Soft in the Middle
Andrews, David

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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I. SILENCE AND MUTILATION

Much of this study depicts contemporary softcore as a system of self-conscious texts rooted in an equally self-conscious “middle” industry situated uncertainly between hardcore and theatrical Hollywood. The benefit of this perspective is that it lavishes attention on the two elements principally responsible for the genre’s peculiar coherence: its narrative-number dichotomy and the anxious industrial maneuvering that this sexualized structure has habitually precipitated. Unfortunately, this focus on texts and producers has tended to marginalize the softcore public, a clear apprehension of which is crucial to an overall softcore concept. The self-conscious patterns of omission, abjection, and distortion that distinguish softcore reception are, in fact, so of a piece with patterns discernible at other generic levels that studying this public yields a compelling argument for holistic conceptions of film genre generally.

However, these patterns of negation also frame the softcore public as a singularly difficult object of analysis. I make no pretense of presenting an exhaustive or scientific sociological study of the softcore audience. In the absence of reliable survey data, I focus instead on the interpretive habits of those segments of the audience that have publicized their consumption. This distinction between an audience and a self-proclaimed public may seem
obvious, but clarity is mandatory here. In most contexts, the failure of an individual to publicize group membership would not of necessity entail suspicions of evasion and bad faith. If a fan of classic Westerns kept his obsession to himself, such would not by itself suggest that he was anxious or even hiding. But since every level of softcore shows traces of anxiety, reticence does raise suspicion; in this genre, consumer silence seems to assume a surplus intentionality. Doubtless, suppositions of this sort are in many if not most cases unwarranted, but as will become plain, they are not baseless.

Consider that silence is arguably the most salient way in which the contemporary softcore industry has marketed its products. In theatrical contexts, the discursive activity of consumers is spurred in part by the promotional exertions of producers and distributors, which provide consumers with a preliminary basis for their own readings, evaluations, and generic repositionings (Sandler 202; Altman 44–46). Yet in softcore, producers and distributors outside the cult nexus do not devote much energy to promotion. There are reasons for this reticence. Major cable and video distributors prefer producers to adopt an under-the-radar stance that allows entry into crucial outlets. Corporate softcore in particular has discouraged discussion, which could entail pornographic classification, thus jeopardizing distribution. Of course, this strategy often backfires, not only muzzling confab but also confusing genre-literate consumers hunting for softcore, cash in hand. Especially in chains like Blockbuster and Hollywood Video, the industry’s under-the-radar approach—along with the fact that neither chain cordonsoftcore into an “adult” section—forces consumers to rely on rudimentary cues to predict a text’s genre and contents.1 But condemning such practices as hypocritical or inept would only conceal how it all works: discreet or deceptive producers have made feminized, values-oriented softcore films that have achieved mainstream reach through values-oriented chains, whose discreet or deceptive policies have acted as the guarantor of this market penetration. In turn, these policies have worked to consumer advantage in at least two major respects. As Jane Juffer asserts, a “bright, well-lit,” family-friendly Blockbuster is such an “innocuous and easy site” that even “mothers with little time” can rent softcore there, all without the stigma of “going into a ‘porn section’” (“No Place” 55). Industrial discretion and generic ambiguity also work to the advantage of consumers who would rather not admit even to themselves that they are renting “porn.”

Which is to say that this industrial strategy may help individuals negotiate a set of intricate, internal contradictions that resemble what Jean-Paul Sartre has defined as “bad faith” or self-deception. In my research, I have talked to producers as well as consumers who have resisted calling fully dichotomous softcore “porn” or even “softcore.” Typically, they would not,
or could not, reconcile the dominant devaluation of “pornography,” which they accept, with their manifest approval of a genre that they enjoy in various ways for various reasons. Hence, after one discussion—whose omissions and evasions made it seem like a non-discussion—my interlocutor stopped renting a popular form of softcore. Our conversation had repositioned those vehicles beyond his ideological limits. Rather than revalue the term “pornography” in a more flexible manner reflective of the harmless pleasure that he had taken from softcore, this consumer distanced himself from the object of his pleasure. According to Sartre, individuals in the thrall of bad faith convince themselves that they cannot live by their own beliefs, preferences, and values due to reasons beyond their control (Being 86–116). Pressured by ideologies that make it convenient to avoid asserting their idiosyncrasies (Coombes 1), such individuals reject the implications of their existential freedom. The reluctance of the softcore industry to talk about its products is, among other things, a tacit recognition that many consumers would sooner refuse its products than remold their attitudes in conformity with their pleasure. For the softcore industry, then, silence and obfuscation make better economic sense than the kind of ideological confrontation that begins with straightforward classification.

Despite these muzzlings, a softcore conversation has emerged as one concomitant of the post-1995 Internet explosion, which roughly coincided with the maturation of the industry. Though softcore has long had a marginal presence in print fanzines such as Psychotronic Video, the Internet has dramatically enlarged awareness of this genre. Today, many Internet sites provide forums for discussing softcore (though only a self-conscious few self-identify with the genre). Ironically, this expanding discursive fabric has made it possible to gauge the silences that still enmesh the genre. Such lacunae have a gendered character. Both men and women are susceptible to the ideologies that restrict and devalue softcore, but it appears these pressures have affected them unevenly. Though cable softcore in particular has a large female viewership, women are less likely than men to register their responses to softcore—and when they do, they prefer the most mainstream response sites. These intriguing phenomena dovetail with dispositions noted by scholars working on cult networks. But because it is difficult enough to follow the softcore conversation as manifest, I have limited my speculations about these and other silences, concentrating on the most salient and present responses.

For sake of clarity, I have organized the sites that register this online response to softcore into three categories. In the first category are relatively small “outsider” review sites that fit into a much larger cult network. These sites include The Joe Bob Report and b-independent, among scores of others. The second category is devoted to definitively mainstream “user review”
sites such as IMDb and Amazon. The third and most pertinent category focuses on sites wholly devoted to softcore such as Softcore Reviews and This Is Sexy? Though these consumer-oriented areas all evince a populist, nonacademic sensibility, each one is a specialized category that represents a distinct demographic and articulates a distinct taste regime. Though it is not possible to bestow the same level of detail on each of these categories, I will discuss the broadest distinctions among them, reserving the most scrutiny for the third category—and, more specifically, for Softcore Reviews, a forum that offers intriguing continuities and discontinuities with sites that identify themselves less problematically with the cult nexus.

