Soft in the Middle
Andrews, David

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My favorite response to the Janet Jackson affair was a full-page appliance ad in the Chicago Tribune on 14 December 2004. Against a teal backdrop, two Siemens “xTronic” ranges sit side by side. The oven on the viewer’s left is wide open, revealing a succulent turkey. The tagline: “our apologies to anyone offended by our exposed breast” (Siemens 17). Only an ingenious culture, I reasoned, could use sex to sell stoves. And only an inspired culture could use an oven door to simulate a “wardrobe malfunction” and a roast turkey to signify a woman’s breast. (Her right breast, at that.)

More than a year later, the effects of the Jackson imbroglio seem no less impressive—consider that the Siemens ad appeared ten months after the 2004 Super Bowl show that spawned it—but much less inspired. The litany of headlines about indecency fines, self-censorship, and unintended consequences is instead numbing. This durability testifies to a fact broadly recognized in early 2004 but not today: the FCC crackdown was planned in advance of Janet and Justin’s epochal tango, and this federal choreography has yet to malfunction. Congressional legislation to increase fines for broadcast networks was in place before the Super Bowl took place on 1 February 2004. The FCC had levied its first indecency fine—against a San Francisco television station that had shown a penis—on 27 January 2004. Moreover, former FCC chairman Michael Powell, pressured by Congress and the mass e-mail campaigns of the Parents Television Council (Shields 1), had warned the cable and satellite industries in the weeks prior to the Super Bowl. 
Conclusion


Figure 30. Janet Jackson's notorious “wardrobe malfunction” may have contributed to contemporary softcore's current decline. © CBS and MTV, 2004.
Indeed, the FCC’s actions and widening threats might be viewed as the most publicized component of a strategy to “sanitize” the culture that also included the Justice Department’s resumption of obscenity prosecutions in 2003, its first major effort in a decade, and the solicitor general’s attempt in 2004 to smash the impasse blocking the enforcement of the Child Online Protection Act (Singer 1, 16; “Time” 10). Given all this, then, the infamous “wardrobe malfunction” is shown for what it was: a high-profile, high-impact opportunity that a reformist government had prepared for and did not miss.

What intrigued me in February 2004 and still fascinates me a year later is how this contrived brouhaha would affect softcore. Such interest is more than a scholar’s filmy conflation of a breast-induced upheaval and a breast-heaving genre. Softcore, it bears repeating, is not as hardy as hardcore. In the past, it has proved uniquely susceptible to shifts in economics and cultural temperament. It was softcore that retreated after the Miller v. California ruling in 1973; softcore that remained absent through the reactionary 1980s; and softcore that reemerged as the Justice Department scaled back anti-obscenity prosecutions in the early 1990s. Now this middling genre is uncharacteristically off-center and thus more fragile. Since launching my project in 2002, I have had occasion to watch softcore, corporate softcore in particular, as it has withered into a less fruitful form. Though the genre’s renewal in the 1990s was rooted in an upscale, midbudget paradigm, this always-deflationary genre has flirted with hardcore for so long that its down-scale, ultra-low-budget identity is today equivocal. Given America’s repressive climate—to which Linda Ruth Williams has ascribed Hollywood’s current unwillingness to treat sexual themes and imagery in a frank, substantive manner (“No Sex” 1–6; Erotic 37, 245)—the markets may soon render this type of softcore expendable as well.

And they may already have. Recently, I revisited the home video outlets that from 2002 to 2004 supplied my study with much of its material. I was struck by softcore’s recession. The most mainstream outlets registered the most drastic contraction. Hollywood Video was carrying no new softcore releases, and Blockbuster was carrying but one—and that one had been produced in 2003. How this diminished presence relates to politics is not clear, but the fact persists that a year earlier those same shelves were replete with new softcore releases. Of course, video distribution is not as crucial in this respect as cable and satellite distribution, for the production slates of the corporate softcore studios that yet comprise the largest segment of the industry remain contingent on the needs of premium cable and pay-per-view. The premium networks are decisive insofar as they provide a much wider distribution base than pay-per-view; if softcore is to move upscale again, premium cable is still the most likely context for it to do so. Though the softcore licensed by HBO and Showtime has long been shifting down-
scale, these entities still pay comparatively high licensing fees and continue to avoid the harder, shot-on-video content that has become de rigueur even among studios like MRG and New City, which have been increasingly reduced to scrabbling after pay-per-view dollars—and, in consequence, producing even more explicit, low-end material.

