

ROUGH BEASTS SLOUCH TOWARD BETHLEHEM TO BE BORN:

Eraserhead and the Grotesque Infant (Whose Hour has Come Round at Last)

Résumé : Une réévaluation du film *Eraserhead* de David Lynch, à la lumière de récentes théories portant sur la signification du corps, permet à l'auteur de déduire que le corps déformé du jeune enfant représente un texte complexe suggérant une multitude de senses qui ne sont pas prescrits par notre culture contemporaine. En contrastant l'idée du corps « ouvert » à celle du corps « fermé », Lynch critique les lectures et représentations traditionnelles du corps infantile en tant que site de l'innocence, situant plutôt ce corps au centre d'une suite infinie de signes horribles et stupéfiants.

As an alternative form of research, channel surfing occasionally bears strange fruit. I recently stumbled onto an episode of *The Maury Povich Show* which bore the caption, "I'm Just Like Any Other Kid" at the bottom, left hand corner of the screen. The child in question was a six-year-old girl who was "perfectly normal" in every respect, except she was afflicted with neurofibromatosis. Frankly contradicting the politics of the caption, her lower jaw and cheeks were extremely disproportionate to the upper half of her head, ballooning out to an enormous width. A century earlier, the same disease led John "Elephant Man" Merrick to be featured as a monster in a travelling carnival and later as a biological anomaly in a medical academy. In Foucauldian terms, the discourse of Merrick's monstrosity did not change, merely the semantics of its definition. Whether in a freak show or the halls of medicine, his monstrousness remained a site of exhibition for a curious public.

The talk show of the 1980s and '90s features similar spectacles, in which the contemporary human grotesque straddles a dual polemic of compassion and repulsion. Grotesque or excessive bodies are simultane-

ously (and paradoxically) paraded, degraded, and celebrated during televised carnivals that attempt to construct moralizing narratives that can contain the transgressive nature of these bodies. In the case of the deformed child, *The Maury Povich Show* attempts to render the abnormality invisible by paying lip service to the semantics of political correctness. By asserting that "[She's] Just Like Any Other Kid," *The Maury Povich* show eradicates the profound ambiguity of the grotesque body. As a product of a society that refuses to see or credit difference, the talk show neutralizes the subversive powers of the grotesque body. Traditionally, "a person in a social situation...is 'discredited' if [his/her] impairment or other deviance is immediately obvious or if it *becomes* apparent."¹ However, the dominant bourgeois ideologies of the late twentieth century extend the discrediting of the grotesque subject by negating the very fact of his or her otherness.

Hegemonic corporeal homogeny even informs the scientific discourse of medicine, which seeks to preemptively recognize difference through genetic screening and perhaps, at the most extreme, eliminate such "monstrosity" while it is still *in utero*. One need only refer to the prenatal testings available to detect Down's syndrome or other potential "deficiencies" as evidence of the scopic drive to detect difference, even at the moment of gestation. At the very least, medical science endeavours to institutionalize the radical potentiality of physical abnormality. Today's kinder, gentler physician attempts to adopt a liberal humanist veneer of benevolence and tolerance in treating patients who are "physically special." However, MDs cannot help occasionally lapsing into the clinical language of doctor/patient (or rather, master/subject) when describing the circumstances of physical deviation. In order to avoid an acknowledgment of unsettling difference, medical discourse mechanizes deformity.

For example: "A qualitative measure allows us to develop an idea of *where* the strengths and weaknesses lie in the [deformed] child's coping repertoire [and] can then reinforce the strengths and get to work *appropriately* on the weaknesses."² Here, the physician introduces a perhaps well-intentioned, but ultimately misguided system by which a child's ability to acknowledge and accept her/his physical difference can be measured numerically. The child's deformity becomes mechanized through a procedure that awards points according to how "well" he/she "adjusts" to the reactions his/her appearance prompts in others. Barring the likelihood that the simplicity of a "precise" numerical system is completely incommensurable with assisting the "appearance-impaired" in the complex process of socialization, such a system further institutionalizes difference. A subject's physical abnormality is reduced to an irritating condition that can be treat-



Eraserhead (USA, 1976, David Lynch).

ed by a quantifiable "coping repertoire," and his or her "progress" measured according to the point system of a "Composite Coping Index."³ Such a strategy not only disregards the radical potentiality of extremely visible physical difference, but is extremely condescending toward the subject in question. The system is not outlined at great length in this particular source, but it is not difficult to imagine the system's patronizing applications, in which a subject might score 9.5 for "well-adjusted," or 4.0 for "does not work well with others."