Despite the minutiae distinguishing these sites, the responses they generate are dominated by some striking patterns. It is critical to bear in mind that the softcore public mainly comprises fans who verify their predilection for the genre by regularly returning to it. Still, even when they explicitly intend to celebrate softcore, these fans tend to delegitimize it via their application of condescending disclaimers. More characteristic yet is their bias toward partial interpretations that diminish or deny one part of softcore’s narrative-number dichotomy so as to privilege another, a practice that at times verges on textual amputation or mutilation. These tendencies are rooted in anxieties attached to the genre’s dichotomous structure and correlate with patterns visible in the response to other pluralistic softcore media. Reception theorist Mark Jancovich has, for instance, detected comparable patterns among *Playboy* readers (“Placing” 2–4). Interpreters of both forms of softcore insist that the “truth” of these mixed, middlebrow media inheres either in their “respectable” materials (narrative segments in the films, essays and fiction in the magazine) or in their “illegitimate” erotic materials (sexual numbers in the films, pictorials in the magazine). Though these responses to contemporary softcore are not always tantamount to bad faith, they routinely tend in that direction. Many responses conform to Sartrean definitions in that they implicitly value softcore’s “impure,” dichotomous nature even as they explicitly devalue, diminish, or deny that nature.

The negational style peculiar to softcore reception is disclosed most tellingly by comparison with the oppositional advocacy of cult audiences. The softcore advocate avoids the aggressive, self-assured rhetoric of “outsiders” praising low, cult texts or of “insiders” praising high, elite texts. Outsider and insider alike mystify their tastes via terms like “masterpiece” and “genius.” But the softcore advocate shuns sacralizing terms, at most praising a film *qua* softcore in practical, utilitarian language that recognizes the genre’s eroticism and even its craftsmanship but rarely its artistry—as if to imply that as a commercialized, affective genre softcore is *intrinsically* inartistic, one that can aspire to Entertainment but not Art. This self-effacing
rhetoric is distinctive in that it dispenses with essentialist terminology but only as a meek gesture of “good taste” that recognizes a “higher” claim on such terms. As in responses to Playboy, this middling inferiority may come across as a self-conscious tic. The evaluation policy of Softcore Reviews reduces softcore vehicles to a single sexual criterion, “steaminess,” partly out of anxiety that judging softcore according to broader criteria could only result in the site’s appearing pretentious, blind, or otherwise foolish. Apparently, what Jean-Claude Chamboredon once said of photography may also be said of softcore: advocating this particular medium “means condemning oneself to a practice that is uncertain of its legitimacy, preoccupied and insecure, perpetually in search of justifications” (129).

It is likewise revealing that softcore anxiety subverts cult confidence in areas of overlap such as cult softcore. Softcore materials present cult commentators with special dilemmas that problematize their carefully cultivated (albeit mostly nominal) oppositionalism. This dynamic is crucial in that it isolates the decisive significance of antisex attitudes and antimasturbatory norms in particular. My assumption is that two far-reaching ideological influences have conditioned softcore abjection: aesthetic elitism and an even broader anticonsumerism. Both of these hierarchizing imperatives limit and devalue consumer-oriented sexual expression. A pornographic form like softcore is uniquely susceptible to these devaluations. Because one of its “target audiences . . . is absolutely guys who want to masturbate” (Linda Ruth Williams, Erotic 243), it represents, on one hand, a radical violation of neo-Kantian values privileging “disinterested” modes of aesthetic contemplation and, on the other, a challenge to traditional family values that valorize heterosexual monogamy. Softcore also flouts codes of quality. Its frequently low values—which are “low” insofar as they fail to conform to arbitrary technical standards established by classical Hollywood—exemplify one way of breaching a traditional elitism. But as Jeffrey Sconce first noted a decade ago, cult fans have had little trouble endorsing low-budget films that flaunt low values (380–87). Indeed, “trash” fans often use these “failures” as the basis for anti-Hollywood manifestos, which may be as elitist and as self-important as any highbrow diatribe. Such interpreters have also had little trouble reconciling their “reverse elitism” with other cult “impurities” (Sconce 382), like the blatant commercialism of a low-budget industry that churns out genre pieces and the reliance of this industry on affective spectacle. But when these impurities combine with the autoerotic import that attends pornographic sexualization, cult commentators are more prone to incertitude, self-consciousness, and contradiction.

Bad faith, it should be noted, is not necessarily “bad.” Though I embrace the utility of mauvais foi, I reject the early Sartre’s snobbish, hence logically untenable and practically dishonest, construction of this term along with his
antideterministic view that individuals are uniformly free to transcend contradiction and self-deception. One would expect Pierre Bourdieu, whose more deterministic, sociological premises are basic here, to offer an antidote to this Sartrean condescension. Such is not the case. The tone of Bourdieu’s rhetoric reinforces the snobbery historically implicit in terms like *culture moyenne* (“middlebrow culture”). Personally, I have zero desire to add to the anxiety already entangling the softcore genre through any insinuation that its self-consciousness, which is nothing if not useful, proves that its texts and fans “really” are inferior. They are not: for neither they nor anything else has intrinsic value.

II. PICTURES OF RAINCOAT MEN, NOT YOU

“Show me a girl who doesn’t masturbate, and I’ll show you trouble waiting to happen.”

—FAST LANE TO MALIBU (2000)

Before turning to these response categories, it helps to consider the generic implications of an archaic but oddly durable consumer stereotype: the image of the porn consumer as the furtive and disreputable “raincoat man.” This figment is a legacy of porn’s theatrical heyday, when the audience for classical sexploitation and classical hardcore first emerged in the cultural imagination as a group of “dirty old men in semen-spotted black raincoats who frequent[ed] sex theatres” (Turan and Zito 219). One would expect this grindhouse image to have receded in an age in which porn consumption has become pervasive and overwhelmingly private, but the raincoat man is a surprisingly current pejorative. Though it tells us more about the stability of antimasturbation norms than the demographic and sartorial realities of contemporary audiences, it offers insights into absences that structure softcore textually and contextually.

