

“The optical and scopic urges viewed from a phenomenological perspective”

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The cinematic universe, in all its possible ramifications, is the result of a tension between the optical (that which sees and/or enables seeing) and scopic (that which possesses a desire to see and/or lets itself be seen and taken for an object of desire). *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell 1960) is a film about the obsession of the doubly mediated gaze. Therefore, it is the perfect study case of the phenomenological aspects of cinema.

According to Vivian Sobchak, the filmic experience, since it is mediated by technical equipment, is altogether complex and dialectical. Not only does it involve two types of relationships - material (primary) and hermeneutic (secondary) – but also entails two platforms of exchanges – intra-subjective (directly between human being and instrument) and inter-subjective (between one human being and another human being, with instrumental mediation in each case) <sup>1</sup> and two modalities of transaction – transparent relationships (immediately intelligible) and opaque relationships (not immediately understood). The filmic experience could be described as follows: the director is involved in one single transparent relationship with objects mediated by instruments (he accesses the world through the camera); the spectator, in turn, is involved in two relationships with objects (i.e. the world), both of them mediated by

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<sup>1</sup> Of all the communication that takes place at an inter-subjective level (i.e. between the several platforms), I would like to stress the connection between spectator and film, inasmuch as viewing a film is an experience, at once, direct and mediated. In other others, it is an experience of the spectator mediated by the film.

instruments and in dialectical tension one with the other. They are, respectively, the transparent relationship with the projector and the opaque relationship with the director's camera. Something like "This is the film that I do of the film the projector presents me with" and also "This is the film the director did, not me" (Sobchak 194). Although the intention is different in both cases, director and spectator do share the same perception of the world and both are engaged with specific instruments: the camera and the projector, which are a sort of an eye extension of them. The pair director-camera is the author of the film's perception, while the pair spectator-projector is responsible for the film's expression.

In *Peeping Tom*, the protagonist, Mark Lewis, is in a constant relationship with these two pieces of cinematic equipment to the point of being, simultaneously, a "man-camera" and a "man-projector". He works as a focus puller in a film studio, moonlighting as a porno photographer and is an obsessive recorder of behaviors related with death or sexuality. He is always behind a camera, be it the large studio 35 mm or his hand-held 8 mm that he never parts with. So much so, that he no longer can stop looking; neither can he let go of the machinery that, usually, does the looking for him. He keeps a film laboratory and a small projector at home and as soon as he comes in, he processes his film stock and sits watching the results, night after night. He is the peeping tom of the title and the symbolic incarnation of the camera and the projector. He physically manipulates these two objects and sees what they see but not exactly how they saw it, because they have their own powers of expression, their own hermeneutic capabilities. That is why in *Peeping Tom* there are black and white scenes and colored scenes. Supposedly, the diegetic cameras see in black and white but the reality is in color, which only the protagonist's eye can capture. Also in one of the numerous films-

on-film made by Mark's father, the camera is out of focus for a while, when obviously the recorded reality is not.

The instrumental properties of the protagonist are terribly evident in the first sequence, when he murders a streetwalker. The film starts with his eye opening quickly at the sound of a camera shutter. The analogy between the human eye and the eye of the camera is immediate. This is the only shot in the entire first scene where a glimpse of Mark's face is caught; throughout the rest of this excerpt he remains a behind the camera figure in search of a prey. Therefore, he is not relevant as a person, only as a perception mode. This fact justifies the visual and auditory unreality of what the film shows during this scene, in total contrast to what we will later gather as the truth of that place and situation. As a matter of fact, the entire scene is based on a carefully planned trick: the images we see, and that are conveyed as the vision of Mark, mediated by the camera, do not exactly match the position where the diegetic equipment is placed. Hidden under Mark's coat, at the level of his stomach, the camera could only record the world - the prostitute and her murder - in an upward position. In other words, for narrative purposes the camera is hidden in the jacket, but for recording purposes it is placed at the height of Mark's eyesight. That is how, indeed, Powell shot the scene. The inference is obvious: Mark is the true camera; the optical equipment is just a mediator, a stand-in of his own vision and status in the industry (as it also points to the backstage of production). When Mark throws an empty package of film onto a garbage bin, in an alley, we get to see his arm, which, at that point, represents the entire cinematic apparatus. This shot is particularly misleading because when the entire scene is watched during the main credits of Powell's film, which refer to the private watching of the sequence by Mark, the arm is no longer there, although the images are a perfect match

to the viewfinder of the camera and all that it recorded. The arm shot is therefore imbued with an ontological dimension mainly destined to expose the film as such.