Interestingly, both the popular language of the talk show format and the specialized language of the medical field share a similar preoccupation with normalizing children with deformities. Since the abnormal child has become a social subject in Lacanian terms after successfully navigating the transition from the imaginary to symbolic order, his/her monstrosity can be deflated through discourse and sutured into a contextual place within the public sphere. However, the monstrous *infant* is another matter entirely: it is a pure creature of the Imaginary and representative of unadulterated difference. Not yet taken up into the symbolic order, the infant is not malformed so much as it is mysteriously *unformed*. In his 1977 film *Eraserhead*, David Lynch is perhaps the sole artist who convincingly articulates the profound ambiguity of the grotesque infantile body.

Gross babies have long occupied a revered position in the tradition of the horror film.⁴ Such films often embody the spirit of the modern satiric grotesque, whose "themes of otherworldly upheavals and transformations and near lunatic disarray threaten to overturn the bourgeoisie's own world of sanitary and sanctimonious normalcy and diurnal mediocrity."⁵ Lynch's first feature film introduces the recurring metaphorical dissection of the paradoxically diseased family idyll, which is embodied in a graphic, corporeal dichotomy:

The paradox finds expression in Lynch's contrast of the "closed" body—neat, formally dressed, "whole," and the "open" body—broken fissures revealing otherwise concealed matter: an unborn foetus, vital organs, diseases. If you break the skin which covers the "perfect" body, all kinds of "imperfections" are revealed....⁶

However, like the greatest surrealist work, *Erasehead* operates on multiple levels and embraces multiple readings.⁷ More than a merciless autopsy performed on the developing family unit, the film's themes include the masculinist fear of the maternal body and apprehensions of paternity, the dehumanizing of the body by capitalist industry, and most important, the deformity and decay of the cryptic infantile body. Lynch employs his opposition of the "open" versus "closed" body to critique dominant readings and depictions of the infantile body as a site of innocence, rather than a locus of horror and astonishment.

Before determining the hermeneutics of the monstrous infant, it is necessary to place Lynch's film within the historical context of teratology. Defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "the scientific study of congenital abnormalities and abnormal formations" and "mythology related to fantastic creatures," teratology represents a unique cultural hybrid of reason and superstition. In the West, the monstrous birth is a particular event which draws much discursive traffic. Dudley Wilson has indicated four historical teratological attitudes that surrounded the event: (1) monsters were signs of God's displeasure with sin and also symbolized the mystery of His creative intentionality; (2) monsters were spectacles for a seventeenth century intellectual community "obsessed with collecting and viewing curious phenomena"; (3) monsters were biological treasure troves, subject to the theologically driven observations and recordings of eighteenth century science; (4) monsters can be classified (and even created) by technology under the auspices of increasingly organized and "objective" scientific disciplines.⁸ However, none of the four historical positions can be as clearly

demarcated as Wilson indicates. With each passing century, the signifier of the monster acquires ever more signifieds since the socio-scientific discursive residue of previous centuries remains to inform the discourses of the subsequent century. Theoretically then, the postmodern monstrous baby may be seen as an amalgamation of its previous four incarnations—a signpost at the converging sectarian crossroads of science and superstition.

