

= Eraserhead =

Eraserhead is a 1977 American surrealist body horror film written and directed by filmmaker David Lynch . Shot in black @-@ and @-@ white , Eraserhead is Lynch 's first feature @-@ length film , coming after several short works . The film was produced with the assistance of the American Film Institute (AFI) during the director 's time studying there . Starring Jack Nance , Charlotte Stewart , Jeanne Bates , Judith Anna Roberts , Laurel Near , and Jack Fisk , it tells the story of Henry Spencer (Nance) , who is left to care for his grossly deformed child in a desolate industrial landscape . Throughout the film , Spencer experiences dreams or hallucinations , featuring his child and the Lady in the Radiator (Near) .

Eraserhead spent several years in principal photography because of the difficulty of funding the film ; donations from Fisk and his wife Sissy Spacek kept production afloat . The film was shot on several locations owned by the AFI in California , including Greystone Mansion and a set of disused stables in which Lynch lived . Lynch and sound designer Alan Splet spent a year working on the film 's audio after their studio was soundproofed . The film 's soundtrack features organ music by Fats Waller and includes the song " In Heaven " , penned for the film by Peter Ivers .

Initially opening to small audiences and little interest , Eraserhead gained popularity over several long runs as a midnight movie . Since its release , the film has earned positive reviews . The surrealist imagery and sexual undercurrents have been seen as key thematic elements , and the intricate sound design as its technical highlight . Thematic analysis of the film has also highlighted these issues and has elaborated on Spencer 's fatalism and inactivity . In 2004 , the film was preserved in the National Film Registry by the United States Library of Congress as being " culturally , historically , or aesthetically significant " .

= = Plot = =

The Man in the Planet (Jack Fisk) pulls levers in his home in space , while the head of Henry Spencer (Jack Nance) floats in the sky . A giant spermatozoon @-@ like creature emerges from Spencer 's mouth , floating into the void . The Man in the Planet appears to control the creature with his levers , eventually making it fall into a pool of water .

In an industrial cityscape , Spencer walks home with his groceries . He is stopped outside his apartment by the Beautiful Girl Across the Hall (Judith Anna Roberts) , who informs him that his girlfriend , Mary X (Charlotte Stewart) , has invited him to dinner with her family . Spencer leaves his groceries in his apartment , which is filled with piles of dirt and dead vegetation . That night , Spencer visits X 's home , conversing awkwardly with her mother (Jeanne Bates) . At the dinner table , he is asked to carve a chicken that X 's talkative father , Bill (Allen Joseph) has " made " ; the bird writhes on the plate and gushes blood . After dinner , Spencer is cornered by X 's mother , who tries to kiss him . She tells him that X has had his child and that the two must marry . X , however , is not sure if what she bore is a child .

The couple move into Spencer 's one @-@ room apartment and begin caring for the child ? a swaddled bundle with an inhuman , snakelike face , resembling the spermatozoon @-@ like creature . The infant refuses all food , crying incessantly and intolerably . The sound drives X hysterical , and she leaves Spencer and the child . Spencer attempts to care for the child , and he learns that it struggles to breathe and has developed painful sores .

Spencer begins experiencing visions , again seeing the Man in the Planet , as well as the Lady in the Radiator (Laurel Near) , who sings to him as she stomps upon spermatozoon @-@ like creatures . After a sexual encounter with the Beautiful Girl Across the Hall , Spencer has a vision where he is decapitated by a creature resembling the child , revealing a stump underneath that resembles the child 's face . Soon afterwards , Spencer 's head sinks into a pool of blood and falls from the sky , landing on a street below . A boy finds it , bringing it to a pencil factory to be turned into erasers .

Spencer seeks out the Beautiful Girl Across the Hall , but finds her with another man . Crushed , Spencer returns to his room , where the child is crying . He takes a pair of scissors and for the first

time removes the child 's swaddling . It is revealed that the child has no skin ; the bandages held its internal organs together , and they spill apart after the rags are cut . The child gasps in pain , and Spencer cuts its organs with the scissors . The wounds gush a thick liquid , covering the child . The power in the room overloads ; as the lights flicker on and off the child grows to huge proportions . When the lights burn out completely , the child 's head is replaced by the planet . Spencer appears amidst a billowing cloud of eraser shavings . The side of the planet bursts apart , and inside , the Man in the Planet struggles with his levers , which are now emitting sparks . Spencer is embraced warmly by the Lady in the Radiator , as both white light and white noise crescendo before the film suddenly ends .

