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The *Flesh* Trilogy

Morrissey broke out of the Warhol shadow with a surprisingly successful trilogy of films that he wrote, photographed, and directed with minimal resources from 1968 to 1972. Although all three films carry Warhol's title (*Andy Warhol Presents Flesh*, etc.) they are clearly Morrissey's films. True, they retain elements of what is usually considered the "Warhol aesthetic." This Morrissey has called "exaggerated naturalism": unconventional acting, lack of scripting, minimal camera work, the visible economy of verisimilitude, and a focus on the life-styles of the libertine and lethargic. But even where the films cohere with the Warhol aesthetic, they follow what he and Morrissey had done together, not Warhol's pre-Morrissey films, which were minimalist provocations with a single camera position. The more successful aesthetic evolved during Morrissey's control of the Factory experiments.

The trilogy also contributed to the period's revolutionary openness in its new explicitness in images both of drug use and of sexuality. After all, *Hair* – with its nude be-in – opened on Broadway in April 1968, and the even bawdier *Oh, Calcutta!* opened in June 1969. In film, Morrissey opened a new frontier in the representation of male nudity. There are more dangling penises in this trilogy than you can shake a stick at. Simply in depicting the male hustler's life in *Flesh*, Morrissey extended the boundaries of American cinema.¹ Even in their adaptation of Warren Miller's *The Cool World* (1963), Shirley Clarke and Frederick Wiseman omitted the gay prostitute, Chester (though Clarke later confronted the character type's speech, if not deeds, in her *Portrait of Jason*). Rather new for the uptown cinemas was a film in which the camera leered at the naked male with the open fascination traditionally spent solely upon the female. "No one had yet done it, and we had to be different," Morrissey says. Morrissey continued Warhol's compulsion (from his art-school cause célèbre of the nose-picking self-

portrait on) to show the forbidden, to batter down the taboos, but without his mentor's evasiveness. Without showing any hard-core specifics, Morrissey's *Trash* opens with a much clearer and more explicit "blow job" than the famous Warhol film of that name and subject.

Despite these extensions of "the Warhol cinema," Morrissey's films broke away in several key respects. Technically, Morrissey adopted plot, characterization, more controlled sound and color, the impulse to expressive camera and editing work, and working professionals. Morrissey's technical advances always had a purpose, however, or at least a telling effect. For example, a panning camera across even a static space would emphasize the distance between his characters. In the last shot of *Trash*, the space between the lovers expresses their unbridgeable alienation, after their separate close-ups and the woman's offer of union. The stricter the style, the more meaningful is the slightest nuance.

With these strategies Morrissey built upon what he considered Warhol's major discovery: "People themselves are the information," he says. "The content is so interesting – it should be. You don't have to emphasize it with dramatic notions." Dramatic structuring and dramatic acting styles are to him old-fashioned:

Today a lot of things are very banal and very prosaic and very casual, no standards, much has no strict morality. Everything is a bit easy-going. If you tell a modern story, you're better off with this casualness. . . . There are very few stories about modern life on the screen. The techniques for telling those stories, I think, are different than the techniques for telling stories where there was a moral or there was a standard . . . of life. Techniques change with life.²

Morrissey's unobtrusive aesthetic points to his ethic, that is, quietly to expose the emptiness of contemporary liberty. Instead of railing, Morrissey lets his viewer dig out the import of his pretended indifference and humor.