Regardless of its cultural status, its monstrosity remains the embryological standard by which the “normal” birth may be measured. Since “biologists have privileged phenomena that deviate from the norm in order to exemplify the normal structure of development,” the relative propinquity of normality and monstrosity indicates that “scientific rationality is implicitly normative, function[ing] by exclusion and disqualification according to a dualistic logic.”⁹ Despite the rhetoric of tolerance espoused by liberal humanism, the monstrous Other is always kept at a distance—indeed, is objectified as an instrument of measurement to construct the logistics of a definable humanity. Clinical distance—both metaphorical and especially physical—is essential to maintain the dualistic structure of normality. One medical text written for personnel treating the malformed infant states, “The longer you refrain from touching the child, the more you will learn.”¹⁰ It is as if John Merrick/Hurt’s passionate cry (“I am not an animal! I am a human being!”) in Lynch’s subsequent film, *The Elephant Man* (USA, 1980) has fallen on deaf ears. What is interesting, however, about the previous quotation is that besides its espousal of dispassionate objectivity, it transforms the infant from subject to text. The deformed infant is a cipher that physicians and geneticists must decode in order to expose its secrets to the eager eyes of normalcy. But, as Lynch graphically reminds the viewer with the evisceration of the baby at the end of *Eraserhead*, such dissections can occasionally produce even greater mysteries.

While mystery is ultimately at the heart of nearly every Lynch film, *Eraserhead* remains the most opaque of his works, defying any generic categorization, attempts at meaning construction, and even simple plot description. The film’s thematic and visual influences include the work of Luis Buñuel, Franz Kafka, and H. R. Giger. Henry Spencer’s decapitated head and the narrative dream-logic are reminiscent of Buñuel’s *Tristana* (Spain/Italy/France, 1970) and *Un Chien Andalou* (France, 1929, Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel); the multiple grotesqueries echo Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis,” and Henry’s tribulations with the X family recalls *The Trial*; the horrific man-machine hybrids of Giger’s paintings are resurrected in the form of the disfigured Man in the Planet, whose image bookends the film. Perhaps owing to these surrealist influences, critics have read the

film according to Freudian psychoanalytic doctrine and characterized Henry's dilemma as the archetypical masculine fear of sex. For example: "*Eraserhead* is... a depiction of the self-defeating tensions which result from man's inability to reconcile his intellect with other equally potent aspects of his nature."¹¹ While privileging the crisis of Cartesian dualism and re-enacting the Oedipal scenario in a reading of the film is tempting, I would prefer to shift the critical focus from the crisis of the protagonist to the film's central attraction: Henry and Mary X's revolting mutant baby.

Bodies are not created in a vacuum, in fact: "The body is actively produced by the junction and disjunction of symbolic domains and can never be legitimately evaluated 'in itself.'"¹² In the West, the infantile body has always been a culturally dichotomous body: both immaculate and filthy. Preeminent middle-class ideology images the infant according to a Johnson & Johnson hegemony of the clean—the radiantly pink, beatific, and (strangely) nude body of the toddler dominates popular media representations of infancy. These babies are a far cry from the creatures they resemble at birth, whose rashes, cone heads, and swollen genitals hardly conform to popular representations of childbirth.¹³ Hygienic representations of the infantile body not only seek to romanticize and naturalize paternity/maternity, they operate in accordance with the continuing prevalence of the liberal humanist view of the infantile body as a *tabula rasa*. Although cleanliness is no longer next to Godliness in a secular state, Huggies commercials would certainly have the viewer believe cleanliness is at least next to Innocence.

But, works such as *Eraserhead* that occupy the postmodern Gothic sensibility seek to disrupt such representations. "Within postmodern Gothic, we no longer attempt to identify the monster and fix the terms of his/her deformity, rather, postmodern Gothic warns us to be suspicious of monster hunters, monster makers, and above all, *discourses invested in purity and innocence*"¹⁴ As Henry laments the abrupt end of his (imagined?) love affair with the Beautiful Girl Across the Hall, the infant cackles malevolently and dribbles pus—a reminder that bodies are rarely innocent and never pure, regardless of their age.