This low-other imagery of a “brigade” of “poor suckers,” in Karen Jaehne’s phrasing (12), and “zombies,” in Gertrud Koch’s (151), was never honest. As early as the 1970s, research had emerged suggesting that this image distorted the realities of actual porn audiences, who reportedly mirrored society in age, ethnicity, and education (Turan and Zito 220; see 219–22). The stereotype was further corroded by porno-chic. By 1975, film critic Wayne Losano could presume that times had changed: “The old audience, stereotyped into raincoat carrying old men, has been replaced by a more varied group. Young people, women, and respectable-looking middle-aged couples are appearing with increasing frequency” (136). This vogue did not endure. The less permissive 1980s hastened the return of the old
pejoratives—as did the 1991 arrest of Pee Wee Herman (Paul Reubens) for masturbating in a Florida theater (Linda Williams, “Second” 165; Linda Ruth Williams, Erotic 256, 273n11). Technology played a decisive yet ironic role in this wholesale restigmatization. Cable and video have made porn consumption a domestic experience, democratizing its audience—meaning that the idea of the porn consumer as a low other has become even more dishonest. But because porn spectatorship has become invisibly private, this image has reemerged unchallenged. When updated at all, it has only proved more pathetic, as when Tom Lazarus points to “some guy in a motel in Toledo with his pants around his ankles” as the reality of Playboy’s pay-per-view audience (Andrews, “Personal” 27). Despite this image’s incompatibility with the demographics of cable and video, privacy has made it possible to view the porn consumer as a déclassé slob unlike oneself. In that sense, the raincoat-man image foments bad faith.

One does not have to read deeply into this stereotype to discern its masturbatory import. eI Cinema’s Michael Raso makes this explicit in confirming that his company’s films are often “geared to—fine, I call it ‘the raincoat brigade,’ other people call it ‘the jerk-off crowd’—which basically is saying we produce a lot of films specifically for men to masturbate to” (Andrews, “Lesbian” 31–32). The logic of this imagery is that the men who masturbate to sex films are failed men. Lonely, untidy, and unproductive, these men lack prestige and social graces. Antimasturbatory pejoratives are also applied to women but are today embodied in less abject terms. The raincoat man seems to be the cinematic equivalent of the aging romance novel reader who reads pulp novels well into the night, substituting autoeroticism for heterosexuality. Through negative association, these two images imply a common failure to conform to socioaesthetic ideals. Each stereotype links dubious classes of aesthetic objects (sex films, romance novels) to dubious classes of subjects (older males who inhabit skid row areas, unmarried older women). Most pertinently, each stereotype insinuates the dubious, flagrantly interested uses to which said subjects put said objects (masturbation, autoerotic fantasy).

One should not overstate such comparisons. The public man in his loose, dirty raincoat is more seedy and menacing than the private woman snug in her clean, bourgeois bed. This difference reflects the genteel prejudice that men are “naturally” less hygienic than women, a stereotype reinforced here by the squalid arenas visited by sexploitation’s original clientele and by the “ballooning and squirting mechanics” of the male genitalia, as Alan Soble puts it (Sex 67). But this difference also reflects cultural patterns in the expression of antimasturbation norms, which have since the sexual revolution regulated female masturbation less stringently than male. According to Thomas Laqueur, this change was effected by second-wave feminism, which validated clitoral masturbation as the “truth” of female sex-
uality and as the path to self-sufficiency (74–82; see O’Toole 373n15). Before feminism’s second wave—and since onanism emerged around 1712 as “the evil doppelgänger of modernity” (Laqueur 419)—post-Enlightenment norms had painted male and female onanism in similarly bleak, repressive terms. The harsh negativity of the raincoat-man image indicates what is obvious: masturbation, “at once most vanilla and most politically incorrect of sexual acts” (Dyer, “Idol” 109), has never been rehabilitated on a similar scale for heterosexual men.

Feminism’s rehabilitation of female masturbation was embraced by classical sexploitation and was in fact in accord with trends already apparent in it. As far back as burlesque, films in the softcore lineage had favored female imagery with positive autoerotic resonance. At the advent of sexploitation, fairly explicit female masturbation sequences became a staple, often with a male observer serving as an audience stand-in. But as the classical era wore on, the female masturbator was increasingly portrayed as the observer figure. This alteration was one of many ways in which sexploitation maximized female spectacle. Apart from vehicles like Mondo Rocco (1970) that were specifically geared to homosexual audiences, male observer figures seldom exhibited autoerotic signals, much less masturbated. Because there was obviously no similar injunction against framing the female observer in the act of masturbating, she could supplement a number’s sexual imagery rather than merely serve as a detached and peripheral exemplar of audience desire. On the other hand, it was perhaps in the latter capacity that the female version of this device was most significant. After all, the implication of the female observer-masturbator was that the sexploitation audience was to some extent composed of autoerotic females (see Linda Ruth Williams, Erotic 340–41), a progressive notion that sexploiteers fostered in part because it conferred legitimacy.

