

The elephant man movie review examples

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English 225 Introduction To Film

The film “ The Elephant Man” is an iconic and powerful humanistic filmmaking endeavor. Released in 1980, the film relates the story of Joseph Carey Merrick, the real-life figure who was born with a horrible deformity and had to deal with issues of humanity and discrimination in 19th century London. Through the use of compelling performances, assured and minimalistic direction, and a stark, Victorian Gothic aesthetic, director David Lynch forces the horrors and sadness of deformity onto the audience in a way that leaves the viewer tear choked with sadness and sympathy. Most people who watch the film are touched in a way that alters their view of the crippled, weak, and deformed persons of the world.

Merrick, a man of the Victorian era, is extremely disfigured and condemned to a terrible existence as a sideshow attraction. Eventually Merrick is admitted to the London Hospital by Frederick Treves who becomes his personal physician. Protected by Treves and other concerned authorities, Merrick was able to live until the age of 28. His life is remembered with a sense of dignity. Throughout his life Merrick was able to captivate the public with his physical appearance and also through his intellect and charismatic personality. Merrick is a model of humanity for the reason that despite having been treated so awfully he harbored no ill feelings toward his fellow citizens. This is perhaps the reason that Lynch chose to tell the story of Merrick.

The creation of the film begins with Joseph Merrick’s incredible story being written into a play by Bernard Pomerance in 1979. This play is still performed from time to time. Lynch’s film version was released the following year, and

was not derived from the play, though it did give Lynch the inspiration for the play itself. Lynch based his film version of Merrick's life on various biographical sources most of which were Merrick's own words in his memoirs.

David Lynch, known for his surreal style, highlights his artistic abilities in this film. In fact, Lynch's style is most accessible from this movie. Lynch who has in the past been accused of allowing his artistic flair to run rampant, seems to subdue himself in "The Elephant Man". Perhaps by following a real story Lynch has avoided the familiar strangeness of his films. Lynch instead allows the film to develop in a direct manner without the use of his trademark symbolism and sometimes strangeness. There is only one scene where Lynch seems to wander into his usual bizarreness. This is during the opening sequence, which can best be related as a disturbing fantasy version of how Merrick came to bear his looks.

The opening scene is, arguably, poorly placed and so out of place with the plot of the movie that it has been cited as "inexcusable" by critics such as Roger Ebert. The sequence is a terrible vision of Merrick's mother being trampled and kicked by elephants as if somehow to explain his state of being. This scene is intended to be shocking, which it is, but strangely inappropriate considering that Merrick was the victim of a disease which Lynch would know from the biographic resources. The reason for Lynch's diversion is difficult to grasp, but it is possible that there is a metaphorical subtext to be gleaned from this scene: by introducing us to this overt cruelty early in the film, Lynch shocks us and leaves us agape to get us used to the horrors of Merrick's life. The elephants are symbolic of Merrick's moniker "

The Elephant Man," and the visual symbol provided is evidence that Merrick's life will be cruel and unforgiving; this 'elephant' moniker and the stigma associated with it will cause Victorian society to figuratively trample him as well. It also emphasizes that he was possibly born of unusual circumstances, and having such a dramatic and symbolic cinematic birth raises his mythic and tragic stature in the audience's eyes.

The script, written by Lynch, contains information based upon Merrick's memoirs and biography, as well as from Frederick Treves' personal accounts. As far as historical accuracy is concerned, certain details have been altered to make the story suitable for film. For example, Merrick is referred to incorrectly as "John". This inaccuracy is however, a perpetuation of the error that was made in history according to Frederick Treves' account of the story. Lynch in an effort to maintain realism botches the name purposely but fails to make this understandable to the viewer. This is however not an error in writing or research but is exemplary of bad film. But beyond this mistake, many elements within the film are based in history. The way Merrick dressed, wearing a hood and cloak when he travelled, his deep love for his mother, and his cardboard construction of a cathedral.