To such an end, the often messy, dribbling, excessively biological body of the baby is positioned lower on the hierarchy of representable infantile images. In demonstrating the absorbency of their product, diaper commercials never violate the delicate, middle-class sensibilities of their audience by showing a diaper leaking urine or faecal matter. Instead a split-screen image will often feature nonthreatening blue liquid being poured from Pyrex containers into the diapers, juxtaposing the absorbency of

"Brand A" with "Brand B." Even when the baby body violates the codes of cleanliness, its various oozing fluids are sanctioned under the popular discourses of "cuteness" (e.g., "Did mommy's widdle sweetums just make a stinky poo-poo?"). The corporeality of the baby is relegated to the sub-genre of the domestic comedies which centre around the infantile body and authorize its transgressions. For example, John Travolta and Kirstie Alley toilet train their toddler in *Look Who's Talking Too* (USA, Amy Heckerling, 1990) by forming a conga line around him and chanting, "Pee-pee in the pot-ty!"

Despite the licenced transgressions of the cute baby, the excessive infantile body is occasionally subject to hysterical exaggeration. Grotesque babies exemplify the dark, unacknowledged other side of the Janus coin of birth. Representations of the malformed infantile body are usually relegated to the (ostensibly) diametrically opposed channels of the horror film or six o'clock news, where their subjectivity is negated and their bodies become the site of spectacle. Here, the potential subversiveness of the grotesque infant is at its highest. In the mid-1980's, controversy surrounded the popular "Garbage Pail Kids" trading cards, which featured humorous portraits of nauseating tykes, including "Varicose Wayne," and "Starvin' Marvin." While babies have always connoted "to-be-looked-at-ness," the graphic bodily humour of the cards disrupted "acceptable" representations of the infantile body. Many parents were unsettled, perhaps because the cards reminded them of how deformity challenges popular notions of unconditional parental love. In her study of parents' attitudes toward disabled children, Meira Weiss concluded that "bonding with one's biological child is not spontaneous, automatic, or natural, and...every child undergoes a process of adoption or abandonment, grounded in the child's external appearance and resemblance to the image of a 'person.'"¹⁵ Accordingly, Mary X's post-natal abandonment of her infant is a rejection of the shrieking insatiability and repulsive physicality that signifies her child.

Moreover, fear of the deformed infant issues from its apparent lack of subjectivity and an Otherness that may well be contagious. The child's parents may "feel threatened by the lack of clarity regarding the identity of a child as a 'person' and by their sense of a violation of body boundaries. These things make parents fearful that there will be a violation of their own body boundaries as a result of their contracting whatever 'pollution' the child suffers."¹⁶ Henry's baby in *Eraserhead* is thus doubly grotesque since the indeterminacy of its "person-ness" is further "horrorified" by the outbreak of revolting sores on its body, which Henry acknowledges with

mild concern: "Oh, you *are* sick." Although "parents' behaviour is not a response to the actual bodies of their children, but rather to their images of their children's bodies," the subconscious threat to imagined "body boundaries" through contagion is central to the film's narrative.¹⁷ In the main dream sequence, a fleshy protuberance springs out of Henry's neck and dislodges his head from its body. Following a close-up of his head rolling to a stop on the floor, the camera returns to Henry's body to reveal that his head has been replaced by the baby's tiny, shrieking visage.

However, the threat of invasion is later displaced, as the baby takes on greater significance than Henry could have imagined. While disgust at the embryonic putrescence of the baby's alien body and the subconscious fear of its invasion are fundamental to the film, *Erasarheads* monster refuses to be easily placed within the conventions of the body horror genre. Strangely enough, a Hollywood comedy (coincidentally, as we will see) about the potentiality of male pregnancy features a similar scene. In *Junior*, (USA, Ivan Reitman, 1995), the character played by Arnold Schwarzenegger dreams about giving birth to a baby who freakishly sports a miniaturised version of Arnold's own head. Naturally, Ah-nuld sits bolt upright in bed, wide-eyed and panting.¹⁸

Rather than simply concentrating on the amplified bodily "grossness" of the infant in *Erasarhead*, considering the baby as a mysterious representation of the heart of a Kristevan abjection may be useful. For Kristeva,

There looms, within the abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.... But it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, fascinates desire, which, nonetheless, does not let itself be seduced.¹⁹

And yet, though alien familiarity sickens desire, such abject horror compels the subject to a place beyond the pale of Otherness. Since infancy is popularly signified as the stage in a subject's life when the individual is a blank text waiting to be written on by the various discourses of experience, an abject *tabula rasa* is doubly shrouded in mystery. A bouncing, beaming, blue-eyed baby connotes innocence and the glimmerings of potential, but the horror of the deformed baby is its radical subjectivity—it could turn out to be *anything*, anything at all.