By co-opting feminist ideas about masturbation’s revolutionary value for women but continuing to spurn or ignore its value for men, sexploitation has developed into one of the areas of contemporary culture that evinces the starkest sexism in its masturbatory attitudes. In the rare instances in which soft vehicles refer to male masturbation, they construct it as a symbol of male futility. Often such symbolism reinforces a low, burlesque ethos, as in Chuck Vincent’s sex-coms or Seduction Cinema’s carnivalesque. Though this anti-erotic, anticonsumerist comedy antedates by two millennia the post-Enlightenment hysteria limned by Laqueur, it is now complicit with the same. (Consider that the raincoat man has done double duty as a target of Aristophanic derision and as a focus of “productivist” fearmongering.) Today, most middlebrow forms of sexploitation, including corporate and aspirational softcore, avoid this low comedy and rarely depict male masturbation graphically. By contrast, these postfeminist forms still routinely lend
female masturbation an affirmative mystique, positioning it as a quintessentially erotic and “serious” activity, not as grounds for fear or embarrassment. The upshot of these developments is the negation that structures and strictures contemporary softcore. Directors view male masturbators as a core constituency; indeed, male consumers on mainstream sites like Softcore Reviews attest that masturbation is a normalized though not necessarily habitual aspect of their home viewing experience. And there is much evidence that the flow of spectacle is synchronized to a masturbatory logic. Of one film, Linda Ruth Williams has speculated that, though there is too much spectacle “for even the most energetic onanist to keep up with,” the unevenly paced “scenes come in bursts, presumably because the average length of self-pleasuring stretches beyond the duration of one individual scene” (Erotic 45). Williams has also noted how the shift to private technologies, which has had “massive implications for how we understand the role of the viewer in the production of cinematic meaning,” abets masturbators not only through privacy but through the enhanced controls that VCRs and DVD players offer, including freeze frames, slow-mos, replays, and skips (Erotic 257; 175–76, 256). In the texts themselves, male masturbation occasionally figures as humiliation, but mostly it does not figure at all. Thus it shapes softcore positively and negatively and qualifies as a “structuring absence” in Dyer’s sense—for male masturbation is quite definitely an issue that a softcore “text cannot ignore, but which it deliberately skirts round or otherwise avoids, thus creating the biggest ‘holes’ in the text” (Matter 105).

Female masturbation, by contrast, seems to qualify as a contextual absence. Though softcore films indefatigably affirm female autoeroticism—and though anecdotal evidence suggests that women employ softcore to autoerotic ends—and though postfeminist norms support female openness on this subject—the genre’s female viewers are nevertheless relatively reticent as a group and specifically silent on masturbation. Despite consumerist trends supportive of female openness, the antisex, anticonsumerist norms that have traditionally placed gender-specific pressure on women to deny or downplay interest in porn and masturbation may remain operative (see Lopez and George 275–88). This silence is so pervasive that one might almost think that the raincoat-man pejoratives that have long attended softcore demonize female, not male, masturbation.

III. FROM JOE BOB TO AMAZON

Jeffrey Sconce’s 1995 Screen article “‘Trashing’ the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style” remains the most cited piece
of scholarship on the aesthetics and ideological postures of cult film networks, which he calls “paracinema.” Sconce frames paracinema as a “counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus” (372). Cult has not only established a grassroots base in fanzine discourse but has also penetrated academia, where its adversarial tastes and politics challenge canonical criteria (Sconce 373–77). Yet paracinematic discourse has links to elite discourse. Drawing on cultural studies scholars like John Fiske, Sconce observes that trash aesthetics and elite aesthetics “situate themselves in opposition to Hollywood cinema and the mainstream US culture it represents,” with “the paracinematic community often adopt[ing] the conventions of ‘legitimate’ cinematic discourse in discussing its own cinema” (381). These convergences lead paracinema to invoke an ironic “reverse elitism” marked by aggression (Sconce 382).

Since the appearance of Sconce’s article, the cult film network has expanded dramatically through the Internet, prompting many savants to weigh in on its processes. Feminists have proved influential, with scholars like Joanne Hollows and Jacinda Read providing recent pieces that limn the masculinized nature of these subcultures. (Compare Hollows’s “The Masculinity of Cult” [2003] to Read’s essay, “The Cult of Masculinity” [2003].) Today, most scholars concur that the “oppositionality” claimed by cult fandom is nominal. Picking up on gender and class identities posited by Sconce (375), Jancovich et al. observe that these fans “are largely middle-class and male, and their oppositionality often works to reaffirm rather than challenge bourgeois taste and masculine dispositions” (2). Feminists in particular have shown how cult mechanisms serve status-quo purposes and, in the process, exclude women (Feasey 183), all while failing in the larger culture to confer anything but a “nerdish failed masculinity” (Read 68). On the other hand, as Nathan Hunt has pointed out, it is mainly within discrete subcultures that the insider’s “trivia” functions as cultural capital. Hunt adds a crucial insight in verifying that such esoteric information is neither a useless form of “trivia” nor, contra Henry Jenkins, a transcendent act of resistance (185). Such information is instead a locally useful form of capital that may confer various distinctions on its user (Nathan Hunt 198).

The small cult discourse on contemporary softcore provides an adjunct to these comments, for it reveals inconsistencies in its speakers’ adversarialism. Before exploring this, I should situate softcore vis-à-vis cult discourse. Contemporary softcore has virtually no place in the large academic discourse on cult, which reflects the fact that the genre has but a minor place in cult itself (Linda Ruth Williams, Erotic 295). By contrast, classical exploitation—the supergenre that almost seems as successful for “cult smut” distributors like Mike Vraney’s Something Weird Video as it was for
the original sexploiteers—has established a purchase in cult discourse and is rapidly establishing one in the academic discourse on cult. This contrast is predictable given classical sexploitation’s promotion of itself as a terrain of nonpareil transgression—an identity with appeal not only for cult fans but also for academics schooled in modernist rhetoric—and given the genre’s distance from more current genres in time, visual style, and sensibility.

Contemporary softcore has affected the “zine” world most often when circulated by labels that emphasize subgenres in the cult nexus (horror, sci-fi, comedy, etc.). Studios in this cult softcore category, like Seduction Cinema, the now-defunct Surrender Cinema, and American Independent Productions, reside outside the corporate softcore orbit in that they stress video distribution over cable and cultivate an alternative, youth-oriented demographic that targets fans who attend cult conventions. Seduction is intriguing insofar as it has embraced classical sexploitation, whose titles it rereleases and even remakes. More intriguing is that the contradictions that have affected other softcore sectors have left their mark on Seduction, whose founder, Raso, is loathe to admit that his movies qualify as “porn” despite his admission that they have been geared to male masturbation (Andrews, “Lesbian” 31–32, 34–35). This anxiety is pertinent to his desire to nudge ei Cinema, Seduction’s parent, toward horror. For several years, he pursued this goal by linking the studio’s fortunes to a single “cult” actress, Misty Mundae, who hopes to cross from sex films into horror films. If Mundae is successful in this maneuver, the company that so tirelessly promoted her will have enhanced its own cult credentials.