= = Production = =

= = = Pre @-@ production = = =

Writer and director David Lynch had previously studied for a career as an artist , and he had created several short films to animate his paintings . By 1970 , however , he had switched his focus to film @-@ making , and at the age of 24 he accepted a scholarship at the American Film Institute 's Center for Advanced Film Studies . Lynch disliked the course and considered dropping out , but he changed his mind after he was offered the chance to produce a script of his own devising . He was given permission to use the school 's full campus for film sets ; he converted the school 's disused stables into a series of sets and lived there . In addition , Greystone Mansion , also owned by the AFI , was used for many scenes .

Lynch had initially begun work on a script titled Gardenback , based on his painting of a hunched figure with vegetation growing from its back . Gardenback was a surrealist script about adultery , which featured a continually growing insect representing one man 's lust for his neighbor . The script would have resulted in a roughly 45 @-@ minute @-@ long film , which the AFI felt was too long for such a figurative , nonlinear script . In its place , Lynch presented Eraserhead , which he had developed based on a daydream of a man 's head being taken to a pencil factory by a small boy . Several board members at the AFI were still opposed to producing such a surrealist work , but they were persuaded when Dean Frank Daniel threatened to resign if it were to be vetoed . Lynch 's script for Eraserhead was influenced by his reading as a film student ; Franz Kafka 's 1915 novella The Metamorphosis and Nikolai Gogol 's 1836 short story " The Nose " were strong influences on the screenplay .

The script is also thought to have been inspired by Lynch 's fear of fatherhood ; his daughter Jennifer had been born with " severely clubbed feet " , requiring extensive corrective surgery as a child . Jennifer has said that her own unexpected conception and birth defects were the basis for the film 's themes . The film 's tone was also shaped by Lynch 's time living in a troubled neighborhood in Philadelphia . Lynch and his family spent five years living in an atmosphere of " violence , hate and filth " . The area was rife with crime , inspiring the bleak urban backdrop of Eraserhead . Describing this period of his life , Lynch said , " I saw so many things in Philadelphia I couldn 't believe ... I saw a grown woman grab her breasts and speak like a baby , complaining her nipples hurt . This kind of thing will set you back " . Film critic Greg Olson , in his book David Lynch : Beautiful Dark , posits that this time contrasted starkly with the director 's childhood in the Pacific Northwest , giving the director a " bipolar , Heaven @-@ and @-@ Hell vision of America " which has subsequently shaped his films .

Initial casting for the film began in 1971 , and Jack Nance was quickly selected for the lead role . However , the staff at the AFI had underestimated the project 's scale ? they had initially green @-@ lit Eraserhead after viewing a twenty @-@ one page screenplay , assuming that the film industry 's usual ratio of one minute of film per scripted page would reduce the film to approximately twenty minutes . This misunderstanding , coupled with Lynch 's own meticulous direction , caused the film to remain in production for a number of years . In an extreme example of this labored schedule , one scene in the film begins with Nance 's character opening a door ? a full year passed before he was

filmed entering the room . Nance , however , was dedicated to producing the film and retained the unorthodox hairstyle his character sported for the entirety of its gestation .

= = = Filming = = =

Buoyed with regular donations from Lynch 's childhood friend Jack Fisk and Fisk 's wife Sissy Spacek , production continued for several years . Additional funds were provided by Nance 's wife Catherine E. Coulson , who worked as a waitress and donated her income , and by Lynch himself , who delivered newspapers throughout the film 's principal photography . During one of the many lulls in filming , Lynch was able to produce the short film *The Amputee* , taking advantage of the AFI 's wish to test new film stock before committing to bulk purchases . The short piece starred Coulson , who continued working with Lynch as a technician on *Eraserhead* . *Eraserhead* 's production crew was very small , composed of Lynch ; sound designer Alan Splet ; cinematographer Herb Cardwell , who died during production and was replaced with Frederick Elmes ; production manager and prop technician Doreen Small ; and Coulson , who worked in a variety of roles .

The physical effects used to create the deformed child have been kept secret . The projectionist who worked on the film 's dailies was blindfolded by Lynch to avoid revealing the prop 's nature , and he has refused to discuss the effects in subsequent interviews . The prop ? which Nance had nicknamed " Spike " ? featured several working parts ; its neck , eyes and mouth were capable of independent operation . Lynch has offered cryptic comments on the prop , at times stating that " it was born nearby " or " maybe it was found " . It has been speculated by *The Guardian* 's John Patterson that the prop may have been constructed from a skinned rabbit or a lamb 's fetus . The child has been seen as a precursor to elements of other Lynch films , such as John Merrick 's make @-@ up in 1980 's *The Elephant Man* and the sandworms of 1984 's *Dune* .

