



## FILM REVIEW: Eraserhead (David Lynch, 1976): USA

### Description

Reviewed by [Larry Gleeson](#). Viewed at the Egyptian Theatre, AFI film festival, Hollywood, Calif.



[Eraserhead](#), directed by David Lynch, the 2010 AFIfest's guest director, continues to mesmerize audiences with its stark portrayal of the many all too human desires. As NY Times' Manohla Dargis so eloquently writes "The black-and-white world of *Eraserhead* disturbs, seduces and even shocks with images that are alternately discomfiting, even physically off-putting. It also amuses with scenes of preposterous, macabre comedy, among them a memorable family dinner involving a cooked bird that wiggles obscenely on its plate while it gushes forth a menacing dark liquid." Consequently, Henry Spencer, played by John Nance is informed that he has fathered a child with girlfriend Mary X, played by Charlotte Stewart. However, the child is born as a mutated fetus. The doctors aren't even sure the baby is human any longer. The baby appears with shuffling eyes and a bulbous wet head that looks like a skinned lamb and just lies on a table, cackling and cooing – more an emblem of dread than a bundle of joy. Henry and Mary move into Henry's single-room apartment where the baby's constant crying keeps them awake at night. Their existence is dominated by the overwhelming banality of Henry's single apartment and its outlook onto a brick wall. Eventually, Mary walks out, leaving Henry with sole charge of the baby. Henry is left with what is some men's greatest nightmare – of being left with the sole responsibility for raising an unwanted child.

Throughout *Eraserhead*, Lynch plays with a good deal of sexual imagery and sexual energy which seems to be the through action of the film. In the opening moments, we see Henry floating through space dreaming and what look like sperm emerging from his mouth. When domestic life with the baby

starts going wrong, Henry is seen pulling sperm out of the sleeping Mary's mouth as though trying to symbolically reverse the pregnancy. The sex in the film seems tinged with disgust – Henry's future mother-in-law questions Henry about whether he and Mary have had sexual intercourse and proceeds to come onto Henry by slobbering on his cheek and neck. Later Henry hooks up with the seductive, attractive woman from across the hallway. However, Henry's bed turns into a glowing swamp. Henry's pick up attempt comes full circle as he sees the woman seducing another man. She teasingly turns to Henry and laughs at him somewhat menacingly. The only happiness Henry seems to find is in his radiator dream-land where a girl with puffy pock-cheeked cabaret-style dancer nervously sings and moves on stage as sperm drop on her. Perhaps as Richard Schieb suggests "this latter seems to be arguing that masturbation is the only safe form of sex – certainly, this would seem to be the case at the climax of the film, which sees Henry going off to join the pure and innocent puff-cheeked girl in radiator dream-land in a blaze of white light that may be the hereafter." And who is the mysterious man depicted at the beginning and at the end of the film? He appears to be "the man behind the curtain" pulling the lever that controls Henry's fate. Moreover, he quite possibly may represent Henry's bloodline with his disfigured appearance shadowed by the flying sperm-like images. Or, maybe he represents a higher duality of fear and omniscience as Henry, in the opening scene, is seen confessing a wrongdoing and receiving forgiveness. This first scene sets the tone for *Eraserhead*. It is open to your interpretation.

*Eraserhead* certainly defies any type of classification. Lynch literally seems to have tapped into his subconscious. He uses dreams and dream-like imagery. Overall, *Eraserhead* seems to symbolize industrial dehumanization to a post-holocaust nuclear proliferation era with powerful sexual overtones. Henry lives in the midst of an industrial wasteland. The only views we get of the outside world are of cold, dirty factories. The only greenery we see is in Henry's room consisting of two piles of dirt, one on his dresser and one on his bedside table where branches have sprouted. And, as Scheib so poignantly asks, "What do the pencil erasers represent – do they, as some pedantic academic suggested, symbolically represent the mind's ability to repress or 'erase' matter?" Indeed.

*Eraserhead* was produced by the American Film Institute (AFI). AFI is known for its Lifetime Achievement Awards and for its production of over 250 short films. *Eraserhead* appeared at the 1976 Chicago International Film Festival, at the Filmex Film Festival in 1977 and at the 1978 Avoriaz Fantastic Film Festival garnering the Antennae II Award. In 2004, The USA National Film Preservation Board named *Eraserhead* to the National Film Registry. It took Mr. Lynch five years to complete it. Other notable films by Mr. Lynch include *Mulholland Drive* (2001), *Blue Velvet* (1986), *Twin Peaks: Firewalk with Me* (1992). Recommended.

## Category

1. #AFI
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