Disability Studies Quarterly
Winter 2002, Volume 22, No. 1
pages 5-21 <www.cds.hawaii.edu>

Disability and David Lynch's `Disabled' Body of Work

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In David Lynch's recent film *The Straight Story*, the 73 year-old veteran Alvin Straight (Richard Farnsworth) fell and had been unable to get up off his kitchen floor. Sitting agitated in a doctor's office, he fears what most of us do - an unfavorable diagnosis. The doctor delivers the inevitable bad news: Alvin is in the beginning stages of emphysema, his hips are bad so he will need two canes to walk, and he is going blind due to his diabetes. Stubbornly, Alvin refuses to pay for X-rays to check for other health problems, to give up his cigars, and to tell his daughter Rose (Sissy Spacek) the serious nature of his health.

Alvin's bodily limitations do not stop him when he learns that his estranged brother, who lives a state away in Wisconsin, has just suffered a stroke. Alvin decides to make the trip to reconcile with his brother "in [his] own way" traveling 5 miles an hour on his riding mower - the one way he can get there by his own volition. The emotional resonance of *The Straight Story* comes from Straight's ability to overcome the doubts of his friends and his own pride to mend his relationship with his brother.

The film's critical acclaim and Farnsworth's Oscar nomination reveal that Alvin's struggle is a significant one. The fact that the film deals with disability, and that it was directed by film maker David Lynch who is infamous for his dark, hallucinogenic fables of human violence and sexuality, like *Eraserhead* (1977), *Blue Velvet* (1986), and *Lost Highway* (1997), may at first seem incongruous. However, if one takes a closer look at Lynch's other films, the theme of disability can consistently be found there as well. This article will examine how Lynch treats the theme of disability not only in *The Straight Story*, but in his film canon, so as to discern his position towards both the disabled body and its counterpart, the `normal' body.

David Lynch consistently foregrounds images of the disabled body: the legless woman (Catherine Coulson) of his short film *The Amputee*; John Merrick (John Hurt) of *The Elephant Man*; Ed (Leonard Watkins), a blind man working at Beaumont's hardware store in *Blue Velvet*; Juana (Grace Zabriske) who has a wooden leg in *Wild at Heart*; the host of disabled characters on *Twin Peaks*, including one-eyed Nadine Hurly (Wendy Robie) and one-armed

Phillip Gerard (Al Strobel); Arnie (Richard Pryor) in *Lost Highway* who is in the advanced stages of multiple sclerosis requiring the use of a motorized wheelchair; and, finally, Alvin Straight in *The Straight Story* and his daughter Rose who has a pronounced speech impediment. All these characters imply on Lynch's part a fascination with the disabled body that has proved problematic for some critics.

David Foster Wallace, commissioned to write an article on *Lost Highway* for *Premiere* magazine, claims Lynch's use of Richard Pryor as an auto shop boss is exploitative because Pryor is "painful to watch, and not painful in a good way or a way that has anything to do with the business of the movie" (188). Wallace nevertheless states that Pryor is "symbolically perfect" in *Lost Highway* since he "both is and is not the `real' Richard Pryor" (189). However, Wallace appears to be commenting more on his own uncomfortable reaction to the vulnerable nature of the human body than on Pryor himself since Pryor appears to Wallace to be less "real" due to the fact that he is now disabled. Because Lynch cast Pryor with his disability, does that imply that Lynch is exploiting Pryor's condition? Such a question opens up not only what signification the disabled body has in Lynch's art, but whether the disabled body is a `normal' phenomenon in contemporary cinema.

Lynch's exploration of disability becomes an organizing category of his art that allows people with disabilities to challenge conventional conceptualizations of the body and normalcy in Hollywood. Disability and cinema have much in common because both create discourses about the body. Throughout his films, Lynch depicts how disability renders the concept of normalcy tragic and inadequate. The three most striking examples he offers concerning the destructive nature of normalcy are the baby in *Eraserhead,* John Merrick in *The Elephant Man,* and the disabled characters in *Twin Peaks* including Lynch's own acting stint as a partially deaf man. Film critic Chris Rodley questioned Lynch on the large number of "disadvantaged" people in his film *Wild at Heart*. Lynch explained that he did not want to exploit them, but to create an atmosphere where one gets "the feeling of the joy of everyone being together, regardless of whatever. And it's just great. There's another thing going on. Everybody's welcome. That's the way it should be" (153-54). Lynch's optimistic, poetic vision is not a naive one since he does not seek to code people with disabilities as `special'. Whether the audience perceives Lynch's representations in this manner, however, is another matter.

