

MONSTROSITY, ANXIETY AND THE REAL:
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE VICTORIAN
METROPOLIS IN DAVID LYNCH'S
THE ELEPHANT MAN

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"I am not an animal! I am a human being! I...am...a man!"¹

*'If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject.'*² (emphasis in original)

Introduction

The following paper will offer an interpretation of David Lynch's film *The Elephant Man*, and its representations of late-Victorian London as a *monstrous* and *deformed* body. Besides tracing these themes in a discussion of exemplary scenes of the film, I wish to illuminate how underlying notions of monstrosity in the writings of Victorian urban explorers and reformers contributed to ideas and anxieties about the body and domesticity, and helped to promote the image of a clean, sanitized and civilized city. I will make use of a range of theoretical and historical approaches developed within and in-between a variety of disciplines such as anthropology, geography and architectural history, as well as literary studies, film theory and psychoanalysis, and, in so doing, aim to complicate the image of the monstrous metropolis.³

Jacques Lacan's concept of the structuring of the psyche into 'the Real', 'the Imaginary' and 'the

Symbolic' (or the 'big Other') and the importance of the mirror-stage within this system in particular, have offered alternative, less static, models of interpretation.⁴ Employing Lacan's idea of a tripartite structure, I wish to develop an argument in three sections - a kind of 'trialectic' between theory, various accounts of the Victorian city, and the film's imagery.⁵

The plot of *The Elephant Man*, I will argue, following Slavoj Žižek, develops in a move from reality towards the Real.⁶ By means of inversion – confronting its spectator with a world turned inside out – the film establishes a symbolic reality in the first part, while focusing on identification and the Imaginary in the second part, and leading to more and more disturbing eruptions of the Real in the final part.

'Ladies and Gentlemen: The Terrible Elephant Man': Establishing Monstrosity

It takes thirteen minutes until the viewer of the *The Elephant Man* – his look being an extension to that of Dr. Frederick Treves's, curious to see the notorious freak-show exhibit – is first allowed to peer at what was carefully hidden behind the curtains of a symbolic *reality* that meanwhile got established through various representations. By avoiding a confrontation with what 'makes women fly in horror', an unsettling absence lays the foundations of the film's 'reality'. Though not having seen 'it' yet, we have an image of the too 'monstrous' to be 'allowed' in our mind. Why are we - just like the freak-show visitors - not allowed to see 'it'? The policeman who closes down the scandalous attraction provides an answer to this question and points to what I will be concerned with in this section, when he says that 'this exhibit degrades everybody who sees it as well as the poor creature himself'⁷.

In the first part of his essay *The Ugly*, Marc Cousins questions the way we traditionally conceive

⁴ The details of these concepts are going to be explained later in this article.

⁵ My use of the word trialectic here refers to the work of Henri Lefebvre and the (more recent) writings of Ed Soja. Both Lefebvre and Soja tried to avoid binaries by using triads. See for example: H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* transl. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) and E. Soja, *Thirdspace. Journeys to Los Angeles and other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996)

⁶ Slavoj Žižek discovered this strategy as an underlying principle in the work of David Lynch. See: Slavoj Žižek, 'David Lynch, or, the Feminine Depression', Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 114

⁷ David Lynch, *The Elephant Man*, DVD 188mins. (Momentum Pictures, 2001)

¹ David Lynch, *The Elephant Man*, DVD 188mins. (Momentum Pictures, 2001)

² Julia Kristeva, 'Approaching Abjection', Kelly Oliver (ed.), *The Portable Kristeva* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 232

³ In response to, or extending, Mary Douglas's study *Purity and Danger*, different writers and theorists since the second half of the 20th century have worked on themes such as formlessness, disorder, dirt, the abject or the ugly from different perspectives. Examples of this work are being used and referred to in this text; e.g. Julia Kristeva's *Approaching Abjection* or Marc Cousins's *The Ugly* or the work of David Sibley, to name but a few.

