

The Cinematic Killer: Cameras and *Peeping Tom*

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The history of horror film is the history of fear. The genre examines themes as miniscule as personal repressed anxieties or as massive as an entire culture's fears. Horror has the ability to make its viewers scared of routine activities, such as the infamous shower scene in *Psycho*, or even children's toys, like Chucky in *Child's Play*. The range of iconic horror villains, scenes, and plots proves anything can be designed to be scary.

Michael Powell's 1960 *Peeping Tom* pushes the boundaries of this assertion, that anything can be designated as terrifying, by making a camera its antagonist. The film stars Karl Boehm as Mark Lewis, a disturbed photographer and filmmaker with a fetish for filming the beautiful women he murders. In the final moments of *Peeping Tom*, Mark asks, "Do you know what the most frightening thing in the world is?" and ultimately answers his own question: "It's fear" (01:37:21-01:38:15). By the end of *Peeping Tom*, Mark's declaration is confirmed, as director Michael Powell successfully assigns a camera as an antagonist by showing its victims their own fear through a mirror attached to the camera as the victims are murdered. Powell's depiction of a serial killer filmmaker comes at a time of groundbreaking developments in camera technology, which revolutionized documentary film. Further, he allowed the camera to become the antagonist by giving it agency. Because of this portrayal, *Peeping Tom* has contributed to academic discourses on cinematic representations of voyeurism and psychoanalysis. The camera functions as a monster because it manipulates the portrayal of Mark's victims, making it a killer of reality and the literal and figurative murderer of the victims.

The film begins through a camera's gaze and follows a prostitute up a set of stairs, when she inexplicably screams. The following scene reveals that she has


ABSTRACT

In Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*, cameras are delegated the role of antagonist. Cameras become the movie's monsters, murdering women and their identities. These murders reflect flaws of and anxieties preoccupied with technological advancements in documentary film during the middle of the 20th century. The terror cameras cause in *Peeping Tom* showcases the danger in believing in an objective lens.



been murdered. Mark Lewis films the aftermath for a personal documentary whose subjects are women that he kills. This is merely his pastime; he formally works as a film crew member and a pin-up photographer. One night, Mark meets Helen, his tenant and neighbor, and invites her into his apartment upstairs. Mark shows Helen experimental home videos, filmed by his psychologist father, of Mark experiencing trauma as a child. Helen is disturbed by this but still likes Mark, and they eventually begin dating. Still, this does not satisfy Mark's urges. He stays late at the studio one night to film Vivian, a stand-in actress on the movie set he is working on. Vivian becomes a part of Mark's documentary as he exposes a knife on the leg of a tripod and stabs her throat. He locks her in a trunk, and she is found on set the following day. Detectives visit the set to question everyone, and Mark films it for his movie. Mark repeats the same process with Milly, one of his pin-up models. Afterward, Mark arrives home to find Helen watching one of his murder movies. Mark explains to Helen that he captures ultimate fear by attaching a mirror to his camera so the women he impales must watch their own deaths. The film concludes with Mark filming himself committing suicide with the same technique.


Cameras become their own characters in *Peeping Tom* through personification, which is achieved through Mark's relationship with cameras. When referencing them, he uses humanizing language. While interrogating Mark, Chief Inspector Gregg asks Mark if anyone was with him at a specific time. Mark responds, "No sir. Just my...just my camera" (00:59:44-00:59:51). When Mark is with his camera, he is not alone. Mark's relationship with cameras, and his accompanying violent fetish involving them, has a traumatic foundation. His father, scientist A.N. Lewis, put Mark in fearful situations and filmed Mark's reaction as a case study on fear and the human nervous system. Mark's childhood was spent as the object of documentation, and cameras were always present in his rearing. Even though cameras were a source of discomfort, their critical presence in his upbringing made them sentimental for Mark—and even companions. His camera acts as a comfort blanket, reassuring him as he commits the murders. In a moment of apparent anxiety, Mark strokes his camera. Cameras receive Mark's affection, despite being an accessory to his abuse. In Mark's life, cameras are not purely harmful—they are his guardians. The cameras' aversive stability forms the basis for an unhealthy relationship between them and Mark. The enduring presence of cameras maintains Mark's relationship with them and ruins any development of a sense of privacy, which Dr. Rosan, psychologist and Mark's late father's friend, points out. The oversaturation of cameras in Mark's childhood has not only caused him to have an emotional dependence on cameras, but cameras themselves control Mark and have changed the way he participates in the world.



