlines his phallic futility. Fast Times contains an influential instance of such a scene—but a similar scene from Vincent’s Sex Appeal is no less exemplary. Cowering in a bathroom with a “Playhouse” magazine that conflates Playboy and Penthouse, the hero (Louie Bonanno) of Sex Appeal is thwarted by a mother’s intrusions. The details bespeak awkwardness, impotence, and low, Freudian shame. Witness the clumsy mechanics of penis, porn, and pants; the proximity of the toilet; the overbearing voice of the Mother.

In alluding to print and film porn, Preppies and Sex Appeal manifest a related signature of the Vincent oeuvre: self-referential devices and plots. Here again, Vincent might be viewed through his sexual identity. Dyer has discussed the tradition of self-reflexivity in gay porn videos (“Idol” 105–9), and Gerli has examined self-conscious aspects of Vincent’s hardcore (204–12). But in the context of a broad discussion of sex comedy, the self-reflexiveness of Vincent’s sexploitation is again most usefully read as a means of reinforcing heterosexual male disempowerment. Consider that Preppies and Sex Appeal both refer to Vincent’s hardcore, including collaborations with Ron Jeremy and Candida Royalle like Fascination (1980) and
Sizzle (1980). These references are subtly linked to the abjection implicit to the male masturbation motif. As Sex Appeal’s toilet scene shows, the teen sex-com construes porn as a sign of male weakness. This view buttresses Alan Soble’s anti-antiporn contention that “pornography is not an expression of the reality of male power, but an expression of men’s lack of power” and “an admission that men must accept the social advances of women” (Marxism 7; Soble’s italics). One pillar of antiporn orthodoxy is that men use porn as a tool of seduction and, by extension, of rape (Russell 80–82). Vincent counters this orthodoxy in a self-reflexive fashion. In Sex Appeal, his would-be Casanova uses Fascination as a comically inutile tool of female seduction. The director also counters this thesis by having one of Preppies’s lower-class females (Jo-Ann Marshall) pose as a preppy writing a sociology paper titled “The Male Response to Popular Erotic Cinema.” She subjects the male preppies to hardcore films like Sizzle, making them instantly pliable. In the teen sex-com, then, porn is a self-reflexive signifier of male heterosexual disempowerment; it may also function as a self-reflexive signifier of female heterosexual empowerment.

In addition to covert images of female dominance, Vincent’s sex-coms supply overt images as well. Sex Appeal contains a pair of dominatrices and a mystery woman (Tally Chanel) whom the hero cannot control even in his fantasies. These films also contain more positive images of female empowerment, including the hero’s sympathetic sister (Marcia Karr) in Sex Appeal and the protagonist’s smart, assertive girlfriend (Donna McDaniel) in Hollywood Hot Tubs. What is more, in this context of male frustration and deferment, misogyny is comprehensively ironized. Besides the fact that the “illuminating” nuggets that the hero of Sex Appeal gleans from his self-help book are plainly camp (e.g., “women love to talk; be a patient listener—that big mouth of hers has several other uses”), their suave chauvinism is so discredited as to render them absurd. In Vincent’s work, women may embody all the qualities, positive and negative, that men embody, save one: they are not made ludicrous and low by their sexual desires. Almost without exception, they are creatures of choice, not necessity.

Vincent also produced sex-coms outside the teen area, including Young Nurses in Love (1987), which parodies the earnest career-woman films that Corman pioneered in the early 1970s, and Slammer Girls (1987). As a women-in-prison parody, Slammer Girls exemplifies a trend of 1980s exploitation comedy, which often borrows motifs from adjacent genres with a similar interest in female strength. Hence, “slasher-coms” like David DeCoteau’s Sorority Babes in the Slimeball Bowl-O-Rama (1988) and Ray’s Bad Girls from Mars or Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers were not uncommon. These hybrids reconfirm what I have been arguing by way of Vincent: even
when it is ultra-low-budget, ultra-lowbrow, and masculinized, direct-to-video sexploitation is no less “postfeminist” in its advocacy of female agency and choice than the midbudget, middlebrow, feminized softcore that premium cable would help finance from 1991 to 1996.

