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CAFÉ FLESH (1982)

David Church

Café Flesh (1982) is one of the few hardcore adult films to have gained a significant cult reputation beyond porn fans, not only because its postapocalyptic setting and low-budget surrealism made it a surprise hit on the midnight movie circuit but also due to its satirical commentary on the stereotypical porn viewer. Set in the aftermath of World War III, nuclear radiation has transformed 99% of survivors into “Sex Negatives” who become violently nauseous upon erotic contact and are instead reduced to watching members of the “Sex Positive” minority perform in sex shows at cabarets like the eponymous café. The second collaboration by director Stephen Sayadian, screenwriter Jerry Stahl, and cinematographer Francis Delia (credited under the pseudonyms Rinse Dream, Herbert W. Day, and F.X. Pope, respectively), *Café Flesh* attempted to elevate adult cinema’s artistic ambitions but found itself pushing against the limits of pornography’s generic and industrial norms. In the words of adult film critic Jim Holliday, *Café Flesh* “should be mandatory viewing for film buffs of all genres. The problem with the picture can be summed up in one blurb—it is the best explicit film ever made that is lacking in eroticism.”¹ By flaunting creative vision and technical excellence over autoerotic appeals, *Café Flesh* exposes important fault lines between generic conventions and audience tastes in adult cinema.

The Sayadian/Stahl/Delia team began making adult films in a roundabout way, after having first met as *Hustler* staff members in 1976, shortly before the growing magazine relocated from Columbus, Ohio, to Los Angeles. Within two years, Sayadian became the magazine’s creative director, based on the success of his humorous, off-beat photo ads (photographed by Delia) for *Hustler*’s in-house line of sex toys. But, after Joseph Paul Franklin’s failed attempt to assassinate publisher Larry Flynt in March 1978, Sayadian and Delia left

Hustler to start a design firm, Francis Wolf & Associates, housed in downtown Los Angeles's Cherokee Building. Their first commissions were box covers for adult videos, though video buyers often complained that the cover art far surpassed the films themselves. Next, they produced one-sheet posters for horror and exploitation films, and these grim-but-colorful photographs prefigure the shadowy, surreal mise-en-scène in Sayadian's films.² Indeed, they reused sets and costumes from their *Dressed to Kill* (1980) and *The Funhouse* (1981) posters in several vignettes (a noir-inspired rape-fantasy sequence and a malevolent jack-in-the-box, respectively) in their first adult feature, *Nightdreams* (1981).

Co-directed by Delia, *Nightdreams* not only uses theatrical tableaux that extend Sayadian's expertise in art direction (and maximize the single, small set at their disposal), but also introduces key themes that would be further developed in *Café Flesh*. Scripted by Stahl and Sayadian, *Nightdreams* alternates between monologues by "erotic trauma" patient Mrs. Van Houten (Dorothy LeMay), overseen by two doctors (Andy Nichols and Jennifer West), and vignettes depicting Mrs. Van Houten's dark sexual fantasies. In the film's opening close-up, she states, "I know you're watching me. I can feel your eyes like fingers, touching me in certain places," and later remarks, "I can imagine all of them, all the men in the world, just drooling when they see me [...] You think I do it for you." Accusing the doctors (and, by extension, the film's viewers) of projecting their own desires onto her from behind the silver screen of the observation room's two-way glass, the film eventually ends by revealing that Mrs. Van Houten is the doctor in charge, and the apparent "doctors" are actually her patients. Were this twist ending's indebtedness to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920) not already apparent, Sayadian would again use the Mrs. Van Houten character in *Dr. Caligari* (1989), his semi-sequel to the German Expressionist classic. "That period between 1919–1938, it's in my brain," Sayadian notes. "It's so much a part of who I am and what I do and how I look at things."³