of the ugly as a simple negation of the beautiful. In linking his argument to Mary Douglas's concept of dirt as 'matter out of place', he describes the experience of the ugly object as something 'which is in the wrong place' – something that is there but 'should not be there'.⁸ For Douglas, beliefs about pollution and contagion are based on the experience of anomaly, from where they lead 'to anxiety and from there to suppression or avoidance'.⁹ The assertion that the ugly object should not be there, however, presents a totality for Cousins; there is no place for the ugly. 'The 'wrong place' is an absolute'.¹⁰ Hence, the ugly object has to be removed – it must be radically *excluded*. In *Approaching Abjection* Julia Kristeva points in a similar direction. The abject, she argues, confuses categories, as it exists between subject and object. Being something that essentially disturbs order, that transgresses, her notion of the abject – like Cousins's ugly – relates to Douglas's ideas about dirt. The potential threat and anxiety that arise from it, though, lead to acts of radical exclusion, in a similar fashion to those addressed earlier, rather than just their avoidance. This radicalism refers to the strong psychological implications in relation to the abject: the traumatizing effects it can bring about, the obsession and hopelessness connected with any attempt to fully exclude it as to the reality of its persistence. At the ground of the abject, however, Kristeva sees an initial recognition of *meaninglessness*, an existence without words or signs:

A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A “something” that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, which crushes me. On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a *reality* that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me.¹¹ (my emphasis)

This experience of meaninglessness is inherent to the experience of the monstrosity of the Elephant Man and his deformities as well as the urban explorers' perception of the Victorian city, the “strangely mingled monster”, a city “so clumsy and brutal, and [which] has gathered together so many of the darkest

⁸ Mark Cousins, 'The Ugly' (part 1), *AA Files 28* (1994), p. 63

⁹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An analysis of concept of pollution and taboo* (Oxon: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 6

¹⁰ Mark Cousins, 'The Ugly' (part 1), *AA Files 28* (1994), p. 63

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, 'Approaching Abjection', Kelly Oliver (ed.), *The Portable Kristeva* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 230

sides of life,” that it would be “frivolous to ignore her deformities”.¹²

The former is being introduced to the viewer in two starkly contrasting, yet connected, ways. Firstly, in the form of a 'private performance' in a dark and wet cellar conducted by the Elephant Man's proprietor Bytes, seen through the eyes of the curious Dr. Treves. And secondly, on display to the eyes of a shocked, yet similarly disinterested professional audience at the Medical Association, to whom Merrick is presented as an anatomical curiosity, a true 'find'. (Fig. 1) In both cases, confronting Merrick's deformed body leaves Bytes and Treves with pure *unfamiliarity* – so strong that it becomes difficult for them to put into words. Whereas Bytes's story of the Elephant Man's genesis is based on banal misconceptions and myths about monstrosity, according to which a woman gives birth to a misshapen child when she had a fearful experience of an animal during her pregnancy, Dr. Treves analyses the deformities of Merrick's body by means of a rational medical terminology which eventually slips into the spectacular, ultimately degrading his patient. Almost anything about him is extreme, useless or alarming, despite the 'interesting sidenote, [that] the patient's genitals remain entirely intact'¹³.

The explorers of the Victorian city were faced with similar difficulties in describing the *deformed* body of the metropolis of their time, and the new phenomena linked to rapid growth, poverty and the life of Victorian labourers. (Fig. 2) Hence they began to invent models to interpret what had no meaning for them. Those models were developed in their own terms, that is, they were established in order to define (and subsequently reaffirm) the status of a specific group by inventing an *Other*. This Other, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White explain in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, was mainly conceptualized through images the body. They write:

In the nineteenth century that fear of differences that 'have no law, no meaning, and no end' was articulated above all through the 'body' of the city: through the separations and interpenetrations of the suburb and the slum, of grand buildings and the sewer, of the respectable classes and the lumpenproletariat.¹⁴

¹² Quoted in: Judith R. Walkowitz, 'Urban Spectatorship', Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: narratives of sexual danger in late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1998), p. 15

¹³ David Lynch, *The Elephant Man*, DVD 188mins. (Momentum Pictures, 2001)

¹⁴ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 125

The surveillance of the city's body resulted in one chief recognition: that of a lack of clear boundaries, hence allowing transgression. This lack of confinement posed a major threat to the subject; the threat of *contamination*. Because the city's streets were a place of intersection of different social actors, they were a potential source of contagion. Subsequently, the fear of contagion took the form of an existential threat, which began to shape the city. Hence, the major objective became to avoid 'the opening of the slums at nighttime "to [not] let forth the thief, the murderer, the prostitute and the germs – the 'mad dogs" which could "destroy mankind"'.¹⁵ Lines of *division* had to be mapped out across the 'city's topography, separating the suburb from the slum, the respectable from the "nomad"¹⁶

