

Peeping Tom:

WILLIAM JOHNSON

A SECOND LOOK

If I were forced, at the point of a sharpened tripod leg, to name the ten best films I have ever seen, that list would include *Peeping Tom*.

Since the film recently swung back into critical favor after many years in the wilderness, my judgment may seem hasty, a belated gesture of protest at the savagery of the British critics who, in 1960, made Powell unbankable.* On the contrary. Alerted by a friend in London who contributed to the British Film Institute's *Monthly Film Bulletin* (which replaced his favorable notice of *Tom* with a pan), I caught the film's 1962 New York "première"—at the bottom of a double bill in downtown Brooklyn—and was prepared only to call it the best horror film I had ever seen. By the end of the sixties, after several more viewings, the rating began to seem inadequate. But I did not raise it until my next viewing of *Tom*—in its original, untrimmed version at the 1979 New York Film Festival.†

Ironically, my reasons for admiring the film include the one for which it was most vilified. *Peeping Tom* presents a young cameraman who feels compelled to kill women and film their death agonies, and the 1960 critics were outraged at Powell's choice and handling of this Sadian theme.

Having become inured in the past two decades to seeing explicit sex and violence on the screen, viewers today are less likely to bridle at *Tom*'s subject matter. But Powell's sex and violence are explicit in a startling way—in fact, quite unlike the common implications of the term, since he achieves

*A few critics, such as Jean-Paul Török in France and, later, Raymond Durnat in England—did sound a more positive note. But they could not undo the damage caused by the reviewers in the big dailies and weeklies.

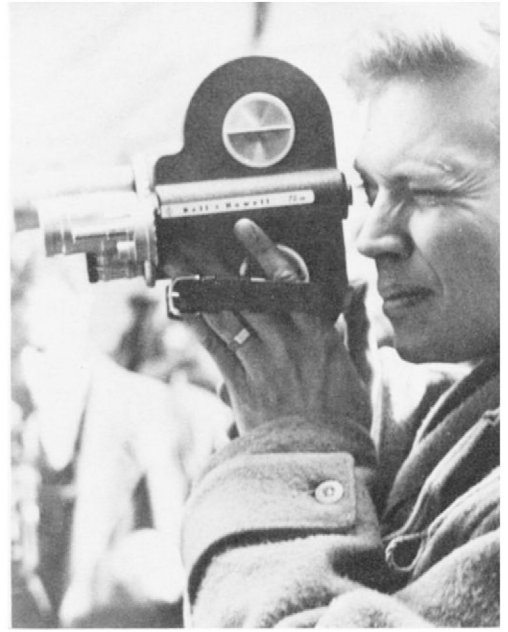
†The film's critical reception even today falls short of general acclaim. Thus Vincent Canby of *The New York Times* managed to dismiss it as "one of the limper suspense movies you've ever seen" and "an excruciatingly schematic, very solemn melodrama, quite badly acted by everyone."

it without showing naked bodies, passionate embraces, dismemberment or ripped flesh. The only time we see a moment of death—at the end, when Mark Lewis impales himself—the modest amount of blood revealed would raise no protests on TV's family viewing hour.* There is nothing coy or devious about this restraint. The title announces the sexual motive in Mark's behavior, and his first victim is a prostitute. From then on, when Mark raises one leg of his tripod and unsheathes the hidden blade, the viewer can hardly overlook its resemblance to a penis. Similarly, when innocent Helen gives Mark a chaste kiss, and he then places his lips on the lens of his Filmo, it's hard not to see the gesture as a kind of perverse fellatio. Scenes like these have a more disturbing power than pornography because they implicate the viewer, obliging him or her to complete the sexual metaphor.

This sense of complicity is strengthened in various ways. Mark, played superbly by Carl Boehm, is personable, gentle and shy; he can also be cool and decisive, especially when carrying out his compulsion to film-and-kill. In other words, he bears a strong resemblance to the familiar type of movie hero who appears at first as an easygoing *naif* but reveals toughness under pressure—like James Stewart as the socially acceptable voyeur in *Rear Window*. In an early scene, when Mark goes to the candy store where he takes "girlie" pictures for sale under the counter, a respectable-looking customer makes a devious approach toward asking for some. As Mark stands by, half-smiling, the viewer is tempted to compare him favorably with the blustering hypocrite.