To the alerted eye, often what seems to be a casual shot explodes in aptness and meaning. For example, in *Trash*, when Joe fumbles in close-up trying to find his vein for the needle, we expect the camera to pan away discreetly, perhaps to some subtle and more assuring tradition (read: cliché), such as fireworks or the Moscow fountains. Instead, Morrissey keeps in the film his camera's gradual focusing. By refusing to interrupt the moment he is recording, he claims veracity. He also provides a process of focusing that acts against the viewer's impulse to turn away from the disturbing but fascinating image. The architect tells *us* as well as his wife to watch Joe shooting up, when he punctuates her chatter with exhortations to *look*:

“Watch this, my dear. It’s your performance. . . . Pay attention. . . . Would you look! . . . Jane, look! . . . Will you look at what’s happening! . . . Look. Look. . . . Would you watch this!” The content of that shot, then, is not just the needle entering the flesh or even our seeing that happen, but our having our attention focused on the incident, in mixed fascination and repugnance. Morrissey then cuts seamlessly from the close-ups on Joe to a dramatic God’s-eye-view, when Joe overdoses. The down-shot freezes Joe like a specimen against the couple’s superiority, imaged in the oriental carpet on which he’s pinned by the camera; the angle situates us at a superior height. Although he mistakenly attributes this effect to Warhol instead of to Morrissey, David James’s elaboration on this point is shrewd: “His is thus a meta-cinema, an inquiry into the mechanisms of the inscription of the individual into the apparatus and into the way such inscription has been historically organized. In it the spectator is revealed as being as much a function of the camera as are the actors.”³

The focusing needle shot also reinforces the film’s theme of voyeurism, of Joe’s reduction to object of (among other things) visual exploitation. That a Factory film might indeed develop themes constitutes a radical departure from the Warhol aesthetic. The theme of the drug addict’s objectification (or voyeurist exploitation) was introduced in the Andrea Feldman character: “I want to see you shoot up. . . . I *love* to watch this.” On a close-up of Joe piercing his vein she says, “The only kind of man I want is real men.” For his part, Joe is given several key close-ups that define him as a pathetic, helpless witness to his replacement in his partner Holly’s needs (by a young John, for example, and by a beer bottle). Usually the object of others’ uses, Joe is himself reduced by his drugs to being able only to watch others do what he no longer can.

At other times, the vacancy in the performer, the tightness in the framing and the articulated vacuity of the character combine into compelling cinema. The down-shot on Joe’s overdosing takes on another level of absurdist inspiration from the yuppie wife’s (Jane Forth’s) jabbering about cosmetics in a marriage that is cosmetic, and in a cosmetic craving for the freakish: “Did you know that egg yolks on your skin makes you look Oriental?” she says.

For these obvious advances Morrissey was branded a commercial sellout in the Factory, as the recent spate of Warhol reminiscences consistently attest. Warhol’s private view was that “Paul was nuts . . . he really believes all these wild theories he comes up with.”⁴ (There’s a distinction for you: to have one’s ideas called nuts by Andy Warhol.) But these very “compromises” have given the Morrissey films a longevity and interest long after

Warhol's "purer" experiments have faded into either the archive or the oblivion of the rare museum retrospective. More to the point, far from being a matter of commercial compromise, *Flesh* launched Morrissey's war against the modern tendency to turn everything – people as well as art and films – into merchandisable commodities.

Flesh (1968)

The opening shot in Morrissey's first independent feature seems to raise the Warhol shadow in order for Morrissey to detach himself from it. A two-and-a-half minute close-up on a sleeping Joe Dallesandro evokes Warhol's most notorious feature, the six-hour silent *Sleep* (1963). "In contrast to [Warhol's] abstracted details of male anatomy," David Bourdon suggests, "*Flesh* presents Dallesandro's nude body in its entirety."⁵ Further, Morrissey enriches his rhetoric with detail. Joe lies on a blanket patterned with gaping teeth, like the *vagina dentata*, implying an anxiety of emasculation. On the soundtrack, a zippy old song (supposedly on the television), invites "whoopie makers" and "wide awakers" to the joys of "Making wicky wacky down in Waikiki." The ensuing feature uses Village whoopee makers to question how wide awake and self-aware such benighted narcissists may be.

Both the themes of sleeping consciousness and narcissism continue in the second shot, a full rear view of Dallesandro's sleeping body. From here on – indeed through the entire trilogy – Morrissey implicitly explores his hero's pride (including his converse self-destruction in *Trash*), his indulgence in his own body, and his audience's fascination with the naked male form. In all three films Dallesandro remains only the attractive "shell" of a hero, with none of the values or character strength that his appearance may promise.

