

## ***Eraserhead* and Masculinity**

by Dylan Price

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The Sordid Seventies, the Scary Seventies, the Surreal Seventies—all such alliterative aliases could be reasonably ascribed to the decade that former President Jimmy Carter famously believed to have inspired a “crisis of confidence” (Graebner 157). This was a time when the sexual revolution and the women’s liberation movement drew the ire of more traditionally minded men nationwide, with the male gaze giving the evil eye to the women who decided that they had what it takes to do the jobs men had already been doing. Men, traditionally the sole source of income—the so-called bread-winners—would potentially now have to compete with their wives, their neighbors, their neighbors’ wives, and any other woman who had in her head the outrageous notions of women’s liberation and/or egalitarianism. As Beth L. Bailey, a historian at the University of Kansas known for her work in the history of gender, put it in her essay “She ‘Can Bring Home the Bacon,’” men had begun to fear the “‘radical’ women’s libbers” and their demands for “sex-obliterating role reversals” (Bailey 117). Each step women took towards equality further stressed the average American male and his image of himself as a man. This anxiety produced an air of masculine insecurity that brought with it an attack upon what The Village People called the proverbial “macho, macho man.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Village People seemed to recognize that masculinity is not restricted to traditional forms, as evidenced by the way they parody the over-the-top machismo of their subject. Interestingly,

With a “nebbish” young man in the lead role, David Lynch’s *Eraserhead* followed this insecurity, leading its viewers into the disturbingly relatable tale of Henry Spencer, his not-so-loving wife Mary X, and their grotesque progeny (Gross d12). Supported by appearances from the Beautiful Girl Across the Hall, the Lady in the Radiator, the X family, and bookend cameos from the Man in the Planet, the film portrays Henry and his family in a surreal, Lynchian<sup>2</sup> kitchen-sink reality, shining a light of inevitability on the shadowy conceptualization of gender roles in the 1970s and the perceived castration of the male persona.

*Eraserhead* is a unique film, even among Lynch’s strange filmography. It is probably the most perplexing film of his career, and its grip on reality is tenuous at best. Like most films that Lynch directed, it has been pulled apart and dissected repeatedly, but it still maintains an air of mystery, often considered to be so disturbing that many would prefer to latch on to the first interpretation that they agree with and move on. This is not a difficult task, as interpretations are offered from a variety of different sources, from fan blogs to *The New Yorker*. Many believe the movie follows a logical plot that is broken up by disturbing dream sequences, but others argue that the movie exists solely in a nightmare plane. Most of the more prevalent interpretations describe the film as a representation of Lynch’s fear of becoming a

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both the song “Macho Man” and the film *Eraserhead* came out in 1977, showing that gender and gender roles were topics that were certainly on the public’s mind around this time.

<sup>2</sup> “Lynchian” is defined by self-described “fanatical Lynch fan” David Foster Wallace as “a particular kind of irony where the very macabre and the very mundane combine in such a way as to reveal the former’s perpetual containment within the latter” (Wallace 6).

father<sup>3</sup>; Greg Olson puts forth one such interpretation in his semi-biographical book *David Lynch: Beautiful Dark*. Though most interpretations are plausible, especially in a movie as determined to shun all logic as this one, Lynch himself said in an interview with Bilge Ebiri for Vulture.com in 2014 that nobody, to his knowledge, has ever interpreted the movie exactly how he interprets it himself. Lynch's own reluctance to speak on his films is likely due in large part to the impossibility and dangers of translating images into words, or, as Grace Lee puts it in her video "David Lynch: The Treachery of Language," "[taking] something suggestive, and [reducing] it to something definitive" (Lee). It is important to note that no interpretation of Lynch's work should be taken at face value or internalized as truth. It is nearly impossible to truly get inside Lynch's head. Though I do not claim to have solved the Enigma code with this interpretation, I have found no evidence to suggest that this interpretation has ever been proposed before. It is my firm belief that any interpretation that can spur deeper analysis and thought is worth consideration and inevitably will help deepen the understanding of a piece of art, especially one as multi-faceted as *Eraserhead*.

