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Elephant Man more than skin deep

by Ken Burke

Every age seems to have its "hero" - someone who represents the perfect in all people, to the extent that she or he can even become a metaphor for the human ideal. And the true hero of the Industrial Revolution (or the mechanized world today) was John Merrick, the "Elephant Man," hideously deformed on the outside, but with a soul as pure as man ever possessed within. That's the position that Director David Lynch took when he made **The Elephant Man**, being revived this Thursday and Friday at Wormwood's Dog and Monkey Cinema, and after having seen the film last year, that's also what I think.

Shot in black and white, making the setting even starker, the London that Dr. Frederick Treves and John Merrick inhabit is one of grinding gears, hissing steam, and smoke and fire everywhere. When Dr. Treves is first seen, he is operating on a workman horribly mangled by some unspecified machine, the likes of which regularly claimed the arms, legs, and lives of many a nameless factory worker. Men were (and are, in the Age of Reagan) just so much fodder to keep the machines going, and the wheels of society turning and crushing, turning and crushing.

And so, in the film, the myth of the "Elephant Man" is played up -- the story that his deformities were caused in part by a runaway elephant injuring his mother months before he was born -- suggesting that, in fact, he is a product of NATURE run amok, and forced to exist in a society where machines have taken over. This accounts for his indestructable, touching innocence in the face of the

torments to which he is subjected. Because of the way David Lynch avoids showing Merrick's deformities until he has demonstrated the nature of his inner self, I found myself looking upon the deformities as beautiful, rather than perverse, when I did see him at last.

This is due in no small way to the performance of John Hurt as Merrick. Even under the completely disfiguring make-up (completely realistic as well -- John Merrick did exist, and he did look like that), Hurt gives Merrick such a sense of love and dignity -- in short, **humanity** -- that it was impossible for me not to identify strongly with him (and I don't want to hear ANY jokes about my looks!). Lynch has also made the film so that the viewer is encouraged to identify with his rescuer, Frederick Treves (well-portrayed by Anthony Hopkins), who demonstrates the horror of discovering that the creature he is studying is, in fact, a sensitive, normal human being trapped in an unbearably grotesque body.

The sum total of all these excellent performances, the triumphant theme of the film, and Lynch's not over-sentimentalized direction, is the effect that the film has (or HAD, on me). I cried so hard I still have salt deposits on my cheeks from that viewing a year ago, and again, I must repeat that the film is not over-sentimentalized in the least -- a freak version of **The Other Side Of The Mountain** this is not. **The Elephant Man** is intelligent, well-made and well-written, and succeeds for those reasons, not because it made me bawl in public, notorious tough-guy that I am. Anyhow, like they say in French, "Prenez-vous des mouchoirs."

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