

Eraserhead

By David Sterritt

“The B List: The National Society of Film Critics on the Low-Budget Beauties, Genre-Bending Mavericks, and Cult Classics We Love”

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“Eraserhead” didn’t invent the midnight movie show. That honor goes to Alejandro Jodorowsky’s savage “El Topo” and George Romero’s chillers “Night of the Living Dead” and “Martin,” which pioneered the field in the early to middle 1970s. Nor did David Lynch’s genre-bending melodramedy skyrocket to success when it did make its witching-hour debut, courtesy of an enterprising Greenwich Village theater that took a chance with it in 1977. Lynch later recalled an opening-night crowd of twenty-five people, and reviews were lukewarm at best.

But momentum grew as word-of-mouth enthusiasm spread — complete with rumors that the sound track emitted an inaudible drone that tapped into the audience’s unconscious, as if only subliminal trickery could account for the picture’s uncanny power. By the end of the ‘70s it had scored a midnight hit in San Francisco and started a Los Angeles run that lasted into 1981; by 1983 it had played everywhere from Mexico and England to Germany and Japan.

Today the movie that took Lynch five years to complete remains a cult phenomenon par excellence, decades old but still able to burrow insidiously under the skin. And the filmmaker himself has become a major figure in world cinema without sacrificing a shred of his ornery, uncompromising vision. Lynch was a student at the American Film Institute when he began “Eraserhead,” shooting most of it on ramshackle sets knocked together in an old stable on the AFI grounds. Now respected stars lobby him for parts, Cannes gives him world premieres, and even Hollywood honors the outlandish like of “Mulholland Drive” and “Blue Velvet” with Oscar nominations. As career stories go, it’s as curious as ... well, a David Lynch movie.

“Eraserhead” centers on Henry Spencer, a young man with an introverted nature, a stand-up hairstyle, and an uncertain relationship with his girlfriend, Mary X, who’s been staying away from him lately. Invited for dinner at her parents’ house, he learns he’s the father of a baby she’s just had. Or something like that. At the hospital where she gave birth, Mary blurts out, they’re not sure it *is* a baby.

Be that as it may, the next scene finds Henry and Mary caring



Jack Nance stars as Henry in David Lynch’s idiosyncratic genre bender.
Courtesy Library of Congress

for the newborn in their apartment. And it’s quite a newborn — armless, legless, shrouded in bandage from the neck down, and emitting plaintive cries from the gaping mouth in its turtle-like face. Stressed beyond endurance, Mary goes back to her parents, leaving Henry to tend the little once. When the infant pushes him over the edge as well, he resorts to self-protective violence.

That’s the basic story of “Eraserhead,” but the film’s most interesting elements are less easily described. When we first see Henry, for instance, he’s adrift in the heavens. Floating translucently among the stars while an unnervingly anomalous creature — part worm, part fetus, part whatever — slides gracefully out of his mouth. We also visit a grungy-looking planet, inhabited by a grotesquely damaged man whose rust-covered industrial levers affect Henry’s fortunes in some unknown, unknowable way. Back on Earth, we meet a chipmunk-cheeked chanteuse who lives in Henry’s radiator, filling his reveries as he listens to music (Fats Waller at the pipe organ) on his run-down phonograph.

And then there’s the nightmare Henry has after a weirded-out tryst with the Beautiful Girl Across the Hall, who seduces him while Mary is away. Henry dreams that he’s visiting the Lady in the Radiator on the little stage where she sings and dances. Suddenly a bizarre stalk shoots out of his neck and knocks off his head, which is promptly replaced by the baby’s cranium poking out from his empty collar. Henry’s disembodied head bleeds copiously, then sinks through the floor and falls to the street below. There it’s grabbed by a street urchin, who sells it to a factory that uses the brain as raw material for pencil erasers. Only then does Henry awaken, more disgrun-

tled and perplexed than ever.

What's going on here? Critics of every kind have taken a crack at "Eraserhead," explaining how it liberates repressed thoughts, probes the collective unconscious, questions the concept of meaning, gives new life to ancient gnostic doctrines, and — take your pick — rejects traditional morality or promotes reactionary ideas. Like most Lynch movies, this one contains more than enough inspired ambiguity to sustain all such interpretations, plus others that haven't been dreamed up yet. But one reliable entryway is Lynch's connection to surrealism, which he got acquainted with during his years as an art student and painter.