What characterized almost all accounts of the city at this time, Stallybrass and White, as well as Judith Walkowitz in her *City of dreadful delight*, argue, was the specific mode of looking employed by a new type of bourgeois male: the urban spectator, whose activities were driven by a 'powerful streak of voyeurism'.¹⁷ Looking at the monstrous body of the city with its power to contaminate, the subject by all means had to be distanced from the object. Its look had to be uneven, that is, a *gaze* – a look which enables the subject to hold *control* over the object. The gaze is thus linked to the *sublime*, described by Marc Cousins as a way of confronting the ugly in terms of a specific relationship between the subject and the object. The recognition that looking at an ugly object may not pose an immediate threat to the viewing subject, he asserts, 'awakens in the subject an apprehension that his potential scope, even his scale, is greater than the vast and fearful object'.¹⁸ Because it has the power to keep the experience of the ugly object under control, the subject essentially survives this experience. It is worth noting how these specific modes of looking – from the distance, or from above – and the uneven power relationships they produced, contributed to notions of social status – 'high' and 'low' – and, thus, formed an essential part in the development of the Victorian middle-class and

¹⁵ (Wohl 1983:79) original quote in: Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 133

¹⁶ Stallybrass and White here refer to a term used by Mayhew, who described the poor in terms of the unsteady, primitive 'nomads'. See: Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 131

¹⁷ Judith R. Walkowitz, 'Urban Spectatorship', Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: narratives of sexual danger in late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1998), p. 16

¹⁸ Mark Cousins, 'The Ugly' (part 1), *AA Files* 28 (1994), p. 62

its self definition through acts of distinction.

Even though, according to Walkowitz, some writers of the late nineteenth century – among them Charles Booth – attempted to 'enter' the life of the poor, the content of their writings established specific representations of the poor that further manifested the fixed power relations between the explorers and their objects of investigation:

Thanks to the literary outpourings, the middle-class reading public became emotionally invested in a set of representations about the poor that cast poor Londoners as central figures in narratives that divested them of any agency or ability to extricate themselves from their situation. Whereas earlier Victorian writings had emphasized pauperism as a failure of the moral will, these new writings relocated the locus of poverty, putting it within the homes and the bodies of the poor themselves. Whether victims of environmental or biological determinism, the poor would remain the poor, unless extricated from their fate by the transforming power of heroic investigators and reformers.¹⁹

Based on such an uneven relationship, Booth was drawn to East London – Whitechapel in particular – as a place of clash, contest, change, life and death in a Darwinian sense.

In the film, the relationship between Dr. Treves and Merrick is characterized by a similar uneven distribution of power. This already becomes clear in the scene of their first encounter. Roaming through the slums to find the 'creature', Treves has to *hide* in the shadow, in the dark corner of the cellar in order to *safely gaze* at Merrick. Furthermore, his *medical gaze* is based on *rationalization* in order to examine Merrick, classify his diseases, and thus establish the chances of his 'curability'. Yet there is another strong means by which he manages to gain control over his patient: by teaching Merrick how to speak; and thus, by setting up his *symbolic order*, he has the power to *include* the (monstrous) 'object'. Hence Dr. Treves represents the *Father*, the figure of law and authority. Lynch emphasizes this relationship, when he lets Merrick recite the 23rd psalm 'The Lord is my Shepherd'.

Monstrosity, both in the film and in the writings of the urban explorers of the Victorian period, is established in terms of an Other based on an initial recognition of meaninglessness – a meaninglessness that threatens the subject, and which the subject in turn seeks to control. However, notions of the monstrous are also defined through objects and representations, in an Imaginary in

¹⁹ Judith R. Walkowitz, 'Urban Spectatorship', Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: narratives of sexual danger in late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1998), p. 30

which the subject establishes and successively reaffirms its position, status, values, and spaces.

