

# Morality, voyeurism, and 'point of view': Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960)

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I have a lingering affection for that outmoded term 'point of view'. Recent narrative theorists have disliked the term because it obscures distinctions (for example between perspective and voice in literary narrative), and because its reliance upon a visual metaphor seems ill-suited to the various ways in which a narrator or reader is positioned by and in a literary text. But its reliance upon a visual model is less of a disadvantage so far as the analysis of film is concerned, and it has the important virtue that it links technical and ideological position. This latter virtue is of paramount importance when one's concern is with issues of morality – how a text encourages its readers or viewers to position themselves with regard to issues of moral conduct.

Morality is intimately concerned with our perspective on the events and situations that we witness, and how we act in response to them. In the non-technical sense of the term, our point of view on things has thus a moral dimension. Action in a literal sense is not an option when we are reading a book or watching a film, but to the extent that imaginative involvement in art hones our powers of moral discrimination, the form of our metaphorical positioning with regard to what we read, or view in the cinema, has moral significance. A scene in a film involving the murder of a woman by a man can be experienced by a male viewer in very different ways. Is he led to feel the horror of the event and to experience vicariously the terror and suffering of the woman? Is he, alternatively, invited to experience the perhaps perverted pleasure attributed by the film to the murderer? Or is he perhaps encouraged not to empathize with either character, but to follow the scene in a more distanced and intellectual manner? Whose eyes do we see through? These are crude alternatives, but even expressed in such an unsophisticated manner one can see that the choice of a point of view, a proffered narrative perspective, has major implications of both a technical and a moral character.

Michael Powell's 1960 film *Peeping Tom* raises these issues in a stark way. A film about a man who films women while murdering them and

which seems more concerned to direct the audience's sympathy towards the murderer than towards his victims can hardly expect to escape censure, and indeed it seriously damaged its director's career and destroyed that of its writer. Publicity for the film unambiguously invited the audience to indulge a salacious voyeurism in watching the film: one publicity poster pictured the doomed first victim Dora staring at the camera/murderer, accompanied by the text: 'Can you see yourself in this picture? Can you see yourself facing the terror of a diabolical killer? Can you guess how you'd look? You'll live that kind of excitement, suspense, horror, when you watch "Peeping Tom"'. The publicity text is clearly concerned to prepare viewers to adopt unusual points of view, but revealingly it hedges its bets with regard to *whose* point of view can be expected to be thrust on the viewer. 'Can you guess how you'd look' has a sort of double purchase, inviting a woman to imagine what she would look like as victim, while inviting a man to imagine looking *at* a female victim. The words 'excitement, suspense, horror' also seem to offer the chance to experience vicariously emotions associated both with crazed killer and terrified victim.

But if the publicity dangles the prospect of a sort of sensationalist voyeurism in front of the prospective viewer, the film itself also explores voyeurism. Leo Marks the screenwriter, who had been a coding expert during the war, was fascinated by Freud (who once visited his parents' bookshop), and originally proposed to Director Powell a 'biopic' of Freud (Christie 1994, 85). According to Marks, 'The greatest code of all was the unconscious, and Freud appeared to have deciphered it. Perhaps not accurately, altogether, but what an attempt he'd made!' For Marks, 'whilst psychotherapy is the study of the secrets a person keeps from him or herself, codes are the study of secrets nations keep from each other' (1998, xii). The film and the published screenplay are full of reference to 'keys', and a psychologist in the film talks of the murderer's scotophilia. There is no doubt that the film does at times attempt to get the viewer to adopt the perspective of sympathetic analyst of the murderer in the film; his murderous voyeurism is related to a conventionally Freudian view of the effects of childhood trauma.

One unfortunate aspect of this is that readings of the film can easily slip from interpretation to decoding, uncovering precisely those Freudian meanings that screenwriter Leo Marks put into his script in a circular cycle of transformations. But to bring a critical and morally alert intelligence to bear on the film we need to go beyond the clues to be found in the film's screenplay, and to look at the positioning of the viewer by the whole range of filmic techniques that the director makes use of.

### *The opening scene*

The opening of *Peeping Tom* is cinematically highly crafted. First we are presented with the names of the producers against a neutral background, and then with a realistic archery target coloured like an RAF roundel with concentric circles of red (outside) white, and blue (centre), into which a number of arrows have already been fired. ('The Archers' was the name given to the production company formed by the collaboration of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, so that this shot has iconic and intertextual-generic significance.) The brief sequence opens as a close-up with only the centre of the target visible, but the camera then pans backwards to reveal the whole of it. The twang of a bowstring and the swish of the arrow then accompany the image of an arrow which is fired into the centre of the bull. After a few seconds the words 'A Michael Powell production' appear on screen bottom left. After a half fade we then cut suddenly to the image of a closed right eye. Almost immediately it jerks open, filling the screen as did the target. The eye is blue, like the centre of the target into which the arrow has been fired (a duplication that reinforces a sense of the eye's vulnerability). The sudden opening of the eye suggests surprise or fear – a suggestion underwritten by a dramatic double chord on the film's sound track. The first chord is struck while the eye is closed, the second, which modulates upwards, after it has been opened. In spite of the expectations raised by the film's title, this brief opening shot strongly evokes a sense of the eye of the observed rather than that of the observing person. Something has shocked the possessor of this eye, perhaps something represented by or simultaneous to the first dramatic chord on the soundtrack: the eye is not narrowed in a manner suggestive of surveillance, but wide in the manner of a scared potential prey. It appears too to be the eye of a woman: something that suggests not a Peeping Tom but his traditional victim. As Carol J. Clover aptly remarks, 'In case we doubted which of the eye's two operations *Peeping Tom* wishes to privilege in its analysis of horror cinema, this opening minute spells it out: not the eye that kills, but the eye that is "killed".'