It is important to look at what was happening outside of Lynch's head just as much as inside. In an entry in the *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers*, Kim Newman cites an article from *Cinefantastique* by K. George Godwin, saying that "seeing *Eraserhead* is an unshared experience: it is as if the film plays not on the screen but inside one's own head" (Newman 383). Even though I

<sup>3</sup>This stems largely from the fact that Lynch made the film while in his thirties soon after the birth of his first child, Jennifer. Notably, Jennifer Lynch herself subscribes to this interpretation, or at least believes she is the source of these themes (Olson 87).

agree that the experience of watching this film engrosses the viewer and develops into a deeply personal affair that is never seen in exactly the same way by any two people, I disagree entirely that *Eraserhead* is an "unshared experience." On the contrary, it is very much a product of the culture that gave it life and is therefore shared almost universally on an entirely separate level, even if this is not immediately evident, and even if each viewer experiences it differently. Each character is rooted in some aspect of the culture that fostered its creation: the culture of America in the 1970s. In other words, the world outside Lynch's head.

An important part of this world were those more traditional men who were so appalled by the idea of women's liberation. Held in the highest regard and sought by most men of the 1970s, traditional masculinity is typified by the strong, sturdy man who always has his pick of the ladies and the aggressive capabilities to fight to defend his family and their name. He is the breadwinner, the head of his family, to be feared and respected by his children, and to be loved and adored by his grateful and submissive wife. He comes home with a fat paycheck and expects to be greeted at the door by his wife with praise, adoration, and a home-cooked dinner. A martini or a scotch in one hand and a rotund, aromatic cigar in the other, he relaxes in preparation for another hard but rewarding workday. This sexist ideal is only a slight exaggeration of the very real priority that was accorded men. Their position as the breadwinning head-of-household, however, was threatened in the 1970s not only by the perceived ascension of women, but also by the fact that "only 40% of the nation's jobs paid enough to support a family" (Bailey 109).

This meant that many men had to have at least two jobs to properly support their families, increasing overall stress and complicating their roles as providers (Bailey 109). With the issue of under- and unemployment as prevalent as it was, it is possible that a second job would have been difficult to find. A study from 2004 by Jiping Zuo, a professor of sociology at St. Cloud State University, mentions that “a massive women’s entry into the paid labor force and increasing male under- and unemployment have gradually eroded men’s status as the primary breadwinner,” (Zuo 813). Since humans tend to be resistant to most change, for many men, being forced to rely at least partially on the financial support of their wives likely would have been as pleasant as a chemical castration. The resultant bruising of the male psyche sets the stage for our protagonist: Henry Spencer.

Henry is the soft-spoken centerpiece of the film, who is first seen with a sperm-shaped worm springing from the mouth of his ghostly, disembodied head. He’s got a second-rate apartment in a miserable neighborhood in what appears to be an industrial portion of his city, and he pays the rent with his working-class clerical job at a publishing factory. He is a sort of avatar of the everyman, representative of the average Joe, but in several ways, he fails to achieve the stereotypical ideals held by the average man. He instead portrays a man who is not a suave, courageous alpha male, but rather a timid and fearful man who would likely be mocked and beaten by the former. Henry tends to shy away from any form of conflict and chooses instead to allow himself to be pushed around, especially by the female characters whom he encounters, to whom he often responds without

so much as an indignant remark. His only retaliation is his recurring frown and accompanying look of concern. Meek and resigned, clean-shaven and weak, Henry is a far cry from the ideal representation of a man; he is instead a personification of the self-perceived image of men brought on by the shifting gender roles of the 1970s. He is the broken, submissive shadow of the male psyche, exiled from traditional masculinity.

