



UNIVERSITY OF  
CALIFORNIA PRESS  
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

---

Review: [untitled]

Author(s): K. George Godwin

Reviewed work(s):

Eraserhead by David Lynch

Source: *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Autumn, 1985), pp. 37-43

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1212282>

Accessed: 07/03/2009 09:00

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ucal>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Film Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

read, “Just think of this as entertainment. It’s not at all going to be such heavy going. . . . There’ll be not one word about El Salvador, no mention of Trudeau and no political commitment whatsoever. So relax and enjoy yourself”—a passage which is full of irony and paradox. Despite what the text says, there is obviously at least one word about El Salvador (if we think of the two-word name as a single entity) and a mention of Trudeau. Further, Snow’s early confrontation of the Ontario Board of Censors and his contention that he “will not allow a word of this to be removed” are obviously political.

Finally, the passage reminds us of one of the absurdities of conventional entertainment film-going: the fact that the pretense of being non-political is widely thought to be essential to our enjoying ourselves.

Nearly any adjective one can think of to describe film in general or specific groups of films—“narrative,” “formalistic,” “political,” “entertaining,” “serious,” “personal,” “detached,” “experimental,” “conventional,” “auteurist,” “semiological”—can, to some degree, be seen as relevant to *So Is This*. In fact, this all-inclusiveness seems one of the obvious implications of this title.

—SCOTT MACDONALD

## ERASERHEAD

Written, directed, and produced by David Lynch, in cooperation with the American Film Institute. Photography: Frederick Elmes and Herbert Cardwell. Music: Peter Ivers. Libra/Corinth Films.

*A man lives in a seedy one-room apartment located in a nondescript urban wasteland. One day he gets a call from a girlfriend he hasn't seen in some time. She has given birth to a baby. Her mother insists on marriage. He agrees—or rather doesn't disagree. Unable to cope with the demanding baby, the woman leaves. The man looks after it through an illness. He has a brief sexual encounter with a neighbor. Increasingly insistent visions of a strange woman who exists behind the radiator in the apartment impinge on his claustrophobic world. Finally, he kills the baby—an act which shatters the world and frees him to join his vision-woman in Heaven.*

*Eraserhead*, writer-director David Lynch’s first feature, has been baffling and disturbing audiences since its release in 1976. It has become one of the most persistent and successful cult films on the midnight and art-house circuits. Yet, while it shares many characteristics which might be attributed to cult films as a class, it differs in some significant ways.

A common characteristic of many cult films is their air of exhibitionism—the relentless grotesquerie and pseudo-mysticism of *El Topo*; the innocent decadence of *Rocky Horror*; the not-so-innocent decadence of John Waters’s outrageous entertainments. These films invite the audience to throw off their inhibitions and join in an assault on generally accepted standards of good taste. The ultimate example of this is the participatory cult which grew up around Jim Sharman’s *Rocky Horror*, the complete identification of the audience with the film, the shared knowledge and rituals which brought the audience together in a communal experience, a new and alternative culture.

Yet *Eraserhead*, while it dwells on shocking, even perverse images, seems in-turned, obsessively introspective. It provides an auditory and visual assault which isolates each viewer. The experience becomes intensely personal, unshared. Lynch achieves this by relentlessly applying alienating devices. Foremost among these is the setting of the film in a bleak world not recognizable as our own. The action which takes place there offers no narrative with an externally meaningful coherence. The simple “story” of Henry Spencer’s forced marriage to Mary X is utterly banal—yet it is couched in a collection of bizarre, seemingly meaningless images and inconclusive scenes which shatter the story’s familiarity and make it frighteningly strange.

Exhibiting an artistry and technical skill almost unique in low-budget filmmaking—*Eraserhead* is shot in beautifully atmospheric black-and-white, enhanced with a remarkably intricate, expressionistic sound track—Lynch has structured the film in a series of almost circular movements, taking the viewer on detours which seem to lead back to our starting point—but not quite. Early in the film, Henry stares at the radiator in his room. A menacingly slow tracking shot moves along the base of the radiator, accompanied by a low, threatening hum and a harsh hissing of steam; sound and

image attain an intensity which warns of some imminent event. But nothing happens. Yet later the radiator becomes increasingly prominent as the location of Henry's vision of Heaven. Expectation is fulfilled, but in an unexpected way and displaced in time.