There is a sense in which this very brief scene (which, like the film's final shot, is never given intradiegetic anchoring or correlated with the rest of the film's action), serves nonetheless as a sort of ideological establishing shot. Traditionally an establishing shot is, as Frank Beaver has it, 'A shot that establishes the location of a film story or scene' (1994, 134). Here however it is not so much physical or geographical location as ideological

positioning or point of view that is established. We look at a woman's eye opening in apparent terror in response to a perceived threat.

The eye appears to be looking into the camera, although it is hard to be absolutely sure; ascertaining eye focus and direction is hard when one is faced with one eye rather than two, and without being able to correlate eye movement with head inclination. Indeed it is not easy quickly to establish whether it is the right or the left eye on the screen; in the cinema this may be impossible. The pupil also makes small flickering movements, suggesting that it is not fixedly focussed upon one stationary object. So that although the eye does indeed seem to be focussed upon camera, it is not necessarily the case that the effect is, as Reynold Humphries claims, that of making spectators 'suddenly finding themselves being looked at' (1995, 40); the primary effect is that of allowing us to observe the eye of a woman frightened by something that is not us. It is, after all, worth asking why Powell focusses in on one eye rather than on a pair of eyes: the immediate answer is that this enables him to establish a parallel with the archery target. More generally, however, it is possible to surmise that this sense of not being sure whether we are being looked at helps to establish the ambiguity at the heart of voyeurism: the voyeur both wants to be invisible *and* to have his identity confirmed in interaction. Thematically, then, this opening sequence introduces the notion of an economy of gazing which is asymmetrical: we observe from a position of power, no threat is directed against us. At the same time, no recognition of our own humanity is vouchsafed by the observed eye. At its most extreme: we are invited to enjoy observing a fear that we have not caused and can not alleviate.

The film now moves directly into the first dramatic scene in which the murderer Mark encounters, then murders, the prostitute Dora. After a brief shot showing a cine-camera concealed at chest level behind the duffel coat of the (as yet anonymous) Mark, we switch to something akin to subjective camera as we follow what we assume is being filmed by this intradiegetic camera. I say 'something akin to', because we see the cross of the viewfinder imposed on what is in front of us, so that although Dora in one sense appears to look at, and talk to, 'us', 'we' are looking through the viewfinder of a camera she cannot as yet see, and through which no-one is actually looking. The effect is thus like subjective camera but with a weird distancing effect. The viewer cannot sink into the fantasy that he or she is in the world of the film, being addressed by Dora, because we are presumably seeing something that the still anonymous Mark is not seeing in quite the same form, as we know that he cannot be looking through the

camera's viewfinder. This particular ciné camera has to be held at eye-level for the viewfinder to be used; moreover, Mark cannot be looking through the viewfinder at the start of the encounter, otherwise Dora would notice this and not be shocked later on when she becomes aware of the camera. Thus although Kaja Silverman is correct to state that Mark's relation with the women he murders is mediated by his camera, she is in error when she states that 'from the moment that he first sights one of them as a bridge to phallic identification, he never looks away from the viewfinder' (1988, 33) – both with regard to Dora and, subsequently, also to his later victims Vivian and Milly.

Once the two have reached her bedroom and she has started undressing, Dora does notice what Mark is doing after he has turned to his bag, retrieved something, and has started to project a light on to her face, and we may be expected to assume that at this point he is holding the camera up to his face. It is worth stressing that prior to Dora's awareness of what Mark is doing, this opening sequence places the viewer in what, were the scene to be treated as 'realistic', is a disturbingly double (or ambiguous) relationship to what is displayed. Our point of view is in one sense human: Dora appears to be looking at and talking to Mark/us, but 'we' are represented by a lens of which she is at least initially unaware. In another sense, however, our point of view is non-human (we are seeing through a viewfinder that no one is looking through, so that when Mark projects his film later on we see the captured events for the second time, but he sees them *in this form* for the first time). Although this precise perspective is not repeated later in the film (we do have shots which appear to be taken through the camera viewfinder, but they represent what Mark is actually seeing), it sets a particular distasteful 'tone': we follow Mark's watching, but without feeling a close identification with him.

This sense of seeing from someone's perspective without seeing through their eyes is one of the things that makes this opening sequence so very disturbing. On the one hand it invites the use of words such as 'vicarious' and 'voyeurism', but on the other hand it does have a defamiliarising effect, forcing the viewer to, as it were, *see* the voyeur while *being* the voyeur. Dora's bemusement followed by terror is offered up to 'us' to witness and experience, and 'we' indeed appear to be addressed as the source of her fear, but at the same time 'we' are not Mark, so we are not accountable for what she suffers. We are offered the chance to be surrogates for Mark, without responsibility for what he does. 'We', in fact, are not even a person (Mark) at the start of the scene; we are only a

camera, filming with no-one looking through the viewfinder. What then this opening sequence does, among other things, is to combine and confuse points of view so as to present the viewer with the voyeuristic experience in its impossibly purest form. We see without being there. We are both the murderer causing Dora to react in terror, and also the empty space behind the viewfinder. We are powerful and feared, and absent and impotent.