The final scene of the film lacks credibility since no one was with Merrick when he died. Lynch divines a hypothetical death in which Merrick lies down like a normal person, which because of his abnormalities, causes his death. Merrick was found lying down in this manner when he was discovered the next day. Because of the peaceful state of his body it is supposed that he chose his death in this manner. Although the scene lacks evidence, Lynch stays true to at least what is known and believed. In this way, we are oddly

relieved for Merrick, as he had endured so much suffering and pain that it seemed fitting that he would die trying to be normal. In his death, we see him try to lie like a drawing of a sleeping child from his room, yet another tie to Merrick as a childlike figure. Lynch also gives a final grace and dignity to the character of John Merrick which allows the film to end in a way that is touchingly appropriate. Since no one was with Merrick when he died, Lynch's ending is purely based in fantasy, but makes a compelling scene nonetheless.

Perhaps most central to the film is John Hurt's amazing, sensitive performance as John Merrick. Despite being forced to emote through layers of makeup and prosthetics (modeled after Merrick's real face and appearance), Hurt manages to convey a depth of emotion that few actors could accomplish, finding beauty in this beastly figure. The character is played as that of a child, one who does not quite understand the world around him, if only because he has not really been exposed to any parts that did not contain cruelty. Lynch shows Hurt being victimized by Victorian society, but also abandoned like a child; numerous closeups of children are shown, and Princess Alexandra describes him as "one of England's most unfortunate sons." His disability shows just how medicine and Victorian society of the time treated people with disabilities: quite poorly, and deserving of the criticism Lynch's camera provides.

John Hurt plays the lead role of Merrick and delivers one of the best performances ever captured on film. The special effects technology of the time allows the appropriate look to be achieved but the transference of emotions is difficult because of the lack of realistic gesticulations. The

craniofacial makeup is so extensive that Hurt is left with only one eye to work with. But Hurt is able to use this limitation and brilliantly show emotions through exaggerated ocular movements. Even when being covered with the mask, Hurt is still able to convey Merrick's emotions through one eye hole. Through his eye movements, Hurt is able to display realistic anguish, fear and joy, without the ability to move his face.

Another point of acting that Hurt is able to expound on is the movements of Merrick's left arm and hand which were about the only part of the body unaffected by this disorder. Lynch uses close-ups of Hurt's arm and hand which create framing that expresses Merrick's personality traits. Such examples include when Merrick gently, almost reverently reaches to touch objects especially the things he has never possessed. The movements relate a deep gratitude and love for his surroundings.

Hurt is also challenged by Merrick's speech, which was severely hampered by the deformity of his jaw, and in the case of Hurt by the makeup application. Merrick who even after corrective surgery, was barely able to move his jaw, challenged Hurt to create this realistic trait. For the sake of the film, Lynch was forced to make Merrick slightly more intelligible. However, for the viewer it does take some listening to become accustomed to the slurring and speech disruption. Hurt is able to use this impediment to his advantage, giving the character a somewhat high-pitched, muffled voice that seems to inspire a sense of wonder and vulnerability. As well, through voice alterations, posture, and awkward body movements, Hurt is able to overcome the difficulties of makeup and is able to bring the character to life. Anthony Hopkins plays Professor Treves, the surgeon who takes a personal

interest in Merrick's case. Treves is at first only interested John Merrick's physical condition. He enlists Merrick for the purpose of showing him to the medical community. However, Treves soon learns that Merrick is an intelligent and thoughtful being trapped beneath the disfigured external form. The doctor eventually views Merrick as a friend rather than research or as a ticket to fame. The character Treves is all too human and makes the viewer question his or her morality and intentions. At one point, Treves openly considers the quandary of whether he began his relation with Merrick out of kindness or as means for professional advancement. As a viewer, it is an all too familiar feeling of moral ambiguity in which he is torn between selfishness and altruism. One can see that Treves cares deeply for Merrick and that his concern is genuine, but what makes this character smack of realness is the manner in which Lynch shows Treves exhibiting self doubt with his own intentions. Further strengthening this honesty is the fact that other characters accuse Treves of exploitation of Merrick. In the beginning of the film, the audience sees this as a possibility, but we learn more and more about Treves motivations, and understand his deep desire to understand and help Merrick. Hopkins handles this ambiguity of character perfectly, playing the subdued, cognitive doctor who finds himself loving a human being which initially he views as a research project.