Although the big screen has commonly represented disability, usually to code one as a villain or as patronizingly special, it rarely invites an empowering audience identification. To flesh out why, we must confront not only how cinema structures our attitudes toward the body, but how social ideals like normalcy seek to stigmatize disabilities. Film is fascinated with the human form and its "main goal, one might say, is the construction and reconstruction of the body" (Davis 151). However, as Wendell

points out, only the current ideals of beauty and able-bodiedness are generally reinforced: "idealizing the body and wanting to control it go hand-in-hand; it is impossible to say whether one causes the other. A physical ideal gives us the goal [. . .] to control the body, and the myth that total control is possible deceives us into striving for the ideal" (268-69).

What is perhaps most disturbing about the idealized body is the fact that "this body is not actually the norm, but [. . .] the fantasized, hypostatized body of commodified desire" (Davis 154). If this fact does not outrightly implicate much cinematic fare in a conspiracy against the body, then it at least illuminates how many viewers ignore the deceptive natures of such representations. Film has a vested interest in selling audiences bodily ideals uncommon to the population at large. The more its images are not connected to bodily limitations, but rather to the idealized yearnings of the audience, the more that audience will crave its powerful brand of wish-fulfillment. Unfortunately, many film viewers demand such idealized images that only empower ideas about the body, never the body itself.

A common alternative for many film makers has been to parody Hollywood's seductive images through foregrounding their self-referentiality (Nochimson 7). However, re-evaluations of cinematic constructions of the body that go beyond their self-referentiality do exist. Lynch's films consistently use the vulnerable physical body as a potential site for new modes of communication that can contact creative forces previously unexplored. Lynch deconstructs cinema's bodily ideals to show, as Susan Wendell explains, that "these ideals are not 'natural' or 'normal' but artificial social creations that oppress everyone" (268).

A Portrait of the Artist as Hard-of-Hearing

Lynch, as did Truffaut in *Day for Night*, is one of the few directors to cast himself in one of his own films as disabled. Lynch's character, Gordon Cole, bureau chief of the F.B.I. in the television series *Twin Peaks* and its cinematic prequel *Fire Walk With Me*, must wear hearing aids. Martha Nochimson discerns that Cole is "arguably Lynch's comedic self-portrait" (178). However, if one of Cole's functions is comic relief, how does that bring disability into the foreground other than to tell a joke at its expense? To chastise Lynch for using a disabled person to invoke laughter would be to play into the system of logic that, as I will show, he is attempting to critique. Lynch states in an interview that limiting the ways the disabled can be represented only provides them a false sense of human dignity:

> When we were doing *On the Air* - this comedy on TV - one of the characters, "Blinky", was blind. [TV executives] said, "You can't have a blind person. It's tied in with humor, and you're making fun of blind people." I remember *It's a Gift* - a W.C. Fields movie - and there

> was a blind man with a cane in it and it was one of the most unbelievably funny things. Now it's getting down to the point where blind people have a Society and any jokes about blind people now are banned because it's an insult to blind people. So there's another avenue of humor cut off. But there's something about humor that is rude, and it makes people laugh. I don't know what triggers it. But jokes like that are not meant to hurt blind people - not in a million years. (Rodley 153)

While Lynch's words at first may appear to be overly unsympathetic, his point is significant: it is unlikely that through politically correct regulations people with disabilities will achieve complete acceptance.

While Lynch's quote can be read as insensitive to the plight of the blind, it can also be read as a warning to the blind themselves that they should not limit their representations in the mass media. To be limited solely to drama and tragedy would imply that the disabled are incapable of laughing at themselves, an important aspect of what makes anyone fully human. Arguably, Lynch's statement concerns how humor does not have to be at the expense of a disabled person, but can be a sign of identification. To assume that audiences cannot identify humor with disability would be to deny the fact that "able-bodied people can often make the imaginative leap into the skins of people physically unlike themselves; women can identify with a male protagonist in a story, for example, and adults can identify with children or with people much older than themselves" (Wendell 267).

To read Lynch's comment that we can laugh at blind people as a derogatory one is to imply that the experiences of people with disabilities cannot be integrated into popular culture at large. Lynch is echoing an insight from cognitive psychology: "when people find it necessary or beneficial to perceive the fundamental similarities they share with stigmatized people rather than the differences, we will see the beginnings of a real elimination of stigma" (Coleman 228). People with disabilities are not so fragile as to need constant condescension through mock sentiments of political correctness. They need to be accepted as entirely human.

The more acceptance people with disabilities achieve in mass media, the more they will then be able to invoke the full gamut of human emotions from audiences. In *Twin Peaks* Lynch does not create laughter through the fact that his character Gordon Cole is deaf, but through the fact that Cole's loud voice threatens to tell too much about his sensitive government business. Cole's need to shout whatever he says threatens to reveal confidential information that normally must be kept hidden from the general population.

