

# WHEN THE WOMAN LOOKS AND TURNS AWAY

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What is it to watch a film about perversion? Does such a scenario invariably call up the scopophilia of the spectator? Indeed, does a perverse scene have an advantage over others in achieving this? Clearly much cinema thinks so and plays with a repertoire of incitement not just to look, but to look at a perversion. It is in general a supplementary feature of any perversion to incite a spectator, as if the aura of the perversion is made up of a consumption of vision that demands that a spectator restore the visual energy which is exhausted in the scene. 'Look at me' says any representation of perversion in a structure of fascination. One's eye does not fall on such a representation; it is seized by the representation. It is clear how our horror and enjoyment go together. If we turn away because it is 'too much', we have to ask 'too much of what'?

This has led to the thought that the enjoyment of the film spectator is perverse insofar as it obeys a regime of scopophilia. And even to the thought that perversion is enjoyable insofar as it can be compared with the pleasure of the spectator. But it seems to me that this precisely fails to distinguish between a pleasure and the question of *jouissance*. In order to try to sustain these distinctions I will speak about just one film - Michael Powell's 'Peeping Tom'. It concerns a young man, Mark Lewis, who films women as he kills them. At the time the film constituted something of a scandal; one film reviewer suggested that it should be flushed down the sewer. But since then it has acquired a certain critical status. Linda Williams has called it a 'progressive' horror movie, insofar as the woman is permitted a look.<sup>1</sup> And indeed the regime and the economy of 'looking' within the film and for the spectator is a central issue which I want to address. How are we incorporated into the structure of looking that constitutes the story of the hero?

I want to situate the question of looking within the question of perversion and its relation to *jouissance*. The real title of the film should be 'Father, Can't you See I'm Filming?'. For I shall argue that the deadly filming of Mark Lewis is both a defence against and a fulfillment of the *jouissance* of the Other. From the beginning the film both includes us within the perverse scenario and distances us from it, in a number of different ways. But it gradually deepens the separation between us and that scenario by representing the sight and looks of two women and I will concentrate on this. Yet this very representation of the women which separates us from the perversion merely hastens Mark Lewis into the enactment and culmination of its logic.

I have already referred to the Lacanian category of *jouissance* that I will use. *Jouissance* of course is not something that exists, or rather it exists as that which is not there, is lost and gone forever. It is the real, that which Lacan famously announced is impossible. But that doesn't mean it is irrelevant. It irrupts and disturbs the life of the symbolic order. That which comes to the symbolic from the real, Lacan calls *objet petit a*. It functions as a hole and as the cover for a hole; to describe it is to chart the vicissitudes of the lost object. The lost object is the connection between the symbolic and the real and its stake is *jouissance*. The symbolic and the real are two heterogenous orders and yet the real appears in the symbolic; this means that though there is no direct, different relation to *jouissance*, we have to deal with the object which is the leftover of *jouissance*. I will add that that *jouissance* isn't very nice,

and unlike Mark Lewis, your mother should have warned you against it.

Now *objet petit a* can be misrecognised and can be sought for in different ways. As neurotic, you can hanker after the object, thinking you can have it, in which case you fail to know that the object comes before desire, that it is the cause of desire. Or the relation to the object can be one of identification as in the perversions, most clearly exemplified in the masochist who is the object which ensures the *jouissance* of the Other. This is where analysis comes in - here you can recognise the lack of the object in the Other, in other words, that the Other is incomplete and does not have the object either. En route there by acting out, you can aim at direct access to the object and to *jouissance*, seeking to have the object in reality outside any mediation by a knowledge which is coordinated with the Other.

This shows that the subject is partially determined by these relations to the object. Hopefully, analysis undoes many relations to the object and permits a separation from the object. Perversions, such as that which the film unfolds would resist any such separation, so the spectator of such a film may well be placed in an interesting relation to the object.

First, let me tell you something about the film. 'Peeping Tom' is the story of a young man, Mark Lewis who films and who works in a studio as a focus puller. His own cinecamera from which he is never separated, is a special object. With it he can film the scenes that he cannot put into words. In these scenes the camera films a murder and is a murder weapon. For one of the tripod legs has a concealed blade at its tip. A victim is filmed as the blade approaches her, the subject being a study in terror. The expression of terror is amplified by the addition to the camera of a reflector, a concave mirror in which the victim watches her own terrified, distorted image which fixes a look upon her face, that as the detective remarks, far surpasses the terror normally found on the victim's face. Yet this act never quite works; a something is not captured which would mark his own assumption of the role of director. Such a triumphant documentary eludes him; 'the lights always fade too soon'.