The cult forums that discuss the output of such companies do at times realize the juvenilia predicted by some feminists. Witness Joe Bob Briggs of The Joe Bob Report, whom James Naremore has referred to as an “ersatz good old boy” and a “carefully constructed persona who enjoys redneck camp” (161). In his newspaper column, long-running premium cable show, and Internet site, Briggs has for several decades reviewed sexploitation films, including Seduction titles like Gladiator Eroticus (2001) and Play-Mate of the Apes (2002); he has also surveyed classical sexploitation films and the tendencies of contemporary cult producers like Roger Corman, Andy Sidaris, and Lloyd Kaufman. Briggs’s signature is to count breasts and other body parts and to wield crude homespun neologisms like “fu” and “aardvark,” a practice marking him as a forerunner of macho folk stylists in other media like sports radio’s Jim Rome.

But it would be wrong to position Briggs as a “natural” effusion of this cult-sex territory, which is also covered by more sophisticated voices at sites like b-independent (Allen Richards), Cold Fusion Video Review (Nathan Shumate), SexGoreMutants (Alan Simpson), Horror Express (Scott Davis),
and Cinebizarre (“Chris” “Main Policy”). Often doubling as compact cyber-bazaars, these interactive sites, which typically contain message boards and chat spaces, are run by highly educated men who perceive themselves as cult curators, propagating and hawking distinctive tastes in a recognizable cult rubric. Though they traffic in misogynistic texts, they frequently reject or qualify texts that violate their own postfeminist indices of good taste or good business. For instance, when confronted by Bill Hellfire’s faux-snuff films starring Mundae, b-independent’s Richards worries about the audience for female strangulation segments that stretch to twenty minutes—and struggles to find a redemptive reading that allows him to avoid a condemnatory posture in conflict with his official valorization of indie filmmaking (Strangler 1).

Richards’s anxiety is indicative of the dilemmas faced by other critic-merchants who, when confronting softcore texts, struggle to maintain their adversarial composure. Though he has never been the hardcore advocate of excess and “badfilm” described by Sconce (385–91), Richards has fabricated an oppositionalism from a set of “illegitimate” tastes. But cult-sex films subvert his consistency along with his certitude, encouraging him to voice middlebrow values antithetical to an adversarial stance. That this dynamic places him in an uncomfortable position is suggested by his delicate response to the faux-snuff film. He can condemn neither asphyxiation imagery nor the fans who consume it, for doing so would violate his nonjudgmental ethos and link him to the postfeminist genres and proprieties that, as Read notes, are depicted as “uncool and unhip in cult movie criticism” (61). Yet his undeniable revulsion confers a mainstreamness that limits his adversarialism. Nathan Hunt argues that cult fans want to differentiate “themselves from the ‘phantom menace’ of the mainstream consumer” (198), who is the feminized figment against which they style self-consciously discerning personae (Hollows, “Cult” 46–48; Read 56–57). But time and again, sexual materials reduce the distance between these twin illusions. Witness Richards’s review of Hellcats in High Heels (1997), where he admits to being “as vanilla as it gets, suburban to the core” (1). Though such disclaimers hardly offer a seamless outsider identity, they are a predictable “muddle ground” for critics aiming to dissociate themselves from masturbatory stereotypes.

Cult reviewers are very sensitive to these pejoratives, which evoke the failed-male imagery that, as Read verifies, is often applied to the “nerdish” cult fan. In pop culture, such fans are depicted as sex-starved geeks, which is to say compulsive masturbators. Cult softcore usually offers the critic “alibis” allowing him to disavow or otherwise avoid this issue. But as the sex scenes get longer, yielding texts that approach hardcore ratios, reviewers like Richards begin to squirm, for they are forced to confront two questions:
Why are the numbers so long? What is a viewer to do with them? Contemporary hardcore is rare on cult sites in part because its utility is so difficult to deny. However, when hardcore has the patina of age—see Something Weird’s juxtaposition of stags, loops, and classical hardcore alongside its other cult materials—this variety of porn is more easily defended as just another ironic consumer pleasure, as it has become more opaque and less obviously masturbatory. (Frances Ferguson has lately written that if “it doesn’t feel contemporaneous, it isn’t pornography. Pornography brooks no stance involving historical distance” [152].) But by distancing himself from masturbation, the cult critic undermines his oppositionalism by signaling his conformity with a pivotal mainstream ideology. As Laqueur puts it, in a post-Freudian world, one’s rejection of “masturbation track[s] precisely one’s willingness to go with the flow of the civilizing process” (74). The lesson in this is that it is cool to cast oneself as a cultural other so long as that other is not wearing a semen-spotted raincoat. Unless cult critics learn to accept the risks of a masturbatory aesthetic whose style of “authenticity” is to subvert the neo-Kantian and anticonsumerist prejudices that structure American culture, then the softcore two-step will continue to corrode their careful illusions of oppositionality.

Richards verifies how difficult it is to stop dancing. At times, he almost condones masturbation. He begins his review of Hellcats by noting that such a text is graded “by how well it turns you on.” But Richards then equivocates, asserting that Hellcats “isn’t about making the audience hot and heavy, but it is about arousal” before denying that the audience is “meant to be turned on” and closing with the safe view that Hellcats “is about finding the art in sexual deviance” (1–2). In other reviews, Richards exemplifies the dynamic noted by Jancovich. He prioritizes one part of the softcore dichotomy over the other, usually favoring narrative over spectacle. Indeed, it is with relief that he waxes rhapsodic anent the complexities and polished values of Seduction offerings by Terry West (whose roots in comic art provide his work with cult credibility [see Simpson 1–2]) and Tony Marsiglia (who borrows highbrow devices from David Lynch [see Scott Davis 1–2]). Though Marsiglia’s films include lengthy, explicit numbers, his outré aspirationalism offers Richards a diversion from questions of utility. Here it is also notable that Internet technology may spur cult anxiety and incoherence. Because e-zines are so interactive, many cult critics must regularly respond to antiporn fans—and their understandably anxious responses to such fans are distinctively contradictory. For example, when answering fans who question his inclusion of softcore on an otherwise “legitimate” site like b-independent, Richards alternates between using the value-laden concept “erotica” as a defense of his sexual taste and undermining the very same concept, as when
he points to the final arbitrariness of any attempt to elevate “an erotic feature” to the status of art as opposed to that of “mere pornography” (Witch-babe 1).