Reynold Humphries has interpreted this opening sequence in a slightly different way. He has argued that because Dora looks the viewer straight in the eye (in his words, 'the woman's look is on the same level as that of the camera, whereas we know from Shot 3 that the camera is hidden on the level of the man's waist'), and because Dora is unaware of the existence of the camera, 'only one interpretation is possible: it is the camera of *Peeping Tom* and not the man's camera which allows this exchange of looks, which is thus an exchange between spectator and prostitute' (1995, 44). But if the camera is as he suggest, 'the camera of *Peeping Tom* and not the man's', then why do we see the cross of the viewfinder imposed upon the screen? And why when Mark replays his film, is Dora looking straight at him/us as she does while Mark is filming? I agree with Humphries that this scene presents the viewer with an interpretative problem: on a realistic level, it provides us with contradictory information. For if Dora were unaware of Mark's camera, she would not be looking at it (i.e. at Mark's chest or stomach rather than at his eyes). But this is not the only such contradiction in *Peeping Tom*: as I will argue below, another one is when we appear to be watching Vivian seconds before her death through Mark's camera, at which she is looking, although this time we do *not* see the viewfinder cross although what we see during this second murder sequence shares an identical camera point of view with Mark's later projection of his filming of this scene.

### *Realism and the conventional*

'Contradictions' such as this have to be understood at least in part in terms of filmic conventions. When we move from shot to reverse shot of a dialogue between two people we can work out that the scene must have been shot twice, because we never catch sight of the 'other' camera. But this is not how we read, or are meant to read, such a scene. Similarly, when Dora looks us in the eye, in a frame that includes a viewfinder cross, I suspect that few spectators respond: 'That's impossible!'. How viewers read this scene can only be guessed at on the basis of one's own responses. I

suspect that most viewers live through what is an impossible experience in the real, extra filmic world, while retaining a shadowy and disturbing-defamiliarising sense that it *is* impossible. After all, we are looking from a concealed viewpoint but we are simultaneously being acknowledged, interacted with. And it is this contradiction that is precisely the impossible wish of the voyeur: to combine invisibility, invulnerability and power with human interaction. It is important for director Powell to place the viewer in the situation of experiencing being looked at by Dora, placed in a position in which we appear to be recognized by Dora and sharing what we assume to be *Mark's* rather than *his camera's* viewpoint, while at the same time enjoying the security and voyeuristic privilege of being given access to the eye of a hidden camera. In this opening scene we are given what for the voyeur is the best of both worlds: complete secrecy along with human interaction and recognition of our own existence. The important point, I think, is that the film offers members of the cinema audience exactly that illusory and impossible combination of perspectives that the Peeping Tom yearns for: on the one hand anonymity and symbolic power through undetected observation, and on the other hand interaction and existential recognition. The offer is made only to be rescinded, however. It is clearly revoked later on during Mark's screening of the film, when we watch Mark from the back, watching the film (remember that when the film was first shown almost everyone in the cinema will have had someone behind him/her, watching *them* watch Mark watch the film . . .).

In the earlier of his two articles on *Peeping Tom*, Reynold Humphries has demonstrated that in this film the unacknowledged conventions that guide and construct our viewing are defamiliarised and foregrounded at crucial points in the film. One particularly important insight of Humphries involves a brief moment in the opening sequence of the film when Mark approaches so close to the extradiegetic camera – what Humphries refers to as ‘the camera of the *énonciation*’ – that his screen image is blurred. This blurring draws the attention of the viewer to the existence of an extradiegetic camera, and this along with the sense that we can now be looked at by Mark's intradiegetic camera unsettles our sense of voyeuristic invulnerability. What we see is no longer the result of the observation of an invisible eye, but of the operation of a very physical camera, one subject to the laws of physics. Because our point of view is thereby physically anchored in the film's diegesis, it can be observed, and as Humphries notes, we ‘are now looked at by Mark's camera, i.e., our look is no longer safe, we are the object of a look and our unity is

disrupted' (1979, 194). This unsettling of our sense of an invulnerable, invisible extradiegetic perspective continues, according to Humphries, through the film. In the scene during which Mark films the police as they take away Dora's body, for example, Humphries shows how the cutting between intra- and extradiegetic cameras again makes the viewer aware of the existence of the normally 'invisible' camera. As I will argue below, such disorienting and defamiliarising effects are compounded in the long scene with Vivian, where we are shown an additional intradiegetic camera as well as Mark's. What is important, however, is Humphries's conclusion:

Thus the film achieves three things here: it reinforces identification (Mark's point of view = the spectator's point of view) and undermines it on another level (Mark's point of view  $\neq$  that of the director of *Peeping Tom*). Given these two elements, a third comes into play: when the spectator does not see via the camera of the *énoncé*, he/she cannot but see via that of the *énonciation*. There are therefore two cameras involved, but they are not filming the same thing all the time and one 'depends' on the other. (1979, 195)

The conclusion is important, I think, because by undermining the audience's voyeuristic activity the film draws attention to the contradiction at the heart of voyeurism itself: the simultaneous desire for both distance and involvement, for invisibility and human recognition and acknowledgement. Humphries also draws attention to a comparable unsettling effect in the screening of Mark's father's film, when the young Mark turns his newly acquired camera (the acquisition of paternal authority) on to the camera of the father, and thus on to Mark's tenant Helen (who is watching the projected film), and on to us, too.