The film ends as it began, but with a difference. Again Dallesandro is naked on his belly in bed. Reversing the opening order, the full-length view is followed by the profile close-up. But now Joe is no longer alone. His wife Geraldine (Geraldine Smith) is asleep beside him, but between them lies her new lover, Patti (Patti d'Arbanville), the women's legs ardently intertwined. We see him in the relationship from which he is excluded. Joe's naked solitude is redefined as an alienation within a relationship. Both the opening and the closing pose the Dallesandro character in passivity.⁶ As the film begins and ends with Joe in bed, the narrative is given a circular frame, reminding us that life is rounded off with a sleep and a forgetting. The

closing circle also suggests a permanent noncommitment: there is little difference between Joe's waking and sleeping states.

Joe is roused from his initial sleep by his scolding wife, who nags him to go to work to raise the \$200 that Patti needs for a (later abandoned) abortion. Although her scolding and violence give way to her erotic play, it in turn is aborted by Joe's less romantic concerns: "Do my laundry, will you? Without me asking? Just once? . . . You really want to make me happy? Do my laundry." Though it is amusing to find such traditional domestica in bohemia, the point runs deeper than satire. As Margaret Tarratt observed, "Much of the film's strength comes from its close observation of people and their contradictory impulses between brashness and uncertainty, openness and evasiveness, desire and avarice."⁷ The scene ends with Geraldine wrapping up Joe's penis in a white ribbon. This comic gift wrapping introduces Joe's commodification: Geraldine packages Joe's sexuality and deploys it for her lover Patti's needs.

After this ribald opening, there is an eloquent domestic coda. In a completely silent three-minute montage, the naked Joe plays with his baby, feeding him crumbs of cupcake, then stands dressed while Geraldine silently irons Joe's white shirt. The silence sets off the tenderness of the entire scene. It also emphasizes the softness of the baby's flesh and the natural warmth of the naked father at ease with his child. Such warmth and intimacy Joe will not again experience in the film. As well, the scene establishes something childlike in Joe. He and the baby seem able to take their pleasure in the moment, as simple nibbles of appetite without weighty import or compulsiveness. It's a scene of appetite without hunger; it suggests sustenance instead of dissipation. This scene contrasts Joe's sexual exploitation; the pragmatic identity he later teaches the neophyte hustlers seems here a childlike purity.

We follow Joe through a variety of subtly demeaning encounters. On the level of plot, they enable him to raise the \$200 he has promised Geraldine. On the level of theme, they play variations on the compromise of self-respect by sexual commodification. As Joe tells his wife, his professional sexual liberty is "very painful. I don't like that kind of work." From the quiet intimacy with his baby, Joe goes out to sell himself on the cacophonous street. *Flesh* draws less on the sentimental treatment of the subject in *Midnight Cowboy* than on Warhol's *My Hustler* (1965), where a self-absorbed stud remains the empty object of other people's fantasies and desires.

In a wordless five-minute montage of street life, Joe waits and watches and displays himself to watchers. In the first shot he is reflected in a street

puddle, as if he were greasy rubble (anticipating the central metaphor of the subsequent *Trash*). The main point is that we see the variety of ways in which Joe is being watched. Indeed our watching him becomes predatory when we strain to find his small figure in the teeming street life. The watching ends in use (that is, he turns from object of vision to sexual object); he turns his first trick in a toilet for \$20 (it's an old movie). The deal is straightforward, except for the two men's ritual hope to meet again ("I'll be seeing you soon").