But a move upscale is hardly in the works. Premium cable is licensing fewer new vehicles and perhaps playing fewer old ones as well. Since 2001, corporate softcore production has dropped sharply. This decline has many determinants, including “softness” in the German market that has offered the most reliable international distribution for American softcore companies from Axis to MRG. But the cardinal factor has been cable’s appetite, which has diminished to the point that MRG casting director Robert Lombard had by February 2005 yet to schedule any 16mm films for the coming year, with his slate slanted toward “porny” serials and shot-on-video features, some showing the elongated numbers indicative of pay-per-view distribution. One quirk in this trend is that, over the past five years, cable has aired more softcore than ever due to the programming needs stimulated by its extensive multiplexing. Most of this content has not been new, for cable has always relied on reruns—though it now appears that even this reliance on old material is shifting. Over the first months of 2005, the premium cable networks appeared to be airing fewer TVMA-rated vehicles at later hours than during a comparable period a year before. These softcore vehicles have mainly been running on nonflagship channels; Cinemax’s MoreMAX channel has, for example, been airing softcore in disproportionate quantities. Even within cable’s established nocturnal framework, then, softcore seems to be in retreat—and increasingly contained and “ghettoized.” Neither HBO nor Showtime has responded to inquiries about these patterns, so I do not want to classify what might be a scheduling blip as a full-blown “trend.” But suffice it to say that any further decrease in cable’s appetite could have an outsized impact on a fractured industry.

There is reason to surmise that cable might elect to wean itself from softcore, at least temporarily. In February and March 2004, the mainstream media were abuzz with speculation that Powell might try to enlarge the FCC’s jurisdiction. Expanding on comments made before the Jackson affair, Powell complained to legislators that network TV was not responsible for 85 percent of television’s effluence, most of which flowed from cable (Smith and Simon 13). Though the networks share links with cable, including corporate ownership (e.g., Viacom owns CBS, Showtime, and MTV), network executives shifted the blame. Not only had the CBS halftime show been produced by MTV, they asserted, but the networks’ disposition toward racy fare...
had been spawned by competition with cable, whose edgiest programs were fostered by an antiquated regulatory regime that held the networks to higher standards than nonbroadcast entities (John Cook 13). Spooked by Powell's threats and by Congress's receptiveness to the same, the industry responded with peace offerings. Shortly after a Senate committee narrowly defeated new decency standards for cable in March 2004, National Cable and Telecommunications Association president Robert Sachs announced that companies representing 85 percent of the nation's subscribers had agreed to offer free channel-blocking gear so subscribers without cable boxes could customize their “dial” (“Cable” 12). Having resisted earlier calls to let subscribers buy “a family-friendly tier,” the industry offered a compromise with a smaller downside for operators. The question now is whether softcore might become a similarly marginal offering in a bid to insulate the risqué spectacle of hits like The L Word. It is not hard to imagine that Viacom might pressure Showtime to make “good-faith gestures” by using more R-rated softcore and less softcore overall, pushing what it does use to later slots on less prominent channels.

But should anyone care what happens to softcore? Not necessarily. After all, if the genre did disappear, history would probably repeat: following a hiatus, it would revive in a reconfigured form and format. Despite its inferiority complex, softcore offers a narrative-spectacle synthesis that consumers, male and female, are willing to pay for, so it is unlikely that a consumer culture would permanently eradicate it. But because the divide between “decent” and “indecent” is a softcore line, it strikes me that free speech advocates and anyone who opposes federal sexual repression should be curious as to the fate of the genre’s current edition. For as it happens, softcore qualifies as indecent material—which is not illegal but is proscribed from public airwaves between 6 A.M. and 10 P.M.—far more predictably than hardcore qualifies as obscenity.