I should close by briefly returning to *Blue Movies*, a buddy film that exemplifies the characteristic postfeminist anxiety of 1980s sexploitation. The porn-actress heroine (Lucinda Crosby) of this self-conscious film-about-film is ferociously independent and dignified, which leads her to verbally assault the malign and impotent male caricatures around her. She thus demands respect from one set of male producers (“[h]aving sex on film for money is my choice, but I want to be treated like a goddamn human being while I’m doing it!”) and joins with a feminist academic in demanding that another set of male producers demonstrate their solidarity by working naked. If *Blue Movies* is a measure, sexploitation comedy had in tandem with sexploitation generally responded to feminism through a broad ideological shift, becoming more deferential to the powerful women whom it continued to objectify—and more self-abasing, indeed more masochistic, *vis-à-vis* the ideas of male desire that it increasingly stooped to satisfy.

IV. SEX OBJECTS QUA ACTION FIGURES

The proliferation of action dramas in the 1980s is one indication of sexploitation’s intensified dependence on Hollywood formulae. The female-empowerment imperative that is central to 1980s sexploitation is most masculinized in this area. The heroines of such films routinely master the same codes of machismo that prove sex-com heroes deficient. In that sense, these empowered babes are sexploitation’s response to Rambo, Conan, and Bond. Here the most exemplary sex-action forms are not the most prominent ones. In this period, the women-in-prison film underwent a notable resurgence—and the teen slasher and the erotic thriller were among the most influential low-budget forms of this or any period. But though these film categories depend on nudity and violence, none is as straightforwardly reliant on action spectacle as, say, a Rambo film. As a result, their heroines have action and aggression thrust on them. This is clearest apropos the “victim heroes” of nudity-driven slashers like *The Slumber Party Massacre* (1982). Such women must confront a killer or die (Clover 21–64). By contrast, the sex-action films on which I focus here offer postfeminist heroines in the *Superchick* manner. These heroines actively embrace lives predicated on violence.
Within this sex-action subset, the two most intriguing paradigms are Corman’s sword-and-sorcery model and Sidaris’s babes-with-guns model. As exemplified by the *Barbarian Queen* films (1985, 1989), the sword-and-sorcery model is notable for its relatively hard, politicized heroines and its odd fetishization of rape. The *Barbarian Queen* vehicles may, in fact, be viewed as a delicate postfeminist balance of three discordant elements: a timid rape-and-bondage spectacle, an incoherent feminism, and a very patriarchal plot structure. Though in most respects different from the Corman films, Sidaris films like *Malibu Express* (1984), *Hard Ticket to Hawaii* (1987), *Picasso Trigger* (1988), and *Savage Beach* (1989) are governed by a postfeminist logic that precipitates similar balancing acts. These films are visual democracies that value the objects of their glossy, materialist spectacle as largely equivalent “eye candy.” At its most liberal, this spectacle has the potential to provide gender-bending pleasures—but ultimately, any impulse toward genderlessness is checked by postfeminist anxieties that compel Sidaris to adhere to safe, paternalistic sex-and-gender representations.

The *Barbarian Queen* films represent a Hollywood-derived alternative to the much harder category of rape-revenge vehicle exemplified by Meir Zarchi’s 1977 film *I Spit on Your Grave* (Clover 114–65). These Corman films specifically capitalized on a vogue for rape-inflected comic book fantasy first popularized by Universal’s blockbuster *Conan the Barbarian* (1982). Corman writer Howard Cohen adapted the *Conan* model in *Deathstalker* (1983), but in Dino DeLaurentiis’s *Red Sonja* (1985), he discerned a more fitting Hollywood vehicle for the Corman sensibility, which favored politicized material. In the *Barbarian Queen* films, a feminist narrative arc ostensibly motivates rape imagery. But given how often the films present such spectacle—or more precisely, how often they *refer* to it, since they do not depict penetrative acts—rape is plainly their central resource, the one that they mean to “exploit.” It is more logical, then, to assume that this imagery motivated Cohen to find a feminist “solution,” one that made rape spectacle acceptable at a time when rape was uniquely politicized, than to assume the converse.

The first *Barbarian Queen* announces its interest in rape-and-bondage spectacle before the credits roll. The film’s preamble depicts the abduction of an adolescent girl by horsemen in the pay of an oppressive regime. (The girl is plucking pink flowers by a river, no less.) Ravishment is left implicit. The girl’s tunic is rent, the deed itself posited by a medium close-up of a soldier unbuckling his belt. In sequence after sequence, this pattern is repeated: soldiers rip the clothing from their female victims, with the camera lingering long enough to show nipples and horrified reactions but never long enough to simulate penetration. *Barbarian Queen* supplements this rape-tease, so to speak, with roughie-kinky degradations in which women are
histrionically soiled, bloodied, and bound to racks. *Barbarian Queen II* follows a similar pattern, though its rape references are even more fleeting, its torture devices even more baroque.