The emptiness of such expressions is made clearer through Joe's two major clients that day. Neither admits the meaning of his interest in Joe. Both idealize their interest – and Morrissey accepts their positions. Joe's second customer (Maurice Braddell) articulates Morrissey's concern, saying, "Best to give you pride in your job, your vocation." But this client's "pride" is a matter of mutual delusion: the British gentleman veils his homosexuality in aestheticism. He poses Joe nude in order to photograph and then draw him. In David James's view, this is "an especially articulate version of such scenarios of scopophilia, in which the spectator's, the camera's, and the performer's gazes coincide upon his body. Reduced to an object of visual consumption, he enacts this function both *in* the film and *for* the film. . . . Dallesandro's dramatic situation restates the use the film makes of him. . . . In the economics of spectatorship, each of us is the industry's John and Braddell our proxy."⁸

The aging aesthete further rationalizes his proclivity by citing the Greeks' drawing of "empathy" and "sympatico" (the feelings as well as the words) from their erotic sculpture and by positing a religion of sensuality:

In a liberated person . . . body worship is behind all art, all music, and all sex and all love. If you cut it out for any reason you've deprived yourself of one whole chunk of life. . . . Body worship is in – is *in* the makeup of the human animal. All human beings, whether they're Puritanicals or whatever they are, they like it. . . . [From art and movies] they all get what they call the sex kick, which is bullshit. There's no sex in it. It's body worship, which becomes sex.

The heartiness of the man's philosophy is undermined by his ascetic image and his reedy voice.

And yet . . . and yet something of the gentleman's pretension still speaks for Morrissey. Morrissey often casts performers of idealized appearance because

good looks are one of the few visible elements in contemporary life that remind us of the past, when life had some meaning. This was the

case with the Greeks, with the Renaissance, with the nineteenth century and even with Hollywood of the thirties and forties. Physical beauty suggested the dignity and worthiness of human life. Juxtaposing a former ideal with today's sordid reality gives the work a tension and dramatic conflict. To me, just to survive this stupidity makes the central figure some kind of hero. None of my modern heroes have any big ambitions or aspirations. Just enough job or money to subsist on. None of my contemporary characters is ever so naive as to expect or to want "love" or even any kind of affection. They live in a world where things like that are long gone, dead, and they know it. Of course, this has alienated the liberal critics who want to see the old clichés of love and sex as "the meaning of life." They want to believe, they have to believe, that love can still exist in a sexually free society. Because they have destroyed the potential for affection in reality, they have to have it, if only in fantasy.

The aesthete's rationalization is paralleled by Joe's last customer of the day, the macho younger man (Louis Waldon) whom Joe knows from the gyms. He pretends that their sex is for friendlier motive than the money Joe always requests and that despite their sex, "we're not queers." The pretense to friendship is undermined when the customer shifts from jocular suggestion to brusquely ordering Joe about. The client's delusions show his need for purity in a relationship – such as that glimpsed in Joe's scene with the baby, but impossible for him elsewhere because of the commercialization of intimacy. Only with the baby is Joe in a relationship in which he is not a commodity.

In Gene Youngblood's view, *Flesh* "epitomizes the unisex world of The Factory. The Brandoesque Joe Dallesandro is virtually the embodiment of polymorphous perverse man as Morrissey interprets him: the archetypal erotic body, responding to the pleasures of the flesh without ideals or violence in a pansexual universe."⁹ But Youngblood overlooks Morrissey's sense of the emptiness of Joe's life. Joe's bisexuality may well represent a recovery of infantile bisexuality, a presocial (or in the repressed and repressive American society, antisocial) natural drive. But Joe's sexual openness can only be partial once he leaves his home. Outside it is delimited and redefined by the capitalism that commodifies everything, especially sexuality and freedom. The result of Joe's radical sexual freedom, then, is that he is bought and enslaved for it. Freedom to be bought is a dubious freedom.

The liberty of Joe's bisexuality is exposed as debilitating when, unfettered and commercialized, it exposes all the other hollow characters. Geraldine's

bisexuality and the baby–man scene both evoke Freud’s denial of a clear distinction between the masculine and the feminine natures. As Joe becomes a specular object, he assumes the traditional female role, while the more aggressive women in his life – Geraldine, Geri – adopt a more masculine character. This gender cross is literalized in the transvestites, whose transcendence of their biological gender proves a remarkable will and integrity.