Later, after Mary has walked out, exhausted by the baby's demands, Henry wakes in the night to find her shivering feverishly beside him. He stares at the wall and the camera passes into it; the wall becomes an alien landscape where a worm-like creature rises up to swallow the camera. We emerge from darkness to look back out of the wall at Henry. But Mary is no longer there.

Henry's neighbor, having locked herself out, invites herself into Henry's apartment. They embrace in a bed which is transformed into a pool of milky fluid into which the couple submerge. Henry now enters his Heaven for the first time and approaches the deformed woman who inhabits it. His head abruptly explodes from his shoulders and sinks into a pool of blood, emerging into daylight where a small boy grabs it and runs. The boy sells the head to a pencil factory where it is found to be made entirely of rubber. From here we find ourselves suddenly returned to Henry's apartment where he lies alone, no sign of the neighbor.

In effect this is a kind of cinematic sleight-of-hand. Lynch diverts our attention and then alters a detail of the scene. But the distraction is far out of proportion with the slight change that he makes. What then are these detours? Simply strange, meaningless intrusions into the film's world? But here either everything is real, or nothing is. We can discern no degrees of reality because there is no baseline to which we can point as *rational*. There can be no distinction between what really happens and what someone thinks is happening because here thought is instantaneously manifest as event. We find ourselves in *Eraserhead* in a kind of psychological quicksand, unable to find the correct footing, emotional or intellectual, from which to view the events we see. In fact, it seems that very little actually does happen in the film, although something momentous is always *about* to happen. Yet the cues we are given by the characters themselves indicate that this world is "normal."

This gives the film a kind of humor like that of Beckett and other twentieth-century absur-

dist, a humor arising from people behaving as if meaning exists in a meaningless world. Henry responds to his child as any doting father might—yet it is a strange reptilian thing, armless, legless, a head attached by a thin neck to a shapeless, bandage-wrapped body—not a human mutant but a perfectly formed something else.

The actions and responses of the characters during Henry's visit to the X's exhibit an almost complete incongruity in each character's behavior—a breakdown or even a complete absence of communication between one mind and another which is nonetheless accepted by the characters as communication. Mrs. X asks Henry, "What do you do?" to which he replies disingenuously, "Oh, I'm on vacation." Mary has a seizure which her unconcerned mother treats by brushing Mary's hair. Henry is asked to carve a chicken which is only the size of a fist; when he tries to comply the bird twitches to life and spews out an oily liquid. And so it goes on—nothing seems to fit.

At its most accessible level, the film seems to be a strange domestic comedy in which the little annoyances of daily life are blown up to monstrous proportions, with poor bemused Henry stumbling through it all, trying his damndest to appear inconspicuously normal in situations where he is not certain just what "normal" is.

But this humor is not *funny*, because it is wedded to dark, bleak imagery, an almost obsessive interest in biological matters—the textures of internal organs, physical deformity. This biological concern and the bleak, post-industrial landscape in which the film is set are reminiscent of the paintings of the Swiss surrealist H. R. Giger (who, not surprisingly, has called *Eraserhead* "one of the greatest films I have ever seen"). Giger's paintings depict people trapped in mechanical complexes, often being absorbed into the machinery; creatures half-organic, half-mechanical; landscapes of glistening flesh; decaying biological matter.

This parallel offers a means of deciphering Lynch's seemingly impenetrable film. Its coherence is not the external one of narrative form, but the internal one of dream images which may represent any number of things simultaneously with no single meaning negating any of the others. It seems that Lynch has managed to capture the processes of dream



David Lynch's ERASERHEAD

consciousness with remarkable precision. *Eraserhead* is not simply a fantasy related to us and labelled dream; it is the dream experience itself.