Cinema and surrealism are an odd couple. Surrealism thrives on images from the world of dreams, while cameras can only film physical objects; even digital techniques usually aim at making the unreal look as real as possible. Still, a handful of innovators (Luis Bunuel, Maya Deren) have brought surrealism to the screen, and its spirit lives on vibrantly in Lynch, who described "Eraserhead" as "a dream of dark and troubling things." Every aspect of the film, from its spacey performances and grim cinematography to its jagged editing and nerve-jangling sound design, contributes to its restlessly off-kilter atmosphere.

In this context, the actual dream sequence has to be super-dreamlike if it's going to seem dreamlike at all. Lynch pulls this off by using the nightmare scene to substantiate the movie's title, rendering Henry's "eraser-head" as an (in) appropriate link in the narrative chain. The result is an additional layer of mystery, wrenched (like the baby from Mary's body or the brain from Henry's skull) from the most spectral depths of Henry's being. For me, this scene marks the transition from feeling involved in somebody's dream to feeling caged in somebody's delirium. Few moments match it for pure hallucinatory power, although several other segments of "Eraserhead" come close.

The first time I saw "Eraserhead" was in the late 1970s, at a dilapidated theater near the Long Island town where I lived. I'd been told by a French filmmaker of my acquaintance that the movie was "very advanced cinema," so I opted for an afternoon showing in the suburbs rather than a midnight one in Manhattan, where the late hour might render me less than totally alert.

Not a problem, it turned out. The film grabbed me instantly and never let go, hurling more novel ideas at my (totally alert) eyes and ears than I normally found in a score of movies. I noted a few missteps along the way — moments when the first-time filmmaker pushed too hard, miscalculated an effect, or bit off more than he could cinematically chew. (I still think the twitching "man-made chicken" is kind of silly.) But most of Lynch's feverish creation struck me as utterly original, hugely audacious, and fearlessly strange.

Especially the ending, which hit me like a revelation — the

ideal conclusion to a film so bravely idiosyncratic that the only suitable finale would be a courageous leap beyond the boundaries of cinema itself. I watched as Henry's attack on the "baby" pushed the film into a seizure of stuttering, non-linear montage, culminating in a new encounter with the Lady in the Radiator, who rushed up to embrace him in a shot so intensely bathed in blinding ultra-white light that the image all but disappeared, becoming a barely detectable trace of indecipherable motion and shade. Following the film's hero, I felt I'd transcended the realm of coherent sights, sounds, and perceptions, entering an undefined new dimension where time and space no longer follow their familiar laws.

I was wrong, of course. Catching the film again at a better movie house, I saw that while Henry and the Lady are indeed swathed in dazzling radiance, they're unmistakably visible as they cling to each other in a ghostly variation on Hollywood's conventional end-of-story clinch. What a surprise — this stunningly outlandish film was actually less outlandish than my imagination, assisted by a rotten projection system, had made it out to be!

I was compensated for this disappointment, though, since overall the film was even more impressive on the second viewing that it had been on the first. Since then my interest in "cult classics" has diminished, but my respect for "Eraserhead" remains high. Its idiosyncrasies bespeak the courage and tenacity of a screen artist exquisitely attuned to inner voices the rest of us may never hear, and eager to share their darkling echoes despite the likelihood that the conundrums, paradoxes, and enigmas they raise will be sounded by almost nobody and fathomed by fewer still. In this sense at least, Lynch's mission is generous and optimistic to its core.

Looking back on "Eraserhead" some twenty years after its release, Lynch observed that his debut film was made from profoundly personal motives and has a clear set of meanings for him. Yet in all that time, he continued, not one critic, scholar, or enthusiast has interpreted it the same way he does. I'll add that there's no reason why we should. "Eraserhead" is at once a movie on the screen, a vibration in the air, and an apparition in the phantasmal space between Lynch's mind and ours. Invite it to tunnel beneath your psychological skin, if you haven't already. It's an ideal introduction to Lynch's universe, and perhaps to unexplored shadowlands of your own inner cosmos as well.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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