For her, it is too much and she asks Mark to stop the film. Her voyeuristic status is even more clearly revealed to her than at the point where he started to set up his camera to film her. Now the screen is doing what it is not meant to do: it is looking back at her/us, returning her/our look, showing itself to be the Real that is beyond our grasp, outside the realm and reach of desire, what we thought we could grasp in reality and quite unproblematically; that imaginary unity into which we re-inscribe ourselves anew with every film-going experience is split apart. (1979, 198)

The viewer's complex and contradictory experiences during the film's opening sequence are founded upon assumptions that have to be established very rapidly as this opening scene develops. The shot showing the camera inside Mark's duffel coat is not included in Leo Marks's



screenplay, and had the film not included this shot then the viewer would be led to assume that Mark is filming while looking through the viewfinder. Moreover, the control of the camera suggests the control of someone able to see what he is filming – especially in its final zoom forward closer and closer to Dora's face, a movement which even on first viewing we may assume accompanies some sort of threat. (The final shot in the 'live' scene is of Dora's face filling the screen with her eyes almost shut in terror, but when we watch the same events in Mark's replayed film immediately afterwards, the final shot is of Dora's open, screaming mouth, which this time fills both Mark's and our screen: her eyes are not to be seen.)

There is of course a point at which realistic assumptions cease to be appropriate to this sort of analysis. In 'real life' a camera with no eye at the viewfinder could not film as accurately as does the camera in this scene, but to object to the film on this basis would be to ignore the way in which cinematic conventions control the way in which the audience reads this scene. The typical viewer responds to this scene, one suspects, just as he or she was presumably intended to: vicariously sharing Mark's experience of first meeting the unsuspecting Dora and then observing her terror as she is murdered (a terror that seems aimed at and caused by the observer) – while also knowing that Mark is also capturing this sequence of events on film. Nevertheless, the contradiction that exists at the diegetic level in this scene (Dora is looking both at the camera and at Mark) is crucial to the film's exploration of the experience of voyeurism, for this 'impossible' unifying of the unseen camera and the seen eyes represents the impossible dream of the voyeur: to watch while hidden and unperceived and at the same time to be interacted with, to exchange intimate recognition of self with another. Most important: this uniting of mutually exclusive points of view has a defamiliarising effect upon the audience, and this, it seems to me, is of *moral* significance.

Up to the final few moments in this scene (that is, those following Mark's turning away from Dora and then turning back as he plays a light on her face), Dora certainly seems unaware of the camera, so that the effect of the scene is partly that of making the viewer a concealed observer of *both* Mark and Dora, an effect confirmed when we immediately proceed to a scene subsequent to the murder in which we are placed behind Mark, watching him watch Dora's projected image on screen. At the same time, because we know that no-one within the film's diegesis can be seeing, or could see, exactly what we are seeing (Dora *and* the viewfinder cross) because the viewfinder cross would not be visible when the film is projected, there is a strong sense of *staging* in this scene, one buttressed by

the urgency of the soundtrack music, about which more will be said below. This is a *performance* arranged for us; its artifice reminds us, makes us conscious of the fact, that we are watching a film, not just in the sense that in the film's diegesis we are observing a process of filming, but more importantly that what we see and hear is being controlled and metaphorically orchestrated for us. We are invited to enjoy being a camera through which no-one is looking, we are invited to sink into the safe and surrogate fantasy world of the cinema, while having these experiences defamiliarised, deconstructed, laid bare. We are invited, in short, to luxuriate in the sensation of being a Peeping Tom while looking at the hopelessly impossible desire of the Peeping Tom. The film gives and the film takes away – but we retain a knowledge and understanding of what we have been both granted and deprived of.

Reynold Humphries has drawn attention to the fact that the projected film of Dora's murder which Mark is shown watching has been edited down from the film we see being made as we look at a screen containing the cross of Mark's viewfinder. As he notes, although the film lingers on the rubbish bin, it does not include a shot of the film packet being discarded, and the sequence on the stairs where he and we meet with a second woman who is coming down the stairs is also missing. Humphries argues that it cannot be Mark who is to be taken as the film's editor.

If he removes the sequence on the stairs, why keep the shot of the bin?  
As I have insisted, the shot remains held for several seconds, despite the fact that we do not see the box of film. There is no reason for this on the level of the *énoncé*, but once we foreground the role of editing as part of the *énonciation*, a coherent explanation is possible. (1995, 48)

Humphries's 'coherent explanation' falls into two parts: first that that experience of being treated by the woman descending the stairs as an object of contempt is removed for both Mark and for us, and second that it is redundant so far as the story goes: reaching the victim's bedroom and killing her are paramount. The spectator's desire to get to the essential thus has alarming repercussions for his/her viewing position(s). (1995, 48)

The cinema viewer is unlikely to be aware of these cuts on initial viewing, and is perhaps not intended to be so: in a private communication Reynold Humphries has suggested that we are dealing here with the working of unconscious coding: as a result of eliminating certain materials between the filmed and the projected scene, 'the film brilliantly gives the spectators what they want and what they are there for: 'to see the gory details and to *enjoy* them'. Thus the cuts are important not in spite of the

fact that they may not be noticed by the audience, but precisely *because of this fact*: they focus on Mark's and the (male) spectator's desire. The speeding-up of the sequence as projected by Mark helps to emphasize an element of sexual excitement, clearly displayed in him as he watches the film. And as has been noted, the projected film gives us both less (the cuts) and more (the final shot of Dora's screaming mouth) than the 'live' sequence. As to whether it is reasonable to assume that Mark may have edited his own film, I think that my primary response is that like the question of how many children Lady Macbeth has, this is not something that the viewer is encouraged to think about, as he or she is unlikely to notice the cuts. (Which does not, it should be stressed, mean that he or she is unaffected by them.) Nevertheless, the lingering shot of the rubbish bin does have thematic force, and Mark's interest in it could be given an intradiegetic explanation.

Comparison of Powell's film with Leo Marks's screenplay is interesting at this point. In the screenplay the woman descending the stairs (described by Humphries as a prostitute) is presented as follows.

