

Appreciation of a film for more than merely personal associations...

Touched by the Elephant Man:



Last night I reconfirmed *'Elephant Man'* (1980) as an all-time favourite film. Watching the David Lynch classic for the first time in accompaniment with my daughter, TE, was especially touching.

The film is remarkably true to the biography of Joseph Merrick (1862-1890) who was grossly disfigured by massive “papillomatus growths”. His appearance was such that he came to be exhibited in freak shows in late Victorian London as ‘the elephant man’.

The film begins with nightmarish images of a woman screaming before the groaning silhouettes of elephants— a surrealistic depiction of her being knocked down by an elephant. Apparently, such a freak accident befell Merrick’s mother during her pregnancy.

The scene then shifts to the backstreets of Victorian London. Rendered in bursts of gaslight and hissing steam engines— the black-and-white imagery of steam-driven machinery darkly hints of hideous new dynamics of the emerging industrial world... Amid the beetle-like creatures who scurry through the shadows of Highgate, a small crowd is gathered where a freak show exhibit is about to be shut down.

“Freaks are one thing,” declares the top-hatted authority to the unkempt showman, Bytes. “This is monstrous and should not be allowed.”

In the midst of the crowd is Dr. Treves (brilliantly played by Anthony Hopkins) drawn to the shadows by his scientific curiosity about the strange deformities of the elephant man. Treve’s face is lit with conflicted pity.

The doctor is thereafter shown at his work in the London Hospital, performing surgery on a man whose chest is torn up by an industrial accident....

“Abominable things these machines,” Treves murmurs. “We can’t reason with them.”

Yet it is in the same dark spirit of the new machine world by which Treves ‘borrows’ the elephant man (played by John Hurt) from the showman, Mr. Bytes, in order to exhibit him to colleagues as a medical curiosity.

“Pray, that he’s an idiot,” Treves remarks to his chief physician in watching the hooded Merrick hobble away after the presentation.

Yet Treves has the opportunity to salve his conscience for having exploited “the poor creature” albeit for medical science. When Merrick is badly beaten by the monstrous Mr. Bytes, the good doctor brings Merrick back to the London hospital for care and further observation.

To avoid upsetting the young nurses, Merrick is kept in an attic room of the hospital. The room is absent of mirrors to spare the elephant man the horror of seeing himself... When Treves discovers his patient can talk, he begins teaching Merrick to memorize scripts. Merrick fails to convincingly perform his lines before the chief physician— but stuns his benefactor by reciting biblical passages he has not been taught to memorize. It is through the discovery of his literacy— that humanity is conferred upon the elephant man...

“We cannot imagine what he must have endured,” says the chief physician (played by Sir John Gielgud) in granting Treve’s permission to keep Merrick in hospital residence despite his being “an incurable.”

Treves provides Merrick with books and encourages him in such hobbies as building a card replica of the cathedral viewed from his window. Treves then takes the bold step of inviting Merrick to his own home. In the drawing room, dressed as a gentleman, Merrick meets Treve’s wife who does her chipper best to make small talk while suppressing her shock (the couple’s children are notably absent). The doctor’s wife cannot hide her tears when Merrick shows the cameo of his mother which he carries like an icon:

“I must be a terrible disappointment to her,” Merrick coos. “Yet maybe—maybe if she could see me among such fine friends— she would love me just a little.”

The screaming irony of course, is that the hideously deformed son could not have come to be abandoned to a freak show without the compliance of the mother...



As news of Dr. Treve’s remarkable patient circulates, Merrick begins receiving distinguished visitors... In a commingling of Victorian pity and compassion, his invited guests marvel at the refinement of a young man so grotesquely afflicted. In one notable scene he is visited by aging actress, Madge Kendall (played by Ann Bancroft), who reads with Merrick lines from Shakespeare. Seemingly weary of the vanities of superficial beauty— Merrick’s sensitivity deeply moves her...

“Why, Mr. Merrick, you’re not an elephant man at all,” says the actress. “You’re a Romeo.”

By the scene, the film has already succeeded in highlighting the shine of Merrick's liquid dark eyes...



Not since Charles Laughton played Quasimodo in *'The Hunchback of Notre Dame'* (1939) has a sensitive being trapped within a grotesque body been so poignantly depicted on film... Actor John Hurt succeeds in bringing the viewer from the shock of hideousness to appreciation of the nobility of a character rising above unspeakable abuse. Undeniably, the soppiness of Merrick's effusive gratitude and Christian self-sacrifice is sometimes reminiscent of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom*. Yet the endurance of 'the human spirit' against crushing odds will always be sentimentality in which an audience is eager to revel.

Of course, the real monsters in the film are the showman, Bytes, and the hospital porter, Jim, who sells tickets to drunken lowlife who comes to leer at Merrick in the night...