The film moves at a bizarre pace, and nothing seems to happen until everything happens at once. It starts with Henry’s wandering about in the general direction of his home while on vacation from work. Upon arrival at his apartment, Henry encounters his neighbor, The Beautiful Girl Across the Hall, and she tells him that someone named Mary has invited him to dinner at her house. We soon learn that Mary and Henry used to date, and that he has not heard from her in a while. He visits her home, and, after an awkward dinner with the X family, complete with man-made chickens, Mrs. X comes on to Henry, then informs him that Mary has given birth to his child, but that it is extremely premature. Mary and the baby move into Henry’s apartment, and Henry is soon forced to care for the baby alone when Mary abandons him. Around this time, Henry starts to daydream about the Lady in the Radiator. The disdain he feels towards Mary for abandoning him soon manifests itself in a one-off affair with the Beautiful Girl Across the Hall. Henry then has a lengthy dream sequence in which he once more sees the Lady in the Radiator before his head falls off and is found by a young child and carried off to an eraser factory, where it is used to make pencil erasers (hence the film’s title). Upon waking, Henry finds that the Beautiful Girl Across

the Hall has moved on, and he begins to panic. Now rapidly spiraling out of control, Henry kills his child, and everything starts to malfunction.

Opposite Henry is his wife, Mary X, who marries Henry out of necessity and due to the demands of her mother after she gives birth to his "son"—his son who looks like a skinned rabbit, with a few reptilian characteristics adding to its lack of humanity. Mary is a self-pitying woman who cries often about her own misfortune and never for the misfortunes of others. She seems to present herself as meek and fragile, she dresses plainly and has relatively simple hair—aside from the serpentine coils of hair that hang over her forehead—and she seems at first to be completely unable to assert herself, much like Henry. She appears to be an ideal candidate for a submissive housewife. As she grows more frustrated by her hideous spawn, however, she sheds her unimposing façade, and a venomous bitterness becomes apparent in her words. She lacks any empathy whatsoever towards Henry, often leaving him to care for the baby on his own simply because she is annoyed by its cries and because its existence in general poses an inconvenience to her. This reflects what many men perceived as the abandonment and blatant disregard of wifely duties by the mother upon leaving the household for the workforce, shirking responsibility and forcing the man of the house (in this case Henry) to take over as the active parent and nurse his child alone. In doing so, she effectively bites into the forbidden fruit that is liberation from traditional gender roles, dooming Henry to live outside the role that minimizes his interaction with his progeny, a role that was glorified by the Zeitgeist of 1970s gender stereotypes as the closest a man could

get to paradise.

Henry is not behind the wheel; he is being driven through the narrative, told what to do and where to go by the female characters of the film. Henry hazily wanders. When Mrs. X forces herself on Henry, his only response to her advances is to call for Mary to intervene. Mrs. X informs him that Mary has given birth to his child and demands that they be wed immediately, and he simply follows along. Although Mary pathetically asks whether Henry would be ok with marrying her, he does not really have a choice. When Mary decides that she cannot handle being around the baby, she leaves, forcing Henry to take care of the child, and he makes no protest. He could tell her no, he could tell her that the baby is just as much her responsibility as it is his, or he could even appeal to her sense of guilt by telling her that to leave would be neglectful parenting, but instead he only mumbles out a few words of frustration as she gathers her things. Henry's aversion to confrontation leaves him as the male counterpart to the submissive housewife and forces him to deal with the sick child alone. In fact, the entire plot is essentially driven by female characters taking advantage of Henry's characteristic passivity.

Even the Beautiful Girl Across the Hall gets the opportunity to take advantage of Henry and his nebbish nature when, the day following their night of indiscretion, he finds her entering her apartment with a sleazy-looking man hanging all over her like an opossum. She remains unconcerned and simply stares him down, more repulsed by him than the half-bald rodent hanging from her arm, because when she looks at him, she sees in him his hideous neonate, its grotesque head and neck momentarily

taking the place of his own. Glimpsing this, Henry's aversion to confrontation transitions to full-fledged fear as he quickly conceals himself behind his now-closed door, physically separating himself from intimidation by female sexuality. Her low-cut dresses, late nights, and promiscuous behavior (which ignores the bonds of marriage, even a shotgun marriage like Henry and Mary's) present her to the audience as a participant in the sexual revolution, seeking, in Bailey's words, "liberation in sex itself... on [her] own terms" (Bailey 116). When she spurns Henry in favor of the possum, it represents the sexually liberated woman's rejection of the average man and her own supposed motherly instincts.