That said, the decency-indecency line is still not a simple one. Judging by Powell’s construction of FCC policy, “indecency” is an extremely subjective standard contingent on nuanced questions of structure, context, and expectation:

For material to be indecent in the legal sense it must be of a sexual or excretory nature and it must be patently offensive. Mere bad taste is not actionable. Context remains the critical factor in determining if content is legally indecent. Words or actions might be acceptable as part of a news program, or as an indispensable component of a dramatic film, but be nothing more than sexual pandering in another context. (29)
Despite this formulation’s considerable fuzziness, it fits softcore rather neatly. More than its emphasis on female nudity, softcore’s narrative-number dichotomy confirms that the genre “panders” to “low” sexual tastes. Indeed, this impulse is a generic priority that typically works against narrative unity, such that softcore canoodling may seem anything but “an indispensable component” of the drama. Contextual factors also play a role here. Consider that premium cable is under no legal obligation to exhibit its most sexualized programming after 9:30 P.M. That the industry has traditionally done so proves not only that it is a good citizen, so to speak, but that it recognizes the FCC’s decency standards—and that it has a clear idea about which genres violate them.

The self-consciousness that structures softcore indicates that this heterosexist genre longs to be decent but “knows” that it is not. Yet how elaborately it has tried to cover its naked indecency! Even amid the shock and disorder of the classical era, the forms that evoke its current spirit offered a tolerant, consumerist counterpoint to the transgressions of sexploitation. In the contemporary era, softcore has expressed its anti-antisocial posture through a comprehensive feminization that correlates with the genre’s most distinctive textual qualities: its middlebrow aesthetics and lush romanticism; its middling, postfeminist ideology, including a female-friendly narrative bias tied to a socially acceptable misandry; and its tendency to suppress sexual violence, especially rape, even in subgenres dependent on sexual violence. This feminization is at once cause and consequence of softcore’s stress on female subjectification, the steady expansion of which has “collaborated” with mechanisms favoring female nudity.

By itself, the middling ethos implicit to softcore feminization might seem to be an uncomplicated expression of postfeminist propriety. But since this propriety is steeped in self-consciousness and therefore tied to processes of negation, abjection, and bad faith, it is far more than that. It is also a tacit acceptance of antisexual assumptions operative in Powell’s smug construction of “indecency.” In softcore, these regressive essentialisms work in tandem with aesthetic ideology and with a multitude of class, sex, and gender stereotypes (and less obviously with stereotypes that center on race) to demean, diminish, and restrict popular sexual expression, including softcore itself. Defined broadly, this genre is thus typified by an under-the-radar stance that demonstrates that its producers, distributors, and consumers “know their place”; by its self-effacing modes of reception, which certify that softcore sex renders even cult audiences squeamish; by its relentless evasion of the “pornography” classifier; by its structuring absences, which at the textual level include the penis, male masturbation, male same-sex contact, and male-identified rape fantasy; and by its “corporate” taste for a stylistic and
intellectual weightlessness largely fabricated from cliché, superficiality, and contradiction.

Must this genre exude embarrassment? As a broad, commercial field—and in the absence of a new sexual revolution—probably. While writing this study, I have often daydreamed that a well-funded, liberated auteur might embrace softcore’s constraints rather than feeling *compelled* to work within them, spurring an NC-17 vogue in defiance of softcore history and received ideas of legitimacy. This is a fairly implausible fantasy—auteurs are as allergic as anyone to overt pornography and more allergic than most to the middlebrow—but not an impossible one. Why can’t softcore have its Quentin Tarantino? This auteur’s apostasy would confirm not that softcore is intrinsically inartistic but that it is comparatively difficult, hence peculiarly rich. But not even in fantasy could I imagine that a “softcore chic” inspired by this individual could have anything more than a marginal impact on a sprawling form. As long as cultural commissars continue to define sex as a low, indecent pleasure, and as long as corporate distribution schemes continue to reflect this very *human* abnegation, fans must continue to consume abjection along with their tub scenes, lace scanties, and soft-focus romance.

I wish them well. In a culture compelled to sublimate sex into turkeys and other, less appetizing objects, people must take joy as they can.