This is patently postfeminist sexploitation in that rape is somehow at the center of a spectacle that cannot simulate rape. The stand-in for rape simulation is a variant on the bodice-ripping device of romance fiction—and, more lately, of Super Bowl halftime shows. By combining the violent exposure of breasts with female reaction shots, the Corman rape-tease reconfigures the indirection with which nonsoftcore sexploitation has traditionally referred to sex: not through bumping and grinding but through furtive close-ups of female breasts and faces. (Ironically, prefeminist films in the roughie-kinky nexus also relied on rape violence as “compensation” for elliptical nudity.) In several passages, the *Barbarian Queen* films imply that exposure of the breast is itself an ultimate violation—a crime, that is, on a par with penetrative rape, which had in turn been placed on a par with murder by dint of feminist activism (Clover 152; see Projansky). If this overvaluation is a product of a particular cultural moment, it is also a product of R-rated constraints. The interplay of all these factors may be discerned in the sequence in *Barbarian Queen II* in which the villain Hofrax (Roger Cudney) exposes the heroine’s breasts only to recoil, declaring them “an awesomely disgusting sight.” In harder-core films or in verbal media, the misogyny of Hofrax’s outburst would likely be applied to female genitals. But like rape simulations, labial and vaginal references are off-limits to the R-rated *Barbarian Queen* films, by default shifting the misogynistic onus to the breasts.

The Corman vehicles are exceptional not in their rape imagery, which is no more than a timid pattern of allusions, but in the diegetic contortions that the use of this material sets in motion. Corman is famous for plots with left leanings, so it is predictable that the adoption of uniquely sensitive material exacerbates this tendency. The resulting agitprop obscures the classic rape-revenge mechanisms outlined by Clover. Throughout *Barbarian Queen*, women fight alongside men, handling weapons skillfully. Though victim-heroes are in evidence, most of these women are not compelled to fight. Aligned to this spectacle is a thin anti-authoritarian rhetoric that in combination with rape-revenge arcs yields feminist import. *Barbarian Queen II* best articulates this political content. Unlike the heroine of *Barbarian Queen*, who accepts her transformation into a bride, the sequel’s heroine violently opposes a similar metamorphosis into a “lady.” This opening vision of resistance is supplemented by the heroine’s later encounters with female vigilantes and matriarchal rebel bands. Through violence (mud wrestling), the heroine proves that she is not “too much of a lady to be of any use” to the rebels. Her feminist arete is matched by her strident principles,
which are evident early on when she asserts that “men don’t understand power—they think all it’s good for is getting more.”

Despite this independent streak, Corman’s Barbarian Queen films work toward patriarchal resolutions. The feminism of these films—which, as noted, is a function of the particular spectacle that they exploit—put the Corman teams at pains to differentiate their vision from “actual” feminist militancy, which they presumed would alienate audiences that enjoyed the roughie-kinky imagery. As a result, these films follow the postfeminist contours of Corman’s first New World film, The Student Nurses, in which empowered babes experience problems inspired by patriarchal institutions but mostly work within the patriarchy for progress. The only difference is that, in the 1980s films, the patriarchal content seems exaggerated to offset the exaggerated feminism.

The plot of Barbarian Queen II is exemplary. The film develops a vision of female solidarity yet still foregrounds the symbology of potency, paternity, and kingship, with the plot hinging on the heroine’s patriarchal loyalty. On hearing of her father’s death, this female Telemachus earns the enmity of Hofrax by refusing to divulge the secret of her father’s magic scepter, the guarantor of kingship. Her rationale is that she has not viewed her father’s corpse. Should she use the scepter while her father is alive, he would die. Her loyalty is tested through crises from which she could rescue herself by handling the scepter. Each time, she abstains for love of her father—who it turns
out really is dead, in a sense rendering the entire plot de trop. That the scepter is an eroticized, incestuous sign of the patriarchy and of women’s vital but subordinate place within it is acknowledged when she informs her enemies that “having the scepter in your hands does not give you the secret of its power,” which cannot be accessed without “the blessing of womankind.” This motif is central, then, to forging the “middle feminism” identifiable with Corman since 1970. The wisdom of collaboration is reinforced by two points. First, it is revealed that the “autonomous” female rebels have similar loyalties and want to supplant a specific patriarchy, not all patriarchy. Cooperation between the sexes is further justified by the film’s portrayal of its supporting villain (Cecilia Tijerina). This young sadist inverts the heroine’s feminist virtue by confirming that “girls are stronger than you think” in their equal capacity for evil. A matriarchy ruled by this villainess, it is indicated, would be no less oppressive than a patriarchy ruled by misogynists.