Since speech has in effect failed Cole, he must discover a new mode of communication and Cole comes to represent the powerful connection between artistic expression and disability.

People with disabilities are often forced to find self-expression outside of traditional means and therefore have the potential to provide new avenues for knowledge. As Wendell phrases this situation: "they are in a better position to transcend cultural mythologies about the body [. . .]. If disabled people were truly heard, an explosion of knowledge of the human body and psyche would take place" (274).

Lynch's cinema operates on Wendell's paradigm, in which disability can offer a potentially revolutionary re-envisioning of not only the body, but communication as well. Because speech fails Cole, Lynch implies that Cole's search for new modes of expression is a great resource for the F.B.I. which has the complex job of not only enforcing society's laws, but investigating those who operate outside of those laws. Cole must "invent a better mode of confidentiality". His sensitive job forces him to express himself in code and his inability to keep things secret, not his disability, provides the humorous context of his character (Nochimson 178).

Lynch uses his 'self-portrait' to show how deafness is only tragic when viewed from the illusory ideal of 'normal' society because a disability may offer new and different possibilities for communication previously unrealized. Lynch inverts deafness' cultural meaning and implies that communication could benefit by transcending its limited form as speech.

Gordon Cole finds one different way to communicate in *Fire Walk With Me* - with an artistic form of bodily sign language. In a secret meeting at a private airport in Oregon, Cole presents his new form of communication to the detectives he is sending out to investigate the Theresa Banks (Pamela Gidley) murder case. He uses the body of Lil (Kimberly Ann Cole), who wears a red wig and red dress, distorting her body in bizarre gestures. Slavoj Zizek does not read this scene as Cole's inability to communicate as a deaf man, but as a "Kafkaesque" parody of normal communication whereby the two detectives receive Cole's coded message "as part of their daily communication" (in *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime* 22). This scene's uniqueness lies therefore in its ability to usurp language, our naturalized form of communication, and to replace it with an utterly unknown one forcing audiences to question what constitutes 'normal' communication.

What Lil performs for Cole, and the audience, is how everything about the body, its facial expressions, clothes, and movements, has the potential to communicate what speech cannot. Cole uses Lil as a medium to a yet-to-be-discovered language that can reveal unknown things about the Teresa Banks' murder case. The detectives in fact deduce that several of Lil's gestures provide secret clues for their case.

Cole dubbed the case a "blue rose" one, implying that relying solely on conventional language will get the detectives, and the audience, nowhere for "a blue rose case stumps the detectives because it confounds their depthless, bounded mindset with intimations of a world with manifold layers and without neat limits" (Nochimson 178). Cole's disability here opens up new

possibilities for discovering human reality in a larger sense. Social reality is reaching critical mass in this movie. Its protagonist Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee), an incest victim, cannot communicate with words the trauma she is experiencing. Laura and the viewer must discover "ordinary reality as a cultural system continually breaking down, yet remaining in place" (Nochimson 180). Since 'normal' society cannot articulate its own crisis, new avenues of communication must be created.

Lil's scene also resonates with Lynch's art in general. Lil symbolizes what Lynch's art hopes to communicate: the potentials for meaning that exist beyond culturally codified ones. Lynch's work is often criticized for its obtuse symbolism, yet this critical resistance may expose a cultural over-dependence on spoken language itself. The implication here is that Lynch's cinema challenges normalcy's inability to provide a malleable self-context concerning bodily difference. The new possibilities for knowledge and communication the body itself provides must be actualized.

Laura Palmer, who is killed at the end of the *Twin Peaks*' cinematic prequel, *Fire Walk With Me*, remains an essential character throughout the television series *Twin Peaks*. Even from the position of being dead, Laura, through the lesson of her tragic life, can still communicate significant cultural lessons. The audience discovers through Laura that culturally reinforced appearances are dangerous terrain; the bodily 'ideal' of beauty provides a potentially fatal illusion since Laura, the blond-haired home-coming queen, is the paradigm of that ideal all the while suffering the cultural horror of being an incest victim. No one close to Laura could 'read' her suffering. Since even Laura could not find words to express her trauma, something other than spoken language was required to capture her private experience of incest.

The hearing-impaired Cole, and by extension Lynch, could not even approach the subject matter of incest without discovering a new mode of communication that can transcend our cultural silence about it. Visual symbols are not the same as sign language, but both can transcend the tendency to totalize all communication as speech. *Fire Walk With Me* is a paradigmatic example of how film, when it seeks to portray something not readily acknowledged in our cultural milieu, can transcend such denials through startling images. An incest victim suffers a trauma which differs from the social stigma of a disability, but both incest and physical anomaly invoke in the 'normal' population the fear that the body is not an inviolable whole.