Between the two commercialized male unions, with their self- and mutual deception, Joe finds more honesty in two other groups. In the first he discusses his trade with two would-be hustlers from Wisconsin. His theme is that it doesn’t matter what people think of each other in this commercial exchange of flesh. Further, “Nobody’s straight. What’s straight? It’s not a matter of being straight, being not straight. It’s just – you just do what you have to do.” Joe is touching in his willingness to teach the younger men, to soften their initiation into a hard, brutal life.

In the second group, Morrissey pans between two drag queens (Jackie Curtis and Candy Darling) reading a Hollywood fan magazine and Joe getting a blow job from an old girlfriend, Geri (Geri Miller). Like the opening detachment from *Sleep*, this scene seems determined to provide a social and psychological context to the act that is only implied in Warhol’s famous forty-five minute film, *Blow Job* (1964), which has been called “the longest ‘reaction shot’ on record.”¹⁰ David Bourdon declares Morrissey’s blow job “more naturalistic, explicit and physical” than Warhol’s, and thereto played “for raunchy laughs.”¹¹ One comic frisson derives from the incongruity of such a private act performed before two witnesses. Because the two groups are in the same room but never in the same frame, they seem isolated within company (like Joe on his ménage à trois marriage bed). Alternatively, the pan speaks to the fact that, as eroticism resides in the head, what else happens in the same room is irrelevant. Another irony derives from the transvestites’ glamour-ad quotations. For example, one – “When is a tampon right for you?” – directly confronts the commercialization of sexual identity, all the more ironic for a transvestite. Other lines allude to the sexual activity from which the reading is supposedly a distraction: “Jergens face cream,” “battle of the bulge.” Further, as David James suggests, “Orally consumed by Miller, Dallesandro is visually consumed by Curtis and Darling. With his back to the camera he looks away from everyone, . . . as in the twin-screen projections, one scene is in competition with the other, the exchange of glances passing from screen to screen, from the image of the subject of visual consumption to the image of the object of visual consumption, a doubled relay which dramatizes the real and the fantasy roles within spectatorship.”¹² The transvestites are both charming and dignified, especially when they urge



Candy Darling, Joe Dallesandro, and Geri Miller discuss Geri's plans for a silicone implant in *Flesh*.

Geri not to get silicone enlargements of her breasts, envying her natural femininity: "Things that move are beautiful. Like your bust. It moves."

For all her naïveté, Geri is distinguished by two instances of self-knowledge. In one, she accepts her mental limitations without pretensions: "My brain can't be developed any more than it is. And I think I'm cute. I don't want to change. If I learn too much I won't be happy. I think the more you learn the more depressed you are." Her self-acceptance contrasts Joe's two male clients, who both have art collections and claim to "illuminate" Joe. Geri also establishes a dramatic integrity when she explains to Joe how she avenged herself for a gang rape, when she was coerced under threat. She saw her rapists again when she was dancing at a club:

Do you know what it's like to be topless in front of someone who raped you? And that was how I got him back. Cause, like, he didn't think I'd have the guts to dance in front of him. And I just danced the best I could, to say "This is what you didn't get." Cause, like, when he raped me I was real stiff. . . . Because he just took it I was real awful. And that's how much I love you. I didn't want to let them hurt you.

Throughout this astonishing disclosure, Geri and Joe are in tight close-up, but Geri faces the camera full while Joe stands in profile, detached and smoking. Joe seems unmoved by her powerful story. She explains that Joe left her when she denied him after the trauma of the rape. Later she does her topless dance at Joe's request but he ignores her. Amid the triviality and falsity of Joe's sexual deals, Geri is his most honest – and therefore undervalued – engagement.