A Woman with hair like a two-toned car comes down the stairs, winks at Dora – looks at us for a moment with great curiosity ...winks... then passes out of camera. (1998, 7)

The description actually gives greater backing to Humphries's description of her as a prostitute than does the filmed sequence, in which I had taken her expression of distasteful impatience to extend to Dora's profession and her client. Again in the screenplay, the cuts in the sequence are achieved by the screen's being obscured by Mark's head, but importantly the sequence of the woman on the stairs *is* included. Powell's compression of the sequence creates a greater urgency and suggestion of sexual excitement, and Humphries is certainly right that the exclusion of the sequence on the stairs – whether as a result of the editing activity of the intradiegetic Mark or the extradiegetic Powell – has the effect of removing both those elements which are unconnected to the murderous sexual chase, and also the descending woman's contemptuous gesture, a defamiliarising challenge to Mark's camera which threatens both his and our voyeuristic enjoyment. Before moving on from this quotation, it is worth noting Marks's use of 'us' rather than 'Mark'.

### *Watching watching*

A foregrounded playing around with reflexive processes of double observation recurs throughout *Peeping Tom*. Mark's father films the young

Mark watching a couple embrace (and the young Mark is played by director Michael Powell's own son – so that the representation of a father filming his son involves a father filming his son); Mark wishes to film Helen watching a film of himself ('wanted to photograph you watching'); Mark explains to Vivian that he is 'photographing you photographing me'; Mark is watched by a detective as he himself observes Helen leaving work; and as he arranges his own death he says of the cameras he has set to film his own death: 'Watch them Helen, watch them say good-bye!'. The repetitive pattern cannot but remind the viewer that he or she is *also* watching someone watching someone: Kaja Silverman has suggested that on a general level, 'obsessive self-referentiality works to uncover the pathology of male subjectivity', and that

*Peeping Tom* gives new emphasis to the concept of reflexivity. Not only does it foreground the workings of the apparatus, and the place given there to voyeurism and sadism, but its remarkable structure suggests that dominant cinema is indeed a mirror with a delayed reflection. It deploys the film-within-a-film trope with a new and radical effect, making it into a device for dramatizing the displacement of lack from the male to the female subject. (1988, 32)

Certainly those scenes of the film which take place in a fictionalised film studio during the production of the intradiegetic *The Walls are Closing In* have a strongly reflexive quality, allowing us to watch the intradiegetic director Arthur Baden watching the scene that he is creating for an intradiegetic audience, a scene that comprises part of another scene which is what the actual director Michael Powell has created for us. Like the players' scene in *Hamlet* the reflexive quality of such strategies of duplication has an alienating effect, causing us to be aware of the cinema's artifices. As a result, one can isolate two opposing forces in *Peeping Tom*. On the one hand, a set of filmic conventions that from the first shot of the jerked-open eye onwards encourage us to situate ourselves with regard to the depicted action as uninvolved observers – voyeurs. On the other hand, a set of self-reflexive elements that make us conscious of our own voyeuristic activity and of the existential impoverishment and potential violence it carries with it.

The challenges to the audience's voyeuristic enjoyment in *Peeping Tom* are generally indirect and implicit rather than overt and explicit. If for example we compare the film's final scene with that in Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 film *Rear Window*, we can note that although there are clear parallels between the two scenes – the main male character's space is invaded, a

camera is used as or mistaken for a weapon – the manner in which the viewer is situated with regard to the diegesis in the two works is quite different. In *Rear Window* it is as if murderer Lars Thorwald is threatening us, invading the space (first visually, then physically) which stands for the cinema auditorium. When the door bursts open, we are facing it from Jeff's perspective, Thorwald is bearing down upon us. When the door is battered down by the police in *Peeping Tom* the camera is standing to one side, allowing us to watch Helen and Mark as the police rush over to them. We witness the scene neither from the perspective of the police nor from that of either Mark Lewis or Helen. The camera at this point is like the teacher of languages in the confession scene in Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* (1911): an unobserved observer. But if the viewer of *Peeping Tom* is repetitively situated as unobserved observer, he or she is also repetitively reminded of the fact. Thus at the very end of the film, the shot of the blank screen-within-a-screen, a shot which comes just prior to the cinema audience being faced with an actual rather than a depicted blank screen, causes us to recognize parallels between our situation in the cinema and Mark's situation in the diegesis. Time and time again we are granted the experience of being a voyeur, only to be forced to observe – our own observing.

The scene in the film studio leading up to Vivian's murder is also worthy of note in this respect. If we follow this scene from Vivian's attending to her makeup alone in the dressing room, we can follow a series of shifts of perspectival positioning. In the dressing room the soundtrack is strictly intradiegetic: natural noises, voices from outside, and the music which ostensibly emanates from Vivian's portable tape recorder. The camera pans and cuts to follow Vivian as she hides from the security guard, then slips out along the corridor and into the studio, but our attention is focussed on her and not on camera technique, which is such as to render itself invisible to the spectator. Then as she enters the studio the camera cuts from a close, sideways-on angle, to a high shot down. In retrospect (and perhaps in prospect, as hypothesis) we may see this particular shot as representative of Mark's viewpoint, as he eventually appears high up on a hoist. But there is no sense at this point that camera angle and movement, or cutting, have any intradiegetic anchoring; technique does not draw attention to itself, but encourages the viewer to concentrate upon Vivian and her situation from a spectatorial and uninvolved position. We are encouraged to adopt the familiar role of cinematic voyeur. As Vivian moves into what appears to be an inner studio, she starts to call Mark's name. He does not answer, but arc lamps are switched on, one at a time.