Wholeness, when seen from the experience of disability, becomes an imaginary construct of the ego. This cultural lack of receptivity to bodily variation exposes itself as a fundamental fear of the body since it cannot be completely controlled by the human will. Lynch echoes a potentially revolutionary notion: "the realm of the 'Real' in Lacanian terms is where the fragmented body is found because it is the body that precedes the ruse of identity and wholeness" (Davis 141). What a society of 'norms'

represses about itself is that its ego-centered reality and its privilege are based on an illusion:

> the divisions whole/incomplete, able/disabled neatly cover up the frightening writing on the wall that reminds the hallucinated whole being that its wholeness is in fact a hallucination, a developmental fiction. (Davis 130)

How 'normal' people envision their own bodies requires a repression that too often denies its intimate connection to a dynamic and ever-fluctuating world. Cole, and by extension Lynch, invites the audience to identify with the plight of an incest victim who must discover something outside of her 'normal' culture to provide meaning for her life. Lynch implies, through Cole and Laura, that the audience can discover new aspects of themselves through identifying with the experience of disability. Alternate voices outside our 'normative' culture are unfortunately seldom heard, but this fact has nothing to do with their potential significance. As Chris Rodley notes, after the release of *Fire Walk With Me*, "Lynch received many letters from young girls who had been abused by their fathers. They were puzzled as to how he could have known exactly what it was like" (xii). The obtuse visual symbols Lynch used to express Laura's unspeakable suffering no doubt had a lot to do with it.

Lynch provides the body with other empowering potentials for communication beyond spoken language throughout the television series *Twin Peaks*. Lynch's infamous depiction of the otherworldly Red Room, with its waiting room set-up, red curtains, and black-and-white striped floor, also conjures up his desire to explore human reality beyond cultural ideals. Since the Red Room is a subconscious space or metaphor for another reality, it allows the body to communicate something not limited to speech. The Red Room is a direct outcome of the body's potential for revelation since it comes into being through the involuntary dreaming of Agent Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan). Lynch states that the Red Room exists nowhere in reality as we know it: "anything can happen. It's a free zone, completely unpredictable" (Rodley 19).

This space is populated by a three-foot tall man and a woman who looks like Laura Palmer. The events in the Red Room take place in a sexualized environment. The Man From Another Place (Michael J. Anderson), a dwarf, connotes a phallic presence not constrained by its usual connotations as a force of limitation and control (Nochimson 88). Free from such conflated signification, the male body, in a disabled, more Real form, reclaims its power as a liberating element in the universe. Hence, even the deceased Laura Palmer, fatally maimed by masculine aggression, can express herself freely in this space.

Language does not order the signification of the body in the Red Room either. To expound on this notion, Lynch taped these scenes backwards so the actor's voices, when replayed in real time, require the aid of subtitles for clarification. As if to

increase his ironic commentary on speech as communication, Lynch's bizarre dialogue, like "that gum you like is going to come back into style," parodies the concept of logos as inherent in language. Slavoj Zizek interprets the scene in this fashion:

> what we have here is the hidden reversal of the Derridian critique of logocentrism in which the voice functions as the medium of illusory self-transparency and self-presence: the obscene, cruel, super-ego-like, incomprehensible, impenetrable, traumatic dimension of the voice which is a kind of foreign body perturbing the balance of our lives (209).

But Zizek does not give Lynch enough credit, for what Zizek misses in these scenes is that joy, and not fear and futility, is the direct result of escaping verbal constraints. The Man From Another Place communicates through bodily gestures similar to Lil's. Speech is not the privileged mode of communication:

> by conceptualizing language as writing and speech, or by fetishizing the aural/oral incarnation of language, we are performing in effect an act of repression against language in the largest sense of the term. (Davis 19)

Lynch undercuts the phallic dimension of language as a force of knowing based on control and domination through Agent Cooper's reference to the dwarf as "the little man." The Red Room is a place where the healing of cultural wounds like incest can take place through rediscovering the body's potential for meaning beyond culturally codified ones. Audiences can take great pleasure in the reinterpretation of the body's potential in these scenes, along with the fact that this is a reality never before realized on prime-time TV. The intermediary to this other reality is, by no accident, a three-foot-tall dwarf who offers pleasure in the human experience of difference. Lynch pushes the envelope of serialized narrative in order to incorporate forces not under its control in a similar manner that disability refuses the control of society's program of 'normalization.'

Twin Peaks also directly challenges misconceptions about the cultural significance of disability. The One-Armed Man (Phillip Gerard) is a reference to another television program, *The Fugitive,* but with a major difference: whereas the villain's lack of an arm symbolized his inherent depravity, Gerard's function in *Twin Peaks* is a visionary one. Gerard explains that during a religious conversion he took his arm off to mark his rebirth. Disability symbolizes a connection to the divine in this paradigm.