During production , Lynch began experimenting with a technique of recording dialogue that had been spoken phonetically backwards and reversing the resulting audio . Although the technique was not used in the film , Lynch returned to it for " Episode 2 " , the third episode of his 1990 television series *Twin Peaks* . Lynch also began his interest in Transcendental Meditation during the film 's production , adopting a vegetarian diet and giving up smoking and alcohol consumption .

= = = Post @-@ production = = =

Lynch worked with Alan Splet to design the film 's sound . The pair arranged and fabricated soundproof blanketing to insulate their studio , where they spent almost a year creating and editing the film 's sound effects . The soundtrack is densely layered , including as many as fifteen different sounds played simultaneously using multiple reels . Sounds were created in a variety of ways ? for a scene in which a bed slowly dissolves into a pool of liquid , Lynch and Splet inserted a microphone inside a plastic bottle , floated it in a bathtub , and recorded the sound of air blown through the bottle . After being recorded , sounds were further augmented by alterations to their pitch , reverb and frequency .

After a poorly received test screening , in which Lynch believes he had mixed the soundtrack at too high a volume , the director cut twenty minutes of footage from the film , bringing its length to 89 minutes . Among the cut footage is a scene featuring Coulson as the infant 's midwife , another of a man torturing two women ? one again played by Coulson ? with a car battery , and one of Spencer toying with a dead cat .

= = Soundtrack = =

The soundtrack to *Eraserhead* was released by I.R.S. Records in 1982 . The two tracks included on the album feature excerpts of organ music by Fats Waller and the song " In Heaven " , written for the film by Peter Ivers . The soundtrack was re @-@ released on August 7 , 2012 , by Sacred Bones Records in a limited pressing of 1 @,@ 500 copies . The album has been seen as presaging the dark ambient music genre , and its presentation of background noise and non @-@ musical cues

has been described by Pitchfork Media 's Mark Richardson as " a sound track (two words) in the literal sense " .

= = Themes = =

Eraserhead 's sound design has been considered one of its defining elements . Although the film features several hallmark visuals ? the deformed infant and the sprawling industrial setting ? these are matched by their accompanying sounds , as the " incessant mewling " and " evocative aural landscape " are paired with these respectively . The film features several constant industrial sounds , providing low @-@ level background noise in every scene . This fosters a " threatening " and " unnerving " atmosphere , which has been imitated in works such as David Fincher 's 1995 thriller Seven and the Coen brothers ' 1991 drama Barton Fink . The constant low @-@ level noise has been perceived by James Wierzbicki in his book Music , Sound and Filmmakers : Sonic Style in Cinema as perhaps a product of Henry Spencer 's imagination , and the soundtrack has been described as " ruthlessly negligent of the difference between dream and reality " . The film also begins a trend within Lynch 's work of relating diegetic music to dreams , as when the Lady in the Radiator sings " In Heaven " during Spencer 's extended dream sequence . This is also present in " Episode 2 " of Twin Peaks , in which diegetic music carries over from a character 's dream to his waking thoughts ; and in 1986 's Blue Velvet , in which a similar focus is given to Roy Orbison 's " In Dreams " .

The film has also been noted for its strong sexual themes . Opening with an image of conception , the film then portrays Henry Spencer as a character who is terrified of , but fascinated by , sex . The recurring images of sperm @-@ like creatures , including the child , are a constant presence during the film 's sex scenes ; the apparent " girl next door " appeal of the Lady in the Radiator is abandoned during her musical number as she begins to violently smash Spencer 's sperm creatures and aggressively meets his gaze . David J. Skal , in his book The Monster Show : A Cultural History of Horror , has described the film as " depict [ing] human reproduction as a desolate freak show , an occupation fit only for the damned " . Skal also posits a different characterization of the Lady in the Radiator , casting her as " desperately eager for an unseen audience 's approval " . In his book David Lynch Decoded , Mark Allyn Stewart proposes that the Lady in the Radiator is in fact Spencer 's subconscious , a manifestation of his own urge to kill his child , who embraces him after he does so , as if to reassure him that he has done right .

As a character , Spencer has been seen as an everyman figure , his blank expression and plain dress keeping him a simple archetype . Spencer displays a pacifistic and fatalistic inactivity throughout the film , simply allowing events to unfold around him without taking control . This passive behavior culminates in his sole act of instigation at the film 's climax ; his apparent act of infanticide is driven by his life of being domineered and controlled . Spencer 's inactivity has also been seen by film critics Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc as a precursor to Lynch 's 1983 ? 92 comic strip The Angriest Dog in the World .