Today, the sympathy that Powell builds up for

*Short of outright suppression, the film is practically uncensorable. Although the original American release print was trimmed, this must have been for length only: the missing scenes are mostly incidental and innocuous.



Discovery and removal of the body of Mark's first victim (left) as filmed by Mark; at right, Mark with his omnipresent Bell & Howell camera.

Mark may raise the additional objection that the film is sexist. After all, the victims are women and they go to their deaths passively. In view of the sexual nature of the killings, however, the victims could have been male only if Mark were made homosexual or female—alternatives which would raise equally strong objections. A sex killing cannot be expected to fit any socially acceptable paradigm, and sympathy should not be mistaken for approval. As for the victims' failure to resist, they are meant to be frightened to the point of paralysis by another of Mark's camera accessories (which I will discuss later). In any case, the two most important women in the film—Mark's tenant Helen (Anna Massey) and her blind mother (Maxine Audley)—play active roles, and each takes the initiative in entering Mark's life.

The question remains whether a female viewer can feel complicity with Mark.* However, this response does not depend only on sexual imagery and on Mark's character. For viewers of either sex who have any special interest in films, or who merely find themselves watching this one with fas-

ination, Leo Marks and Powell have added another and more powerful stimulus—the bond between their hero's sadistic scopophilia and the whole domain of photography and film-making. Mark works at a commercial studio by day as focus-puller on a 35mm Mitchell, moonlights on his girly pictures with an 8 x 10 view camera, and uses a specially equipped 16mm Bell and Howell Filmo for his personal project—which is not just a series of disconnected murder scenes but a documentary that includes the removal or discovery of the bodies and the police investigation—and culminates in Mark's suicide. As films-within-the-film we see not only Mark's work in progress and rushes from the commercial studio movie but also a mixture of scientific footage and home movies taken by his psychologist father, who used Mark as a guinea pig in studies of fear. From the pre-credits murder sequence, shown through a viewfinder mask, to the final shot of film running out of a projector, there are few scenes which lack either a photographic setting (a studio, Mark's darkroom) or the presence of the Filmo. In fact there is only one sequence where Mark leaves home without that Filmo—at Helen's insistence, when they go out to dinner. And even then, as they pass a couple

*The brevity of the film's post-Festival release in New York thwarted my attempts to canvass women filmgoers on this point. My wife, who does not share my high estimate of *Tom*, says that she did indeed identify with Mark even during the killings. I'm also guided by my own response to certain female protagonists who harm or humiliate males, from Barbara Stanwyck in *The Lady Eve* to Jeanne Moreau in *The Bride Wore Black*.

necking, Mark stops and reaches for the camera which isn't there.

Caught off guard, a critic who takes pride in viewing films with detachment may react violently against being made the accomplice of a murderous voyeur. And no doubt the critics of 20 years ago *were* caught off guard. To them, Michael Powell was a respected or at least respectable name: true, he'd made some offbeat films in the past, and he'd often been accused of lapses of taste, but his two most recent releases had been straightforward World War II dramas (*The Battle of the River Plate* and *Ill Met by Moonlight*). The relentless, unapologetic sadism of *Peeping Tom* must have come as a shock.

Worse still for those critics, scriptwriter Leo Marks and Powell offered no moral life-preserver they could cling to. Despite its analogy between scopophilia and cinema, *Tom* never indulges in any breast-beating about the dangers of over-obsession with films. Recently, when I asked Powell whether he intended *Peeping Tom* to be in any way a comment on the film-making profession, he answered with a categorical No.¹ What's more, the film makes no claim to any redeeming social message. Professing to depict violence only in order to condemn it is one of the more common hypocrisies, not only among the makers of commercial films—such as *Scarface* (another New York Film Festival retrospective) and *Midnight Express*—but also among world-famous writers: when Victor Hugo's *The Last Day of a Condemned Man* ran into the same kind of critical storm as did *Peeping Tom*, he responded with a long, brilliant but implausible defense claiming that he had written the novel purely as an indictment of the death penalty. Neither in 1960 nor today has Powell suggested that *Tom* should be treated with respect because it assails the abuse of science, cruelty to children, or inadequate mental health services.* The virtues of the film elude any simple catch phrases.