Through its intricate relationship with Mark, the camera becomes a complex character ranging from Mark's friend to a monster. Mark's connection with his camera is very personal, and he is rarely seen without it. His entire identity revolves around cameras. Mark's violent fetish and both his jobs, adult picture photographer and studio camera operator, involve cameras. Even when Mark is without his camera, like when he is on his date with Helen, he surrenders to his voyeuristic urges for any provocative sights. He stares at a kissing couple with an intense, disturbing gaze until Helen draws him back in. He is not a casual, passive onlooker. His stares are purposeful and shameless, like a camera's intentional gaze, because cameras taught Mark to view in their remorseless manner. The camera is able to condition Mark because Powell allows the camera to transcend its human user by depicting it as conscious.

From the start, the camera performs menacing actions. In the iconic opening, a camera's viewfinder gazes on a prostitute named Dora as she picks up a customer and they relocate to a room. In the room, Dora screams and stares at something horrifying, but viewers do not know what the source of her terror is. Film critic Catherine Zimmer analyzes cameras throughout *Peeping Tom*, paying close attention to the opening, in "The Camera's Eye: *Peeping Tom* and Technological Perversion." In the scene when Dora screams, "[t]he implication is that the camera is the hidden voyeur, not the man who approaches her" (Zimmer 37). The scene is captured through the camera's perspective, armed with crosshairs evocative of a weapon's viewfinder, which make the intentions appear malicious. The wicked characterization of cameras continues as the film develops, and they assist Mark in all of his murderous escapades. Mark lures in women and murders them by impaling his victims with a tripod leg turned knife whilst filming them. The camera has a mirror attached, so victims can see the camera's perspective on their murder as it happens. The highlighting of the camera's perspective cultivates its role as humanized character. In the film's finale, Mark references the cameras as if they are his friends, asking Helen to, "Watch them all say goodbye, one by one" (01:39:23-01:40:17). Zimmer argues that in this finale, "The camera has, like Mark Lewis, become the monster" (48). However, throughout the film, the camera has control over Mark. A Freudian psychosexual analysis of Mark's traumatic childhood history with cameras, his overpowering need to film murders, and the fact that all his victims are beautiful women suggests a fetish. This is furthered by the phallic imagery insinuated by the murder object, a tripod leg for impalement. A person does not control their fetish; it is their fetish that controls them. Mark literally dies for his fetish.


The camera is not a monster like Mark Lewis; the camera is Mark Lewis's



monster. Independent of its relationship with Mark, cameras have monstrous qualities. Cameras reduce the world to the confines of its lens, killing reality. It is also as if the camera makes choices when representing reality. In *Peeping Tom*, these choices are “constantly highlighted” (Zimmer 36). In the beginning moments of the film, the camera’s gaze follows Mark as he throws out a packet of film. The shot lingers on the trashcan, as if the trashcan is an imperative element of the unfolding story. The trashcan is not crucial to the purpose of *Peeping Tom*, but what the camera must forgo to capture it is. By focusing on one thing, the camera must ignore others. The camera’s inability to divulge all details while being able to select which features are revealed gives it a godlike power. With this power, the camera uses its limited domain and conscious gaze to link “technical and ideological position” (Hawthorn 303). *Peeping Tom*’s opening has been described as an “ideological establishing shot,” the quick sequence illustrating the main points of the film, exemplifying the camera as a weapon and beginning to provoke questions about viewership (Hawthorn 305).

A camera’s gaze is influential enough to alter reality and even construct new meaning. Despite a filmmaker having positive intentions, the unavoidable visual incompleteness of a camera’s perspective is powerful. A camera’s restricted scope never grants a filmmaker’s wholesome hopes to show cinematic truth. Mark’s father, A.N. Lewis, hoped his exploitative films would contribute a benefit to the medical community larger than the detriment it would bring to his son. Independent of his experiment’s abusive qualities, A.N. Lewis’s films had a constructive purpose. Still Mark is a single person, so this study cannot substitute for the experiences of all people. However, most viewers do not consider the picture as incomplete, so many ethical implications accompany cinematic accounts of the real. A camera’s view has the power to express truth, as passive viewers erroneously consume its images as fact. Misperceived truth corrupts reality, with most of this burden placed on recorded subjects. The misconception that a film’s images are irrefutable, reliable sources is a common problem in documentary films. Fabricated reality is mistakenly perceived as real, and the identity of its subjects, real people, are murdered. This is expressed in *Peeping Tom* through literal killing. Mark’s victims in *Peeping Tom* are women who, according to distinguished film critic and academic Elisabeth Bronfen, “believe [they] can control and master the masculine gaze” (Bronfen 62). Their naïve perception that they can control the camera makes these women vulnerable. These women are too trusting of the camera. Vivian goes as far as saying, “I do feel alone in front of it” (00:39:50-00:40:01). Their identities are killed as a consequence.


