

## Document Citation

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## **PIN TO SEE THE PEEPSHOW, A**

In its review of PEEPING TOM, the "Monthly Film Bulletin" with unexpected erudition, gives the precise De Sade references: "'120 Journées de Sodom', especially part IV, and the murderous passions numbers 41 and 46".

Michael Powell has never been too squeamish in creating clammy and sticky atmosphere in his films. "MFB" recalls for us the final bloodstained scenes of THE RED SHOES, and the character in A CANTERBURY TALE with a penchant for putting glue into the hair of Kentish maidens, and we might add the frustrated nuns of BLACK NARCIS-SUS or the clash between spiritual and carnal love in GONE TO EARTH, alone. Not that it would

be so difficult to give quite an account of violent moments in the British cinema, as in any other national cinema, if one cared to do so. All the same, PEEPING TOM is probably the classic of its genre, and by a most fortunate combination of talents, one of the best British films of recent years.

A pleasant air of comforting, healthy, realism surrounds the film which makes us clearly aware that in the midst of life, as it were, we are in perversion. From Brenda Bruce's prostitute's case-hardened "It'll be two quid", and her casual undressing at the beginning of the film, to Miles Malleon's portrayal of an elderly voyeur buying pornographic pictures under cover of educational books, we are thrust into a side of realism which makes Free Cinema's brand of reality look like — the cliché dies hard — expurgated Enid Blyton.

The script, by Leo Marks, is remarkably intelligent, and embodies almost certainly the most sophisticated monster plot ever devised. Poor, sad-eyed Mark Lewis (Leo Marks' name back to front?), perverted, via voyeurism by his sadistic father (=mad scientist) who uses him as a guinea-pig in his study of the psychology of fear and later scotophobia, has become obsessed with the lust to murder (=mad monster, a civilised werewolf). He protects his camera as if it were his virility, and examining the semi-nude inverted image of Pamela Green on a photographic plate taps his fingers in rhythm with Pam as she taps her behind. Worst of all, his method of killing is nothing if not original. "Do you know what the most terrifying thing in the world is?", he asks. The answer, no less, is fear itself. So Mark not only stabs his victims through the throat with the sharpened end of his phallic camera tripod leg, but he clips a mirror to the front of his camera for his victims to watch their own fear and death, at the same time as he makes a movie documentary with his phallic long mm. lens camera. Not that Mark doesn't realise the ultimate penalty for his form of perversion. The law is bound to catch up with him sooner or later. While illegally preparing to photograph a studio extra (Moira Shearer — a red-head. Michael Powell likes red-heads) a little while before plunging his tripod into her throat, he mentions "you stand to lose your job — I stand to lose nothing", and one tends to add with Hamlet, "except my life, except my life, except my life".

For all its sickness, and despite its undoubted and doubtful commercial intentions, PEEPING TOM is a sad and beautiful film. Part of its charm is that the characters are immensely sympathetic, and for part of the time, at least, it is not too difficult to identify with Mark. As such it is part of a tradition of the cinema to perform the all but impossible task of making us forgive and pity the sadist (viz. the child murderer in M (Lang and Losey versions), THE SNIPER, Jack the Ripper, or in a way, even GRIP OF FEAR). Undoubtedly this is partly through Carl Boehm's delicate portrayal of Mark and part of the exhilaration of the film is that we want to hate Mark for his victims' sakes, but cannot. Poor Mark is so desperately overshadowed by his father, whose influence he tries to, but cannot escape: it's his father's house, his father's laboratory, and as we shall see, his father's compulsions, which put him in



his present desperate position. When Mark seeks advice from a psychiatrist the man is only impressed by the achievements of Professor Lewis. And so to the sick ending, heard only as a recording from long ago: "Don't be a silly boy there's nothing to be afraid of", and the pity and tenderness of Mark's reply, "All right, daddy, hold my hand", as he joins his father in some sort of hell cum heaven where sad sadists go.

And for likeably characters, who's to beat Anna Massey's Helen Stephens (another red-head), who rents a flat in Mark's house and with whom Mark falls shyly and haltingly in love?: a warm sympathetic children's librarian, who panders to childish fantasies not by dropping lizards on beds as Mark's father had done, but by writing them fairy-tales. ("A scientist drops a lizard onto a child's bed and good comes of it?" she asks.)

Mark is no sheer sadist. He reacts to kindness, and the relationship between Mark and Helen is very touching — his sad, repulsive, perverted, replacement of Helen's kiss by a lens turret (lens fetishism is something new to me, but there is a weird scene in the otherwise "normal" *THE SAD YOUNG MEN*, where a girl substitutes her lover for a ciné camera), the sad dedication "from one magic camera who needs the help of another" left by Helen beside Mark's projector just before the end. And if you look for a message film, I think in *PEEPING TOM* you will find it in the perversity behind beauty, like the deformed lip on the face of the beautiful model Mark is one day sent to photograph — a theme explicit in *CIRCUS OF HORRORS*, another, though unimportant, Anglo stabbing film.