Little wonder that the team conceived their follow-up to *Nightdreams* as a "World War Three musical ... a kind of high-rad *Cabaret* [Bob Fosse, 1972]"—as if the mutant offspring of Weimar-era decadence and dystopian fiction.⁴ Part of their futuristic aesthetic drew on the music and visuals of the punk/new-wave bands that rehearsed elsewhere in the Cherokee Building, plus extras recruited from the local punk scene. One of those bands, Wall of Voodoo, had contributed their 1980 cover of Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire" for an Old West-themed lesbian vignette in *Nightdreams*, so Sayadian and Stahl thought "New Wave loomed as the Next Big Thing."⁵ Rather than using existing new-wave music, though, Stahl tapped his childhood friend Mitchell Froom to write an original score for *Café Flesh*, which blends synthesized jazz instruments to dissonant effect.⁶ Briskly edited to Froom's score, the onstage musical/sexual numbers are supplemented by eerie *musique concrete* soundscapes (e.g., ambient loops of distant industrial noises, moans, and breathing).

Convinced that adult films seldom made artistic use of sound design, Sayadian had previously developed such aural collages to create a dreamlike sense of space in *Nightdreams*' fantasy sequences.⁷

Made in ten days on a \$90,000 budget (up from \$60,000 on *Nightdreams*), *Café Flesh* expands on the hip aesthetic and self-reflexive themes in that previous film, while pushing its set-pieces into the realm of avant-garde theater. But whereas *Nightdreams* opens with a monologue by its central sexual performer, *Café Flesh* opens with a monologue that more closely ventriloquizes the filmmakers themselves: emcee Max Melodramatic (Andy Nichols) teases the crowd/viewer, gloating over the Sex Negatives' unfulfillable "desire in chains" and encouraging them to "remember what it was like to lust." Throughout the film, the (present) viewing of pornographic spectacle is posited as an inadequate substitute for (past) touch, figuring sexual desire as an addictive "need" without a "fix" (a parallel informed by Stahl's own drug addiction).⁸ By repeatedly cutting away from the onstage sex scenes to close-ups of the café's nameless patrons—their sallow, frozen faces drenched in sweat—Sayadian situates the film's intradiegetic audience as an insistent mockery of porn's presumed viewer, pathetically envying those lucky few who can live out the dream. Indeed, Sayadian remarked, "Turning people on was not our intent ... I'd like to think *Café Flesh* breaks that one-dimensional thinking. This isn't a film you go home and stroke off to."⁹

As Bradford K. Mudge argues, *Café Flesh* is closer to a *satire* of pornography, using nostalgia as its underlying theme. Max's onstage patter, for example, is peppered with impressions of comedians and musicians from the 1930s to 1960s, and his opening monologue teases how "Café Flesh is going to take you back to the old days" with a number parodying Fifties domesticity in which a primly attired housewife has sex with a half-rat/half-milkman while her children—three grown men dressed as babies—sit in the background, banging large bones against the trays of their highchairs (see Figure 16.1).

For Mudge, "the film marks a juncture—historically arbitrary to be sure—when 'pornography' is finally capable of critical self-reflection, capable of seeing its own 'imagination' as distinct from but integral to both its aesthetic predecessors and its larger cultural environment."¹⁰ By collapsing the pre-World War III past—from Weimar-era cabaret to European avant-garde traditions, to all manner of American pop culture—into the performances at Café Flesh, pornography emerges as the postapocalyptic "ground zero" of culture, and sex itself is never depicted outside these highly theatrical spectacles. Rather than picturing orgasmic sex as a source of transcendent pleasure, *Café Flesh*'s meta-commentary about pornography exposes something fundamental about entertainment culture in general:

Wanting to be seen subordinates one performance to another, displacing individual pleasure outward to the distant audience who in turn reflect it



FIGURE 16.1 A parody of 1950s domesticity in *Café Flesh* (1982). Courtesy of Pete Tombs, Mondo Macabro.

back for narcissistic approval. In other words, the film insists that something is missing on stage just as clearly and profoundly as there is something missing from the audience. Each loss, however, is predicated upon the other, both subordinate to the larger political and social economy in which they appear, for whatever else they are, the activities of the café are also commercial transactions.¹¹