The supporting cast also increases the humanistic qualities of the film by depicting the best and worst of human characteristics. Sir John Gielgud plays Mr. Carr Gomm, the hospital director, who is a pillar of reason and strength that seems to support Treves through pragmatic conversations of Merrick's state. Wendy Hillard plays head nurse Mrs. Mothershead who scolds the

Treves for bringing people to ogle Merrick in the hospital. As a motherly character, she injects Treves with shame and forces him to question his intentions in these famous lines:

Mothershead: Sir! I don't quite I don't quite understand why it is you allow that sort of people in there.

Dr. Frederick Treves: Why? Because he enjoys it, and I think it's very good for him.

Mothershead: Yes, but, sir, you saw the expression on their faces. They didn't hide their disgust. They don't care anything about John! They only want to impress their friends!

Dr. Frederick Treves: I think you're being rather harsh on them, don't you, Mrs. Mothershead?

Mothershead: I beg your pardon!

Dr. Frederick Treves: You yourself hardly showed him much loving kindness when he first arrived, did you?

Mothershead: I bathed him, I fed him, and I cleaned up after him, didn't I? And I see that my nurses do the same. And if loving kindness can be called care and practical concern, then I did show him loving kindness, and I am not ashamed to admit it! (The Elephant Man, 1980)

As Merrick's "proprietor," Freddie Jones plays a ruthless menace and desperate part of man his greedy and delights in the suffering and controlling of those weaker than himself. Michael Elphick plays a horrible night porter who orchestrates an excruciating scene of humiliation in Merrick's hospital room in which Merrick is put on display naked before paying onlookers. Anne Bancroft as Treves' wife, provides the needed

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compassion as she shows Merrick kindness in the face of a lifetime of women screaming at his physical ugliness. The supporting cast deliver spot on performance that give validity and weight to the plot.

But beyond the acting, it should be stated that the film could not have worked without the convincing makeup. The extensive prosthetic makeup is an incredibly accurate depiction of the real Merrick's horrible deformities. So similar in appearance was the look that production photos of John Hurt in costume have been referred to as "the only color photographs of The Elephant Man." In a strange coincidence the makeup was so uncomfortable and physically restrictive, that Hurt was forced to rest sitting up between takes. This was exactly how the real Merrick had to live his life. Ironically the makeup assisted in conveying the true painful nature of Merrick's existence.

Adding more weight to the crucial nature of the special effects, the character's craniofacial deformities, are only surpassed by his grotesque body features. When Merrick is stripped for viewing, the sagging growths on Merrick's back become visible and make the audience shudder in revulsion. It was these growths that earned Merrick the name of "Elephant Man." The makeup and special effects are by today's standards impressive. Even today the makeup does not look fake or dated, but still illicit dread and sympathy from the audience. Cinematically it is a feat and testament to credibility.

The film is set in the darkness of Victorian London. Filming the work in black and white adds to the depth of darkness and dread for the viewer, and permits the film a much more melancholy and stark atmosphere. The setting seems to only enhance the sadness and despair of Merrick's life. Lynch's imagery is ominous, cold, and filled with shadows. The black and white also

enhances the ugliness of the industrialized era and the camera pans to frequent shots of smoke stacks and clanking machines that seem to grind at the senses.

Complementing this visual atmosphere is John Morris' haunting score.

Depending on Merrick's situation, the music either enhances the eeriness of the carnival lights and motions or becomes the sounds of placid classical music with flutes and mild horns playing. The orchestral score is perfectly suited to the film, as it swells with drama at some of the more evocative moments in the film while settling down to provide perfect accompaniment to the film's more contemplative scenes. The last piece of music heard in the film is Samuel Barber's "Adagio For Strings"; this sad and heart twisting composition is the perfect goodbye sound that Merrick ends his life with. It is very telling that Morris ends the film with this known piece of classical music during the final scene of the film, as it lends a greater sense of familiarity and humanity to Merrick's last moments - all the while reminding us of the era that drove him to this point.

Today, "The Elephant Man" remains a highly-acclaimed film and emotional masterpiece. Expertly directed, written, and performed, with an old style cinematography and classical music, the film can be seen as a return to the days of black white film. The emphasis on character and acting skill was an original move by Lynch during a time when special effects and color were taking the lead in cinematography. In fact when one views the movie he or she comes away with the idea that it could not have been filmed any other way. Too intrinsic to the plot becomes the camera by virtue of its enhancement of setting.