Geri's generous but abused love for Joe also contrasts his wife's exploitation of him. Over his protests, Geraldine and Patti undress Joe. They berate him for his laziness and chatter over his attempts to sleep. Finally, Patti clambers over him to embrace his wife. When Joe rises to watch his sleeping wife and her lover he may finally be awakening to the fact that he is literally spending himself for a relationship of only partial commitment. But he stays a sleepwalker, as he watches placidly, without Geri's resolve to reaffirm her own self-respect. The narcissistic Joe, his name and nature tattooed on his flesh as if that were his sole significance, remains isolated in the sensual shallows of flesh worship.

Joe's flickering consciousness may well be imaged in one idiosyncrasy in the film's technique, a jerkiness in the editing within a shot and in the frequent elision in dialogue. Often a character's speech is cut off before a sentence ends, or a single word or phrase may seem removed. These deliberate devices suggest characters stoned and screwed into a strobelike discontinuity of perception and understanding.

Morrissey's human touches in *Flesh* were not universally accepted. Greg Ford dismissed Joe's scene with the baby as an "interminable affair... the only occasion at which imputations of 'sentimentality' or 'mawkishness' could correctly be pegged on a Factory picture." He found the street montage "self-conscious virtuosity."¹³ Although Jonas Mekas claimed the film "has no special aesthetic or stylistic values" he still declared it "a good illustration of what Andy Warhol isn't about... a Warhol film never gives you an impression that it wants to make itself interesting."¹⁴ This is damning with apt praise. In contrast, John Weightman acknowledged the "very powerful and beautiful effect" when Joe's scene with the baby reverses the neoclassical genre painting in which the adult remained clothed and the child nude. "The nakedness of the father seemed to suggest that human beings are children who beget other children and can only look at them with puzzled affection, without understanding what the whole process is about."¹⁵

Such, precisely, is the mystery of the – as the title should alert us – *flesh*, to the one creature who can think and/or make art about it. Morrissey is

rare for having thought about the flesh as well as showing it. The basic subject of the film is flesh. It is our glory or our failing. The staff of potency dangles pathetically, ludicrous in a ribbon, because our flesh is both our peak and our base. Those who have it handsomely will be bought and sold for it. Even if they are violently craved, those who think themselves inadequate will have silicone augmentation. Those who feel they have the wrong flesh will project a persona that flies in the face of their native flesh. The baby flesh will thoughtlessly nibble a crumbling cake. At the other end of life, the crumbling old man will buy some younger flesh and rationalize his interest, to fend off his shame if not time. Between them, the young and innocent aspire to sell theirs. The older rake who will buy them worries about a wound, his flesh scarred by experience, and hits the gyms to avert flab. This man will squeeze a pimple on his lover's face because he needs another man's perfection to assure him against the loss of his own. Fidelity calls for the sacrifice of one flesh to preserve the integrity of another. So the stripper acknowledges shame but transcends it for her self, as earlier she yielded her flesh to protect her lover. He in turn peddles his flesh so his fleshmate can abort the new flesh growing in her lover's womb. These ripe paradoxes suggest a human and social contract written entirely in the flesh and its uses. To be blessed with being is to be cursed with flesh. Though – or because? – it is what we essentially are, to dedicate ourselves to it is folly.

Trash (1970)

As the title suggests, Morrissey's second film deals with the range of "trash" in his street-life survey. The original title, *Drug Trash*, pointed to Morrissey's intended target as the patrons of the "Swillmore Vomitorium,"¹⁶ who were turning subhuman by deadening themselves with drugs. Morrissey considered them worse than the Bowery winos because they self-righteously disguised their weakness as championing liberty. The film's realism dispelled the myth "that drugs are supposed to free people from inhibitions."¹⁷ Morrissey wanted to counteract the romanticizing of drug use in *Easy Rider* and in the perception of the "ultimate trip" of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. "The basic idea for the movie," he says, "is that drug people are trash. There's no difference between a person using drugs and a piece of refuse."¹⁸

But the film expresses a broader, more forgiving humanity than Morrissey suggests. It's yet another proof that – in D. H. Lawrence's injunction – we should trust the art, not the artist. The shorter title permits a broader reading