This dynamic is perhaps best exemplified in the film's second musical/sexual number—an office scene in which a businessman with a giant pencil for a head has sex with a woman lying on his desk, while a nude secretary sits at a nearby typewriter, robotically intoning, “Do you want me to type a memo?” As with most of the café's other numbers, the performers open with mechanically repetitive pantomimes that evoke avant-garde dance (the woman on the desk moves a telephone receiver back and forth above her body, while the man standing beside her exaggeratedly thrusts his pelvis), before the actual penetration begins. As Jacob Smith observes, the performers' highly theatrical movements and blank expressions not only evoke a Brechtian performance tradition but also mock the perfunctory, routine motions of the average porn performance.¹² Meanwhile, oil derricks rhythmically pumping away in the background echo the pneumatic thrusting of the penis in the foreground, suggesting how sex, industry, and sexual labor have all become subsumed by



FIGURE 16.2 Capitalism and sexual labor in *Café Flesh* (1982). Courtesy of Pete Tombs, Mondo Macabro.

capitalism (see Figure 16.2). Even the same cutaway shots of the café patrons are repeated across the film, from one number to the next, as if their reactions are just as mechanically performed as the onstage numbers. Moreover, the numbers in *Café Flesh* may feature far more surreal *mise-en-scène* than the largely setting-based vignettes in *Nightdreams* (e.g., Middle Eastern harem, Heaven, Hell), yet they tend to share the thematic link of satirizing (hetero) normative institutions, including the domestic home, the corporate office, the military, and so on.¹³

If pornography, like the musical, often presents a world where the musical/sexual number represents a utopian resolution of unfulfilled desires,¹⁴ it is difficult to imagine a porn narrative more hostile to the genre's *raison d'être*—even compared to other dystopian-set adult films from the same era. In *Rollerbabies* (Carter Stevens, 1976), for example, heterosexual intercourse is outlawed due to overpopulation, and all citizens must take drugs to suppress their sex drives; consequently, masturbation becomes the socially prescribed alternative, and pornography becomes mass-televized entertainment. By contrast, *The Satisfiers of Alpha Blue* (Gerard Damiano, 1981) imagines a future where meaningless sex with so-called Satisfiers can be ordered at the push of a button, but love and romance have become remnants of the past. Each film thus roots

its dystopia in either the scarcity or the overabundance of heterosexual intercourse, but neither goes as far as *Café Flesh* in depicting even masturbation as an impossible outlet for repressed desire.

Café Flesh does, however, foreground a dystopian conflict between love and sex through its narrative focus on Nick (Paul McGibboney) and Lana (Michelle Bauer), a couple from the days before World War III. Although now a Sex Negative, Nick would prefer not to be a regular at Café Flesh, but he goes along with Lana. He puts on a macho air of nonchalance but is jealous of Lana's growing interest in the Sex Positives; he instead describes emotional masochism as the closest he can get to genital satisfaction. Meanwhile, Lana is secretly a Positive, keeping her status secret out of loyalty to Nick, and gets vicarious thrills from watching the onstage numbers. Both Nick and Lana have made compromises to remain a couple—at least until Max discovers Lana's secret when he spies on her masturbating backstage. Max knows it is only a matter of time before Lana reveals her true status—especially since talent promoter Silky has just booked famous stud Johnny Rico (Kevin James) to headline at the café. At the film's end, Lana cannot stop herself from joining Rico onstage during his number, cheered on by Max and the other patrons, as Nick is led away heartbroken. According to Sayadian, their original idea for the ending had Nick walk onstage at the conclusion of the number, sever his penis, and hand it to Lana—a heavy-handed acknowledgment of her having ultimately chosen sex over love. When the film's backers objected to that ending, Sayadian and Stahl proposed that Nick should hang himself in the café's rafters during the final number—but that idea was also vetoed as too depressing.¹⁵ Ironically, sex still wins out at the end of *Café Flesh*, even if it is sex reduced to commerce.