= = Release = =

= = = Box office = = =

Eraserhead premièred at the Filmex film festival in Los Angeles , on March 19 , 1977 . On its opening night , the film was attended by twenty @-@ five people ; twenty @-@ four viewed it the following evening . However , Ben Barenholtz , head of distributor Libra Films International , persuaded local theater Cinema Village to run the film as a midnight feature , where it continued for a year . After this , it ran for ninety @-@ nine weeks at New York 's Waverly Cinema , had a year @-@ long midnight run at San Francisco 's Roxie Theater from 1978 to 1979 , and achieved a three @-@ year tenure at Los Angeles ' Nuart Theatre between 1978 and 1981 . The film was a commercial success , grossing \$ 7 million in the United States . Eraserhead was also screened as

part of the 1978 BFI London Film Festival , and the 1986 Telluride Film Festival .

== Home media ==

Eraserhead was released on VHS on August 7 , 1982 , by Columbia Pictures . The film was released on DVD and Blu-ray by Umbrella Entertainment in Australia ; the former was released on August 1 , 2009 , and the latter on May 9 , 2012 . The Umbrella Entertainment releases include an 85 minute feature on the making of the film . Other home media releases of the film include DVD releases by Universal Pictures in 2001 , Subversive Entertainment in 2006 , Scanbox Entertainment in 2008 , and a DVD and Blu-ray release by The Criterion Collection in September 2014 .

== Reception ==

Upon Eraserhead 's release , Variety offered a negative review , calling it " a sickening bad taste exercise " . The review expressed incredulity over the film 's long gestation and described its finale as unwatchable . Comparing Eraserhead to Lynch 's next film The Elephant Man , Tom Buckley of The New York Times felt that while the latter was a well made film with an accomplished cast , the former was not . Buckley called Eraserhead " murky pretentious " , and felt that the film 's horror aspects stemmed solely from the appearance of the deformed child rather than from its script or performances . Writing in 1984 , Lloyd Rose of The Atlantic felt that Eraserhead demonstrated that Lynch was " one of the most unalloyed surrealists ever to work in the movies " . Rose described the film as being intensely personal , finding that unlike previous surrealist films , such as Luis Buñuel 's 1929 work Un Chien Andalou or 1930 's L'Age d'Or , Lynch 's imagery " isn't reaching out to us from his films ; we're sinking into them " . In a 1993 review for the Chicago Tribune , Michael Wilmington described Eraserhead as unique , feeling that the film 's " intensity " and " nightmare clarity " were a result of Lynch 's attention to detail in its creation due to his involvement in so many roles during its production . In the 1995 essay Bad Ideas : The Art and Politics of Twin Peaks , critic Jonathan Rosenbaum felt that Eraserhead represented Lynch 's best work . Rosenbaum felt that the director 's artistic talent declined as his popularity grew , and contrasted the film with Wild at Heart ? Lynch 's most recent feature film at that time ? saying " even the most cursory comparison of Eraserhead with Wild at Heart reveals an artistic decline so precipitous that it is hard to imagine the same person making both films " .

Twenty first century critical opinion of the film is widely positive . Eraserhead holds an average rating of 91 % on review aggregation website Rotten Tomatoes , representing the distillation of 55 reviews , with the critical consensus " David Lynch 's surreal Eraserhead uses detailed visuals and a creepy score to create a bizarre and disturbing look into a man 's fear of parenthood . " Writing for Empire magazine , Steve Beard rated the film five stars out of five . He felt that it was " a lot more radical and enjoyable than [Lynch 's] later Hollywood efforts " and highlighted its mix of surrealist body horror and black comedy . The BBC 's Almar Haflidason awarded Eraserhead three stars out of five , describing it as " an unremarkable feat by [Lynch 's] later standards " . Haflidason felt that the film was a gathering of loosely related ideas , adding that it is " so consumed with surreal imagery that there are almost limitless possibilities to read personal theories into it " ; the reviewer 's own take on these themes were that they represented a fear of personal commitment and featured " a strong sexual undercurrent " . A reviewer writing for Film4 rated Eraserhead five stars out of five , describing it as " by turns beautiful , annoying , funny , exasperating and repellent , but always bristling with a nervous energy " . The Film4 reviewer felt that Eraserhead was unlike most films released to that point , save for the collaborations between Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí ; however , Lynch denies having seen any of these before Eraserhead . Writing for The Village Voice , Nathan Lee praised the film 's use of sound , writing " to see the film means nothing ? one must also hear it " . He described the film 's sound design as " an intergalactic seashell cocked to the ears of an acid tripping gargantua " .

