



ERASERHEAD

1977, USA, 89 minutes

Director and Writer: David Lynch

Cast: Jack Nance and Charlotte Stewart

Synopsis

Director David Lynch's feature-film debut is a masterpiece of the macabre and grotesque. Reportedly a reaction to the news that he was about to become a father, Lynch's *Eraserhead* follows a sensitive young man as he struggles to cope with impending parenthood. Henry Spencer (Jack Nance) lives in a hopeless industrial landscape, lusting after the beautiful woman who lives in the apartment across the hall. After his girlfriend, Mary (Charlotte Stewart), informs him of her pregnancy, he is forced to eat dinner with her extremely odd family. The baby is eventually born, only it isn't a human baby at all; it's a deformed creature that resembles a lizard. The baby won't stop crying, a horrifyingly piercing wail that drives Mary insane. Left alone with the baby, Henry is serenaded by a woman who lives inside his radiator, and soon he decides to murder his baby in order to stop the nightmare once and for all. Five years in the making, *Eraserhead* contains all of the trademark attributes of a Lynch film--haunting visuals, an ethereal score, unsettling sound design, and, most notably, a black sense of humour--creating a world onscreen that is exhilarating, terrifying, and unique.

Review By Anton Bitel, Film 4 Review

"They're still not sure it is a baby!"

The precise nature and identity of the monstrous infant at the centre of *Eraserhead* remains a mystery, but then the same could be said of the film itself, which appeared, as if out of nowhere, in 1977, eluding easy definition or comfortable reception. By turns beautiful, annoying, funny, exasperating and repellent, but always bristling with a nervous energy, *Eraserhead* is a film that has few obvious cinematic precedents - apart from the early surrealist collaborations of Bunuel and Dalí, which Lynch claims at the time not to have seen.

Once, however, it had found its natural audience on the midnight movie circuit, it was quick to attract the enthusiastic support of directors Mel Brooks, George Lucas and Stanley Kubrick (whose *2001: A Space Odyssey* is obliquely evoked in *Eraserhead's* opening image of its protagonist's 'inner space'). From being a little known painter and maker of obscure underground short films, David Lynch had well and truly arrived as one of America's boldest and most original explorers of the shadowy subconscious, unfolding a narrative of knotted dreams and darkest desires.

After an opening which shows Henry Spencer (Nance) floating over a roughly hewn planet and (after Fisk's horrifically burnt 'man in the planet' pulls on some levers) releasing a foetus-like entity from his gaping mouth, the film shifts the 'action' to an imposing industrial landscape through which Henry walks, tiny and alienated, on his way back to a dingy, cell-like apartment. The

beautiful girl living next door (Roberts) informs Henry that Mary X (Stewart), his ex, has invited him to dinner at her parents' house. There, a grotesque meal of painfully awkward conversation, perverse psychosexual tension and animated 'manmade' chicken is interrupted by news from Mrs X (Bates) that Henry is father to Mary's premature baby. Now married, Henry shares his apartment with the loveless Mary and the baby (swaddled, but for its alien neck and head, entirely in bandages), but chooses not to tell his wife about a small, foetus-like worm that he has received in the mail. When one night Mary, unable to endure the baby's endless crying, walks out, Henry, left alone with his stunted progeny, experiences a series of dreams all loosely reflecting his frustrated desire for erasure - not that it is easy to tell Henry's dreams apart from reality.

No plot summary can do justice to the unsettling experience of watching *Eraserhead* for the first time. Confounding, hysterical and almost unendurably tense, it leaves viewers as disoriented as Henry himself. The effect is only enhanced by Alan Splet's extraordinary sound design, where factory ambience, organ drones and other, heavily treated noise combine into a fully immersive kind of musique concrete, jarring one moment, ethereal the next but always forming a carefully calibrated continuum with the film's nearly tangible vibe.

Visually, too, the film is an unnerving treat, wherein Lynch's textured set designs have been shot by DPs Herbert Cardwell and Frederick Elmes on a black-and-white filmstock with lighting set-ups that exploit every conceivable shade of dark to accompany Henry's difficult emergence into the light. Here, sound and image merge together to engender a mood like no other, as Lynch creates his own hermetic world of the mind with dizzying technical accomplishment.

Sporting an impossibly tall haircut that has become one of the film's most iconic signifiers of otherness, Henry is immediately recognisable as a freakish misfit, his very appearance and physical stiffness embodying the discomfort that the film inspires in its audience - and yet Nance's performance is a masterclass in tragicomic understatement, all minutely nuanced gestures and Tati-esque humanity. Grounded in a permanently menacing post-apocalyptic present, Henry seeks refuge in the nostalgic comforts of the past (scratchy recordings of Fats Waller, his old-fashioned suit and tie), while dreaming of the better life and greater love that repeatedly evade his grasp. He is an awkward Everyman for an age of anxiety. At the film's core is a portrait of a dreamer unable to shape, control, understand or ignore the prodigious entity that he has unwittingly fathered and equally unable to get past it and move on.

As such, *Eraserhead* is a thoroughly reflexive film. Lynch and his small, highly dedicated crew lost over half a decade of their lives to the difficult production (with Lynch squatting for more than a year in the very room that served as Henry's bedroom); and after a fraught premiere at Filmex, in a fit of pique Lynch took a pair of scissors to his ill-proportioned progeny and brutally, irrevocably cut some 20 minutes from its heart, apparently in imitation of his protagonist's final act.

There are few more probing portraits of the creative act gone awry, or of a stalled artist's (self) destructive urges than this astonishing debut - at least, that is, until the Coen brothers inventively re-imagined Lynch's film as *Barton Fink* (1991)