Relative to the Corman heroines, the Sidaris heroines are softer and less political. In this, they hew closer to the postfeminist heroines of contemporary softcore, which is logical given the filmmaker’s popularity with latenight programmers from the late 1980s on. The Sidaris vision is also closer to softcore in its pervasive sexualization, which is remarkably free of antisex attitudes. The Barbarian Queen films barely qualify as sexploitation, indicating the throwback dishonesty of their exploitation-style video box art, which is far more sexualized than the films. Sidaris’s films, by contrast, are all but softcore. Malibu Express contains thirteen regularly paced nude sequences, five of which involve active sex. The only element disqualifying these films from softcore designation is that their spectacle more than complies with R limits. (Shots of bumping and grinding are, for instance, rarely held for more than a few seconds.) These independent films also prefigure the contemporary in that they treat men as sculpted sex objects but do not expose male bodies as fully or as often as female. Moreover, the glossy weightlessness of the Sidaris vision anticipates the mood of corporate softcore.

Still, it would be a mistake to lump Sidaris films with more routinized forms. Though these protosoftcore forms exhibit still-extant motifs and register postfeminist anxieties, they are idiosyncratic in imagery and transitional in humor, with a bawdiness rooted in Russ Meyer and burlesque. Indeed, these films throw a unique window onto sexploitation history. Sidaris is the only sexploitation filmmaker that I know of to have directed films in four different decades, all without lapsing into hardcore or Hollywood. Whereas his first films feature classical icons like John Alderman, recent works feature contemporary icons like Julie Strain. Drawing on his classical experience, Sidaris and his independent label, Malibu Bay, made four movies in the 1980s, which led to eight more sex-action films in the 1990s. Sidaris began
with a female detective in *Stacey* but reverted to a more traditional action hero in *Seven* (1979). After *Malibu Express*, however, he opted for joint protagonists, with female leads gradually overshadowing male.

If the Sidaris hero is thereafter diminished, he is not, as in so many exploitation progressions, marginalized, for the Sidaris formula relies on the eroticization of men as well as women. Paramount in this formula is not the sex or gender of the object but its conformity with a slick, prepackaged look. Sidaris films thus offer a consumer-oriented democracy of sex-and-gender types. The glossy carnival exhibitionism that drives Sidaris to supply viewers with fancy vehicles, expensive houses, lush locales, campy guns, odd weaponized gizmos, towering explosions, and bloody dismemberments also drives him to provide Playmates, *femmes fatales*, martial arts experts, macho men, *Playgirl* centerfolds, James Bond playboys, bodybuilders, and transvestites. Sidaris, in short, produces eye candy at its most flexibly “pure,” achieving on midlevel budgets a diversity and a luster rare in 1980s exploitation.  

In *Hard Ticket’s* DVD commentary (2001), Sidaris’s wife and producer Arlene Sidaris claims that “the essence” of their popularity is “beautiful people.” But what unifies Sidaris spectacle is not traditional beauty so much as visual artifice. This “spectacle for spectacle’s sake” leads, as in burlesque, to gender-bending motifs that underscore the constructedness of human appearance.

![Figure 11. Equal-opportunity objectification in the promotional art for Andy Sidaris’s *Hard Ticket to Hawaii* (1987). © Malibu Bay and Andy Sidaris, 1987, 2001.](image-url)
This thesis is verified by Sidaris’s twin sex-and-gender typologies. Sidaris’s female imagery ranges from Playmate spectacle, wherein soft, passive women are marginalized as “bimbos,” to less conventional spectacle, in which harder, larger women conflate sex and death. In the former area are pornographic figures like Faye (Kimberly McArthur) and May (Barbara Edwards), who giggle their way into the hero’s boat and shower in *Malibu Express*. In the latter is *Hard Ticket*’s sinister musclewoman (Lory Green), who performs a martial arts routine in body oil and diapers dyed black. The middle is a hybrid space in which traditional beauties play law agents and assassin *femmes fatales*, combining curvaceous femininity with athletic professionalism. These types share a common exterior, so Sidaris differentiates them psychologically. In *Picasso Trigger*, he aligns heroine Donna (Dona Speir) with an interior softness that is naïve, yielding, and loyal, but he aligns *femme fatale* Pantera (Roberta Vasquez) with an interior hardness that is cynical, unyielding, and treacherous. Donna’s postfeminist arc is to learn to accept that she can carry a phallic pistol and remain true to her internal “woman.” In *Hard Ticket*, her coheroine helps her get past any sense of disjunction by counseling anti-intellectual acceptance. When Donna reminds Taryn (Hope Marie Carlton) that “drug-enforcement agents can’t afford to get soft,” Taryn drops her top for an impromptu shower, blithely asserting, “I’m supposed to be soft, I’m a woman.”