Mirrors Everywhere? The 'High', the 'Low' and the Imaginary

The Imaginary, Lacan argues, is based on the process brought about by the child's recognition of its own mirror image. As he writes in 'The Mirror-Stage as Formative Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', this recognition of the self is linked to development of the ability to coordinate movement. Furthermore it is understood as the act of initial identification of the subject with an *image* (Ideal-I), which at a later stage is being objectified in a 'dialectic of identification with the *other*'.²⁰ The mirror image, however, confronts the child with a fundamental and irreconcilable incompleteness – it sees in its image a 'fragmented body-image'.²¹ Hence the subject seeks completeness through objects, which it wants to become part of itself. The mirror-stage unfolds a complex relationship of images of the self; this is *not* I, I want to be *like* that, as well as *imagining oneself as being seen by others*. According to Lacan, all relationships are based on this principle, which as he notes, is ultimately *narcissistic*.

In the film, the Imaginary is addressed on several levels: in the form of representations of the Elephant Man and others' identification in relation to these, but also conversely, in the process of Merrick's identification with images and symbols of the Victorian middle-class and his subsequent attempts to repress his own monstrous appearance. Therefore, Merrick has to avoid his *own* mirror image: 'Under no circumstances are any mirrors to be brought into his room.'²² Hence, his maturation entirely draws on *preexisting* symbolic order and its *repetition*. As he can only grow within the canon of established sign systems surrounding him, his development is based on 'false' identification, hence not maturation, but mere *acculturation*. This becomes most obvious in the changing character of his home.

As Judith Walkowitz points out, the home in the late Victorian period became the locus of the *good man*.²³ It was the place where law, order, cleanliness,

truth and beauty resided. This image of the home and the *homely* was confronted – in a gesture that ultimately established the latter – with an image of the criminal, disorderly, dirty, immoral and monstrous, thus, *unhomely* home of the poor. This image of an other continuously referring back to the self is what can be found at the bottom of the self-definition of the 'high' through 'obsessive preoccupation' with the 'city's low'.²⁴ Hence, Stallybrass and White note, while the "top" attempts to reject and eliminate the "bottom" for reasons of prestige and status', it is constantly reminded of its dependence on that 'low', as it *'includes* that low symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life'.²⁵ Because of this fundamental dependence on the low in terms of establishing and confirming one's own imaginary status, Stallybrass and White conclude that, 'what is *socially* peripheral is so frequently *symbolically* central'.²⁶ In using the mirror scheme through an *I-not I* distinction, the 'high' defines itself in a negation of the 'low' - for instance through emphasizing 'correct posture' and 'censoring the lower "bodily" references along with bodily wastes' – while at the same time replacing this rejected low with another low, that of the city.²⁷

Merrick quickly learns how to adopt the right 'postures'. Comparing the scene in which he gets invited for tea at the Treves's house with the scene in which a couple from the 'respectable' classes come to visit Merrick's home for tea, the viewer will be able to realize the extent to which Merrick begins to mirror the lives of the others. (Fig. 3)

It is clear that both Merrick and Mrs. Treves encounter strong difficulties in defining their position toward one another in the first scene. He shamefully turns away from her beauty, because he is 'not used to being treated so well by a beautiful woman'.²⁸ In return, as soon as Merrick confronts Mrs. Treves with an image of his *mother*, the posture she upheld for so long breaks down. It is the recognition that his mother is *just as* beautiful as her own parents that makes their (and her) refined image collapse. By those means, the distance between her and him drops in an uncanny way; the monstrous suddenly gets *too close*. She cannot deal with it, and as Merrick further exposes his interior by expressing his feelings for his mother, she finally has to turn away, crying. As Mark Cousins notes, there is a dichotomy between external form and inner substance, which

²⁰ Jacques Lacan, 'The mirror-stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience', Jacques Lacan, Alan Sheridan (transl.), *Écrits: a selection*, (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 2

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4

²² David Lynch, *The Elephant Man*, DVD 188mins. (Momentum Pictures, 2001)

²³ Judith R. Walkowitz, 'Urban Spectatorship', Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: narratives of sexual danger in late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1998), p. 34

²⁴ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 145

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 145

²⁸ David Lynch, *The Elephant Man*, DVD 188mins. (Momentum Pictures, 2001)

leads to a double existence of any object: as its representation and as its existence. The exterior is what the object represents for the subject. The perception of an object is thus based on its exterior, its representation. As long as the subject is able to make sense of an object, that is, as long as the object 'signifies' for it, the subject is 'sustained by the object, which is in a sense a 'mirror' for the subject.²⁹ Hence the moment of ugliness for the subject occurs, Cousins argues, 'when the inside of the object bursts traumatically through the subject's own phantasy of what makes up the inside'.³⁰ Mrs. Treves's experience of Merrick's monstrosity relates to this essentially narcissistic model of recognition of the ugly object. She cannot 'appreciate' him, because his external representation does not make sense in relation to the image of his mother.