The responses generated by cult sites supply fascinating comparisons with those generated by mainstream sites like Amazon and IMDb. These distinctions owe much to the distinctions among the sites themselves. Cult sites are organized by an individual or coterie of individuals who advance their agenda by winnowing the films they review. Though these cult sites include chaotic, demotic discussions, such forums focus on the films critiqued on site and thus represent extensions of an idiosyncratic taste regime. By contrast, the primary voices on Amazon and IMDb do not represent a narrow aesthetic, for their reviews may derive from any of the vast diversity of film products that they sell (Amazon) or track and classify (IMDb). Rather than bonding with like-minded fans or performing the role of cultural gadflies, these amateur critics attempt to fill the journalistic role of the reviewer in the press. Their “user reviews” usually begin with a plot summary that is often prefaced by a “spoiler alert” (a courtesy to readers who might not want to learn too many plot details) and end with an evaluation that warns consumers away from irredeemable dreck or informs them of rewarding choices. Though these sites rarely offer the tribal communitas of cult sites, they may seem more welcoming to female respondents for this reason, with their unthreatening anonymity supplemented by secure corporate backing. Given how common it has become to contribute amateur reviews to such sites—many sources attest that the amateur review has become a blunt economic force, especially in book publishing (e.g., Tawa 1–2)—this combination of anonymity and familiarity has made such sites popular with consumers who share Richards’s urge to opine on softcore but lack his identification with paracinema.

Cult oppositionalism differentiates these response engines in most cases but less consistently in the case of softcore, which elicits a halting traditionalism from a cult reviewer like Richards much as it does from the broad demographic sampled by Amazon and IMDb. Though the diversity of softcore reception is astonishing, familiar patterns may be discerned within it. The realistic ideals established by classical Hollywood narrative figure as the cinematic standard by which users tend to interpret and evaluate contemporary softcore, with reviewers virtually always privileging one aspect or other of the narrative-number unit. As a result, three principal response paradigms are generated, each of which devalues softcore. A large category of response either ignores the spectacle or downplays it (often treating it as an accident or “mistake”). This type of response almost always results in a caustic review. A second major type of response correctly notes that the film
under review has a “mixed,” dichotomous character and rates it according to how well it “overcomes” this hybridity by delivering complexity and values on a par with films in related Hollywood categories. A positive review is thus contingent on the size of a film’s budget and on how well the film, in the reviewer’s estimate, integrates narrative and number. Reviews in this category tend to be negative, for they often juxtapose softcore thrillers and big-budget erotic thrillers, softcore action films and big-budget action films, and so on. This is not a game softcore can “win.”

But even when the deck is stacked in softcore’s favor, the genre still cannot win. Consider that the third and largest response category identifies the softcore feature as One of Those Movies—a form of genre literacy that is often tantamount to the condescending belief that the film is not a Real Movie—and rates it as such. This premise may eventuate in positive valuations depending on the film itself but also on whether the viewer has a taste for “Skinemax” films and applies genre-specific criteria to them. Ergo, reviewers often construct “special” standards that allow softcore films to earn “artificial” affirmations. This type of user review occasionally notes the value of such a film as a “couple’s aid,” stressing the film’s sexual utility in an acceptable way. But even when affirmative assessments result, these reviews are so replete with disclaimers and reductions that they rarely fail to belittle softcore (and, by extension, the user’s own taste). It is not hard to recognize why. Traditional Hollywood criteria may retain their a priori privilege even in rating schemes that do not directly implement them. In this economy, the big-budget narrative is still the measure of cinematic value and “reality.”

During my research, I culled almost a thousand capsule reviews from IMDb and Amazon. While these sites do not provide anything close to precise, reliable demographic data, they do suggest trends that correlate with the above patterns. Respondents usually identify themselves as male under forty-five, with a significant minority self-identifying as female; contemporary softcore has, then, generated a broader female response on these mainstream sites than on cult sites. Though the gender data provided by these user reviews are incomplete and unreliable, IMDb provides an intriguing service that attaches gender- and age-based profiles to its rating system (a simple one-to-ten scale in which ten is ideal). These data roughly correspond to the ratios inferable from the user reviews themselves, with women seemingly comprising between 15 and 20 percent of softcore respondents. Given the many factors that may dampen female Internet response to such materials, it may be surmised that the actual percentage of female softcore fans is higher and, as some critics report, approaches 50 percent for cable-oriented subgenres. An intriguing implication of the IMDb system is that when rating softcore male voters may implement traditional criteria more rigidly than female voters. Highly feminized, aspirational softcore often
achieves high ratings from females but not males, as if this higher-end “eroticica” in effect crosses into Real Movie territory for many women but not men. These men may give such a movie a low rating whether they like it or not because it remains in their minds an illegitimate pleasure, One of Those Movies, due to its structure, imagery, and personal utility. Here it is worth recalling that the most aspirational forms of softcore, including the mid-budget softcore thriller and the softcore serial, impart the misandristic lesson that male sexuality is neither good nor complex. Male viewers might denigrate such vehicles because they feel attacked by them—or, in a more masochistic pattern, because they view said vehicles as an extension of the “bad” male sexuality demonized in said vehicles. Supporting the latter position is the fact that men give only slightly higher marks than women to lowbrow films like Femalien (1996), Bikini Summer III (1997), and Play-Mate of the Apes (2002), with average ratings remaining low enough (below five) to imply that neither constituency views them as Real Movies. Given that male users across the Internet shower praise on this type of softcore, their negative evaluations of it seem to reflect an anxiety inclining toward bad faith.