But whose dream? The film itself presents us with no one who stands outside the events of the dream. Henry, at the center, is not the dreamer but rather the dreamer's dream identity (it is very much a male dream). Perhaps it is this absence of the dreamer which makes the film so immediate and so disturbing: the viewer becomes the dreamer.

Looked at in this way, the film's meanings begin to emerge clearly. *Eraserhead* is about corruption—the corruption of the natural world and of man as a part of that world. At the root of this corruption is man: the human mind, or intellect, or consciousness—that part of man which causes him to perceive himself as apart from the rest of nature, a separateness which causes him to believe that he is free to interfere with and alter nature in any way he desires, with impunity. In the film, the consequences of this meddling well up in vivid

nightmare terms. The world of *Eraserhead* is a dead one, bleak and sterile. Man's interference has made it actively hostile to life, and this process has rebounded on him in the form of a perversion of the most basic of life's forces: sex. The symbolic progress of the film reveals an ever-deepening fear of sex (as the agency by which life perpetuates itself), leading ultimately to a disgust which can only be remedied by a complete escape from it—into death.

The physical world depicted in *Eraserhead* offers virtually no images of life. From the very start, we see only a bleak, grimy urban wasteland; concrete expanses, tenements in a narrow street, relieved only occasionally by open space—treeless waste ground. These open spaces are either mere expanses of mud or wire-enclosed compounds containing a litter of technological debris. There are no bird sounds, just the occasional metallic rattle of some idle device off in the shadows. Just once dogs are heard to bark, an angry offscreen outburst from which Henry ducks away nervously. The only animals actually shown are a bitch and her

pups in the X's house; the sound accompanying the pups' suckling seems wrong, like the squealing of rats.

The "ornaments" in Henry's dingy room are themselves dead: a mound of dried grass on top of the dresser, a mat of the same beneath the radiator, and on the bedside table a heap of dirt from which protrudes a dry, leafless twig. Above this hangs a picture of a mushroom cloud—the ultimate symbol of death.

Even when we are shown a garden (in front of the X's house), it is as bleak as the rest of this world: dark and shadowy, with a high wire fence pressing in at the side through which murky, unwholesome steam drifts from railway yards, it contains only dead, withered flowers and shrubs.

The scene which takes place inside this house presents the film's themes in miniature. Far from being a cozy family home, it offers little comfort, no haven from the grim world outside. Situated right beside the tracks, it gets the full benefit of the filth, noise and vibration of passing trains. The interior is cluttered with clumsily placed pipes which further shrink the small rooms and get in the way of movement. This is just another aspect of the inefficient, decaying technology of the film's world—seen again and again, in the empty rotting industrial sites, in the barely functioning elevator in Henry's building, in the violently burning-out light bulbs (in the X's house, and later in Henry's room as the world is coming to an explosive end).

When Mary's father, Bill, first enters from the kitchen, he bursts into a sudden diatribe which is quickly drowned out by the roar of a passing train. He says that he has seen the area pass from meadows to the hell-hole it is today. And then adds significantly that, as a plumber, he put most of the pipes in himself, ruining his knees in the process.

Bill offers a further symbol of this corruption: as they sit down to dinner, he asks Henry to do the carving. He explains at length why: some years ago he had an operation on his arm. The doctors told him he would never recover the use of it. "But what do they know?" He rubbed it every day and bit by bit he regained movement until now "it's as good as new." Except that there is absolutely no feeling in it; he will not carve because he is afraid he might cut himself. The arm has a semblance of life, but is

in reality little more than animated dead matter. (One thinks of the grandmother sitting in the kitchen, a vegetable appendage to the family, moving only when Mrs. X manipulates her lifeless hands to toss the salad.)

The dinner itself is a kind of perversion. It consists of chickens—of a sort. They are only the size of a fist and Bill says, *man-made*. "Damnedest things, but they're new." Man, trying to extend his manipulation into every corner of nature, has produced a parody.