The display of family images points to another aspect: the experience of loss and separation and its compensation through objects and symbols. As David Sibley, following Adam Phillips, argues in his essay 'Comfort, Anxiety and Space', this initial experience of loss leads to 'anxieties about uncertainty, about the precariousness of love and security'.³¹ From this anxiety derives a strong desire for boundedness and safety, which can be established through repetition, as repetition 'confirms our powers of recognition, our competence at distinguishing the familiar from the unfamiliar'.³² This process constitutes an important stage within the development of the self. However, brought about by a fundamentally irredeemable loss - which the subject successively seeks to make up for through objects, ordering, and the exclusion of the unfamiliar - it also has the potential of becoming an obsession 'to secure something that, by definition, cannot be secured'.³³ Struggling to develop a secure sense of self, the home for Merrick becomes a machine of identification. Through mirroring the habits, the gestures and, not least, the home of Victorian bourgeois society, he constructs his own imaginary world. In the scene in which he invites a Victorian society couple for tea, the viewer recognizes that his hospital room has turned into a look-alike of the Victorian middle-class home - essentially that of the Treves's. Just as images of the family are displayed in the latter, Merrick has filled the ledge over his fireplace with representations of his own absent and other 'imaginary' mothers.

²⁹ Mark Cousins, 'The Ugly' (part 2), *AA Files 29* (1995), p. 3

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3

³¹ David Sibley, 'Comfort, Anxiety and Space', Jonathan Hill (ed.), *Architecture: the subject is matter* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 110

³² *Ibid.*, p. 111

³³ quoted in Sibley, *Ibid.*, p.110

Furthermore, the model he makes is representing the concept of mirroring and repetition. Mirroring the church, which remains foreclosed and inaccessible to him because he cannot leave his room, the model becomes an *object of desire*. Signifying the experience of a lack of the original - as this is located beyond the space of his confinement - the model heightens his tragic dependency on imagination. Consisting almost entirely of images and representations of things that he desires, because of his *separation* from them, Merrick's room forms a catastrophic landscape. So *homely* that it appears to have nothing real to it anymore, and ultimately acting as a means of repressing his own monstrous and uncanny appearance, it seems to become even more fragile and at risk to the dangers of external contamination. As David Sibley writes, '[e]fforts to purify the spaces of the home or the locality will increase anxieties about the *unheimlich* (unhomely) because the purification process heightens the visibility of the threatening other, however this other may be embodied'.³⁴

The subject establishes and successively reaffirms its position, status, values, and spaces through images, objects and representations of an other. Ultimately aiming to secure the unsecurable, it therefore tries to repress or exclude what is other, unfamiliar, dirty, ugly or monstrous. However, any attempt to *fully exclude* the monstrous poses an *impossibility*.

Failure and Excess: The Return(s) of the Real

The film presents the viewer with this impossibility in the third part by means of inversion. This inversion is announced by Merrick's nightmare. In this sequence, Slavoj Žižek writes, the viewer 'crosses the borderline that separates interior from exterior'.³⁵ As the camera moves from a detailed close-up of Merrick's skin, then through the eyehole in the hood he has to wear in public - his 'second' skin - it suddenly dives below the surface, where the pipework and machinery of the city and the interior of Merrick's body coincide. For Žižek this move represents the 'reversal of reality into the Real' which also 'corresponds to the reversal of the look (of the subject peering at reality) into the gaze - that is, this reversal occurs when we enter the 'black hole', the tear in the fabric of reality'.³⁶ Hence, the viewer sees a world turned inside out. (Fig. 4)

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 115

³⁵ Slavoj Žižek, 'David Lynch, or, the Feminine Depression', Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: On Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 115