The subversive potential of Sidaris’s largely amoral approach to sex-and-gender spectacle is, then, counteracted by his postfeminist narrative tendencies, which reconcile the contradictions of said spectacle with mainstream values; this feat is accomplished through the demonization of “excessive” gender constructions and the valorization of neotraditional “tough girls” like Donna and Taryn. But if Sidaris disparages outright gender sabotage, he idealizes a moderate gender reconfiguration. (As Sherrie Inness argues in *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* [1999], such neotraditional “play” is common to strong heroines throughout postfeminist culture.) These dynamics are also visible in Sidaris’s male typology. The Sidaris men range from ultratraditional to antitraditional, with extremes rendered negative. The muscleman of *Malibu Express*—played by actors hired for biceps and bodybuilding titles, much as the actresses were hired for breasts and *Playboy* credits—are villains. These marginal yet eroticized figures correspond to the “bimbos” in that their acceptance of an established heterosexual identity is exaggerated. Among the male figures occupying the other pole are the transvestites played by Michael Andrews in several Sidaris films. In *Hard Ticket*, his villainous “Michele” persona corresponds with the evil musclewoman in that both adopt an ultratraditional exterior associated with the opposite sex. In the middle reside the sculpted
macho men, sinewy martial arts experts, and suave playboys who portray Sidaris’s heroes and *hommes fatals*. Sidaris’s neotraditional heroes are in-between figures. In men and women, then, Sidaris rewards a moderate gender retooling, which he aligns with virtue, happy endings, and attractiveness. But he also aligns in-betweenness with anxiety. The heroes’ covert feminization—rendered as a failure of masculinity, just as Donna is troubled by her sense of feminine inadequacy—is signaled by the inability of the heroes of *Malibu Express*, *Hard Ticket*, and *Picasso Trigger* to shoot their *excessively* large guns straight. Hence the heroines must often rescue these handsome “ladies’ men,” a situational vulnerability that reinforces their feminization.

The viewer hardly needs these signals to discern the heroes as feminized. That they are positioned as slick, artificialized objects conveys the *to-be-looked-at-ness* that Laura Mulvey has described as traditional to femininity, especially as constructed by classical Hollywood (19; see also Berger 45–64). Feminization is, then, most obvious among the most artificial males. Sidaris’s transvestites confirm this point—but it also holds true for the hypermasculine men, whose feminization is reinforced by a stereotypic vanity and fussiness and by sexual ambivalence. Sidaris’s principal male types are all, in fact, epicene—and they all displace their feminization onto others, yielding a motif that slips smoothly from one type to the next. Witness *Malibu Express*, in which Cody (Darby Hinton), the macho hero, differentiates himself from Stuart (Andrews), the closeted transvestite, by labeling the latter “light in his loafers.” Cody’s sexuality is then questioned by other men, including a highly artificial muscleman (John Brown) who mocks Cody as a “pretty boy” only to problematize his own masculinity by asserting that he may “wanna fuck [Cody].” The broader question raised by these characterizations is whether any male treated as an exemplar of a prefabricated look can ever “be” masculine, given that masculinity is aligned with nature. Cody’s macho “prettiness” exemplifies this dilemma. Though based on a 1980s type popularized by Tom Selleck (*Magnum, P.I.*, is Cody’s direct model), Cody’s look has a long history in gay iconography. Macho is the “conscious deployment of signs of masculinity” and thus an “exaggerated masculinity” whose “exaggeratedness marks it off from the conventional masculine look on which it is based” (Dyer, *Matter* 42, 40; Dyer’s italics). Such visual excess undercuts macho’s naturalness, transforming its working-class symbols into “pure signs of eroticism” (Dyer, *Matter* 40). This combination of excess and eroticism is what attracts Sidaris to macho. Ultimately, his preference for the “spectacular” male means that unproblematic depictions of masculinity elude him. The diegetic signals outlined above may be Sidaris’s wry acknowledgment of the inevitable gender inadequacy encoded
in his visual practices.