* Powell's unconcern with self-justification extends to a minor element of the film that has upset some of today's critics: the Austrian accent that tinges Carl Boehm's excellent English. Most film-makers would have thrown in a line explaining, say, that Mark had been sent to live with an aunt in Austria after his mother died; Powell does not. As it happens, the accent works well as an aural sign of Mark's strangeness.

Not only does *Peeping Tom* avoid taking any obvious moral stand, but it deploys all kinds of devices that make for commercial audience appeal. There is a considerable amount of humor, some of it incidental (such as the vignette of the hypocritical customer mentioned above), some of it spun directly from Mark's activities (as when the prop trunk which contains the body of one of his victims is used in a studio take). Above all, Powell borrows from and builds on the familiar strategies of horror and suspense films. A notable example is the killing of Viv (Moira Shearer), a studio stand-in who arranges to meet secretly with Mark after the day's wrap so that he can take some audition footage of her. Mark's previous killing, of course, has made it clear that he has other plans, so that when Viv hides in the dressing room to avoid a guard, the viewer knows she is unwittingly conspiring in her own death. As she enters the sound stage, the huge door rolls down behind her. She looks around but cannot see Mark. His *Filmo* whirs briefly on the sound track. Viv nervously starts whistling, and Mark joins in, stopping when she does. Lights come on, one by one, each accompanied by a piano discord. After Mark appears from hiding, there is a lengthy buildup to the climax: Viv practices dancing, wonders aloud what she should perform, plays with the Mitchell camera; Mark puts a chalk mark on the floor, prepares an impromptu set with the prop trunk placed against the chalk mark, frames Viv in his *Filmo*; and all of this is accompanied by the rapid, insistently percussive jazz of Wally Stott from the tape Viv plans to dance to. Then, complaining that she can't work up a serious mood, she asks, "What would frighten me to death?" Mark raises his camera: "Imagine someone coming toward you, who wants to kill you . . ."—and the climax finally arrives.

This kind of suspense—which may easily be branded as manipulative (as indeed any suspense may be)—informs not only individual sequences but the entire film. It derives not merely from the events but from their structure and tempo, so that it remains even at subsequent viewings when one knows what is going to happen. Powell's interest in music, overt in *The Red Shoes*, *Tales of Hoffmann*, *Oh Rosalinda!* and others, reveals itself in the tight construction of *Peeping Tom*: the entire

action centers on the making of Mark's documentary, and this consists of five movements whose tempi form a simple and elegant curve. There is a brief prelude (1), a slow, deliberate development (2), and then a general accelerando toward the climax (3-5):

1. Prostitute.

a. The killing. Continuous through-finder view; the camera jerks to one side when Mark presumably brings out a weapon, but no part of it can be seen.

b. The screening. Most of 1a is projected behind the credits, with Mark watching.

c. Followup filming. The body is carried out to an ambulance; some of the shots are through-finder. It is either this footage or 1a again that Mark is watching when Helen first knocks on his door.

2. Viv.

a. The killing. As described above, an extensive buildup for which 1a has prepared the viewer. Mark reveals the tripod leg blade. He refers to another frightening accessory, part of which can be glimpsed but not identified.

b. The screening. This is played to coincide with 3a (see below), thus varying and heightening the suspense.

c. Followup filming. More extensive and more suspenseful than 1c. During a runthrough of a studio movie scene, Mark dodges aside and films the opening of the trunk that contains Viv's body; later he films the police at the studio, and at one point is almost discovered as he hides in the sound stage lighting grid. One shot is through-finder—but this is the last in the film (the device has had its effect, and Powell doesn't overuse it).