The film is however, not without its critics. Some have accused the film of relying too heavily on the grotesque features of Merrick to convey the emotion (Rotten Tomatoes, 2007). In a sense the criticism is that Lynch focuses too deeply on the disfigurements in order to show his humanistic endeavor (Ebert, 1980). In general, this criticism seems to be without merit since the deformity of Merrick is central to the ideas that Lynch underpins to his plot. How can one question her own view of vanity and compassion without being taken to that place where she must face deformity? One cannot. It is impossible to challenge a world or personal view of ideas such as this without having the senses smacked.

The other criticism of Lynch's directing is that is emotionally over the top (Clark, 2007). This view is in many ways almost ridiculous when it is considered that the actual portrayal of Merrick is mostly accurate and physically near perfect depiction. It is easy to apply present day admirable qualities to the Victorian Era and lose sight of the history. In truth, people like Merrick were forced to wear masks and hoods in public and were condemned to work as circus freaks. However shocking to a person's sensibilities these ideas are, they are the truth of the era. As such Lynch would be inaccurate if he had directed the movie in a manner that was not horrifying to the average modern person.

Despite what is seen as a relentless miserable existence through the film, Lynch has managed to convey and challenge the sensibilities of his audience. Lynch uses Merrick's life to educate people that the human spirit can endure the worst conditions. Lynch contrasts cruelty with compassion showing the viewer the stark and conflicting reality of the human condition.

The emotional resonance of the film is seen on a range of somewhere between total sadness and total compassion. So challenging is the movie to the human psyche that one must question anyone who would not be moved to tears by John Merrick's plight. The lead actor John Hurt stated this feeling eloquently: "If you can manage to get to the end of 'The Elephant Man' without being moved, I don't think you'd be someone I'd want to know." The intense humanity and depth of feeling on display in *The Elephant Man* is a credit to Lynch's sensitive direction and the strong performances of its stellar cast.

Perhaps the most challenging and famous line happens during the scene when Merrick the tragic hero demands that everyone acknowledge that he is human. In the famous subway scene, Merrick is chased by crowds of people, viewing him as a freak. He utters in anguish, "I am not an elephant! I am not an animal! I am a human being! I am a human being!" (Lynch, 1980) The working class is stunned and step back as he falls in exhaustion and sickness. Here, Merrick is finally able to communicate what he has been attempting to the entire film; the line between monster and human is blurred, as the mob of people harassing him become the real monsters. It is a wonderful scene, filled with human anguish, as Merrick simply cannot hold his feelings and his frustration in any longer. It is a scene that lives on in the minds of viewers and it is the culmination of Lynch's humanistic endeavor to make the audience realize that the deformed, the hurt, the ugly, and the forgotten are still human beings deserving of respect.

This scene is, in fact, the thesis of *The Elephant Man*, as it hammers home the themes of alienation and individualism in the face of a very polite,

homogenized society. Merrick's disfigurement makes him unique, and in the prim-and-proper aristocracy of Victorian England, whatever is unique must be ridiculed. The class distinctions found in the film are very much indicative of Merrick's predicament, as the poor have it nearly as bad as Merrick does. However, Merrick's identity as a sideshow curiosity allows him to infiltrate this sick, diseased upper-class society, which pretends to uplift him but really just uses them for their own ends. Merrick's cry during this scene shows his one real act of defiance against the society that both mocks him and uses him.

Today, “ The Elephant Man” remains a highly-acclaimed film and emotional masterpiece. Expertly directed, written, and performed, with an old style cinematography and orchestral score, the film can be seen as a return to the days of black white film. Victorian cultural superiority is thrown into question, as the high-class sophistication of the aristocrats is shown up by Merrick's raw, basic empathy and humanity. The emphasis on character and acting skill was an original move by Lynch during a time when special effects and color were taking the lead in cinematography. In fact, when one views the movie, he or she comes away with the idea that it could not have been filmed any other way. One of Lynch's decidedly less surrealist films (like Blue Velvet or Eraserhead), Lynch still manages to examine the macabre subject of a real-life freakshow, who becomes the most human character in the film. It is because of this sensitive, nuanced portrayal of disability and human cruelty that Lynch's film remains one of the great film dramas of the 20th century.

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