The film's central symbol for that active part of the human mind, responsible for the disruption and perversion of the natural world—and for the unbalanced, faulty technology which has been the agency of that perversion—is the Man in the Planet. This figure, a grotesque mutant, is a barely moving, twitching creature who sits in a ruined, decaying room with control levers in front of him. He is the repulsive inhabitant of man's own mind. By manipulating his levers he initiates the action of the film; he is "in charge" of this world whose motion has become mechanical rather than living. In the film's final moments, it becomes clear that the Planet itself is not even spherical, but distorted, elongated—shaped something like a head, a dark inorganic head. This creature, embodying the force responsible for corrupting the natural world, stands as the film's devil. But he is also a vital part of man. The horror of this nightmare is the horror of man facing the monster in himself, a confrontation which finally leads to an act of self-destruction to end the horror.

Opposing this devil is a second symbolic figure, Henry's "angel," the sexless woman who inhabits his vision of Heaven. The devil's second appearance in the film blocks Henry's attainment of this Heaven. His third and final appearance shows his control lost, the world destroyed and Henry "freed" at last. But before this sequence can be understood, and the nature of the climactic act of self-destruction comprehended, the second aspect of the film's vision of corruption must be examined.

The perverse sexuality which pervades the film is the key to understanding the meaning of *Eraserhead*. To begin at the beginning: the film opens with images of conception and birth. In the beginning there is space, the Planet—and Henry floating in nothingness. The conception is already corrupt; the sperm comes not from the penis, but is rather drawn mechanically

from Henry's mouth (the head) by the Man in the Planet's manipulation of his levers. The head which attempts to reshape the natural world here tries to control the very processes of reproduction. The sperm itself is an over-sized, clumsy parody of the real thing. It drops into a water-filled cavity in the Planet's surface, submerging in a stream of bubbles which fade to darkness.

The birth consists of a vertical rising from this darkness through a circular hole in the ground, moving up into light and open space. We, like Henry, like the as yet unseen child, have passed from a state of nonexistence into the physical world—a world which becomes increasingly claustrophobic and from which Henry longs to escape back into nonexistence.

The grotesque sperm appears twice more in the course of the film. The first time, it helps to define the nature of the place Henry so longs to enter—the stage which exists in the wall behind the radiator. Although the stage's presence is hinted at just after Henry receives the message from Mary that he is expected for dinner, we do not actually see it until Mary and the baby have moved in and Henry's world has been reduced to the size of the dingy little apartment—until he has become totally trapped within this bleak world.

The stage is as seedy as the apartment, but it is lit by a stark white light which banishes shadows. At the center is the deformed blonde woman of Henry's vision; sexless, with a shapeless body and a bland, childish expression, she performs a stiff little Shirley Temple-like dance. As she dances, the sperm-things drop about her. She steps around them daintily with a coy smile until the music stops; she steps on one of the things and it squishes a milky fluid out on to the stage. She does it again . . . and Henry's Heaven is defined. A warm, moist, safe, enclosed place: the womb. But a sterile womb. Its sexless inhabitant and guardian eliminates the intruding sperm, thus guaranteeing that no conception will occur—and so no birth, no entry into the hated outer world.

At its third appearance, the sperm has become actively malignant. Mary has walked out, yet Henry wakes in the night to find her beside him, tightly wrapped in the sheets, shivering with a fever. Henry, a look of worry, even fear, on his face, reaches beneath the covers and begins to pull something out—a

sperm, pulled free apparently from Mary's vagina. It is now a parasite, a source of sickness. Henry pulls it, and then several more, out of Mary—reversing the normal course of sex—and hurls them at the wall, killing them.

Not surprisingly, birth itself is presented in a series of progressively more negative images. Initially, in the opening sequence, it is a journey from darkness into light—a vertical ascent. The second birth image follows one of the film's circular diversions, occurring immediately after the scene described above. As Henry stares at the wall where the crushed sperm have left their smears, the small cabinet beside these marks opens and we see a little worm he earlier found in his mailbox. This worm is itself significant, so I will here make a brief detour of my own to deal with it.