Despite the bizarre staging of the café's musical/sexual numbers, the sex itself largely conforms to the generic standards of heterosexual pornography, with even the lone lesbian scene sandwiched between heterosexual numbers.¹⁶ Yet, there are a few moments where *Café Flesh* hints at queerer potential. In the scene preceding the lesbian number, for example, a female Positive flirts with Lana, suggesting they start an offstage affair, but Lana maintains that she only wants Nick inside of her. Because Lana knows Nick can overhear them, straightness serves as an obvious alibi for downplaying her true desires, which are implied by the lesbian scene that immediately follows, introduced by Max's declaration that "the real bars are always behind the eyes." From the opening scene, we are led to believe that Max himself is a Positive, since he is part of the show—but he is later revealed to be neither Positive nor Negative, having lost his genitalia during the war. Hence, the film admits that there are people who do not fall within the Positive/Negative sexual paradigm, even as Max's animosity toward Nick still seems rooted in traditional gender norms, with the two emasculated men squaring off in feeble attempts to shore up their compromised masculinity. (Even Lana says that, in a world full of Negatives, the

macho act “doesn’t play anymore.”) Yet, there is also the question of whether it is quite so “lucky” to be a Positive, since this tiny fraction of the population is forced to perform in the cafés as their “duty” to fellow survivors. Being a Positive might well be satisfying for them—but the film’s release during the emerging HIV/AIDS crisis also gives the term “positive” a darker connotation. Largely indistinguishable from each other, Positives may be the celebrated minority and Negatives the diseased majority—but this valuation ironically inverts the extreme stigmatization that so many early HIV/AIDS patients suffered.

Unlike the vignette/fantasy vs. narrative/reality bifurcation used in *Night-dreams*, the onstage/Positive vs. offstage/Negative divide in *Café Flesh* literally unites these two sides beneath the same roof, even as the cabaret milieu narratively deepens the gulf between them. For example, Angel (Marie Sharp), a new arrival from Wyoming, is another closeted Positive, but when a team of “Enforcers” arrive to sniff out nonperforming Positives, Angel is compelled to join the show, and Lana sees how easy it would be for her to also cross the gulf from audience to stage. Interestingly, this division was replicated in the film’s casting and production process, with Lana and Angel—the two characters who make the transition from offstage to onstage—as the only major speaking roles given to actors who had previously performed in adult films. Whereas professional porn actors played the Positives, the non-sex Negative roles could instead be cast with aspiring actors from local theater companies—a talent pool that helped elevate the film’s overall acting.¹⁷ Because the film’s investors kept waffling over whether to merely release an X-rated film for adult theaters or to aim for a larger audience with an R-rated cut, Sayadian filmed the hardcore scenes over the first five shooting days, without the non-sex actors, and he admits that the sex scenes received less creative attention.¹⁸ This ambivalence explains why the onstage numbers sometimes seem to abruptly lurch from nonexplicit pantomime to hardcore imagery—as well as how *Café Flesh* could eventually lurch into the midnight movie circuit.

Distributed by Caribbean Films, *Café Flesh* premiered at the Pussycat Theater in downtown Los Angeles, but closed within a week and was soon pulled from adult theaters altogether. Although declaring it their “X-Film of the Year,” the cover of *Velvet’s Erotic Film Guide* asked, “Will the X-Rated Industry Kill this Porno Shocker?” Unnamed adult film producers vilified *Café Flesh* as “too fuckin’ weird,” remarking “Nobody’ll watch that garbage. Hell, who can understand it?” Even the film’s backers declared it “too intellectual, too avant-garde,” and withdrew support for any future projects with Sayadian’s team.¹⁹ Most adult film critics highly praised the film’s production design, cinematography, screenplay, and acting as among the best in the genre—but also described the film as an acquired taste that only open-minded porn viewers would appreciate. *The Best of Porn Stars* dubbed it “easily the most innovative and eerily erotic film of the year [...] if also a bit disturbing”; while *Adult Video*

News alluded to Federico Fellini and *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971) in calling the film “[h]aunting, frightening, and sexually unsettling.”²⁰ Others were less kind, calling it “anti-erotic,” “like watching a pair of perfect tits being stuffed into a barbed wire bra.”²¹ Although *Nightdreams* had also received divisive reviews because of its *Eraserhead*-style (David Lynch, 1977) moments of weirdness, it still sold well on home video, and ranked far higher than *Café Flesh* (13th vs. 38th place) on Jim Holliday’s 1986 “Expert Composite Consensus” list of the 40 best adult films (compiled from adult industry critics, magazines, and awards).²²