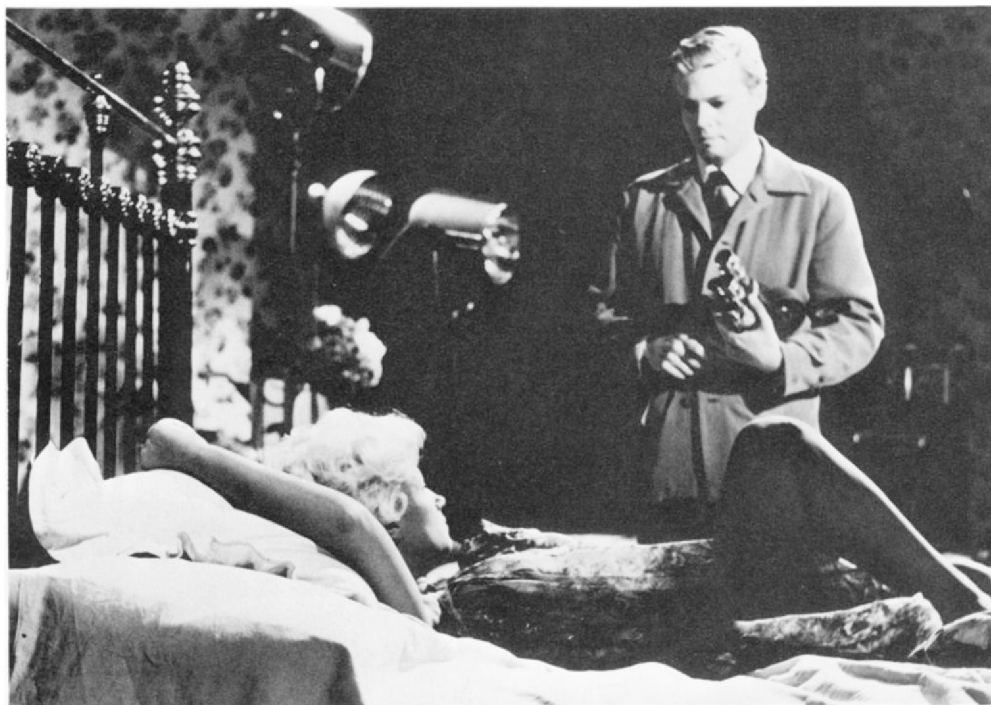
3. Mrs. Stephens (Helen's blind mother).

a. The (abortive) killing. This includes 2b. Mark returns from dinner with Helen, enters his darkroom and starts to project the footage of Viv's death. Then he becomes aware of Mrs. Stephens' presence. (Sensing that he's mentally disturbed, she has come to ask him not to see Helen again until he's had psychiatric help.) Mark projects the killing of Viv onto both of them; disappointed that it doesn't show supreme terror, he starts to film Mrs. Stephens, raising the tripod leg, but stops. Nothing more is seen of the mysterious accessory. (Obviously there is no 3b or 3c; the pace is quickening.)

4. Milly (the girlie-picture model).

a. The killing. Just one brief shot of Mark standing over Milly with his camera: no exposed tripod

Mark has set up a "girlie photo" session with model Milly (Pamela Green) with the intention of killing her (which he does offscreen).



blade or accessory. (There is no 4b: Mark never has time to develop the film.)

c. Followup filming. With the quickening pace of events, this coincides with 5a (see below).

5. Mark himself.

a. The killing. In Mark's absence, Helen has entered the darkroom to leave him a note; she idly switches on the projector—and sees his documentary. (Powell doesn't repeat any footage for the viewer: he keeps his camera on Helen's reactions.) She starts to run out—straight into Mark. He knows the police are on his trail. He shows and tells Helen everything, including the tripod leg and the mysterious accessory—a mirror in which the victims see their own terror. As a siren approaches, Mark films the arrival of the police (this is 4c). Then he clips the camera and tripod to the wall and films his own death. (There is, of course, no 5b or 5c.)