Meanwhile, Dr. Frederick Treves is a fascinating portrayal of a Victorian sense of mission mingled with self-doubt. In the aftermath of the medical seminar in which he details Merrick's morbidities, Treves wonders whether his treatment of Merrick was no less dehumanizing than that of Bytes' freak show exhibition... Even when he invites Merrick to meet his wife, there is ambiguity as to whether the act is borne of friendship, charity— or further curiosity in observing his 'experiment'.

"Am I a good man— or a bad man?" he asks himself.



It is such ambiguity by which Lynch so masterfully draws Treves while creating a moving canvas of the Victorian world in shades of black and white. Given that *'the Elephant Man'* was one of his earliest films, it seems unfortunate that Lynch did not continue exploring such ambiguities of character against historical canvases. Instead, Lynch seems to have chosen to pursue the merely grotesque. Rather than exploring a complex vision— in subsequent films such as *'Blue Velvet'* and *'Lost Highway'*— Lynch is arguably as much a purveyor of freak show oddities as his fictional Victorian impresario, Bytes...



As in every previous viewing, the most affecting scene was the medical seminar, wherein the elephant man is first shown in silhouette behind a screen. When Dr. Treves first draws the curtain, gasps erupt from his fellow doctors. Treves describes the abnormalities as the silhouetted pointer darts machine-like around the misshapen frame. Treves' use of passive voice is hardly less dehumanizing than referring to the subject as 'it.'

"Notice the curvature of the spine," he says in rapid monotone. "Yet despite all the grotesque deformity, the genitalia is perfectly normal."

That sequence jarred to mind a dark moment from July 1972, wherein a young man was undergoing a medical appointment. Naked to the waist, he assumed he was submitting to an orthopedic examination in conjunction with the repair of his prosthetic arm... The Indo-Canadian doctor performing the examination—utterly without warning—pulled open the curtain of the cubicle. With a clank of her bracelets, she revealed behind the curtain a bevy of student nurses. The girls were from the same university where the patient majored in philosophy.

"Notice the slight curvature of the spine," said the doctor in British-Indian accent.

The curious specimen stood frozen as one of the student nurses stepped forward to gingerly trace a finger along his back....

"I am not an elephant! I am not an animal! I am a man!"

Near the end of the film, when the cornered Merrick proclaimed his humanity before his tormentors, the lump swelled in my throat. On the other side of the sofa, the eyes of my 15-year-old beauty, TE, were also misting...



2002, September

Postscript:

In reviewing this journal piece from some twenty years ago, I have mixed feeling about the tone. While I slightly cringe at its sentimentality— on another level I acknowledge the historical context. Perhaps I was indulging in something of the Victoria sentimentality which David Lynch artfully portrayed in *'The Elephant Man'*...



Meanwhile, a recently seen documentary has shed new light on those whose only 'disability' is in the appearance of their faces...

In *'Shameless: the Art of Disability'* (2006) Canadian filmmaker Bonnie S. Klein, who is herself wheelchair dependent, interviews a group of disabled people who are preparing to showcase their talents in an arts festival called *KickstART*... At the beginning of the documentary, the key participants are watching clips from old movies in a tongue-in-cheek exercise of "smashing stereotypes".

Among the group is David Roche, a stand-up humourist who has a facial deformity. The movie clip that he chooses for discussion is the scene from Lynch's *'The Elephant Man'* in which Merrick, with hood tore off, is pursued and cornered on the street... As the voice of 'the elephant man' is heard from the video proclaiming: "I am not an animal", the documentary camera focuses on the face of Roche...

Seemingly moved, he murmurs: "That's it!" He goes on to say: "This whole naïf sincere kind of thing... You know— his coping mechanisms... He's this totally lovable guy— just like me!"

Not unexpectedly, Roche shows remarkable self-awareness. On stage at the end of his *KickstART* performance, he says:

"I know I look differently to you than when you first saw me. I appreciate that... But you know— you look differently to me, too... I have caught a glimpse of my own inner beauty... Now I am more easily able see the beauty in others..."

Whether due to a 'coping mechanism' or something more poetic— Roche certainly does come across as a lovable guy. A man of such apparent inner peace, might not be offended to be seen as an enlightened 21st century Merrick...

His website is impressive. His international appearances have included a performance at the Kennedy Center and even one at the White House where he received "standing ovations..." Among his many awards, Roche was recently inducted (at the age of seventy-eight) into the Order of Canada...

I shamefully admit that until this Googling, I had not even heard of this fellow British Columbian or his achievements... Still, I cannot deny being jarred by the title at the head of his website. He is identified not as a ‘comedian’ or a ‘humourist’— but as an “*inspirational* humourist.”

Whether or not this is a self-description— I cannot avoid thinking of the expression of Stella Young, the Australian disabled activist whose Ted Talk caught my attention a few years ago. She coined the term “*inspiration porn*”. I later came across a YouTube clip of a British actor called Matt Fraser who is a thalidomide survivor with deformed arms. He declared “I won’t do ‘inspiration porn’!”

I can only assume his refreshing attitude reflects that of a younger— even more enlightened— generation...

2022, *March*

fwt