In another important shot of this first scene, Mark sees the prostitute (in long shot), approaches her (in middle shot) and goes with her to a nearby hotel room, always holding the camera and recording the trajectory of the woman. This shot entails a triple conjunction of gazes. We know the image corresponds to Mark's gaze and that the interior markings of the shot represent the optical inner framing of the camera, but we ourselves are implicated in the process, since the prostitute looks directly at the camera lens, attaining us by default. Mark metonymically represents the director; the prostitute is at once world and film that will be; and we, double spectators, watch through the subjective gaze of Mark/camera, placed inside the film, what the projector is delivering to us, shaped on the screen/film theatre. There is, however, a very disturbing fact in all of this, which prevents the scene from being the perfect depiction of the filmic experience mediated by technical equipment. Namely: the internal framing of the camera. This factor prevents us from applying our own expression to the film. If, on the one hand, we see more, because we see exactly what Mark sees; on the other hand, we see less, because we are limited to that and we see nothing beyond (not even the world as it exists in the filmic reality of the scene, which Mark saw (in establishing shot) before he started the camera. By recording the scene in color, as the world is, Powell enables us to see more; however, when we perceive the interior framing, belonging to the camera, we see less. In this case, director and film viewer share literally the same perception of the world, but not its expression. There is a sort of inverted hermeneutic relationship here: it is not the human being who sees through the camera that which she has seen, it is the camera that perceives, with the aid of the human, that which he has registered. The immediate clarity is sacrificed in favor of a perceptive identification of

the spectator with the film, through the camera (but also, in other scenes, through the projector).

Vivian Sobchak sustains that the filmic experience is a system of communication between director, film and spectator, each and single one operating on a separate platform. Intra-subjectively, in each of these platforms there *is* meaning (perception) and, simultaneously, meaning is *created* (expression). Therefore, all of these entities are subjects, for only subjects can, at once, be and create. This is to say that for phenomenology in general a film is also a subject, contrary to the traditional thesis, in which a film is an object and nothing else. This means that the film reveals a perceptive as well as an expressive competency akin to those of the director and the film viewer. The relationship director-film-spectator, therefore, presupposes that all of these subjects of vision be able to see (expression) in an entirely corporeal basis (perception). Whereas vision equates with creation; body rhymes with materiality. The three subjects are imbued with both of these capabilities. In practice, this system plays out as follows: the perceptive experience which is the life of the director is *represented* within the film, itself a *materialization* of that life; the film exists on its own, as film that *is* and as latent meaning, i.e. as film *that could still be*; the film viewer interprets the film as a *signifier* and, in so doing, endows it with a *new meaning*. Since perception and expression are intimately linked, one can talk of a perception of expression and an expression of perception (Sobchak 5).

Foremost, *Peeping Tom* is a film about gazing.<sup>2</sup> There is little in the dialogues and in the structure of the script that does not point to an optical universe. For instance, at one