Peeping Tom motivates its viewers to question what happens when people



are turned into commodities. Unlike Mark's personal documentary camera, *Peeping Tom*'s secondary cameras have a commercial purpose. The photography and studio cameras have the same ultimate objective of transforming subjects into objects by making them a commodity. The stars of these cameras' gazes are given a new existence, one that aims to be economically desirable. Models and actresses agree to abandon their notion of self under contractual stipulations to be compensated, and the assumption that spectators know what they are visually consuming is simulated. An audience may be immersed into the thoughtfully crafted world, but reality is promptly restored when the lights come on and the movie is over. Mark's victims are a prostitute, an actress, and a model. Other than being beautiful, the main characteristic that unites Mark's victims is their willingness to sell themselves despite possible consequences. In the film's beginning seconds, the camera gazes at Dora as she stares into a store's display of dismembered mannequins. Completeness cannot be assembled using the mannequin's fragmented parts. Moments later, the same thing will happen to her. Her individuality will be dismembered, as she is immortalized as a one-dimensional victim in newspapers and the camera's film. The lack of complete identity will transform her into a mannequin, an object able to be fashioned to satisfy one's desires.

In contrast, despite being like the rest of his victims—young, beautiful, and powerlessly alone with him—Mark spares Helen's life. Powell always shows a barefaced Helen in great lighting, contrasting her chiaroscuro-lit costars. Unlike the film's victims—Dora, Vivian, and Milly—Helen does not attempt to alter her image through makeup or profession, which may be one reason Mark pardons her. Furthermore, she is not as naïve as Mark's victims and is skeptical of the camera's gaze. When Mark tries to film Helen, she appears threatened. She responds to his traumatic home videos with discomfort and questions, demanding, "I like to understand what I'm shown" (00:25:00-00:25:12). She understands the intricacies behind a creative composition because, just like Mark, Helen creates a fabricated reality. However, unlike Mark, Helen's reality is never taken as real as it only exists within the realm of the children's novels that she writes. Mark's medium is film, a visual surrogate for authentic reality, so it is often mistaken as truth. This unites them; nevertheless, Mark's reality comes with more risks.


Of the film's three cameras—Mark's documentary camera, his photography, and the studio's camera—Mark's 16mm documentary camera is the primary star and subject of a fascinating history. Mark's conscious camera can be considered his costar, assisting him on all of his exploits. The 16mm camera was introduced during World War II, which lends it a "legacy of violent trauma" (Zimmer 47). Compared to previous technology, 16mm cameras are small, lightweight, and



portable. This allows them the ability to be at the forefront of action or, in the case of *Peeping Tom*, to perform the action. Their capabilities extended documentary film techniques. For the first time, documentary films did not have to be staged, as a camera could be brought out in real settings to record real people. Still, all genuine elements did not necessarily yield genuine results.

Around the same time as the advent of synchronized sound cameras and the production of *Peeping Tom*, two important documentary techniques were coming to the forefront—direct cinema and *cinéma vérité*. They both share an aspiration, debatably the goal of all documentary film, to accurately represent truth. However, they go about it in very different ways. Direct cinema created the infamous “fly-on-the-wall” technique, in which documentary filmmakers record their surroundings without disturbing them to try to capture a situation as an objective account. Direct cinema operates under the assumption that truth can be passively observed without the influence of a camera. Explained by Bill Nichols, documentary film study’s pioneering scholar, where direct cinema tries to portray an “absolute or untampered truth,” *cinéma vérité* only attempts “the truth of an encounter” (184). *Cinéma vérité*, literally meaning truthful cinema, “reveals the reality of what happens when people interact in the presence of a camera” (184). It acknowledges the relationship of power between people and cameras, so filmmakers try their best to create situations that will draw out truth. Brian Winston, one of the first British journalists to discuss documentary ethics, once said, “the only thing direct cinema and *cinéma vérité* have in common is their ‘equipment’” (qtd. in Zimmer 40). Despite having very different techniques, they face the same issues. Both deal with the unavoidable influence of subjectivity, which muddles truth.