As each lamp is switched on, a jarring chord on the soundtrack – clearly this time *extradiegetic* – signals 'surprise', and Vivian looks appropriately shocked and disturbed. The conventional element in this use of the soundtrack to accentuate suspense represents a significant transition here, from a soundtrack which is ostensibly *intradiegetic* to one which is clearly *extradiegetic* (the chords have no realistic source within the world of the scene). It is at this point that our sense of staging is strongest: the film at this point conforms to the conventions of a thriller, in which sudden and unexpected sounds and images cause the viewer to duplicate that tension and fear that is being represented by one or more characters. The sudden chords may of course be conventionally interpreted as transpositions or displacements of the successive shocks experienced by Vivian as one by one the lights are illuminated, but they also serve as strong generic markers, causing the viewer to entertain expectations appropriate to the genre suspense/horror film. And of course in shocking the audience, they evoke empathy between viewer and Vivian: we experience what she is portrayed as experiencing.

### *Sound and diegesis*

Familiar cinematic conventions work so as to cause the viewer automatically and unconsciously to interpret particular aspects of a film soundtrack as overt markers of the subjective experience of characters, and indeed there is one fine example of this elsewhere in the film: when Mark is watching the film of Vivian's murder, the urgent background piano music already associated with murderous sexual and voyeuristic excitement in him is played, but when he hears a knock on the door (it is Helen) and switches off his projector, the music stops abruptly at exactly the moment that he switches off the film, as it does, too, in a later sequence when Helen makes Mark switch off the projector. It seems clear at this point that this music is the external marker of sexual excitement in Mark, one which displays rather than comments upon his subjective state. Thus the viewer's understanding of the significance of this music develops in the course of the film; it is first heard during the film's main credits, which are run after the scene in which Dora is murdered, beginning as Mark watches the film that he took of Dora. The sense of urgency, crescendo and climax in the music, accompanying Mark as he watches the film (as Reynold Humphries points out, 'The fact that the man rises from his chair as the woman undresses and sinks back into it as she dies is an obvious moment of *jouissance*' [1995, 49]), and the strong culminating chords suggestive of

closure as the film ends on Dora's open mouth, all encourage the viewer to read the music as a depiction or 'objective correlative' of Mark's increasing sexual excitement and climax. Then when Helen first enters Mark's dark-room, and she asks to see the film that he has just been looking at, Mark picks up the film which, we know, shows the police removing Dora's body, and the recognizable piano music starts in a slower, more reflective form, but stops when Mark on second thoughts returns the film to the cupboard. On its first use in the film, then, this piano music is given a double identity: accompanying the credits and so extradiegetic, yet associated with Mark's voyeuristic replaying of his film and so betokening his perverted sexual excitement, and thus in a sense intradiegetic. But as scene follows scene, and especially after the music stops when Mark switches off the projector subsequent to hearing the knocking on the door, the music increasingly tends to be read more as a marker of Mark's dark subjectivity and less as extradiegetic accompaniment.

To a much more limited extent this can also be said of the dramatic chords that accompany the switching on of the arc lights in the deserted film studio – they represent subjective shock experiences in Vivian while at the same shocking us and thus allowing us to empathize with her. But their more familiar and conventional nature also brings a greater sense of staging to the scene, more of a sense of an extradiegetic controlling organization, which is not there in the scene in which Mark is watching his film.

### *Blindness and insight*

The scene in which Mark shows Helen his father's films of himself falls in between these examples: the piano music comes to a sudden dramatic climax on two occasions: first when the lizard is dropped on the young Mark's bed, and second when Mark shocks Helen by revealing that the woman whose arms are seen in his film is his (dead) mother.<sup>1</sup> In both cases it can be argued that although the mood-changes signalled by the music represent an objectification of subjective experiences, first the young Mark's and subsequently Helen's, the music has more of an extradiegetic feel to it than it does in the earlier scene where Mark is watching his film alone. The music is repeated again while pictures of the development of

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<sup>1</sup> Mark's gift of an 'insect' brooch to Helen seems intended to replay this horrifying scene in a revised form that renders it safe and thus undoes the previous trauma. The brooch is however shaped not like a lizard (as Kaja Silverman claims: 1988, 35) but a dragonfly.

the film of Vivian's murder are being shown – pictures which are cut to, and imposed as double exposures upon, the pictures of Mark and Helen at the restaurant. And the music is again repeated when Mark projects this film depicting Vivian's horrified face in the presence of the blind Mrs Stephens (leading to one of the most striking visual effects of the film when that part of the frame projected on to Mrs Stephens's body produces an image which resembles a skull, the clearest point at which the association between representation and death is made).

Linda Williams has noted that 'many of the "good girl" heroines of the silent screen were often figuratively, or even literally, blind', and she suggests that one of the ways that female blindness functions in classical narrative cinema is to allow 'the look of the male protagonist to regard the woman at the requisite safe distance necessary to the voyeur's pleasure, with no danger that she will return that look and in so doing express desires of her own' (1984, 83). Mark does not kill Mrs Stephens, although it appears that he is preparing to do so, and we are led to surmise that this is because he cannot see fear in her eyes, nor can he reflect her own terrified eyes back for her to witness. Thus although Williams's point seems essentially correct, Mark's need for his victims to see is a perverted recognition of the fact that their inability to see him would (and does) ignore his existential needs and rights just as he ignores theirs. Generally speaking one would assume that a blind woman would represent an ideal target for a Peeping Tom, allowing more extensive unobserved observation than in the case of a sighted individual. The fact that Mark's psychosis cannot operate with the blind Mrs Stephens suggests that he is portrayed as more than simple Peeping Tom.