Given its overt scorn toward porn viewers, it may be no surprise that *Café Flesh* inspired adult theater patrons to demand refunds—but it found a second life in 1983 among a hip contingent of viewers who might have similarly looked down on porn fans. After being shelved for close to a year, an enterprising distributor released *Café Flesh* in the midnight slot at the NuArt Theatre in Los Angeles, where punk/new-wave-themed films like *D.O.A.: A Rite of Passage* (Lech Kowalski, 1980) and *Liquid Sky* (Slava Tsukerman, 1982) had already proven successful. It played the NuArt for 18 months, plus nine months at New York’s 8th Street Playhouse. Although punk/new-wave midnight movies received fewer bookings outside large cities, there was enough demand for twenty-two 35 mm prints *Café Flesh* to remain in circulation around the United States through the late 1980s.²³

The film also resonated with the “downtown” avant-garde movements (such as the “Cinema of Transgression”) that emerged from the early-1980s punk and no-wave scenes in America’s largest cities—but, as Jacob Smith observes, “where many downtown filmmakers were incorporating aspects of pornography in avant-garde film, Sayadian made the opposite move, bringing techniques associated with art films” into his adult features.²⁴ Sayadian himself recalls,

[T]hese people from the art world were putting porn into their images—people like Nick Zedd, Lydia Lunch, this transgression stuff—but if you look at that stuff today, I think we won out. I think our porn-to-art approach holds up much better.²⁵

Meanwhile, back in the porn industry, Sayadian’s influence continued to be felt, despite the conventional wisdom that *Café Flesh* had been a generic outlier. Jim Holliday, for example, would describe *Nightdreams* as having

pioneered a whole new sub-genre within the industry. It may disturb you, it may even offend you, but love it or hate it, the most important thing is that you will not forget it. The raunchy[,] gritty sexuality is combined with truly new wave sets and the *Miami Vice* eighties “look” taken even further in *Café Flesh*.²⁶

Likely alluding to the Dark Brothers' *New Wave Hookers* (1985) as part of that divisive "new sub-genre," Holliday pinpointed highly theatrical production design, a music-video-inspired aesthetic, bizarre sex scenes, and outrageous or disturbing effect as part of the *Nightdreams/Café Flesh* legacy.

Although Sayadian, Stahl, Delia, and Froom collaborated again on *Dr. Caligari* (a sort of R-rated remake of *Nightdreams*), in hopes of replicating *Café Flesh's* success as a midnight movie, home video had eroded the midnight movie market by the late 1980s (as it also had for adult theaters), and Sayadian soon returned to directing adult features. Shot on video, his sequels *Nightdreams II* (1990) and *Nightdreams 3* (1991) would retread much of the same territory, sacrificing much of the surrealism for cheaper production values and much more conventional porn scenes.²⁷ Antonio Passolini's derivative sequels *Café Flesh 2* (1997) and *Café Flesh 3* (2003) appeared several years later, but none of the original *Café Flesh* team were involved. Meanwhile, the cult reputation of *Café Flesh* (and, to a lesser extent, *Nightdreams*) has remained steady, representing a strange nexus of avant-garde and adult cinema that, much like the contemporary "post-porn" movement,²⁸ questions whether pornography must privilege eroticism over artistic vision.