It is notable that the pleasure that the director and his producer wife take from their movies transcends traditional and neotraditional categories. Sidaris has an impolitic habit of dissecting female parts in his DVD commentaries—in his Hard Ticket remarks, he points out “some beautiful, large, American breasts,” all but neglecting the “cute little thing” attached to them—so it is interesting that Arlene also admires the chests, arms, and abdomens of their heroes, duplicating the low “male” way in which women ogle men in Sidaris films. Most telling is that the Sidarises are liable to gush in unison in response to characters of either sex. In the Picasso Trigger commentary (2001), Arlene directs Sidaris to “look at [Steve Bond’s] arms!” “He looks great,” Sidaris agrees. “He sure does!” she responds. And both express open-mouthed titillation when reviewing the Hard Ticket sequence in which Andrews recalls Vicki Lynn’s classic transvestite-striptease performances. The surface aim of Sidaris’s glossy burlesque is to satisfy heterosexual tastes—but its deeper, more consumerist thrust may be to assert that identity distinctions need not differentiate or otherwise obstruct spectator pleasure.

So many aspects of Sidaris’s oeuvre support Judith Butler’s analysis that genders are “sustained social performances” (180) that it is worth asking why Sidaris ultimately favors essentialism. Why, that is, does he favor Carlton’s character, whose anti-intellectual acceptance of her feminine “softness” contradicts the complexities of her social violence? For one thing, Sidaris is an anti-intellectual himself, so it is not clear that he has explored the implications of his spectacle. But a more satisfying answer discerns the postfeminist logic of Sidaris’s neotraditionalism. Given his irrepressible eagerness to please and equally irrepressible sexism, it is predictable that he has proved susceptible to the postfeminist anxieties that in the 1980s compelled producers across sexploitation to embrace female agency. Sidaris thinks that his sexist humor, which the more middlebrow Arlene notably disavows, is funny, pleasing, but he is aware that it may give offense. Thus his commentaries alternate between impropriety and defensiveness. It is clear that the same equivocation has led him to develop the paternalistic themes and styles that restrict his development of untraditional pleasures. When justifying his films—often as if in response to a generalized antiporn feminist—Sidaris always points to their ostensibly profemale traits. His heroines, he argues in his Hard Ticket commentary, “do what they want to do when they want to do it.” He extends this to the actresses themselves by noting their authority on his sets, going out of his way to describe how Carlton ghost-directed certain Hard Ticket numbers. But he slides into a paternalism that implies female disempowerment when he stresses his obligation to avoid putting “our
women in compromising situations where blood and guts are graphically shown” (Sidaris and Sidaris, _Bullets_ 27). Sidaris’s postfeminist anxiety has paradoxically encouraged him to “protect” women to accent their self-empowerment. He has also implied that postfeminist anxiety has conditioned his use of traditional styles, including _Hard Ticket_’s soft-focus numbers: “And we do it rather sensuous—and sometimes [they] said, ‘oh, you’re doing those pictures’—our pictures are so, so sensitive and soft, there’s never any mean violence and sexual innuendos.”

Sidaris’s use of a feminized aesthetic is, then, linked to his gender traditionalism, his paternalism in particular, and is motivated by a postfeminist anxiety. Such anxiety limits his most consumerist visual mechanisms, which tend toward genderless pleasures. This quintessentially postfeminist incitement to gender traditionalism could not have been foreseen by antiporn forces. But if contemporary sexploitation is any index, it has been among their most significant legacies to postfeminist culture.

The decisive factor in the shift from the classical to the contemporary was the gradual move from public to private modes of exhibition, which contributed to upheavals in low-budget genres, including a temporary reduction in sexploitation’s explicitness that all but eliminated softcore. An ironic function of this shift was that the classical era’s emergent feminization was interrupted as masculinized Hollywood models like the teen sex-com dominated the shrunken sexploitation marketplace. Softcore’s return was ensured once premium cable had by the mid-1980s established its middlebrow palate; this eminently safe taste formation would later justify enhancing sexploitation’s explicitness. But softcore’s exceptionally feminized sensibility was also anticipated by the fact that even masculinized sexploitation forms like teen sex-coms and sex-action dramas bore a postfeminist imprint in the era of Reagan and Rambo. By decade’s end, cable programmers favored the softest of these forms, including Sidaris’s babes-with-guns cycle. The type of sexploitation that cable liked the most—that is, the _noir_ romance hybrids purveyed by Zalman King and numerous other producers who had incrementally remolded the theatrical erotic thriller into the nontheatrical softcore thriller—were also the upscale forms that led most directly to contemporary softcore.