*The Lady in the Radiator* performs her traditional gender role

Every female character in the movie is also seen rejecting or taking advantage of Henry in some way, save one: The Lady in the Radiator. Her role is much more ambivalent and complex than that of the other female characters because she does not necessarily control Henry. The Lady in the Radiator is posed as

a much more comforting and familiar character than any of the other women in the movie, in part because, unlike the other females, she does not speak a single word throughout the movie. Her appearance elicits images of a submissive housewife from 1950s Americana: her blonde hair that has been done up into a clean, domestic style; her traditional heels; and her modest dress that contrasts with the attire of her sexually liberated counterpart, the Beautiful Girl Across the Hall. The similarity between her and the stereotype of a 1950s housewife is not lost on Henry's subconscious, and he sees her appeal whether he knows the reason or not. She appears, however, to reside exclusively in his dreams. The most peculiar trait of the Lady in the Radiator, however, is her face, made grotesque by her disturbingly bulbous cheeks, a gross exaggeration of the chubby cheeks commonly associated with a cute smile and cuteness in general (such as those of a baby). They suggest that, like most stereotypes when viewed head-on, she is flawed, at least in the way she imitates the 1950s housewife. She smiles throughout her appearances in the film, keeping up a veneer of elegant joviality, and sidesteps innocently along an imagined stage to a musical number. When large, sperm-like worms begin to rain from the ceiling in the middle of her dance, she begins to stomp them into the ground without breaking her smile. Henry seems to perceive this act as her trying to free him from the bonds of his marriage to Mary by removing the inhuman offspring, which happens to be the only thing trapping them together. In the inclusion of this scene, Lynch has captured the self-perceived betrayal and castration of the average man at the hands of his supposedly submissive housewife by having

the symbol of domesticity stomping the symbol of male virility, the same "worms" that Henry is shown to produce in the opening sequence, within his dream sequence. Reading about women's liberation in the morning paper shocked and appalled the manly men of the decade, but most would never have suspected that *their own wives* could possibly want anything more than what had been provided for them. This ignorance is reflected in Henry's extended dream sequence, which at one point features the Lady in the Radiator singing a song claiming that "in Heaven, everything is fine." However, as I mentioned earlier, the Lady in the Radiator is mute throughout the movie, and the song is not sung by the actress portraying the Lady in the Radiator; it is not actually sung by an actress at all, but rather only "lip-synched by [the Lady in the Radiator], and sung by a man" (Taylor 65). In true 1950s housewife fashion, she does not speak with her own voice, and is instead literally spoken for by a man. This demonstrates the intended role of women in a domestic heaven on earth as little more than useful household appliances that do all the housework, freeing the man to do whatever he desires. Notably, the Lady in the Radiator tries to get Henry to take her hands during this scene, but when he tries, a peculiar white light flares up and she disappears. She is an unattainable ideal that Henry seeks but cannot have.

Aside from Henry, the remaining male cast is minor and consists of Bill X and the Man in the Planet. Combined, the two have barely a fraction of the movie's total screen time. However, this does not mean that they are insignificant to the film's messages about masculinity. The only other tangible male character in the movie is Bill X, Mary's