To the British critics of 1960, jolted by the film's subject matter and the sense of complicity with Mark which it created, the commercial expertise of *Peeping Tom* must have seemed the last immoral straw. Of course, they shouldn't have been surprised. Powell had spent over 30 years in the commercial cinema, and his experiments (with color in *Black Narcissus*, sets and opticals in *Tales of Hoffman*, etc.) had been designed to extend its boundaries rather than leap outside. (When I asked whether he had found the restrictions of commercial film making a help as well as a hindrance, he answered: "I don't get the distinction. . . . I have always meant my films to be commercial.")¹ Nevertheless, some critics cited the commercial appeal of *Peeping Tom* as their chief reason for condemning it. Thus Peter G. Baker in *Films and Filming*: "[I]f we are going to have films about life's darker moments, then we must be very certain about the film-maker's motives. Whether he is genuinely trying to explain life . . . or whether he is concerned . . . merely to exploit life for what it is worth at the box-office. I cannot give Michael Powell the benefit of the doubt. His big giveaway is the emphasis not so much on the character of Mark, but on the detailed violent sexuality of the girls' deaths. And worse, in the cliché-ridden, ridiculous characterisation of the psychiatrist, played . . . and written for laughs."²

The irony of this is not that *Peeping Tom* started

out as a box-office disaster but that, without its commercial appeal, it would have been an artistic failure, too, and no one would have rescued it from oblivion after 20 years. For it is precisely the humor, the suspense and the taut structure that hold the viewer in complicity with Mark. There's no trick to making villainy seem hateful or repellent; and little value in it, either. Consider Pasolini's Sadian film, *Salò*, which undercuts its ostensibly anti-fascist purpose by imputing fascism only to a handful of monsters: after all, how many of us viewers, given absolute power over other people, would choose to smack our lips over tureens full of shit? Powell, by contrast, does not allow the viewer either to ignore the terrible things that Mark is doing or to retreat into superior detachment. When I saw the film at one of Times Square's shoot-up palaces, the usual mutterings and drunken snores began to die down; during one tense scene a man wailed, "I can't stand this!"—but stayed to the end. A similar resentment at being implicated in Mark's sadism might account for the virulence of the 1960 reviews ("Shovel it up and flush it down the nearest sewer").

The boldness of Powell's challenge to the critics can best be seen by comparing *Peeping Tom* with another horror film laced with humor and released the same year amid similar charges of nastiness—*Psycho*. Hitchcock does not reveal what Norman Bates has been up to until just before the end of the film. Then, by adding the psychiatrist's explanation, he allows viewers to cool themselves off from the horror and suspense and to detach themselves from any sense of complicity. In our final brief view of Bates, he has become a figure of fun.

Far from relaxing the tension, the final sequence of *Tom* keeps tightening it to the end. The disclosure of the accessory mirror—the counterpart of Mother Bates's mummified corpse—is accompanied by an even more far-reaching revelation: that the whole house is fitted with microphones which have enabled Mark to listen in on the most intimate moments of his tenants' lives. That's not all. In the final two minutes, Mark kills himself amid a popping of preset flashbulbs and the babbling of multiple tapes; the police break in; the film runs out in Mark's projector; the screen fades to blackness with a ghostly exchange of words between Mark and his father.*

It may be argued that there are just too many events in the final sequence—that the revelation of the mikes, in particular, opens up such an unexpected and dizzying new perspective on Mark's voyeurism that it can scarcely be grasped at a first or second viewing. (No review I have yet come across mentions it.) Indeed, this argument could be extended to the whole film, which teems with detailed allusions, revelations, and ironies that may pass unnoticed even at a sixth viewing. But these elements, whether grasped consciously or not, contribute to the film's effect. Here is another reason for the tight structure analyzed earlier: without it, the details would threaten to overwhelm the film; with it, their centrifugal pressure becomes constructive, adding extraordinary tension to the ostensibly straightforward handling of the plot.

The comparison between top-flight Powell and off-peak Hitchcock may have been misleading: in *Tom*, despite its suspense and humor, Powell is not challenging Hitchcock at his own game; he is playing a different game entirely. Hitchcock likes plots that ramify, either by extending through space and time (*North by Northwest*, *Vertigo*) or else by focusing in turn on different characters (*Rope*, *Lifeboat*), with the various branches drawn together at the end. In *Frenzy*, which could share the same program note as *Peeping Tom* ("A sex killer at large in London; featuring Anna Massey"), the action ranges through a variety of settings (including a market, a hotel, a flophouse and other points of random human encounters), and from scene to scene the viewer may identify with any one of four or five characters. *Peeping Tom*, by contrast, stays almost entirely within three closed interiors (Mark's house, the commercial studio, the girlie picture studio) and its focus

remains on Mark throughout. The film's variety comes from its details, and from the tier upon tier of metaphor which they conjure up.