IV. THE CASE OF SOFTCORE REVIEWS

Founded in 2000 during the heyday of corporate softcore and still the most specialized softcore Internet site, Softcore Reviews verifies that anxiety remains central to softcore reception even at a site geared to celebrate the genre through positive evaluation. Like many user reviews on IMDb and Amazon, Softcore Reviews makes it possible for softcore films to earn high ratings (again, on a one-to-ten scale). But its policies do not provide representative accounts of what the genre is or what its fans want. Instead, such statements graph the site’s self-conscious evasions of the kind of attacks launched against defenders of other middlebrow pornographies like Playboy. “Commonsense” detractors have positioned Playboy’s fiction and reportage as “a mere ‘gloss’ or ‘window-dressing’ that is designed to legitimate the magazine and divert attention from the ‘pornographic’ materials” (Jancovich, “Placing” 3). Playboy readers who focus on the articles have thus been mocked as pretentious, foolish, dishonest, or just dull. Softcore Reviews shows that it feels an analogous anxiety about focusing on softcore narrative; this anxiety is inflamed by its project of rating and ranking specific films. Like most sites devoted to “genre films,” Softcore Reviews wants to perform these tasks but cannot do so straightforwardly, for the site collectively recognizes Bourdieu’s point that if “[t]aste classifies” it also “classifies the classifier” (Distinction 6). The site thus reflects a common fear that elevating “inferior” tastes above their stations can only render one foolish.
Softcore Reviews employs two tactics for evading mockery. First, it preemptively mocks its own project. Thus it laughs at its task of rating softcore when it directs its users “to read our standards (ha!) in full” (“FAQ” 2). But its more intriguing tactic is to create a demarcation between softcore and “legitimate” genres such that granting a particular softcore feature a high rating cannot be read as a claim that it “really” merits this rating in a field that also contains Real Movies, including Serious Films. This tactic insulates the reviewer from ridicule but also inadvertently reinforces the claims of highbrows and of various antiporn factions. To create this divide, Softcore Reviews reduces softcore to sex and nudity, indicating that the genre’s essence resides “in” its numbers. This reduction, which it frames as mere common sense, justifies its manner of reception: “We watch for the sex and nudity, plain and simple” (“FAQ” 2). Even here, the site mocks itself preemptively, as when it sarcastically refers to its main criteria, “nudity” and “steaminess,” as two “highly complex levels” (“How We Rate” 1).

By privileging the numbers, Softcore Reviews attempts to institutionalize a broad evaluative mutilation (“FAQ” 2). This is a futile gesture, for it is impossible to enact a policy that directs reviewers to deprioritize diegetic segments that often comprise more than 50 percent of a film’s running time. Predictably, the site’s reviews devote almost as much space to the diegesis as to the spectacle. Given that the site’s criteria for rating the “steaminess” of a film’s spectacle involve complexity, acting technique, and general credibility, the reviewers’ failure to embody the site’s policies marks a tacit admission that the qualities that appeal to fans in the numbers are not fully distinct from those in the narrative. And of course, it is not strange to think that softcore narrative might enhance softcore number and vice versa. A central tenet of Linda Williams’s Hard Core—that “[n]arrative informs number, and number, in turn, informs narrative” (130)—is an item of faith among softcore fans and producers, with estimates of quality traditionally tied to this integration. Indeed, Softcore Reviews’ attempt to rip these elements apart ignores a probability borne out by its own reviews: despite the disclaimers and reductions, softcore fans appear to value the softcore film at least as much for what it is (a dichotomous, narrative-number construct featuring inexplicit sex and nudity that aspires to a measure of realism and diegetic complexity) as for what it is not (a narrative-heavy, conservative Hollywood blockbuster or a spectacle-heavy, fully explicit hardcore video).18 Hence, fans of both sexes testify that they are fans of the genre because the softcore dichotomy offers a combination unavailable in Hollywood or hardcore.19

From a generic perspective, then, Softcore Reviews’ most telling characteristic is its lower-middlebrow rhetoric, which is characterized by bawdiness, defensiveness, and double talk. This distinctive tone, which is present in exploitation discourse as far back as the burlesque era, is clearly dis-
cernible in its policy statements:

We are not so foolish as to think that people watch these movies for the cinematography, storyline, or the editing, although all of those elements can certainly help to make a softcore film succeed. ("FAQ" 2)

Softcore movies . . . can hardly be criticized as “serious” film (although we think the genre has some bona fide talent on both sides of the camera), [but] we do think that it’s fair to critique a softcore erotic movie based on its levels of nudity and the realism of the sex being depicted. If these qualities can lend themselves well to an interesting story or good character development then even better, but we can hardly care about that stuff when Lorissa strips down to her g-string panties and starts rubbing herself. I mean, c’mon! ("How We Rate" 1)

Though they do not strictly adhere to these policies, reviewers do reflect their rhetorical style, offering cautiously measured claims. The essentialist superlatives (“masterpiece,” “excellence,” “artistry,” “genius”) that are de rigueur in almost every sector of review culture are thus muted. It is rare for reviews to depart from a mildly ironic or practical tone. On the few occasions in which reviewers strive to convey a sense of real cinematic distinction, they usually revert to double talk before the end of the review. To wit, in his review of Word of Mouth (1999), “Mick” initially praises the film by suggesting that it does not belong to a genre that is, it seems, shoddy by definition:

Those whose taste in softcore runs on the cerebral side will find lots to like about Word of Mouth, an intelligent and very hot film that rises far above traditional “B” movie standards. Hell, to even call this a “B” movie would be misleading; you’ll find no amateurish acting, no razor-thin plot, and no scrimping on the production values. What you will find is a well made and captivating little sex-o-drama that slowly draws you in and turns you on unlike any other movie I’ve seen in quite a long while. Yeah, I liked this one. I liked it a lot. (1; Mick’s italics)

Because Word of Mouth so clearly is of the genre—the film is, after all, richly “steamy”—Mick must back away even from this qualified flattery. He does this, first, by anointing Word of Mouth “the Citizen Kane of softcore,” a compliment that looks considerably more timid once its context (“all those Shannon Tweed ‘thrillers’”) is stipulated (2). That the reviewer’s closing praise is more ribald signals that it is even more reserved. “At the very least,”
Mick concludes, “this flick will get your attention, and not simply by dangling tits in your face” (2).