Alice Kuzniar claims Gerard "disavows his deformity through replacement. His entire being is possessed to compensate for the loss of one appendage" (121). However, such a reading disregards the fact that Gerard self-creates his disability as a powerful

marker of his newfound connection to larger spiritual forces. Kuzniar mistakenly proclaims that *Twin Peaks*' treatment of the body operates on the paradigm of replacement, assuming that normality is always the desired end. To limit the function of disability in this manner ignores how "the disabled figure calls into question such concepts as will, ability, progress, responsibility, and free agency, notions around which people in a liberal society organize their identities" (Thomson 47). Nevertheless, Kuzniar does provide an interesting insight into disability as a metaphor for potential revelation:

> *Twin Peaks* is thus motivated by the separation, isolation, and substitution of body parts, frequently involving the eye, as if Lynch wanted to show, through the thematization of blindness, how what we long to see in this detective/soap opera/serial repeatedly is kept from view (121).

If we reverse Kuzniar's assumptions about the negative stigma of disability, we can again see how Lynch equates what is unseen or unknown with pleasure and not frustration. The body itself becomes our main access to new modes of communication. These new discoveries may not conform at all to our expectations, but Lynch assures us that there is pleasure to be found in them. *Twin Peaks* offers a philosophy toward the body that is strikingly different from many standard prime time dramas, edifying the fact that social forces can attempt to control, but never completely eradicate difference.

The Elephant Man As a Martyr For Normalcy

In *The Elephant Man*, Lynch's sympathetic rendering of the plight of his most seriously disabled protagonist, John Merrick, provides a deconstruction of the tragic nature of normality. Although the film unfolds in Victorian England, it still provides revealing insights into disability's connection with the social norms of today. One of Lynch's most dramatic contributions to the real-life story of John Merrick is his artistic exploration of Merrick's probable suicide at 27 (Nochimson 137). This event foregrounds Lynch's philosophy not only concerning disability, but also the personal and social denials that create its negative connotations.

After Madge Kendall (Anne Bancroft), a famous actress, invites Merrick to the theater, he is overwhelmed by the possibility that he will be accepted by upper-class English society. However, Merrick's social 'acceptance' proves to be only a fantasy, one which he dies to preserve. He yearns to sleep in a bed like everybody else, but lying down impedes his breathing due to the weight of his enlarged head. Merrick's wish to be normal turns into a fatal event. Lynch shows Victorian society's desire for normalcy is a tragic one through foregrounding the fatal social problems of the industrial revolution: its contaminated

streets, wounded workers, and black, smoke-filled skies all suggest that Victorian England made "Merrick's biological problems seem social rather than normal" (Nochimson 137). The film explores that phenomenon in detail.

For most of his life, Merrick was an attraction at the freak show - it was his only connection to the society around him. The film portrays the freak show in its exploitative nature since Merrick is physically abused if he refuses to perform his master's bidding. The freak show itself can be seen as a brutal exposition of Victorian England's problematic views toward individuality. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson elucidates, only at such a place can a "normal" citizen "safely focus an identificatory longing upon these creatures who embodied freedom's elusive and threatening promise of not being like everyone else" (69). The inhumanity characteristic in Victorian society's views of difference is in part tied to a false limit placed on human perception:

> the [movie's] initial frames place the audience in its only relationship in the film that is truly different from that of the looking involved in the freak show, the dominant metaphor of the film. In many ways, The Elephant Man roots the spectator in these frames to suggest that inhumanity is a false habit of seeing. (Nochimson 138)

Social norms that limit individual freedom unfortunately equate disability with the unattainability of individuality. Merrick's social reality is shown not only to dis-empower the disabled, but the apparently privileged 'normal' citizens as well. Merrick's physical appearance makes him an individual with the worst possible connotation since the freak show is the only place in which Victorian society allows him to exist.

John Merrick's life seemingly improves when he is admitted to the hospital by Dr. Treves (Anthony Hopkins). But science only replaces the stares at the freak show with its own humiliating and controlling gaze. Merrick's acceptance by the medical world even further limits his humanity, Lynch shows, through reducing his body to the object status of a shadow to be studied in Treves's lecture class. Merrick intuits the lack of care science can offer him when he desperately asks Treves if he can be cured. That question exposes science's posturing and arrogance in its desire to control the human body. Science, along with Victorian society, cannot accept what it sees. Merrick's only hope for friendship is with Treves, who feels genuine compassion, but is rendered for the most part powerless to change Merrick's fate. All Treves can do is dress Merrick up and parade him around in a false charade of social acceptance. Merrick knows the only possible way to be accepted is to appear normal, and, unfortunately for him, that is impossible.