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<sup>2</sup> Powell's film is packed with duplications of the gaze, either unmediated by the machines or entirely based on them. For instance, when Mark takes, as a side job, some porno still pictures of a girl, we get to see the photographic camera with the hood followed by the inverted image of the girl posing, as viewed

point Mark falsely claims to be a reporter of *The Observer*. In fact, the protagonist works as a sanctioned professional of the image; he aims to gain control through his gaze, mediated by optical equipment. He is a metonymic representation of the extradiegetic director, Powell himself, who also appears in the film for a brief but highly charged moment, as when he, portraying the character of the diegetic father, offers the son his first camera. By being the object of his father's films, Mark is very much materialized in *Peeping Tom* and he also captures images incessantly. That recorded film stock has a certain materiality, as proved by all the apparatus dealing with the revelation of the film strips, but it also contains the possibility of perfection, measured by Mark's criteria. Only a film where the terrorized last seconds of the victim of a murder are recorded in its entirety can thus be considered the "proper" film. That is why, to his despair, Vivian's death scene turns out to be just film stock with no relevant expressive meaning. As an eager spectator of what he has filmed, Mark is an interpreter. Only he can decide if the images he perceives are imbued with an expressive value (of homicidal art form). All of this happens at the level of narrative because *Peeping Tom* is a hybrid allegory of cinema. The film contains three perceptive instances perfectly attuned, corresponding to the aforementioned triad director-film-spectator. All of them have gazes and are gazed upon.

As an aspiring filmmaker, Mark represents the cinematic Creator. When in the deserted film studio, during the private session with Vivian, he descends from above in a mechanical platform like a Greek *Deus ex machina*, he is truly an almighty *maestro*.

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from the camera's perspective. This reinforces the idea that the intervention of optic equipment can adulterate the conveyed vision, or better yet, can transform it in another, hermeneutic vision. It is the use of the filmic equipment, particularly the camera and the projector, through its mediation, that enables the relationship between the three platforms of the filmic experience. Never, until 1960, had these tools of the cinematic trade been so exposed in a film.

Figuratively, in *Peeping Tom* the Film is also present in the film through the characters. The film as being is conveyed as a centered entity that we, as spectators, receive physically in a third moment of its *life* (that of perception), but towards whose *meaningful* existence we must contribute if we want it to exist inside ourselves (expression). That is why Helen, when being shown one of Mark's films, asks insistently: "What does it *mean*?" In this context, Mark is always the film. Not only is he constantly present in his father's shootings, but, in fact, his entire life is nothing if not a film. For example, the first time he is seen by Helen he is framed in the window paneling, as a picture with inside framing marks, just as an 8 mm camera image.<sup>3</sup>

In keeping with the views of phenomenology, Jacques Lacan rejects the existence of an absolute subject, an entity synonymous with the individual, defending instead a double and un-centered subject, formed by I + Other, in which the latter legitimizes the former. The psychoanalyst completely divides the subject in two interactive and equivalent halves, none of them prevailing over the other. Therefore, the act of gazing is be akin to that of being gazed at. Whoever gazes is simultaneously a voyeur and a voyeur seen; whoever looks is, at the same time, the object and the subject of the gaze. This articulation presupposes a double system, organized in scopic terms. For Lacan, someone's desire is the desire for the Other. That is why only the Other can return the voyeur's gaze. The fascination is not subverted; it simply spreads out in both directions. One might contend that the voyeur wishes to look at himself/herself, which is partly achieved with this splitting. Consequently, the gaze libido is the pleasure to look at oneself. The predator and the victim are one. *Peeping Tom* is not only about gazing; it is

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<sup>3</sup> The same triad can be perceived through the character Vivian: in the session that will culminate in her death, she begins by being a creature in the world, either in front or behind the camera; is then transfixed into film stock and ends being projected onscreen for Mark to see.

also, following Lacan, about being gazed at. In other words, it is about perception and expression, and its optical and scopic import.

According to Lacan, the voyeur looks at the same time towards the object of his/her desire and to something else that lays beyond (a “blot”), which, in turn, addresses the voyeur, making him/her feel somehow gazed and present in the Other. This particular point in space works as the instrument through which the voyeur is photo-graphed. Such a gaze entails, in Lacan’s view, some blindness, an inability to see the whole picture, which can only be guessed at. The conscious gaze is synonymous with power but, at the same time, it involves some impotence, because the desire (and especially the fulfillment) is mediated. The machine is a phallic substitute, indispensable to the establishment of potency and subsequent sexual pleasure. It is precisely the primordial lack of the cinematic spectator, one degree above the dissatisfaction caused him/her by the distance at which the film is placed, that Michael Powell tried to stage in *Peeping Tom*. The fact that the camera is a substitute for Mark’s gaze implies a lack.<sup>4</sup> *Peeping Tom* tries to convey in narrative form the perfect merging of film and spectator. The gaze itself is always a fusion of sorts, because by projecting itself in space, the gaze physically attains the observed surface. The optical process of vision requires a haptic process as well. This is what Powell decides to enact in the scene where Helen’s blind mother confronts Mark, who is in the middle of an incriminatory private projection. The protagonist sees the film with his own eyes; Helen’s mother tries to perceive it with the