The rhetorical humility in evidence on Softcore Reviews is neither antiessentialist nor fallibilistic, for its restraint is a gesture of lower-middlebrow deference that consents to the aesthetic ideology informing current cultural hierarchies. Nor is this rhetoric, in its bawdiness, more liberated than that expressed in other sectors; Mick’s “dirty talk” is, after all, a weak substitute for a discussion of masturbation. One consequence of the site’s self-conscious reductivism is that it simultaneously overstates and understates the genre’s affective quality. By pretending to reduce softcore to sex, the site indicates that its reviewers are concerned with sexual titillation above all else; it reinforces this implication through its descents into good-natured lewdness. But the logic of its conformity with the mainstream is that it cannot confront this erotic utility head-on and thus largely ignores it. Not even the naughtiest mainstream reviewer invites confusion with the raincoat man. Conversely, this style does effectively differentiate Softcore Reviews from cult sites dominated by a more bombastic rhetoric that attacks the academic canon even as it mimics aspects of academic elitism. But as noted above, cult softcore prompts cult critics to adopt a similarly contradictory and halting style. This subtle concordance implies that Softcore Reviews may not be so far from the cult nexus after all.

For fans, the distinction between Softcore Reviews and a cult forum is perhaps nominal, for it fills functions filled by sites like b-independent and SexGoreMutants. By providing fans with a populist space to discuss a stigmatized genre, Softcore Reviews allows them to “come out,” to confess their affection for a genre that many were not sure could be classified as such until they visited the site. Through a combination of policies, reviews, interviews, message boards, links, and VCR alerts, Softcore Reviews has gone further than any other softcore site in forming an interactive community. This tribe has reached consensus on contemporary “classics,” whose exemplars are most consistently held to include Play Time, I Like to Play Games, Friend of the Family (1995), Femalien, Word of Mouth, House of Love, and Forbidden (2001), and on contemporary icons, most of whom are actresses (Shannon Tweed, Shannon Whirry, Julie Strain, Gabriella Hall, Lisa Boyle, Monique Parent, Maria Ford, Catalina Larranaga, Tracy Ryan) or aspirational directors (Zalman King, Alexander Gregory Hippolyte, Mike Sedan, Tom Lazarus). Plus, the site has established insider trivia and commonplaces like “R means return to shelf”—a truism routinely invoked in the message spaces and a reflection of Softcore Reviews’ official castigation of edited, R-rated softcore as “an abomination” (“FAQ” 3). The message boards are active and highly substantive and have featured regular visits by influential indus-
try figures. Consider that in 2004, one topic to have garnered heated interest was viewer perception of the genre’s sexism and racism; consequently, during his back-and-forths with fans, longtime MRG casting director Robert Lombard came in for rough treatment over his role in reinforcing softcore’s “whiteness.” Interestingly, by 2005, Lombard had been so fully absorbed into the tribe that members of the forum rallied to his defense when a respondent perceived as an “outsider” launched an extended attack on his casting practices, blaming him for the decline of softcore.  

Considering that these spaces indicate that softcore’s audience is more diverse than its films indicate, such viewer-producer interactions may prove significant insofar as they represent a partial reversal of corporate softcore’s traditional disconnect from its audience. My informal surveys suggest that these online fans represent what sociologists describe specifically as a “neotribe,” whose fluid membership is formed not by relatively stable identity categories like gender, race, or class but by “a multitude of individual acts of self-identification” (Lury 251). The majority of these “chatty” fans are males between twenty and fifty. Though many describe themselves as middle-class, educated, white, and straight (a group that seems to divide evenly in marital status), most respondents do not fit all these categories at once, with significant numbers identifying themselves as working-class, African American (most prominent among the ethnicities mentioned), and gay. Moreover, the men who responded to my queries implied, albeit self-consciously, that masturbation is a regular if not requisite part of their viewing routine. The female presence on Softcore Reviews is more muted, and the questions that I posted for women mainly drew responses from men. Still, a consistent female presence exists on the site, where it is welcomed without the caveats noted by cult scholar Rebecca Feasey (182–83). Recent contributions by female voices on the Softcore Reviews message boards included a comparison of what women take from gay porn versus what men take from girl-girl scenes. Another centered on one fan’s fetish for semicon-sensual rape scenes—and her hatred of nonconsensual scenes. Yet another addressed the dearth of male nudity. And still another concerned a female moderator’s decision to censor the comments of a male participant who had a history of incivility; in performing this conversation maintenance, she conferred with her male peers, eliciting their full support.

In the end, Softcore Reviews cannot be classified as a cult entity. Its rejection of cult adversarialism is in part a function of its identification with mainstream culture. In this respect, the site has much in common with corporate softcore, the strain of softcore that it embraces most consistently. This self-identification with the mainstream, which may at first seem ironic, is the reason its abjection and bad faith are so deeply rooted. (What is more
deeply ironic is that the genre’s increasing flirtations and conflations with hardcore have reinforced the site’s sense of itself as a mainstream entity during a moment in which the genre is clearly edging away from the mainstream.27) Naturally, such identifications, in tandem with the civility they entail, have enlarged this community by encouraging diversity, which includes a salient female presence. But by the same token, these democratizing impulses have counteracted the elitist, exclusionary processes through which cult entities tend to define themselves. At the most, then, Softcore Reviews is a cult of anxiety and bad faith whose meekness dictates that its users can never form a “cult” in today’s ironically conventionalized oppositional sense.

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My assumption is that the softcore audience, vast segments of which are so private as to remain imperceptible, conforms to the patterns notable at Softcore Reviews and other sectors of the softcore public. As long as producers channel doubts about the genre’s legitimacy into new texts, it is difficult to imagine how any part of this negative-feedback loop could be altered. In this circle of contempt, filmmakers denigrate the softcore audience, despite the fact that they continue to produce softcore. In turn, the softcore public denigrates the filmmakers who produce softcore, despite the fact that it continues to consume softcore. And they all denigrate themselves. Economics plays a decisive role in this acerbic loop, with softcore’s low (and shrinking) budgets reinforcing the genre’s low (and shrinking) prestige. But even if the softcore industry were to somehow return to the comparative largesse of the early 1990s, it seems likely that competition would eventually enforce a new cycle of austerity that would gradually renew these tendencies toward anxiety and bad faith. Only a radical, durable liberalization of cultural attitudes regarding art, sexuality, and their utilitarian intercessions might spark the change requisite to raise softcore’s self-esteem. I hardly see it coming.