Of the many networks of allusion that run parallel or interweave throughout the film, the most obvious is the linking of Mark's compulsion with the world of film, not only on the sexual plane discussed earlier but also in terms of artistic endeavor. Mark may be seen both as a psychopathic killer who happens to film and as a psychopathic film-maker who happens to kill—a perfectionist who's prepared to make any sacrifice for his art. Powell extends this ambivalent view of creativity to the commercial director for whom Mark works. In the first scene at the studio, the production chief dictates a memo to "all producers and directors: If you can see it and hear it, use the first take." From then on we see both the studio director and Mark alternately disregarding that order as their female leads fail to give the right performance—in Mark's case, to depict the supreme terror of death. With Viv's killing, Mark's documentary converges on the studio farce: both share the same sound stage; Mark holds his lethal Filmo right in front of the studio Mitchell; and later the two cameras run simultaneously to record the discovery of Viv's body.

Moreover, Powell contrives to implicate *Peeping Tom* itself in this equation by subverting the relationship between container and content, so that from time to time his own film appears to recede (as in the flip-flop of a Necker cube) inside the film-within-the-film. At the end of Helen's first visit with Mark, his gaze and ours linger on the piece of birthday cake she brought him; then a voice cries "Cut!" and the scene changes to the commercial studio. This sound-track appoggiatura suddenly identifies the fictional director with the person who is shaping the real film. Later, after another cut from Mark and Helen to the studio, the scene has a distorted perspective that suggests at first an error in Powell's filming; then a slow pan reveals that he has given an oblique view of the screen on which the commercial dailies are being projected. The most sustained self-implication is with Mark's documentary, right at the beginning: the through-the-viewfinder scene of the prostitute's last moments does not, like subsequent finder scenes, represent Mark's view, since he is

* In making this comparison I am not trying to boost Powell at Hitchcock's expense. I simply find that Powell is in top form throughout *Peeping Tom*, while Hitchcock falls well below his best in the second half of *Psycho*. It's ironic to look at the November 1960 issue of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, which includes two long and admiring articles on Hitchcock and *Psycho* and one short review of *Tom* by a critic so blinded by auteurism and anglophobia that he can write: "By what miracle does nothing [in the film's promising ideas] ever manage to arouse the slightest emotion in us? Not the slightest resonance, not the slightest shudder, not the slightest detail that throws off the slightest spark of beauty. . . ."

holding the Filmo at waist level; the subjective camera eye here can belong only to Powell.

The personal involvement of Powell in *Peeping Tom* branches off into a network of its own. In the black-and-white home movies that Mark shows Helen, Powell himself plays the father and his son plays Mark as a child. The exteriors of Mark's house show Powell's own home. Although Powell denies that the film is in any way autobiographical, he does say that as the filming progressed it became more intimate and enclosed.³ Both the cast and the crew involve associations with other of Powell's films: Moira Shearer (Viv) also died for him in *The Red Shoes*; Anna Massey, daughter of Canadian Raymond Massey (who played the patriotic soldier at the end of *49th Parallel* and the anglophobe American in *A Matter of Life and Death*), is the outsider whom Mark admits into his secret world; blind Esmond Knight (studio director) appeared under Powell's direction in half-a-dozen earlier films; composer Brian Easdale had scored nearly every Powell film from *Black Narcissus* on. And Powell himself photographed the "home movies."

That network, too, connects with another: the relation between father and son. Although Mark's psyche was ruined by his father's experiments, he never rails against him; in fact, he lives in the same house and has converted his father's lab into his darkroom-cum-projection room. Throughout, the film stresses what the two men have in common, above all an involvement in filming: Mark is a focus-puller, and in the home movies we see his father approach the lens to adjust the focus; the psychiatrist brought in by the police as a consultant says of Mark, "He has his father's eyes." Some of the most extraordinary scenes revolve around the 16mm Kodak movie camera that Mark's father gave him as a child. In the home movies that Mark projects for Helen, his young self tries out the camera, panning until it points directly at Powell's camera—that is, at the viewer, at Helen (who cries "Switch it off!" at the sight of Mark's debut as voyeur) and at Mark himself. The Kodak now stands on top of the tape deck in the darkroom, and at the end of the film it appears in the foreground, surveying the dead body of Mark, half-conscious Helen, the police and the overturned projector. Then in an odd voiceover dialogue the

father says, "Don't be a silly little boy," and Mark-as-a-child replies, "Good night, daddy—hold my hand."