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<sup>4</sup> As a fetishist, Mark is in a perpetual love affair with his 8 mm hand-held camera. Once, during a short interrogation by the police, one of the two inspectors present holds his camera for a while, much to his chagrin, and he is seen once holding his camera in anguish before scenes of psychological torture of himself as a child. As he claims to Helen, his newly found romantic interest, he grew with a camera always pointed at him.

only instrument at her disposal: touch. Thus the lack (of sight, in this case) is assumed as the necessary reverse of the gaze.

Without his precious camera, Mark cannot access the world, neither can he film himself filming, thus warranting the perfect fusion. Of little good is his symbolic crucifixion on the screen, when he embraces with open arms the white flat surface in despair, or the use of two cameras simultaneously, during his private session with Vivian, when he films her, with his hand-held camera, filming him, with the studio heavy camera. The last reflection cannot be accomplished. Thus, the concept of the total mirror is a downright delusion. The only mirror capable of delivering Mark's *perfect film* is a deforming surface, entrusted with the mission of terrorizing Mark's victims to death. Ironically, it is in his own death that the protagonist of *Peeping Tom* will redeem himself, since it is in that final act that he is able to record his gaze of man-camera (not to be confused with camera man) duplicated by the camera that shoots the man exhaling his last breath, when he impales himself on the camera tripod and sees the reflection of his agonizing face on the distorted mirror.

This is not the lacanian territory of the Other returning the gaze to the I. That is what happens when, for instance, a character looks directly into the camera, making the spectator feel as though he/she has been *seen*. Insofar as the film is made by the spectator, the meaning of that gaze is also validated by him/her. Therefore, in this case, it is still the spectator who gazes at himself/herself from the other side of the film, in a body which is not his/hers. What is impossible to obtain is the centered gaze of I+Other reflected in the centered gazed of the Other+I. If the film would point a mirror at whomever gazes from "this side" of the screen, the production space would be distorted by an element which was not originally part of it. Besides, the recording dynamics

would be lost, since the film would not really be making a film. In phenomenological terms:

I (expression / signified / film viewer)

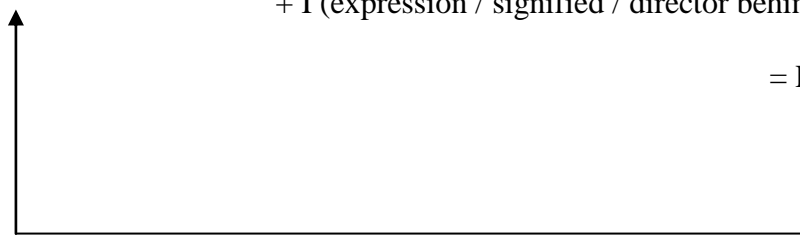
+ Other (perception / signifier / film on screen)

= Film (from the viewer perspective)

Other (perception / signifier / film on the projector)

+ I (expression / signified / director behind the camera)

= Film (in itself)



MIRROR

What is at stake here is the redoubling of an entire system. Indeed, an all round perceptive entity is supposedly placed beyond this dynamics: a trans-human mirror-effect made possible by an invisible and non cinematic camera whose work is translated by the projective abilities of another piece of equipment.

Because *Peeping Tom* is a pathological rendition of some cinematic issues connected with the gaze and the desire it entails, we tend to finish this projection with the same terror Helen reveals at one point: “Show me, or I’ll remain frightened for the rest of my life. Show me!”.

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