To expand on the abject multiplicity of monstrousness:

A product of a multitude of morphogeneses (ranging from somatic to ethnic) that align themselves to imbue meaning to Us and Them behind every cultural mode of seeing, the monster of abjection resides in that marginal geography of the Exterior, beyond the limits of the Thinkable, a place that is doubly dangerous: simultaneously "exorbitant" and "quite close."²⁰

Because of the multiple identities the monster represents, its body always-already disrupts the categories of the normal. In the case of *Eraserhead*, the baby's torso is formless, unfinished; it is simply a head and neck attached to a mass of internal organs. Henry's fateful scissors do not cut through his child's flesh as many viewers mistakenly believe, but rather, through the bandages that have both hidden the body and held it together. At the end, he quite literally opens up the infant to be "read," like some magic ritual in which signs are divined through bloody viscera. "A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically 'that which reveals,' 'that which warns,' a glyph that seeks a hierophant. Like a letter on the page, the monster always signifies something other than itself" and begs to be decoded.²¹

Whether such a "reading" is possible is uncertain, since not only does the grotesque baby resist the cultural inscriptions the "normal" baby is subject to at birth, but the "language" its body represents is completely alien. The baby's very humanity is always in question throughout the film, especially considering the ambiguity that surrounds its conception and birth. Its lack of normalised subjectivity is heralded during the bizarre Annunciation scene at the X household in which Henry claims that the birth is "impossible," while Mary weeps, "They're not even sure if it *is* a baby!" It is unclear whether Henry's disbelief refers to the implied brevity of the pregnancy (hitherto unknown to him), or, more interestingly, is expressed because sexual union never occurred between the couple. Henry never answers Mrs. X's repeated question: "Did you and Mary have sexual intercourse?" and in fact, much of the narrative imagery implies that the baby is a product of parthenogenetic conception. Their relationship's sexual sterility seems to be confirmed when Mary shrinks away from Henry's touch in bed and the viewer can only infer that his sexual initiation occurs later, as he sinks into a pool of milky liquid with the Beautiful Girl Across the Hall. Much of the baby's abject monstrosity seems to reside in the implication that it is actually *Henry* who has given birth, as supported by the "logic" of the opening sequence.

Serving as an extremely loose establishing sequence and certainly among the most abstract moments of the film, the first sequence begins with a close-up of a brain-like mass over the top of which is superimposed Henry's horizontally floating head. In conjunction with the subsequent shot which tracks in and pans over the surface of the sphere, the first shot articulates the strange geography where the narrative action will take place. Sequential logic leads the viewer to infer that the "planet" depicted is both a celestial body and Henry's brain, thus correlating with the blurring of inside/outside boundaries made manifest by the presence of the baby. *Erasehead* is paradoxically set in both an inner *and* outer world which is apparently controlled by the horribly disfigured Man in the Planet. In the next shot, the Man is seated beside a window and several levers in a burned-out room, like a cosmic brakeman. Following the introduction of the Man, the first shot is repeated, except that an object resembling a giant sperm is superimposed over Henry's silently screaming head. As the Man shifts a few levers in the next shot, the monstrous sperm-shaped thing flies into a pond, and the camera follows it into what becomes a pool of blinding light which fills the screen. Finally, the white light fades in to Henry, who wanders through an urban wasteland in "real" time.

