



## ROOTS, RITUALS AND PHANTASMAGORIA

# Eraserhead

### Eraserhead

Directed by: David Lynch

©: David Lynch

Produced with the co-operation of:

AFI Center for Advanced Film Studies

Produced by: David Lynch

Production Manager: Doreen G. Small

Production Crew: Jeanne Field, Michael Grody,

Stephen Grody, Toby Keeler, Roger Lundy,

John Lynch, Dennis Nance, Anatol Pacanowsky,

Carol Schreder

Assistant to the Director: Catherine Coulson

Screenplay: David Lynch

Camera and Lighting: Frederick Elmes,

Herbert Cardwell

Assistant Camera: Catherine Coulson

Special Effects Photography: Frederick Elmes

Special Effects: David Lynch

Picture Editing: David Lynch

Production Design: David Lynch

Song Composed by: Peter Ivers

Song Sung by: Peter Ivers

Pipe Organ by: 'Fats' Waller

Location Sound: Alan R. Splet

Re-Recording: Alan R. Splet

Sound Editing: Alan R. Splet

Sound Effects: David Lynch, Alan R. Splet

Special thanks to: Jack Fisk, Peggy Lynch,

Sidney P. Solow, Sissy Spacek, George Stevens Jr

Cast:

John Nance (*Henry Spencer*)

Charlotte Stewart (*Mary X*)

Allen Joseph (*Bill X*)

Jeanne Bates (*Mrs X, Mary's mother*)

Judith Anna Roberts (*beautiful girl across the hall*)

Laurel Near (*lady in the radiator*)

V. Phipps-Wilson (*landlady*)

Jack Fisk (*man in the planet*)

Jean Lange (*grandmother*)

Thomas Coulson (*the boy*)

John Monez (*bum*)

Darwin Joston (*Paul*)

Neil Moran (*the boss*)

Hal Landon Jr (*pencil machine operator*)

Jennifer Lynch (*little girl*)

Brad Keeler (*little boy*)

Peggy Lynch, Doddie Keeler

(*persons digging in the alley*)

Gill Dennis (*man with cigar*)

Toby Keeler (*fighting man*)

Raymond Walsh (*Mr Roundheels*)

USA 1976©

89 mins

Digital 4K

### Content warning:

Contains strong gore and disturbing surreal imagery

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In his first film, *Eraserhead*, David Lynch created a world from which everything has been stripped away except for the anxiety at its heart. Henry Spencer tramps numbly across a ruined industrial landscape. He goes for dinner with his girlfriend Mary at the house of her parents, Mr and Mrs X. They eat small chickens which move and exude a mysterious slime when cut. Henry is compelled to marry Mary because she has given birth – but so prematurely that the hospital wasn't even sure if the result was a baby.

The despair and frustration in the film's subject accords somewhat with the circumstances of its production. The entry on *Eraserhead* in the second volume of *Cult Movies* says that it took a year to film and a year to edit. This sounds daunting enough but is nevertheless an understatement. According to Lynch's own account, the film took five years to complete, from 1971 to 1976: 'We shot straight for a year and then we were down for a whole year. Then we shot and did the editing and sound piecemeal for the remainder.' The film looks as if it were set in a depressed industrial part of Detroit or Philadelphia but was in fact shot in the stables of an old mansion in Beverly Hills where Lynch was renting some rooms. During the day he delivered *The Wall Street Journal* ('I had my route down to one hour') and at night he shot *Eraserhead*.

Even ten years later, after the trauma of shooting *Dune* and in the throes of promoting a new picture, Lynch still speaks vividly of his first filmmaking experience: 'It was extremely frustrating to hold on to everything for so long. I couldn't do anything new because that wasn't finished, I didn't have anything to show anybody. So I just saw the world going by and tried to raise money and little by little I did it.'

Clearly, only a very unusual actor could have made himself available for such a period to play the leading role, but Lynch had the good fortune to find such a person in John Nance: 'Jack is a strange actor anyway. Some people are what you call highly motivated and he is the exact reverse: zero motivation. He's very content to stay at home, not even watching television, just sitting thinking in a chair, wearing his little slippers. So he was pretty happy. He just had to keep his haircut, he wore a little hat. But he did fine for the five years.'