The Guardian 's Peter Bradshaw similarly lauded the film , also awarding it five stars out of five .

Bradshaw considered it to be a beautiful film , describing its sound design as " industrial groaning , as if filmed inside some collapsing factory or gigantic dying organism " . He highlighted the film 's body horror elements , comparing it to Ridley Scott 's 1979 film Alien . Keith Phipps , writing for AllRovi , also gave the film a rating of five stars out of five ; he highlighted the disturbing sound design of the film and described it as " an open metaphor " . He felt that Eraserhead " sets up the obsessions that would follow [Lynch] through his career " , adding his belief that the film 's surrealism enhanced the understanding of the director 's later films . In an article for The Daily Telegraph , film @-@ maker Marc Evans praised both the sound design and Lynch 's ability " to make the ordinary seem so odd " , considering the film an inspiration on his own work . A review of the film in the same newspaper compared Eraserhead to the works of Irish playwright Samuel Beckett , describing it as a chaotic parody of family life . Manohla Dargis , writing for The New York Times , called the film " less a straight story than a surrealistic assemblage " . Dargis felt that the film 's imagery evoked the paintings of Francis Bacon and the Georges Franju 1949 documentary Blood of the Beasts . Film Threat 's Phil Hall called Eraserhead Lynch 's best film , believing that the director 's subsequent output failed to live up to it . Hall highlighted the film 's soundtrack and Nance 's " Chaplinesque " physical comedy as the film 's stand @-@ out elements .

= = Legacy = =

In 2004 , Eraserhead was selected for preservation in the National Film Registry by the United States Library of Congress . Selection for the Registry is based on a film being deemed " culturally , historically , or aesthetically significant " . Eraserhead was one of the subjects featured in the 2005 documentary Midnight Movies : From the Margin to the Mainstream , which charted the rise of the midnight movie phenomenon in the late 1960s and 1970s ; Lynch took part in the documentary through a series of interviews . The production covers six films which are credited as creating and popularizing the genre ; also included are Night of the Living Dead , El Topo , Pink Flamingos , The Harder They Come , and The Rocky Horror Picture Show . In 2010 , the Online Film Critics Society compiled a list of the 100 best directorial débuts , listing what they felt were the best first @-@ time feature films by noted directors . Eraserhead placed second in the poll , behind Orson Welles ' 1941 Citizen Kane .

Lynch collaborated with most of the cast and crew of Eraserhead again on later films . Frederick Elmes served as cinematographer on Blue Velvet , 1988 's The Cowboy and the Frenchman , and 1990 's Wild at Heart . Alan Splet provided sound design for The Elephant Man , Dune , and Blue Velvet . Jack Fisk directed episodes of Lynch 's 1992 television series On the Air and worked as a production designer on 1999 's The Straight Story and 2001 's Mulholland Drive . Coulson and Nance appeared in Twin Peaks , and made further appearances in Dune , Blue Velvet , Wild at Heart , and 1997 's Lost Highway .

Following the release of Eraserhead , Lynch attempted to find funding for his next project , Ronnie Rocket , a film " about electricity and a three @-@ foot guy with red hair " . Lynch met film producer Stuart Cornfeld during this time . Cornfeld had enjoyed Eraserhead and was interested in producing Ronnie Rocket ; he worked for Mel Brooks and Brookfilms at the time , and when the two realized that Ronnie Rocket was unlikely to find sufficient financing , Lynch asked to see some already @-@ written scripts to consider for his next project . Cornfeld found four scripts that he felt would interest Lynch ; on hearing the title of The Elephant Man , the director decided to make it his second film .

While working on The Elephant Man , Lynch met American director Stanley Kubrick , who revealed to Lynch that Eraserhead was his favorite film . Eraserhead also served as an influence on Kubrick 's 1980 film The Shining ; Kubrick reportedly screened the film for the cast and crew to " put them in the mood " that he wanted the film to achieve . Eraserhead is also credited with influencing the 1990 Japanese cyberpunk film Tetsuo : The Iron Man , the experimental 1990 horror film Begotten , and Darren Aronofsky 's 1998 directorial debut Pi . Swiss surrealist H. R. Giger cited Eraserhead as " one of the greatest films [he had] ever seen " , and said that it came closer to realizing his vision than even his own films . According to Giger , Lynch declined to collaborate with him on Dune because he felt Giger had " stolen his ideas " .