The Elephant Man is in part an allegory about the impossibility of an empowering individuality when oppressive,

idealized views of the body reject any such empowerment. This aspect of the movie is heightened by Lynch's portrayal of Merrick as an artist. Merrick's sensitivity can only be expressed through the medium of art because his desires are for the most part unattainable in his social reality. His pencil sketches of a child's bed invoke his wish to become 'normal'. Since Merrick does not draw anyone sleeping in the bed, the sketches are haunting due to the absence of a human figure. They also foreshadow Merrick's own dilemma in life since, if he sleeps 'normally' in a bed, he will die. His model of the church steeple can also be read as a direct commentary on the experience of disability since he can only see the upper half of what he is attempting to replicate. Because he cannot safely go out into the street, his own imagination must fill in the part that he cannot see.

Lynch implies that people with disabilities, when faced with hostile social attitudes, can resort to art and their own creative imagination, a powerful tool in their quest for self-expression. Art is not just a compensation in this paradigm, but a legitimate vehicle for creating new possibilities for communication and understanding. Artistic expression can help transform social attitudes toward the disabled that often deny them the legitimate status of innovators. Merrick's art also invokes empathy from the audience who should be able to relate to the fact that his deepest desires will not be recognized.

The simple fact that Merrick has survived 20 years of abuse and still possesses an overflowing sense of human compassion is nothing short of miraculous. The movie's 'tear-jerker' label becomes not a pejorative term, but an empowering one, through the fact that audiences do identify with Merrick's pain. Lynch shows that the experience of disability should not be limited to marginalized segments of the population, but should stand as a common connection to human suffering (and every other emotion) shared by all peoples.

John Merrick's premature death arises from his desire to become 'normal.' With the sympathetic attention Merrick receives from the ladies of Victorian high society, the flames of his fantasy that he can be normal are fanned: "they introduce him to the saccharine idealization of emotions that creates idols to which he is eventually willing to immolate himself" (Nochimson 144). Upper-class English society becomes more destructive for Merrick than the freak show through its "mock" acceptance of him.

Lynch suggests that, until real change in social attitudes is realized, normality's destructive self-regard concerning bodily difference will continue to operate. Nochimson expresses this idea as follows: "the idealizations of a sentimentalized popular culture are devastatingly seductive invitations to self-loathing of our secret incommensurabilities with normality" (145). All people, disabled or not, are prey to such imaginary identifications, for "suffocated by sweetness, Merrick does not even know enough about this form of abuse to protest it" (Nochimson 143).

When Merrick is invited to the theater, Lynch superimposes Merrick's face over the images of the theater and of the audience applauding him, which functions like Lacan's Mirror Stage with its ability to capture its viewer in an alienating identification. As if trapped in the imaginary world of absolute self-autonomy, he ignores the bitter reality of his own immediate circumstance and pays the price with his own life.

By lying down to sleep in front of a picture of his mother, Merrick's fatal regression into a fantasy world provides an important lesson for the film viewer. In the film, Merrick's wish to be like everybody else is a lesson for others to overcome the seductive nature of idealized self-images. Through *The Elephant Man*, Lynch demonstrates that destructive attitudes toward the body are common to all segments of the population and this realization can potentially serve as a common ground for all people whether traditionally disabled or not.

Both Gordon Cole and John Merrick's artistic self-expressions serve as reminders that humanity is not limited to codified views of an idealized normalcy. In order for all of us to view disabilities as empowering - it's far from a reality - we need the transformative vision which art provides.

Eraserhead: Disability as Social Process

Eraserhead presents another similar crisis in human communication that resonates with Gordon Cole's non-linguistic warning. The film elaborates a social inarticulateness by depicting a drab, polluted society whose repressive nature has created a resistance to life and whose paranoia and alienation are plain for all to see. The only normalcy in the film is ironic in that there are no emotional, physical, nor psychological connections between the characters. The film's horror arises from the characters' inabilities to communicate their own fears and desires. No one, not Henry (Jack Nance) nor anyone in the X family, has any agency to effect change in their surroundings. Nothing natural can take place since nature itself has been banished. Not even a child brought into this world can be natural.

When Henry and Mary X (Charlotte Stewart) learn that they will have a child in that world, it is anything but an edifying experience. Nochimson's insight that their deformed baby is in reality an "ersatz" one opens up an interesting reading of the film that is in accord with several aspects of disability theories (160). The baby provokes anxiety in audiences by playing on their own fears of the vulnerable human body. It is often a very disturbing sight for viewers, who are horrified by the fact that it is not human, but this is Lynch's point. The film's job becomes the elaboration of this bizarre phenomenon.