The problems of both direct cinema and *cinéma vérité* are illustrated in *Peeping Tom*. Mark’s documentary lies somewhere in-between the two techniques. Sometimes, he adopts a direct cinema approach, passively filming situations around him, like the aftermath of Dora the prostitute’s murder. Inevitably, Mark becomes an active part of his film when someone asks him what paper he is filming for (00:05:19-00:05:30). The camera’s inability to be ignored is where direct cinema fails. Usually, Mark’s filming serves as a commentary on *cinéma vérité*. He does not merely reveal how people react in the presence of a camera; he shows their interaction with the camera itself. Unlike other documentary techniques, *cinéma vérité* is very upfront about the unequal distribution of power. However, that does not necessarily make the imbalance any better. In trying to draw out the truth through techniques like the interview, filmmakers sometimes create a truth. Interview questions that lead to desired answers is an example of this. No tactic can perfectly construct power equality, as a human will always be doing the strategizing.




In Peeping Tom, this power imbalance is blatantly demonstrated through Mark's ability to take lives through his filmmaking.

The world of a film, documentary film included, is carefully crafted through choices behind the camera, which *Peeping Tom* often reminds its audience. While posing for Mark, Milly asks him if he can hide her bruises in the photograph (00:10:25-00:10:34). A few moments later, the camera shot gazes at a beautiful woman standing by a window sill. The woman turns her head and reveals a facial deformity. Prior to her turning her head, the camera could not see the deformity and, therefore, it did not exist in the audience's universe. In reference to her facial deformity, she jokingly asks Mark if he can remove her bruises too. Mark is mesmerized by the woman and asks to film her with an obsessive demeanor. When he does film her, the frame only includes her eyes. Once again, her deformity is erased by the camera's limited perspective. Nevertheless, both of these instances of incomplete representation are intentional. A moment of the camera's will to omit can be noticed in Mark's childhood videos, but only on a re-viewing of the film. In these videos, in which Mark's father intentionally imposes fear on his child, a light can be seen. Helen questions it: "What's the light? Well I suppose it's the camera" (00:22:45-00:22:50). This light is familiar to viewers, as it can also be seen in the murder footage. It is not until the final moments of the film that the light's source is revealed: the mirror.


Editing is another critical factor in devising the world of a film. A clever sequence in *Peeping Tom* that emphasizes editing's power to make meaning is when a slice of cake is shown as a voice commands, "Cut!" The word, "cut" seems to refer to the slice of cake until the scene promptly cuts to the studio, revealing the diegetic source of the commanded "cut" (00:30:11-00:30:15). While a camera limits perspective to select the meaning, editing is the intentional sequence strategized to design meaning. In the editing process, humans are the intelligent creators. In the case of documentary film, ethical filmmakers strive to, as best as possible, recreate a situation without the addition of motivated changes. In the filming process, a person guides a camera's gaze, but he or she is working within the camera's world and ultimately under its authority. The camera's limited scope paired with the assumption that it does not lie is a dangerous combination. A camera is confined to its own frame of view, so it exploits the very concept of reality. Because of this, documentary filmmakers will always fail at perfectly representing truth, even when they so desperately attempt it.

The literal camera of *Peeping Tom* illustrates the danger of representation to its documentary subjects-turned-victims. The camera is a monster that uses Mark, the tripod, and a mirror to achieve its goals. The literal murder from the impaling



tripod is a metaphor for the identity slaughter common in cinematic portrayals. The function of a tripod itself is to create a stable frame, akin to the way we actually view the world. Steady shots allow film's viewers to sink into its universe and forget they are watching a fabricated reality or, in the case of documentary film, a mediated reality. In documentary films, stability lends to the illusion of truth. Mark's victims are literally being killed by a tripod, the camera's tool for delusional truth. The believable feigning of truth makes the accuracy of portrayals more critical, yet the camera's limited abilities do not allow for the perfect portrayal. The attached mirror is an attempt at transparency between the camera and its victims. The power imbalance is still present, as subjects cannot control their representation. However, it allows for the victims to have a firsthand account of their murder. Victims are cursed to see their murder as it occurs without the power to escape it. Subjects of *cinéma vérité* are given the freedom to candidly exhibit their character for a camera, but their domain, the camera's scope, is limited. As a result, subjects ultimately persist as objects. Ultimately, Michael Powell uses Mark's conscious camera as a platform to point out the problems with representing reality and personal identity in film. When *Peeping Tom* concludes, Mark's 16mm camera is the most threatening character. During the film's climax, one detective comforts the other two by saying, "It's only a camera." Another detective responds with fear, "Only?" (01:38:40-01:38:50).

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