While Mark's acceptance of his father's shadow even on objects he might easily have discarded may suggest the extremity of his sickness, it may also mean that he accepts his condition of life and sees little point in raging against a man whose actions may have been shaped by *his* heredity and upbringing. This alternative is supported by Mark's calm self-awareness and also by the touch of dignity that Boehm imparts to his speech and movement. A sense of responsibility for one's own life and actions and a willingness to follow one's destiny to the end would be the link between Mark and the heroes of Powell's patriotic-Tory films, such as the captain in *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing* or Clive Wynne-Candy in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*—and also, in the light of his reaction to the 1960 debacle, Mark's "father," Powell himself.*

Reduced to verbal description, these networks of symbolism and allusion may already seem too heavy a burden for even the most compelling storyline to bear—and there are more to come. But on the screen they do not stand out baldly, one after another, like appendages to the storyline; instead, they are embedded in the whole fabric of the film. I will now pull focus myself to concentrate on that embedding—to show how such varied elements as movement, color, sets, costumes, make-up, sound, music, dialogue and cutting go into the making of the networks.

The dialogue deserves special mention. Leo Marks has a background in cryptography (a profession used overtly in his original story for *Sebastian*), and this seems to reveal itself in *Tom* in a penchant for verbal games. The dialogue is loaded with double meanings and dramatic ironies. Thus Milly, posing for Mark in the "girlie" studio, tries to hurry him up by saying, "Come on, sonny; make us famous"—an injunction he obeys near the end of the film by murdering her. Or when Helen tells

* It would have been understandable if Powell had blamed *Peeping Tom*'s failure on Leo Marks and avoided collaborating with him again. Yet not only did Powell co-produce *Sebastian*, based on a story by Marks, but also, he tells me, "We have just collaborated on a new film script, a gritty love story called *At Arm's Length*. I hope you may see it one day."

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Mark that the publishers of her children's book about a magic camera want to illustrate it with drawings because they think photos would be impossible, he exclaims, "Nothing's impossible"; and when she's embarrassed by his offer to take the photos, saying there won't be much money, he replies, "There are some things I photograph for nothing." Yet the dialogue rarely seems overassertive, because it does not try to carry the dramatic weight by itself: its ironies and allusions refer not to other parts of the dialogue but to nonverbal elements of the film.* And in the major networks of allusion to which the dialogue contributes, Marks and Powell are content to let it play a minor role.

Consider the Freudian concept that Mark kills women whom he sees as whores but respects Helen because he identifies her with his mother. The costume and make-up of the first victim indicate that she is indeed a prostitute. For the other two victims, color is the key: with Viv, a close-up of the red light outside the sound stage door (reinforced by Mark's line, "I switched the red light on"); with Milly, a conspicuous scarlet lantern just above her head when she poses for Mark in front of a Paris backdrop. At first Helen too runs the same risk: not only does she have red hair, like Viv, but when Mark invites her into his darkroom he switches on a red light. Cutting first reveals the Helen-Mother equation: young Mark in the home movies reaches out to touch his dead mother's hand; Mark beside the projector reaches out to touch Helen's shoulder. Later, music plays its part: the elegiac slow waltz that accompanied the dead mother scene recurs when Mark looks into Helen's room, which was once his mother's.

Color and sound conspire to create a visceral atmosphere inside Mark's house—to suggest that these rooms and halls, and especially the secret world of his darkroom, are an extension of his body. Glistening browns and purples stand out from the shadows of the hall and stairway; vari-colored lamps punctuate the gloom of the dark-

*I have found only one exception. At the end of Mrs. Stephens's encounter with Mark, when she asks, "What's troubling you?" and he turns away, she calls after him, "You'll have to tell someone!" In the climactic scene with Helen, Mark says, "Your mother said I'd have to tell someone, and I'm sorry it has to be you."