While extremely abstract, the sequence operates according to its own specific logic and, moreover, suggests that Henry is both the father *and* the mother of the baby. If the Planet is indeed Henry's mental world and the disfigured Man is the anthropomorphic manifestation of his intellect, the infant may well be a product of psychic conception. Reading the sperm-like object as a mutant embryo is not untenable, especially since its sexual conception is in question and the child's actual physical birth is not presented or referred to by any of the characters. Issuing from Henry's head and triggered by the mechanical manipulations of the Man in the Planet, the embryonic monster-tadpole pierces the membrane of the psyche and is fired into the physical world. Whether it gestates in Mary's womb or somewhere else, is never clear, and the thing is simply waiting in the hospital for its parents to take it home. Significantly, Mrs. X declares, "There's a baby," not, "Mary had a baby," affirming an implicit suspicion that the unnatural infant may have had an equally unnatural birth.

As if it were not enough that the event of natural birth is already culturally and theoretically stigmatized as grotesque by the nature of its excessive and visible biology, Lynch strives to reinforce the paternalist horror at the birthing body.²² At the X's dinner table, Henry is asked to carve the pigeon-sized chicken (which Mr X. portentously declares is both "man-made" and "new") and recoils in horror when the legs begin to twitch

and a dark, viscous substance oozes out in a raunchy extreme close-up. Both women flee the room after the episode induces a bizarre sexual seizure in Mrs. X. In retrospect, the viewer realizes the chicken is actually performing a perverse parody of a birth which subsequently prompts the Annunciation of the hitherto unmentioned baby. Tempting as it may be to code the infant with a doubled grotesqueness because of the base carnality attributed to the act of childbirth, it is important to remember that the film suggests that the baby has been conceived *in vitro* within the petri dish of Henry's mind. Neither Mary's pregnancy nor labour is presented or even alluded to, which implies that the baby's monstrousness issues from possibly having a father for a mother. She may simply be carrying to term the fetus Henry produces through sexual autonomy.

Nonetheless, it is not Henry who is monstrous. Even if Mary is the baby's surrogate mother, her body is coded as just as horrifying as the infant's—specifically it is her womb that is delineated as monstrous. According to popular representations, "the womb represents the utmost in abjection for it contains a new life form which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of its contamination—blood, afterbirth, faeces" and, moreover, "the horror film exploits the abject nature of the womb by depicting the human *male and female* giving birth to the monstrous."²³ Both Henry and Mary give birth to monsters, and other examples of (unnatural) sexual ambiguities in the film include the baby's indeterminate gender, the song about Heaven which is lip-synched by a woman, but sung by a man, and the phallic, wormlike creature which opens up into a cavernous vaginal mouth, swallowing the camera whole. Regardless of the blurred gender motif, Henry's psychic pseudo-womb ironically does not mark him as monstrous, while Mary's reproductive system is clearly a representation of the abject womb. During a particularly disturbing (dream?) sequence, Mary reappears in Henry's bed and somnambulistically gives birth to a succession of organic cords which are identical to the giant spermatozoa/umbilical cord-thing mentioned previously.

By endowing Mary with a hyperactive womb that produces nothing but wriggling sperm creatures, Lynch establishes a parallel between the mother and infant through monstrosity. Despite the suggestion that it is Henry who has given birth, Mary's reproductive capabilities are depicted as horrific. Henry throws the products of her womb against the wall in disgust not because they are physically repulsive, but because his role in their production has been circumvented. While some form of psychic insemination was (or may have been) required to produce the mutant infant, Mary is able to manufacture the living umbilical cords without being

impregnated. In fact, the preceding shot suggests that they work their way from between her thighs while she sleeps, triggered by the unconscious rubbing of her eye in a squelching extreme close-up. Mary is a monster to patriarchal discourse because she renders the male sexually redundant, but is denied full autonomy and subversiveness because her womb cannot produce recognizably humanoid forms of life. Moreover, though she may represent maternity run amok, she certainly does not possess the "inherent" maternal instincts which patriarchy attributes to women. The baby's grotesqueness and incessant crying drive her back to her parents, truly disproving the myth of "the face only a mother could love."