Lynch does not reveal that the baby is disabled because it is not natural enough to be real, but that it metaphorically stands for a socially constructed false image of life. Its connection to disability in everyday reality is implied by the

fact that disability's stigma is also a construct and hence not real. Lynch is not duping the audience. He shows that what is unsettling about disability is not the disabled person, but the stigma of disability. From this angle, the film playfully becomes a psychodrama, flaunting a common audience fear in an equally fearful representation. By literalizing disability's social stigma, Lynch demands that social attitudes must acknowledge their responsibility in such constructions.

The baby's 'disabilities' are significant. It has no arms or legs, only a head and torso held together by tape. It is only eyes, mouth and stomach, and "in lacking ears it lacks any suggestion of receptivity and thus the subconscious that is so germane to Lynch's understanding of humanity" (Nochimson 151). The baby constantly cries and can will itself sick if Henry threatens to leave. The baby is a manipulator of human emotions for no reason other than to constrain Henry's life and Henry puts up with it only because the baby is his social responsibility. Lynch's more than unsettling vision of parenthood has to be understood not as a pessimistic statement on the impossibility of any real human connection, but rather on what limits us from recognizing what is human:

> this "baby" is the essence of illusionist reality - there is something there, but it is actually formless, held together only by the word and a bandagelike swaddling. It is an ironic representation not in that it is the new life of the infant but rather the preclusion of new life by social will. (Nochimson 151)

Lynch's cinematic baby inverts the controlling gaze that the audience of a freak show projects onto the spectacle of bodily difference. As Thomson points out, at such freak shows questions such as "'what is it?' [. . .] [heighten] the difference between the common observer and the marvelous body" (61). Eraserhead completely inverts the power related to the gaze in cinema since the audience is implicated in the social construction of the baby. In its social manifestation, "disability [. . .] is a disruption in the visual, auditory, or perceptual field as it relates to the power of the gaze. As such, the disruption, the rebellion of the visual must be regulated, rationalized, contained" (Davis 129).

Usually the gaze codes disability as something undesired and to be avoided, but this film's gaze is paradoxically trapped by the fact that its socially controlling force is what produces the baby! Lynch shows how social rationalizations can be relativized by the medium of film. Disability, which is usually represented as passive spectacle, in the context of the film mocks its social origins by the fact that the baby will never be able to move on its own. The fantasy of power and control that informs the ideal of normality is rendered by Eraserhead wholly imaginary since, Henry's surroundings attest to the fact that human volition that seeks such mastery only produces sterility, desolation, and

hopelessness: "the disabled body exposes the illusion of autonomy, self-government, and self-determination that underpins the fantasy of absolute able-bodiedness" (Thomson 46). Eraserhead foregrounds the social construction of disability in such a dramatic way that its manifestation in *The Elephant Man* appears understated. Lynch's art is undaunted by the monumental efforts it will take to reverse the social stigma of disability - he fearlessly attempts to blow away the protective, idealized representations of 'normal' bodies.

In *Eraserhead*, human touch becomes a way to contact realities beyond socially constructed ones. The baby's parents, Henry and Mary X, never touch on screen, as Nochimson points out (157), as if to imply that they only stay together because of the social expectations of her parents. Real connection and sensuality are not possible without breaking free from the 'resistance to life' that normalcy embodies, and Lynch's harkening to the power of touch connects the unactualized potential of their society to the regenerative nature of the human body. Although Lennard Davis comments on the specific language Touch in John Varley's story "The Persistence of Vision," which explores a Utopian society where every citizen is blind and deaf, Davis's description works well to elucidate the power touch wields in Eraserhead:

> Touch [. . .] is very underutilized in an aural/oral/visual world. The line between the sexual and the nonsexual, between heterosexuality and homosexuality is erased, since all body contact is a form of talk, and everyone talks with everyone. The language Touch is itself a metalanguage, a language beyond language. (Davis 21)

Lynch's foregrounding of spoken language's incapacity to create an adequate social reality in *Twin Peaks* takes on even more dramatic meaning in *Eraserhead*. To speak of the 'erasing' of social categories structured on idealizations is to speak of a reality beyond discourses of human mastery and control. Touch has the potential to communicate the unfamiliar. Since the disabled are often automatically placed under the label of the Other, and since touch is generally prohibited in American society, "the disabled touch is seen as both contagious and erotic" (Davis 148). It appears that common social attitudes about disability place many 'normal' people in a dilemma of desire. Anything Other must be stigmatized so as to keep its threat of contact at bay. This paranoia at the heart of American society is what Lynch attacks in *Eraserhead* and he is not so pessimistic as to script Henry into a narrative dead end.