eccentric father. Mr. X is most memorable for his bizarre enthusiasm and frankness in discussing his crippling injuries. Like Henry, he is a representative of manhood, albeit an older one. He is a working-class man—a plumber, in fact—whose 30 years of dedication to his trade and providing for his family have taken a toll on his wellbeing, leaving him with bad knees and difficulty in using his left arm, which he rehabilitates by rubbing it, though nerve damage has left the entire arm numb. Mr. X is in a position similar to Henry's, but he is more representative of the working man and the ordeals he faced during the recession and job crisis. Henry, on the other hand, has a white-collar, clerical job, which is traditionally more feminine: in the 1970s, an increasing workforce led to demand for more jobs, so men moved into the fast-growing sector of white-collar, clerical jobs previously held largely by women. Therefore, Henry is a better representative of the contemporary feminized everyman, whereas Bill's blue-collar, labor-intensive job represents traditional masculinity. Bill's injuries represent the ways in which the lack of jobs—and as a result, lack of money—crippled the American working man. His bad knees, damaged in their ability to support the rest of his body, represent the way in which the "working man" suddenly had difficulties attempting to support his family during 1970s. His arm, which he is afraid to damage because he can't feel a thing in it, symbolizes the hardship faced by the working man in continuing to perform manual work, though Henry certainly does not lack experience with this either. Cheryl Elman and Jenny Chesters write of men in the 1970s, "key subgroups of adult men... became subject to job displacement and weakening labor force attach-

ment yet were less likely than other men to (re) enter postsecondary schooling to facilitate employability" (Elman and Chesters, 11). This meant that men had to make a decision: go back to school to get a degree and a chance at a better job, or run the risk of further financial hardship (Elman and Chesters). This difficulty in finding work is seen through both Bill's frustration and Henry's "vacation." Unfortunately, many of the people affected by the job shortage would not have had the money to afford postsecondary education. The anxiety and inability to provide for one's family was enough to emasculate such men, but even attempting to go back to school had potential for doing the same.

The Man in the Planet, an ugly amalgamation of scarred man and cold machine serving as a bookend near both the beginning and the ending of the film, represents the ugliness of sexism and being stuck in one's ways in a post-industrial world. He appears to be in control of the world, and when he pulls a lever in his first appearance, it sets in motion the events of the film. In his second appearance, however, he is losing control: sparks fly from his levers, which do not appear to have much of an effect on anything at all. The planet where he resides, representing Henry's metaphorical world in a very literal way, begins to crumble, falling apart as Henry looks on in abject terror. When the baby finally breaks "Nance's [Henry's] fragile hold on reality" (which not only traps him in a dead-end marriage that he cannot escape but also symbolizes his inability to escape his cyclical way of thinking), the Man in the Planet fully loses control over the world and everything begins to glow white (Gross D12). The Lady in the Radiator runs to Henry and embraces him as the white light washes over them.

In this instant, we discover that the Lady in the Radiator, despite implying otherwise for most of the film, never truly fit the stereotype of the 1950s housewife (as is given away by her flawed cheeks). Now that the Man in the Planet is no longer in control of Henry's world, she is able to embrace and awaken Henry, freeing his mind and waking him up to the idea of women's liberation. It is at this point that the nightmare – and the film – is over, and Henry has been freed.

Lynch's *Eraserhead*, like any serious example of the horror movie, functions as a mirror into the psychological headspace of the time in which it was made. It functions like a time capsule of fears and anxieties: after enough time has passed, it is possible to look back and discern its true secrets. Captured and preserved by Lynch's *Eraserhead* are the collective male psyche's reactions to the rise of women into something resembling equality. The film also reflects the hostility and sexism that were bound to follow from challenging the beliefs of male identity and from the economic hardships and societal changes that allowed such a thing to happen. It is a film that seems on first viewing to be about nothing at all, and on second viewing to be about something as forthright as fear of parenthood and the anxiety surrounding procreation. But upon multiple viewings, and given the right context, its true meaning can be traced clearly, guiding the viewer to the deeper layers of the artwork, bringing forth the anxiety that was written into the script like runes into an ancient monument – eye-opening when properly transcribed. *Eraserhead*, though it may appear at first to be "a sickening bad-taste exercise," perfectly develops a piece of the picture, allowing the modern viewer a glimpse

into what was the surreal reality of the 1970s everyman during the sexual revolution and women's liberation movements ("Eraserhead").

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