### *Cameras and points of view*

In the climactic scene immediately prior to Vivian's murder there are at least three anchor points which serve to determine the viewer's perspective. First there is (a) the extradiegetic camera (actually cameras, as we cut between different angles), filming first Vivian and then Mark and Vivian, ostensibly invisible to them and representing no intradiegetic presence. Next there is (b) the studio camera through which Vivian looks, and through which on occasions the viewer may imagine that he or she is looking. And then there is (c) Mark's own ciné-camera, the one with which he actually films Vivian's death. In the closing seconds of this scene it is not always clear whether we are being given (a) or (c). Shots of Mark



filming are clearly from the perspective of (b), as we see his own camera from an angle incompatible with that of the observed studio camera. And early shots of Mark filming Vivian are clearly seen 'through' the lens of his own camera, as we see the cross of the viewfinder. But later head-on shots of Vivian give the impression of being seen from the perspective of Mark's camera, although Vivian is actually looking (I think) very slightly to our left. As the knife-ended tripod leg is held in Mark's left hand we may assume that it is this that fixes her gaze, and that this is why her eyes are not pointed directly at the lens. We can indeed see the shadowy tripod leg along with what we may later assume is the attached mirror, the 'something else' mentioned by Mark, although side-on shots of the blade-carrying leg do not reveal it. But, paradoxically, although we do not see the cross of his camera viewfinder as we have earlier in this scene and in the film's opening sequence, our perspective seems so close to that of Mark's own camera that although logically the perspective would seem to be (a), the viewer does I think assume that it is actually (c). Although the cross disappears from the viewfinder in this reading, Mark's chalking of a cross on the floor to mark the spot on which he wishes Vivian to stand may be taken as some sort of wish to transfer that reality that he observes through his viewfinder on to the world outside the camera. When she does stand in the allotted space, Vivian obscures the cross (which is proleptically the cross over her grave); her presence thus deletes the reminder that we are seeing through Mark's viewfinder, so that the subsequent absence of the viewfinder cross seems oddly appropriate. This invisibility of the viewfinder cross captures Mark's subjective experience of the scene: for him the camera is invisible, just as it will be when he views the film that he is taking. Also important is the fact that in the closing seconds of this scene, after Mark has said, 'There's something else', the soundtrack restarts the 'dramatic' music, warning the audience of the impending dramatic climax and increasing our sense both of Mark's growing sexual excitement and also of the managed nature of the presentation.

It is hard to be definite concerning the precise results of such a mix of elements, but my own response to the film suggests to me that during this scene we never simply feel either that we are seeing and experiencing from the perspective of one of the characters, or that the scene has been staged for us. Generally our sense is of a transparent narrative that allows us to observe from a neutral and extradiegetic position, but this sense is on occasions coloured by an impression of staging which is undoubtedly called up by the dramatic chords, the

extradiegetic music, and the final climax shot of a blood-red arc light. Only at the close of the scene are we placed precisely in Mark's position, looking with him through his viewfinder. My assumption is that the absence of the viewfinder cross is something of which the audience is unaware given the dramatic nature of the sequence, and Powell may indeed have chosen to omit the cross so as to increase the dramatic impact of the scene, so as to focus on Vivian-being-frightened-of-Mark rather than on Vivian-being-filmed. It is also the case that the film's relentless and repetitive portrayal of processes of reflexivity produces a constant sense of multiple meaning that is in tension with our experience of being an uninvolved observer of a realistic sequence of actions.

All of these elements *prior* to the final shots of the terrorized Vivian release strong generic expectations which dilute our sense of a realistic scene and thus cause us to distance ourselves from the characters and lessen our involvement with their fate. Another way of expressing this would be to suggest that these elements heighten the voyeuristic element in our experience of the scene, because the generic markers increase our sense that 'it is only a film'. The scene also invites voyeuristic engagement because our looking does not mirror anyone's looking in the film's diegesis – which would counter our sense of unobserved watching and give us a greater sense of vulnerability – but neither do we feel the strong presence of an organizing intelligence with a design upon us, something that again would reduce that sense of privacy and secrecy central to the experience of the voyeur. (The organizing intelligence is of course there, but because it is dissolved into the fluid movements of the extra-diegetic camera to which our attention is not drawn, its conventional nature renders it invisible to us.) But at the end of the scene our placement changes: we are in the scene, being looked at and responded to by Vivian, we are Mark. This movement from invisibility and non-existence to object of fear brings together the two aspects of the Peeping Tom's desire: to be safe, invulnerable, private, and to be responded to. The fact that these two aspects are irreconcilable is *not* foregrounded to the same extent at this point, indeed by allowing the viewer to experience them successively rather than simultaneously, it is concealed.

In this scene, then, the film presents the (male) viewer with a double sense of invading a privacy. We are first positioned to invade Vivian's privacy by voyeuristically observing her when she believes herself to be alone, and then we both watch and partake in Mark's invading of Vivian's privacy in the most brutal manner possible.

## *Defamiliarising voyeurism*

If I am right, then the extent to which *Peeping Tom* is filmed in such a way as to encourage especially the male viewer to become aware of his voyeuristic tendencies varies from scene to scene. But even in scenes in which the defamiliarising process is less apparent, the *cumulative* force of the shifts of point of view is generally destabilising. The viewer is made a self-conscious voyeur while watching a film about a self-conscious voyeur.