If nothing else, however, the extreme length of shooting allowed Lynch to make sure everything in the film was right. There is a whole range of flaws that are traditionally associated with and excused in student or 'underground' films: poor lighting, echoing sound, clumsy acting, rickety sets, shaky camerawork. *Eraserhead* is not just without these faults; it is one of the major technical achievements of its decade. One is tempted to hail the film as a one-man, shoestring, nightmare version of *Citizen Kane* because of the vitality with which it uses every element available. For example, the careful use of sound, in particular the sound of some mysterious industrial process, is an integral part of the film. (Alan Splet, who collaborated with Lynch on sound for *Eraserhead*, has remained with him for all his subsequent films.)

Making *Eraserhead*, David Lynch had a level of control over every aspect of the filmmaking process that most directors, however successful, will never achieve. This is of far more than anecdotal interest in a consideration of Lynch's career. The script is only one part of the finished movie – 22 pages for an 89-minute film (scripts usually work out at about a page per minute). Lynch speaks of the

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### Dead of Night + A Winter's Dale

Mon 2 Sep 20:40; Sat 14 Sep 12:30

### Little Otik Otesánek

Wed 4 Sep 20:15 + intro by musician and Starve  
Acre composer Matthew Herbert; Sat 21 Sep 17:45

### Don't Look Now

Tue 10 Sep 20:45; Thu 26 Sep 20:50; Sun 29 Sep 18:10

### A Ghost Story for Christmas: A Warning to the Curious + Beasts: Baby

Fri 13 Sep 18:15

### Eraserhead

Fri 13 Sep 20:45; Tue 1 Oct 21:00; Mon 7 Oct 18:10

Screenplay: **White Lady** + intro by filmmaker and season curator Daniel Kokotajlo + **Children of the Stones (episode 1)**

Mon 16 Sep 20:40

### The Shout + Lonely Water (aka The Spirit of Dark and Lonely Water)

Wed 18 Sep 18:10 + Q&A with filmmakers Daniel Kokotajlo and Mark Jenkin; Sat 21 Sep 15:00; Wed 2 Oct 20:50

### The Hunger

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exhilaration he felt standing in the set of Mr and Mrs X's apartment and realising that what he had pictured in his mind had been exactly recreated. And this control had immense implications for the film itself. The narrative is as much concerned with the industrial hum of the soundtrack, the metamorphic worms, the terrifying machines, as it is with what is said. This move beyond the mere words and plot forms a fruitful and fascinating struggle right through Lynch's work.

Such an approach can prove difficult for critics, and when *Eraserhead* appeared in Britain in 1979 there was a general unwillingness to provide exegesis. As Paul Taylor prudently concluded in his review in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, it was 'a movie to be experienced rather than explained'. However what is needed for *Eraserhead* is not a glossary of symbols but a clear account of its imaginative power. The two sources of horror in the film are the diseased organic world of the body itself and the cruel machines (and indeed the ruined industrial setting) that surround it. With a cold, clear eye, David Lynch shows us both kinds of disgust – the slimy, unguent products of the human body and its activities and then the vividly imagined device into which Henry's head is inserted to be processed into erasers for pencils.

Sean French, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1987

### A contemporary review

No synopsis could adequately convey the perfect nightmare of David Lynch's extraordinary black-and-white horror; the film itself is an absurdist, surreal treat of repulsive beauty and grisly comedy. Over and above its perverse plot, the film's crisp imagery (often of inexplicable phenomena) and its controlled playing have a unique and eerie suggestiveness.

Even though there's material enough in this post-punk dreamscape for an imaginative Freudian to have a field-day, Lynch consistently eschews symbolism and allegory, and gives priority to none of the levels of inevitably decomposing 'reality' inhabited by his catatonic hero. He also refuses to indulge in isolated shocks – although the superb effects provide opportunities aplenty – and concentrates on a cumulative, suspenseful grotesquerie. Henry's unique odyssey, finally, is tracked towards an almost intimate apocalypse.

Critical shorthand would probably append the work of Bosch and Beckett, and perhaps David Cronenberg and the Kuchars, as tenuous reference points, but *Eraserhead* is a movie to be experienced rather than explained.

Paul Taylor, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, March 1979