Notes

- 1 Jim Holliday, *Only the Best: Jim Holliday's Adult Video Almanac and Trivia Treasury* (Van Nuys, CA: Cal Vista Publications, 1986), 124.
- 2 Jacob Smith, "Sound and Performance in Stephen Sayadian's *Nightdreams* and *Café Flesh*," in *Peep Shows: Cult Film and the Cine-Érotic*, ed. Xavier Mendik (London: Wallflower Press, 2012), 42–45; Stephen Sayadian, "Interviews," *Dressed to Kill* Blu-ray, Criterion Collection, 2015.
- 3 Stephen Sayadian, interviewed in Ben Croll, "Étrange 2013 Interview: Stephen Sayadian is 'The Most Interesting Man in the World,'" *ScreenAnarchy*, September 20, 2013, <https://screenanarchy.com/2013/09/etrange-2013-interview-stephen-sayadian-is-the-most-interesting-man-in-the-world-gallery.html>.
- 4 Jerry Stahl, "*Café Flesh* and Me: Confessions of a Cult Sex King," *Playboy*, April 1985, 80.
- 5 Stahl, "*Café Flesh* and Me," 80; Smith, "Sound and Performance," 44. Sayadian would bring his signature style to the music video for Wall of Voodoo's "Do It Again," a 1987 Beach Boys cover.
- 6 Jacqueline Castel, "The Music of *Café Flesh*," *Screen Slate*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.screenslate.com/articles/music-cafe-flesh-soundtrack>. Froom's score would be released in 1984, with additional lyrics by Stahl, under the title *The Key of Cool*.
- 7 Smith, "Sound and Performance," 47–48.
- 8 Also see Jerry Stahl, *Permanent Midnight: A Memoir* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1995).
- 9 Jim Dawson, "*Café Flesh*: X-Film of the Year!" *Velvet's Erotic Film Guide*, January 1983, 53–54.
- 10 Mudge, "How to Do the History of Pornography: Romantic Sexuality and Its Field of Vision," *Romantic Circles Praxis*, January 2006. <https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/sexuality/mudge/mudge.html>.

- 11 Mudge, "How to Do the History of Pornography."
- 12 Smith, "Sound and Performance," 53.
- 13 *Nightdreams* does, however, have satirical moments: most notably, its breakfast-themed number where Mrs. Van Houten fellates a living box of Cream of Wheat, while the Ink Spots' jazzy rendition of "Old Man River" plays on her kitchen radio—a tongue-in-cheek comment on white Americans' consumption of racially insensitive brand mascots.
- 14 Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 152.
- 15 Dawson, "Café Flesh," 56–57. When asked why they did not end with Nick also becoming a Positive, Sayadian replied that a happy ending would have subverted the film's nuclear holocaust theme.
- 16 According to Sayadian, the film's investors vehemently objected to his initial plans to include a gay male sex scene ("Interview with Stephen Sayadian," *Café Flesh* Blu-ray, Mondo Macabro, 2024).
- 17 Stahl, "Café Flesh and Me," 80; Dawson, "Café Flesh," 57–58; Smith, "Sound and Performance," 52–53.
- 18 "Interview with Stephen Sayadian"; Dawson, "Café Flesh," 57; Castel, "The Music of Café Flesh."
- 19 Dawson, "Café Flesh," 52. The animosity was mutual, with Sayadian remarking, "I assumed from the start that the idiots wearing the gold chains wouldn't like it. [...] The last thing I want is to be compared to [porn director] Anthony Spinelli" (59). They had not even bothered to submit *Nightdreams* for consideration to the Adult Film Association of America's annual awards.
- 20 "Café Flesh," *The Best of Porn Stars*, November 1983, 33–34; I.L. Slifkin, "Café Flesh," *Adult Video News*, March 1983, 2.
- 21 Dawson, "Café Flesh," 52.
- 22 Holliday, 185.
- 23 Stahl, "Café Flesh and Me," 118, 202; Smith, "Sound and Performance," 55–56; Gregory A. Waller, "Midnight Movies, 1980–1985: A Market Study," in *The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason*, ed. J.P. Telotte (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 178, 182–183; Sayadian, "Étrange 2013 Interview."
- 24 Smith, "Sound and Performance," 44. Also see Joan Hawkins, "Midnight Sex-Horror Movies and the Downtown Avant-Garde," in *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, eds. Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lázaro Reboll, Julian Stringer, and Andy Willis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 228–229.
- 25 Sayadian, "Étrange 2013 Interview."
- 26 Holliday, 106.
- 27 Sayadian directed the two-part adult videos *Party Doll a Go-Go!* (1991) and *Untamed Cowgirls of the Wild West* (1993) in a similar style.
- 28 Inspired by sex-positive feminist and queer politics, the post-porn movement blossomed at the crossroads of sex work and performance art during the 2000s. Post-porn often uses a campy, transgressive, and theatrical aesthetic to challenge cishet porn tropes, instead celebrating queer sexualities and gender nonconformity.