Both Mary and the Beautiful Girl Across the Hall (an early Lynchian *femme fatale*) are ultimately (sexually) inaccessible to Henry; the former because of her own monstrosity and the latter because she recognizes Henry's monstrosity. During their lovemaking scene, the Beautiful Girl is initially preoccupied with the wretched baby and later mentally substitutes Henry's head for the infant's (recalling Henry's dream in the previous sequence). Therefore, it is up to the hopelessly strange Lady in the Radiator to help Henry reach the Heaven she sings about in her second performance number. Excepting her swollen, deformed cheeks, the Lady almost resembles Marilyn Monroe and first appears doing a shuffling little dance across the stage in the radiator. When the organic cords begin to drop from the ceiling, she crushes them under her heels, smiling sweetly the entire time. Ironically, as a representative of anti-life, she seems to represent a source of desexualized bliss for Henry. Eros and Thanatos converge in the end; he is united with her and the two embrace in a blinding flash of light as Henry's Planet/mind blows apart. Interestingly, although the Lady in the Radiator is physically deformed, her body is idealized as a transcendental interface of aversion and desire. By presenting her as an angelic figure in the only serene moments in the film, Lynch appropriates the interrogative spirit of postmodernism which destabilizes the fixed, or singular meaning of the grotesque in popular forums (such as the talk show).

Lynch's postmodern disruption of the monstrous is extended to the infant as well. The discursive shift from the "monstrous" body to the "ambiguous" body is historically based and can be understood according to the cultural displacement of homogeneity. "If unity is no longer the organizing principle of the world and self—as the modernists lamented and the postmodernists celebrate—then the grotesque sheds its twisted, repugnant, and despair-laden implications and becomes a cyborg; the affirmed survivor of cultural otherness, ready to engage the postmodern world on

its own terms."²⁴ The theme of the cyborg and organic mechanization is present in the film (as evidenced by the industrial mise-en-scene, Mr. X's limbs which have been crippled from years of plumbing, and the pencil factory which uses Henry's decapitated head to make erasers), but *Eraserhead* does not offer a positive representation of such hybridity. In Lynch's nightmare world, "modern technology finds a use for everything and finds everything for which it has a use."²⁵ Rather than being viewed as a cyborg, then, the baby is something else, some postmodern Other.

As previously mentioned, since its body is unreadable as a text, the infant's grotesqueness must be ratified to some other pragmatic use within the diegesis if it is to disturb the ostracizing boundaries of abjection. At the end of the film, Henry "opens" up the body of the infant in apparent curiosity, and then, horrified by its unrecognizable lack, he plunges the scissors into its throbbing heart. His spontaneous act of surgery can be committed under the auspices of a culture that does not credit infantile subjectivity (especially in deformed babies) and as a result, does not credit an infant's pain. "Because babies could not 'think,' the mortification of the flesh [is] acceptable, and even opportune," as Henry eventually discovers.²⁶ Evidently in its death throes, the baby empties itself of vital fluids and expels a thick stream of mush (which may cause the viewer to look at mashed potatoes in an entirely different light) from its innards. While Henry looks on, its head flies off on a cord from the "body" and swells to the size of the room. The lamp light intensifies and flickers, giving off a stroboscopic effect in which multiple images of the baby's enormous head are seen. Next, the camera flies into the lamp which flickers and goes out and a cut to the Man in the Planet shows him trying to brake (?) frantically in extreme close-up moments before the Planet cracks and explodes. Finally, Henry is reunited with the Lady in the Radiator in a nuclear blast of light as the grating soundtrack roars and the image abruptly flares to white.

Lynch's hapless protagonist is not so much opening an organic text as he is opening a door and it is uncertain whether his action is infanticide or midwifery. "Henry's act is monstrous, but at the same time an image of deliverance. Even as he pierces [the child's heart], Henry brings on a premature birth (the mother has gone) and frees something in its body which was not growing."²⁷ The birth/murder causes Henry's mind/world to crumble, but also transports him into the idyllic arms of the Lady—perhaps even the Heaven she sings about, where "everything is fine." Through metamorphosis, the baby has achieved that rare state only dreamed about by sympathetic creatures such as Frankenstein's monster: its monstrosity

has mystically transcended its own corporeality and is a field of wonderment, rather than horror. Perhaps the film's final moments have provided a cosmic blueprint for future popular imaginings of the grotesque and a way of seeing the deformed body differently. For Bakhtin, the body is heteroglossaic, and is a perpetual process of becoming. He is "fascinated by the unfinished body, the elastic malleable body, the body that outgrows itself, that reaches beyond its own limits and conceives new bodies."²⁸ At the end of *Eraserhead*, such a process is accelerated and literalised in a fantastically graphic way as a radically new organism (and state of consciousness) are generated from the previously unformed body of the infant.