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 115

This inverted world draws the viewer's awareness to the fact that, despite its necessity to suspend the subject within 'the Symbolic' and 'the Imaginary', there is a side of monstrosity that points to 'the Real'. In the act of *intrusion* into Merrick's home, in the last third of the film, this Real brutally erupts. The collapse of meaning, which characterizes this eruption, is represented in the total *destruction* of all symbols and objects in his room. Merrick's hopeless attempts to repress his own monstrosity – addressed in the dressing case he is given by Dr. Treves, which is merely useless to him because of his deformities, and which, of course, cannot physically eradicate those deformities – is followed by an *excessive return* of monstrosity in the form of the drunken mob, lead by the Night Porter. (Fig. 5)

Any move towards purification is based on the existence of its other, dirty side, which is constantly sought to be repressed, but which returns through acts of inversion. Those inversions, besides pointing to the initial act of repression, often have a liberating power, which evolves from their rejection of law and meaning. Julia Kristeva has developed this powerful side of the abject in her discussion of the deject, or the stray. Being the one 'by whom the abject exists', and conscious of its existence, the deject refuses to belong.³⁷ In this light, Merrick's final *identification* with his own monstrosity conveys a sense of hope in the film. After confronting *his own mirror image* during the intrusion of his room, Merrick is at last conscious of his appearance, knowing that there is no cure to his deformities. Only with this knowledge can he loudly and consciously assert the fact that he is human. A group of men have chased him into a public toilet at Liverpool Street Station, after he accidentally knocked down a little girl. Demasked and cornered by the angry mob next to a urinal, he shouts at them: 'I am not an animal! I am a human being! I...am...a man!'³⁸ Exhausted, he breaks down and sinks into the urinal. The toilet here becomes glorified, its ambiguity heightened in the monstrous Elephant Man's self-conscious expression of humanity. What was sought to be repressed suddenly becomes exposed, visible, alive – Real. Hence the images of the exposed steel structure of the station's roof seem to relate to the exposure of Merrick's body. (Fig. 6)

Conclusion

This account of David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* sought to discuss representations of Victorian London in relation to theme of monstrosity. In this context, established theoretical models like Marc Cousins's ugly, Julia Kristeva's abject or Mary Douglas's study of pollution presented productive categories for its analysis. Monstrosity, as I have argued, has been established as a means to secure the self against an ultimately unfamiliar and threatening experience. This uncanny and threatening experience arose along with the development of the industrial metropolis, its rapid growth, blurred social and spatial boundaries, as well as its spectacles and dangers. Hence, in order to re-establish system, order and confined spaces, the body of the city had to be examined like the body of a patient. Furthermore, models for identification and reaffirmation of Victorian bourgeois society had to be developed, as a means of distinguishing that class from the new social actors that the changing city brought to the fore. Moral standards, behaviours, postures, gestures, and a reconception of the home – domesticity – played a major role in this process. The re-establishment of boundaries necessarily meant the radical exclusion of the monstrous, unfamiliar, frightening, and dirty. This act of exclusion, at a psychological level, is linked to the infant's initial recognition of his separation from the mother. Because of the experience of this fundamental, and constitutional, loss, the subject enters a hopeless project, in which it seeks to compensate for this loss by establishing a sense of boundedness and security, through objects, actions and symbols. As well as any insight Lynch's movie might offer of the Victorian city, home and body, a lot of its themes also point to contemporary issues. The way in which Merrick constructs an imaginary world of signs and representations in which he mirrors himself (yet lacking true identification with his own image), for instance, seems to relate to postmodern concepts of pastiche. In seeking to exclude the unfamiliar, unknown and unplanned, most spaces based on this concept show nothing more than an inability to do so. Because of the impossibility of fully excluding it, disorder in such places becomes amplified. Thus, framing themes such as monstrosity (as well as the ugly, the abject or dirty), with the help of established concepts like that of 'the Real', can shed light on processes that underlie urban redevelopment and regeneration. Furthermore, it also illuminates recent interest in abandoned sites, derelict houses, post-industrial ruins and run-down areas (not only) in relation to subcultures and marginalized groups and their growing influence on processes of gentrification.

³⁷ Julia Kristeva, 'Approaching Abjection', Kelly Oliver (ed.), *The Portable Kristeva* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 235

³⁸ David Lynch, *The Elephant Man*, DVD 188mins (Momentum Pictures, 2001)

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