As the cabinet doors open, the worm (which, a woman once commented to me, resembles a very young foetus) comes to life and crawls off into darkness, emerging onto a cratered landscape. It slips into one hole, rises from another, repeating the action several times. And each time it reappears, it has grown larger and fatter—like a penis swelling to erection. This awakening of the penis, as it were, leads directly into the scene which follows (involving the neighbor) and to the climactic self-destructive action. The original finding of the worm—in a dark place (the mailbox)—and Henry's furtive concealment of it, represents the first moment of sexual self-discovery. The circular craters which so stimulate it to growth are an obvious female symbol. Finally, the end of the worm opens into a rapidly widening mouth, an image of extreme appetite, also perhaps becoming a symbol of the vagina, which swallows the camera into complete darkness.

We emerge from this in a way which echoes that first birth image; the camera pans slowly until an opening comes into view, through which it travels. Here, however, instead of rising vertically it tracks horizontally, and we emerge not into light and open space but into Henry's cramped, dimly lit room.

The third birth image is more shocking. Henry, having finally reached the stage-Heaven, is decapitated. His head lies in a pool of blood. Abruptly, it plunges down into the liquid, emerging into that apparently different outer world where it is found that Henry's head consists entirely of rubber. Here we have not



ERASERHEAD

only violence, blood, and a *descending* movement—we have a stillbirth; its product is not alive, indeed may not even be organic.

Given all this, it is equally unsurprising that the vagina occurs as another central image. Its first appearance comes during the dinner scene—the opening into the body cavity of the little chicken which comes to life and oozes a thick oily liquid which might be blood. Henry finds the sight distasteful. Yet Mrs. X is aroused by it to the point of sexual climax, after which she frightens Henry by making a sexual advance. There is a complex fear here: of menstruation, of female sexuality, and of its links to reproduction.

Subsequent appearances of the vagina image are less threatening, as should be the case, given Henry's desire to re-enter the womb. It becomes an image of absorption (the craters on the Planet's surface, the mouth of the worm) which culminates in what is perhaps the film's only moment of beauty, as the bed becomes a pool of milky fluid into which Henry and his neighbor sink in an embrace.

It is at this point that Henry first reaches his Heaven. He journeys through the vagina to emerge into the womb. Standing among the crushed sperm, the deformed blonde sings her brief song about Heaven and then reaches out towards Henry. But he is blinded by a fierce light and the Man in the Planet takes her place. Henry backs away and his head explodes from

his shoulders, replaced by the baby, its insistent cry more plaintively demanding than ever. Henry has reached his Heaven, but he cannot possess it—because he penetrated to the womb through an act of sex. But here sex (as the means of procreation) is forbidden. Henry is violently expelled in that image of stillbirth.

This brings us to the image which dominates the film, which becomes its center as it becomes the center of Henry's life: the "baby." This inhuman (yet still oddly human) creature, which lies unmoving on the table from its first appearance, somehow seems to be in control. It wears Mary down with its incessant demanding cry, finally driving her away. Yet Henry accepts its presence passively. What is this bizarre reptilian thing? From its shape and its position in the film's structure of symbols, it can be only one thing: the penis (complete with scrotum—the bandage-wrapped sac to which the head is attached by a thin neck). But it is the penis grown out of all proportion; it has become a separate entity, all appetite. Its cry for attention hardly ever stops. It even disturbs the neighbor as she is willingly giving herself to Henry. Mary is driven away by its need, she rejects its demands (and Henry's slightest sexual move) and is, as a punishment, "infected" by its product, the malignant sperm.

After Mary has left, the baby continues its wailing. Henry wants to leave the apartment, the claustrophobic trap of his tiny airless room, but every time he reaches for the door the baby cries out again. Henry turns back to discover it a mass of repulsive blisters. "Oh," says Henry with a mild concern, "you *are* sick." He attempts to treat it, his actions as mild and ineffectual as ever. But perhaps in that moment he has his first glimmer of where his true problem lies. For it is this thing which blocks his access to Heaven. He is ruled by the penis, the source of the dreaded sperm, agent of reproduction, and is thus unworthy. This is the meaning of the decapitation sequence. Control by the penis is complete.