Bodies are, thus, never what they seem in the film. Due to the sparseness of the dialogue and amplified by the relentlessly eerie aural ambience, the viewer's complete attention is focussed on the bodies of the characters and how they operate in space and time. These are bodies that may be thought of as rarely complete or whole, especially considering their fragmentation by the very select pools of light which only illuminate parts of their anatomy, while blending the rest into the surrounding darkness. No matter how incomplete or "open" these bodies seem, they pale to the wildly oscillating subjectivity of the grotesque baby. Its alien formlessness allows it to become an endless chain of signifiers, and radicalizes the paradoxical, culturally "closed" body of the deformed infant. Perhaps as a result of a perceived lack of infantile subjectivity that is coupled with the strategies of popular discourses (legitimised by the authority of medical jurisprudence), the somatic unruliness of the monstrous baby must be contained or, alternatively, ignored. But through its cosmic Second Coming in *Eraserhead*, the repressed grotesque infant returns with a vengeance. The prophetic scissors of the father thus herald the eruption of an endless discursive field of play, a messianic body of infinite becoming.

Notes

1. Ann Hill Beuf, *Beauty is the Beast: Appearance Impaired Children in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 161.
2. *Ibid*, 108.
3. *Ibid*, 108-109.
4. A popular filmic predecessor of *Eraserhead* is, of course, *Rosemary's Baby* (USA, Roman Polanski, 1968), while the gross-out factor of an antecedent, *The Brood* (USA, David Cronenberg, 1979) occasionally trumps Lynch, even at his most graphic moments.
5. John R. Clark, *The Modern Satiric Grotesque* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 25.
6. John Alexander, *The Films of David Lynch* (London: Charles Letts & Co, 1993), 48.
7. I use the term "surrealist" in the loosest sense here and only for want of a better term. *Eraserhead*, like many of Lynch's subsequent works, cannot be categorized as strictly

- "surreal." While there certainly have been attempts to read Lynch's work in such a manner, it is problematic to analyse these films according to surrealist criteria unequivocally.
8. Dudley Wilson, *Signs and Portents: Monstrous Births from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1.
 9. Rosi Braidotti, "Mothers, Monsters, and Machines," in *Writing on the Body*, eds. K. Conboy, N. Medina, and S. Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 68.
 10. R. M. Goodman and R. J. Gorlin, *The Malformed Infant and Child* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 3.
 11. George K. Godwin, "Eraserhead," *Film Quarterly* 39.1 (1985): 43.
 12. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 192.
 13. I am indebted to Angela Stukator (University of Western Ontario) for this observation.
 14. Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 27. Italics mine.
 15. Meira Weiss, *Conditional Love: Parent's Attitudes Toward Handicapped Children* (Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1994), 265.
 16. Ibid, 253.
 17. Ibid, 135.
 18. Thanks again to Angela Stukator for pointing out this similarity.
 19. Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abstraction*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.
 20. Jeffery Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. J. Cohen (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996), 20.
 21. Cohen, 4.
 22. M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 353.
 23. Barbara Creed, "Woman as Monstrous Womb: *The Brood*," in *Monstrous Femininity* (London: Routledge, 1993), 49. Italics mine.
 24. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 115.
 25. Kenneth C. Kaleta, *David Lynch* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 24.
 26. David B. Chamberlain, "Babies Don't Feel Pain: A Century of Denial in Medicine," in *Cyborg Babies: From Techno-Sex to Techno-Tots*, eds. Robbie Davis-Floyd and Joseph Dumit (New York: Routledge, 1998), 182.
 27. Michel Chion, *David Lynch*, trans. Robert Julian (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 166.
 28. Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 157.

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