If you are alert to the signs, you will spot that Mark identifies Helen with his dead mother. There are at least two clues (as I recall it Mark puts his hand on Helen's shoulder at a crucial moment in a play-back of his old movies, and we are left in no doubt as to what he is thinking as he looks around his mother's room, now occupied by Helen.) Oedipus, in fact, plays an important role in *PEEPING TOM*. Hatred of father derives not only at resentment of the experiments, but at dad's treatment of mum. Mum obviously has little to say about the experiments on young Mark, and Mr. Lewis marries a sexy young thing only six weeks after his first wife's death. Obviously there is no love lost between Mr. and Mrs. Lewis, in fact for all we know dad might even have killed mum. Now here indeed is good reason for Mark to hate his father and love his mother. But here's something else. The first shot we see of Mark's step-mother is of Venus rising from the waves: an extremely buxom thing rushing out of the sea and bursting all out of her very brief bikini. She isn't so very much different from those photographic models Mark takes dirty pictures of in his spare time. "Look at the sea" says Mark to an astonished model (whom he later murders), and it isn't too much to imagine that he's having a (conscious or unconscious?) recall of something his father said to his new mother. So there's certainly something very odd going on: Mark identifies Helen with his real mother, and his victims — all sexually precocious in some way or another — with his

stepmother. In other words, Mark's oedipus complex takes on a dual role — respect for his real mother and Helen, oedipal sadism for his step-mother and his victims.

Significantly, Mark is not too fond of keys, an obvious phallic symbol. Helen, on the other hand, was given a massive key on her twenty-first birthday. As Mrs. Stephens, Helen's mother, says before packing her daughter upstairs to Mark's room: "We both have the key of the door — mine needs oiling, yours needs exercising". (It is doubtful whether Helen is a virgin, for when Mark, who has all the rooms wired for sound, plays back her old boy friend and neighbouring flat-dweller's taped seduction conversation, she seems mighty anxious to turn it off. And the feeling in the film is whether Helen is deceitful, like all women, unfaithful). At the end of the film, however, Mark is given a key by the owner of the dirty bookshop, who leaves him alone with a model to take some photographs. None of Mark's previous victims had been quite so sexually provocative as young Milly (Pamela Green), but his step-mother had gone one better, even a souped up Milly. And perhaps, as we have noticed, Mark had already identified Milly with step-mother when he told her to "look at the sea". Is it too much of a guess to say that at the last, and fittingly, Mark's compulsion was satisfied?

Appropriately enough, in a film about a peeping tom, the eyes have it. The opening shot is of an opening eye, and throughout the film the camera eye predominates. There is no need to elaborate on the phallic symbolism of the camera lens and tripod, and the Freudian overtones of the fact that Mark is a focus puller in a film studio are obvious. Helen's mother, who like Tiresias, senses that Mark isn't quite all right, is blind (in contrast with peeping tom), is an old woman (Mark Lewis is a young man), rough-tongued (v. soft-spoken Mark), drinks heavily, has a stick (v. Mark's tripod), and like Nemesis has an "all-seeing" eye. She is in fact the "witch" mother, or wicked stepmother-in-law: appropriately enough for the mother of a weaver of fairy-tales. It is little wonder that Mark is frightened by her, and the scene where he attempts to kill Mrs. Stephens in his dark room, but ends by fleeing from her, takes the form of a duel, a trial of strength. Going back to the Oedipus tack, it is worth remembering that Oedipus blinded himself, which makes Mark's awareness that he is a compulsive pervert (closely linked with camera-eye substitution for the penis) all the more ironic, for it relates with the lovely slow-motion shot of the pencils falling down from Mark's pocket (= castration) as he spies on the police investigating the extra's murder. All the same, it could be argued that Mark lost the effective use of his genital organs, long, long, ago. Scaring a child with a lizard is all very well, but it has its phallic significance. So too, in the context of a peeping tom, has shining a bright light into a child's eyes: the blinking brightness of the light, symbolically blinds and perverts to the camera eye. There is even room for a joke (in some ways *PEEPING TOM* is an immensely funny and cheerful film): when challenged with his camera Mark claims to represent "The Observer". (Later we are told





A peep at the export-strength version of "Peeping Tom".

about a pin-up 'photo that: "you don't get that in 'Sight and Sound'").

When we watch PEEPING TOM we are really watching four films. One is Mark's documentary. The other three are by three different directors, who are all really the same man. There is Mark's father who makes films of the experiments on Mark, and who is played by Michael Powell. There is the director at Mark's film studio (played by Esmond Knight) whose name is Arthur Baden = Baden-Powell = the man who looked after the welfare of little boys. And there is Michael Powell, the director of PEEPING TOM. The black and white films of the experiments on Mark as a child, like the "memory" shots in THE MIRACLE WORKER, remind us of Nazi film records. In THE MIRACLE WORKER, the concentration camps; in PEEPING TOM, appropriately enough, clinical experimentations. The present in colour versus the past in black and white is, in fact, the device used by Resnais in NUIT ET BROUILLARD. And when Dad in the movie, gives Mark a ciné camera as a present, a cut-in shot of the actual camera at rest, yet still existing today, reminds one of a concentration camp relic, an instrument of torture. The tape-recording machines in Mark's room, loaded with ghastly wails, screams, and whimpers have the same effect too. And the grim piano music which accompanies the "news-reel" shots, should make every NFT client think twice about the source of the pleasure he derives from silent retrospectives.

Actually, the problem in PEEPING TOM is to know who is the voyeur. Is it Mark? Or is it the victims who watch a movie of their own death? (You do see THE CONNECTION, don't you?). Or

is it us, the cinema audience? For Michael Powell often takes us behind Mark's camera, thus making voyeurs of us all. One might feel a little uneasy over Mark's dark room cum projection room, too, for, filled with all his atrocious documents, doesn't it represent the secret place for all our own secret, dark, perverted, thoughts? Magic mirror on the wall, who is the nastiest of us all? — it's folks like you and me, who came to see a film called PEEPING TOM... — IAN JOHNSON