Henry's breakout from constrictive social constructions is marked by his receptivity to touch. The Lady in the Radiator (Laurel Near) embraces him, apparently an apparition from his subconscious, as does his sexually enticing neighbor across the hall. Both of these women 'erase' social control over the body

which Lynch represents as a white flash that in effect erases the film frame. This visual metaphor conjures up the imaginary empowerment of the Mirror Stage, however, Henry's breakthrough is not a fantasy like John Merrick's. The climax of *Eraserhead*, when touch releases Henry from the stagnant social world around him, shows random energy, not ordered by any gaze, sparkling behind him like eraser dust in the air. Louis Giannetti describes the scene: "ordinarily the halo effect created by backlighting is romantic, but here it suggests an electrifying shriek" (18).

Nochimson suggests, like Henry's floating frame in the film's opening scene, that such liberated energies and their unregulated motion are neither "mechanically regular, as is conceptual movement proposed by Newtonian physics, nor is it unstable like a machine gone wrong. Instead, like the motion proposed by chaos theory, it tantalizingly suggests an order under what appears to be random flux" (154). The fear of traversing social conventions into the unknown, Lynch shows, is an irrational one. People with disabilities, and all other groups coded as Other, only attain that label through a paranoid definition of what constitutes normality, the impossible goal people seek to their own discontent.

How does Henry deal with the baby after he understands that it is an incarnation of his own imprisonment and is a false image of life? He destroys that false limit the baby embodies, but not in the context of murder for one cannot kill what is not real. The violence of this act is proportional to the energy required to break out of the negative social cycle represented by the baby. The metaphor of "erasing" that the film proposes is of direct relevance to the social construct of disability.

A pencil can make a mark and take it away implying that social constructions are not rigid forms imposed once and for all. Nochimson elaborates on Lynch's metaphor that arises from a bizarre dream sequence in the film: "a core sample of [Henry's] brain produces a pencil, a perfect Lynchian image of redemption. The pencil that emerges from Henry's brain reassures us that the human mind is a tool for creating both open and closed form" (160). *Eraserhead* suggests that abundant energies are produced through breaking social denials and that the erasing of arbitrary separations does not lead one to the Mirror Stage's illusory empowerment, but rather to a new agency in the world that transcends limiting ideals like normalcy. Lynch optimistically represents that not only breakthroughs from alienating identifications are attainable, but that social norms can be re-created as well as codified.

Since the disabled are often conceptualized as dehumanized, "to have a disability is to be an animal, to be part of the Other" (Davis 40). John Merrick, reeling against an angry crowd who mistakenly believes he molested a young girl, cries out against this injustice with his famous exclamation: "I am not an animal, I am a human being." Lynch shows how art can help re-formulate social ideals through acknowledging their shortcomings. *Twin Peaks*, *Fire Walk With Me*, *The Elephant Man*, and *Eraserhead*

all serve as paradigms for the fertile results of such labors.

Conclusion

Lynch exposes the destructive illusions normality constructs around the body in all their inhumanity and horror. Through seeking the ideal of normalcy, one not only rejects one's limitations, but banishes anyone who reflects human vulnerability. Normality traps one in an imaginary relationship to one's own body. Whether traditionally disabled or not, the body rarely achieves any empowerment other than an idealized/imaginary one. It is perhaps paradoxical that our bodies - what constitutes our humanity - are what we often actively dis-empower.

Referring back to the previously-stated question as to whether Lynch exploited Richard Pryor by casting him in *Lost Highway*, one can now safely say "no" to that question. Pryor chose the role, and, if he is not embarrassed by his disability, why should film audiences react differently? Self-empowerment is the mutual goal of not just the disabled, but the supposedly abled as well. Acknowledging such limitations can be such an empowerment. The cinema of David Lynch, in its re-envisioning of the body and its relationship to normalcy, stands as a unique voice for the pleasure inherent in breaking both personal and social denials about the body: "disability is not an object - a woman with a cane - but a social process that intimately involves everyone who has a body and lives in the world of the senses" (Davis 2). In both film and social realities, the worthy goal of self-realization must not ignore bodily difference that the disabled powerfully embody. The fantasy of being untouchable denies not only the fragility, but the real agency, of which all are capable. What makes us truly human, our bodies, must become not imaginary sights of an alienating ego control, but rather a continual process of discovering new potentials for communication and understanding.

Lynch's films serve as object lessons for the need to reformulate normalcy's idealized discourse about the body. Hopefully other directors will also continue exposing the destructive nature of fantasized audience identifications. *The Straight Story*'s Alvin Straight, a protagonist who may for some only invoke the vulnerable nature of the human body, has nevertheless served as a sight with which movie audiences do identify. The success of *The Straight Story* speaks to the reality that audiences are hungry for not only codified bodily ideals, but for the revelations that can arise through embracing the limitations of the human form.

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