This is reinforced later. After his "return" from Heaven, he cannot stop thinking about the neighbor (sex). He jumps at every sound from the hall. But when he finally does see the woman again, she is about to enter her apartment with another man, one with a disfigured face who is touching her salaciously (sex has lost its glow). Henry stares; she stares back.

And what she sees is the penis-baby rising in place of Henry's head.

Now the film moves into its climax. Why does Henry take up the pair of scissors and cut open the bandages in which the baby is wrapped? His movements are hesitant. Is his interest clinical? An attempt to diagnose his sickness? Is he trying to punish the baby for trapping him and making his life hell? Or is it a deliberate act of self-release? Certainly, the outcome is release of a kind—the kind, in fact, which Henry longs for. The act itself is self-castration: destroy the appetite by destroying the organ. All the poisons flood up out of the dying thing, and its death throes cause chaos. Because, in destroying the penis, Henry also destroys the tool of continuity, the means by which the world (the particular inner world of the dream) is sustained. Without the support of this organ, the world flies apart. The result is death. But of course this is what Henry desired. The nothingness of the sterile womb, Henry's Heaven, is death itself.

How does this all relate to that other theme, of the world corrupted by man's mind? Quite simply, the kind of control involved in man's heavy-handed manipulation of the physical world is unable to harness the forces of life. The attempt (seen in the mechanical act of conception which initiates the action of the film, in the man-made chickens) results in gross parody—and, worse, in a great conflict with those forces which continue to express themselves in their own terms. The horror of sex which is so pervasive in the dream—from Henry's discomfort around women to the grotesquely distorted sexual imagery—arises from the perception that this particular force is beyond the control of man's rational consciousness (the twisted Man in the Planet). Instead of trying to come to terms with it in a way which would acknowledge its rightful place, consciousness fears sex, tries to suppress it; and down in the subconscious, the place of dreams (the realm of the film) it becomes distorted, even more fearsome. Because it is beyond this kind of control, sex is perceived as a monster. And the only way to escape it is to eliminate it entirely. But self-castration not only obliterates sex—in cutting off the links to life's vital forces, it also kills the castrating consciousness. And so, at the very moment of victory, as sex is finally defeated and Henry sinks blissfully unconscious into the

arms of his sterile angel, the Man in the Planet pulls desperately at the controls of his disintegrating machine and flies, with his world, into a million fragments.

*Eraserhead* is, then, a depiction of the self-defeating tensions which result from man's inability to reconcile his intellect with other, equally potent, aspects of his nature. What makes Lynch's achievement so impressive is that he states this entirely through suggestion—and with a good deal of dark, skewed humor—manipulating his symbols with remarkable dexterity in a surreal vehicle which is organic and unified—and frighteningly alive—without ever reducing the message to the level of a tract. An obsessive, haunting work made by a remarkable, original talent, *Eraserhead* is completely *sui generis*. —K. GEORGE GODWIN

## Short Notices

*This section will mainly aim at giving coverage to experimental or documentary or video works which deserve attention but do not generally get covered in the film columns of widely available publications. However, we will also include some other films which raise issues or embody problems that we think will interest our readers.*

**Broken Mirrors.** Director Marleen Gorris is working the same feminist vein as in *A Question of Silence* (see review in Winter 1983–84 issue), but this time the women are victims instead of killers. The main action takes place in a brothel; a parallel plot follows a mystery man who kidnaps a woman and keeps her in chains, visiting to watch and photograph her, until she dies. In the brothel, Gorris presents the viewer with an unusual worker's eye view, as nearly every sequence begins with the preparations for the arrival of the day's customers. Although there is violence here, too, the main focus is on the women's reactions and interactions. Gorris can obtain large effects with economical means, such as the brief scenes of the women's haggard faces at the end of a busy students' night. Indeed, the whole film is deployed with at least as much precision and control as *A Question of Silence*. But *Broken Mirrors* falters at the crucial point where *Silence* triumphed—the driving home of its feminist message. The meticulous realism of the brothel scenes obscures the metaphorical equation of the prostitutes' cultural-economic-sexual subjection with the kidnapped woman's physical shackles, so that the revelation of the mystery man as a regular Happy House customer appears mainly as a psychological im-