Such reflexive parallels might be felt to underwrite the attempt to garner sympathy for Mark Lewis, especially as little attempt is made to evoke the viewer's compassion for either Dora or Milly – although some such attempt is perhaps made in the case of Vivian. Interviewed by Chris Rodley, Leo Marks denied that the similarity between his name and that of Mark Lewis was deliberate or significant (from a man who used to set the *Times* crossword this is not wholly convincing, especially as the name he gives the director *in* the film – Arthur Baden – is obviously an in-joke, suggesting a link with the director *of* the film Michael Powell through the name of founder of the boy scouts Lord Baden-Powell), but he does link Mark to the cinema viewer.

I believe that the cinema makes voyeurs of us all. And I wanted to write a study of one particular voyeur, from a little boy to the time that he died. I wanted to show, visually, what made him a Peeping Tom, and scatter throughout that as many visual clues as I could find, in the hope that the audience would want to discover the clear text of this man's code for themselves. (1998, xx)

The comment seems almost divided against itself. On the one hand it suggests that in watching a film about a voyeur we will all become aware of our own voyeurism as film viewers. But on the other hand the comments about Mark Lewis here suggest that there is something special about *his* upbringing that has turned him (but not most people) into a Peeping Tom. In like manner, I feel that *Peeping Tom* is a film divided against itself. Aspects of the film are such as to encourage the viewer to relate his or her own cinematic watching to Mark Lewis's scopophilia, but other aspects discourage such a drawing of parallels.

If the viewer recognizes her- or (especially) himself in Mark Lewis, then coming to terms with this shared experience of being a voyeur should mean that understanding Mark Lewis will cause the audience to have greater insight into its own voyeuristic impulses and, conversely, that confronting the voyeuristic element in our cinematic experience will help

us to understand – and sympathize with – Mark Lewis. But if we see Mark Lewis as an isolated oddball, the one-off result of his father's perverted treatment of him in childhood, then we are unlikely to see similarities between his scopophilia and our cinematic viewing.

Our choice of interpretive strategy has, I think, much to do with the extent to which we recognise the ways in which *Peeping Tom* engages with what Elisabeth Bronfen has described as the 'perverse economy of gazing' in our society. For in spite of its moral and aesthetic lapses the film does uncover the violence implicit in the trade in representations of women's bodies. Although in one sense Dora, Vivian and Milly are on the margins of society, in another sense their trades symbolize structurally central elements in the Britain of 1960. I find it interesting to compare the tobacconist's shop in which Mark takes his pornographic photographs with the shop in which Mr. Verloc, the title-character in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), uses as front for his political spying. Both shops display pictures of naked and semi-naked women, and both shops – because they *are* shops, open to the general public – serve as points of contact between the taboo, the marginal, and the perverse on the one hand, and the public, the normal, and the respectable on the other.

The male viewer's intermittent identification with Mark Lewis is crucial, for it draws the men of a whole society into Mark's perverse economy of gazing. Even the way in which the film divides women into those who 'ask for it' and 'good girls' like Helen is deconstructed by the way in which Mark is connected to both: he is both charming dinner companion and shy conversationalist with Helen, and also murdering pervert with Dora, Vivian and Milly. The four women all play different parts in the same system, just as the prostitute in William Blake's poem 'London' is related to 'the marriage hearse'. It would be bizarre to categorize *Peeping Tom* as a feminist film, and yet it makes available insights central to that second wave of feminism that was to flourish at the end of the decade in which it was first shown. Before the arguments of second-wave feminists gained currency, the idea that prostitution, pornography, or even the work of the glamorous female film star were linked both symbolically and directly to structures of violence in society seemed absurd. And yet such a link is to be found clearly delineated in *Peeping Tom*. In this film, the fact that a man filming a woman is *literally* involved in violence against her has crucial *symbolic* force. We can note in passing that this same association of filming and violence is picked up in a work for which the term 'feminist' does not seem inappropriate – Margaret

Atwood's 1972 novel *Surfacing*, in which a husband who abuses his wife also forces her to perform naked while he and his partner film her.

### *Moral decisions*

In an interview first published in 1989 the American film director Martin Scorsese comments at length about the effect that *Peeping Tom* had on him when first he saw it in 1962. Summing up his view of the film, he states:

I have always felt that *Peeping Tom* and *8½* say everything that can be said about film-making, about the process of dealing with film, the objectivity and subjectivity of it and the confusion between the two. *8½* captures the glamour and enjoyment of film-making, while *Peeping Tom* shows the aggression of it, how the camera violates. (Thomson and Christie 1996, 18)

How is it, then, that the film caused such outrage on its first release? The answer may not be simple. On the one hand, there seems little doubt that the film does offer the male viewer the possibility of vicarious enjoyment of acts of voyeurism and violence against women. On the other hand the film's implicit association of this violence with wider patterns of accepted objectification of women seems to have challenged a conventional view of the murderer as other rather than as an extreme version of the accepted. And the attempt to *explain* the leading character's murderous second self certainly would have aroused the ire of those who believed that evil was *sui generis* and not accessible to analysis or explanation. I believe, too, that the very success of the film in allowing the male viewer (for a while) to voyeuristically enjoy the sadistic murder of women also came with a sting in the tail: the final view of Mark as pathetic and impotent carries the implication that the empathising male viewer was equally pathetic and impotent. The extremely complex movements of point of view in the film thus betray the male viewer into a knowledge of things about himself that he would rather not know.

A changed view of the film must also in part relate to a changed cultural context. Seen by viewers familiar with the arguments of feminists in the 1970s and the 1980s, the film is less sympathetic to a murderer and more critical of a culture. And that reminds us that point of view in a film or a novel can never do more than provide a point of departure for the reader's or viewer's own responses and interpretive processes.

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