Just before killing himself, Mark tells Helen everything. He also plays her the tapes of himself crying and screaming as his father's childhood guinea pig.

room. Many of the sounds in the house come from liquids: Helen's alcoholic mother sloshing whisky into her glass; Mark pouring photochemicals; a continual sharp drip in the darkroom; the roar of a filling bath that accompanies Helen's kiss for Mark (and his kiss for his Filmo) like an amplified rushing of blood. At the end, with the revelation that the whole house is wired for sound, as Mark simultaneously plays half-a-dozen tapes of his guinea pig childhood, the tangle of screams and sobs and mutterings creates a new internal image—that of a brain discharging its memories.

This fusion of inner and outer worlds suggests why *Peeping Tom* is to be considered as more than a *tour de force*, more than a fascinating experience for film buffs, more than the best horror film ever made. Throughout his career Powell has shown a predilection for themes that allowed him to unite two opposing modes of perception: on one side, what might be called the outer, the objective or the real; on the other, the inner, the subjective or the imaginary.* Even his most realistic films make forays into the fantastic. In *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing*, a Dutch hideout for the downed

*Since Powell has shared credits with Emeric Pressburger on many films (though not *Peeping Tom*), it is worth quoting his statement on how they share the creative work: "I direct. Emeric writes the original story and screenplay. I write the final script and dialogue and then we both produce, i.e., take all the major decisions together, including editing." Concerning *Tom*, he says: "The script . . . was all Leo's own work. I had a lot to do with it, day by day, but Leo wrote it."

bomber crew has an unearthliness which foreshadows *Orphée*: the entry is by a stairway past a large curved mirror; the exit, by rowboat gliding silently along a subterranean channel. In other films the two modes are evenly matched from the start, and the viewer may not always be sure which is which. This applies to *A Matter of Life and Death*, which Powell still considers his most satisfying film:¹ the afterlife scenes may be viewed throughout as the delusion of injured Peter (David Niven); but when the doctor (Roger Livesey), killed in an accident, reappears at once on the other side and continues his efforts to help Peter, he carries a charge of reality over with him.

In *Peeping Tom* the two modes of perception are more than evenly matched: they remain inseparable throughout. On the one hand, the characters and settings look and sound as naturalistic as in any ordinary commercial film: where an artificial eyelid closed over the lens in *A Matter of Life and Death*, it is a real eye that opens at the start of *Tom*; where Sammy in *The Small Back Room* had delusions of a gigantic whisky bottle, Helen's alcoholic mother grapples with one of normal size; where the "Red Shoes" ballet used optical trickery to convert a flower into a knife, Mark's tripod becomes lethal with the simple removal of a sheath. On the other hand, the straightforward images and sounds of *Peeping Tom* reverberate with mul-

tiplied circuits of metaphor, all of which connect with the master metaphor, film = life. Powell distilled his more than 30 years of film life into *Peeping Tom*: the madness of Sister Ruth from *Black Narcissus*; the ruthlessness of Lermontov from *The Red Shoes*; Sammy's fear as he tackles the unexploded booby trap from *The Small Back Room*; Wynne-Candy's romantic obsession with different incarnations of the same woman from *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*; Joan Webster's struggle against her destiny from *I Know Where I'm Going*; and, for good measure, the unseen camera that recorded them all.

Perhaps the most startling element in *Peeping Tom* is not the sadism, or the reflexive role of film-making, or even the circuitry of metaphor, but the unwavering assurance with which it unfolds. If the cinema has a masterpiece of innocence in *Citizen Kane*, then *Peeping Tom* stands beside it as a masterpiece of filmic experience.

NOTES

1. From written answers to a questionnaire, September 1979.
2. *Films and Filming*, May 1960.
3. From statements made at a New York Film Festival press conference, October 1979.

CREDITS: Direction: Michael Powell. Script: Leo Marks. Photography: Otto Heller. Music: Brian Easdale. Distribution: Corinth Films.