This partial and schematic story will readily support your worst fears about the kind of film 'Peeping Tom' is. Is it as Mary Ann Doane asked a decade ago, the kind of film in which, to the detriment of women, the dominant cinema repetitively inscribes scenarios of voyeurism, internalising or narrativising the film-spectator relationship? In this argument the man looks and the woman isn't allowed to. Presumably the man looks at the woman and presumably he finds a satisfaction in the target. But what Mark Lewis is looking for is a look which will satisfy his looking and yet he will not get this satisfaction. Certainly his looking is inscribed in scenes of voyeurism and exhibitionism but there are other inscribed scenarios of looking that are narratively constitutive of the film. In these it is the woman's look that counts. Or rather, the woman's relation to the look. For the look is the object look and it is the vicissitudes of this object that I want to follow through the film.

The title of the film, 'Peeping Tom' and the appearance of a psychiatrist who speaks of scopophilia are both necessary and misleading. If anything, at the beginning, the film peeps; we peep. But Mark Lewis is primarily an exhibitionist. This is partly to do with his murdering camera with its phallic blade. But it is also because of what he aims to do, which is to produce and to steal a look. For what is the terror he produces? What does it do? It effects the division of the Other to show that the Other has the object. That is to say, that the scene ensures the *jouissance* of the Other, which is the aim in all perversion. Now in exhibitionism and voyeurism the object at

stake is the look. When a peeping Tom looks the circuit of the drive only closes when, by a rustle or a movement he finds himself surprised as pure look. By contrast, the exhibitionist forces the look in the Other, through the division of the Other. In the end, in the Lacanian doctrine, the exhibitionist too identifies with the object. But its mechanism allows us to make sense of the distorting mirror in Mark Lewis' scenario and of two crucial scenes later in the film.

It is important, whether it concerns exhibitionism or voyeurism, that the pervert's partner has an eye which is complicit, a fascinated eye. Which reminds us of a story told by Theodore Reik of a failed exhibitionist act in which the woman exclaims 'My good man! Won't you catch cold?' She looks and refuses; but what happens when the look is captured? In seeking to divide the Other the pervert is mounting a challenge to castration, for the lack that would appear in the Other will be filled with the object. Now the exhibitionist's partner with the fascinated eye is complicit with this denial of castration; the look completes the Other, it secures the *jouissance* of the Other. But it doesn't work with the woman in Reik's story and as we shall see it doesn't work with one woman in the story of Peeping Tom.

So Mark Lewis, in his exhibitionist murder scenarios, attempts to experience *jouissance* directly, and in this the film invites our participation. As he stalks his first two victims we are enclosed within his camera's point of view. At this point we are one with a thousand horror films relishing the threat to the victim at the very moment we identify with her. But the film veers away from his documentary; it cuts before the murder and it repeats his documentary as an act of repetition and projection in his darkroom. His aim is to document what Lacan calls the *angoisse* of the other, that anxiety that touches the real and puts it in relation with the barred subject. Which is what puts this film at the level of the problem of *jouissance* rather than the imaginary system of pleasure and unpleasure. We as spectators are implicated in this as we are put in the position of wanting to see what it is that Mark Lewis wants to see. Not only do we see through his viewfinder in the first two murder scenes, but at times we see him with his back to us watching the documentary that he has made and this sets up an explicit relay of looks - we are looking at him looking at the victim. In the replay of the second murder we see yet another figure behind him watching him watch the screen. However, the effect is not magnified; on the contrary this additional figure sets up an interference in the relay of looks. Which has much to do with her blindness as we will see.

The film provides part of the unfinished documentary as another related documentary. Old footage shows Mark Lewis as a boy filmed by his father who also made documentaries. Strong lights awake the boy who is deprived of sleep and privacy by being filmed in states of fear. For his father is represented as a scientist whose study of fear has led him to film his child - awakening to find a lizard in his bedclothes, his child at his mother's deathbed, his child watching a courting couple. The footage ends with this happy monster leaving home with a second wife, leaving the boy with a gift - a camera. Obviously the camera can only shoot his father's film, and the son sets off to document a scene which essentially repeats the scene his father documented. The scene which Mark Lewis tries to film, his own primordial *mise-en-scène*, has not to do with the usual senses of primal scene but with intolerable *jouissance*. The promise is that this production will free him once he has captured it on film. But each murder can only be a rehearsal, for the lights always fade too soon.

In effect Mark Lewis wants to make a documentary which will free him from the

torment of his own life. It would document the look of terror which someone about to be murdered would exhibit if not only facing death, the victim faced her own face at the *momenta mori*. But this is impossible and the documentary is only a simulacrum of the documentary that awaits him as its completion.

The drama concerns the fulfilment of this logic. Two figures, a daughter and her blind mother, live in the flat below him and his darkroom. They precipitate a crisis in the drama and in the spectator's relation to the object look. The daughter (insofar as she mobilises a romantic wish which is split off from his primordial scene) produces the wish in him not to make a victim of her. It is this which highlights the inescapability of his perversion and it makes us finally look differently. Meanwhile, his encounter with the mother propels him into his suicide scenario and allows a break in the relay of looks the perverse scenario sets up.

I can only be brief here about the daughter's function in the narrative. Helen has a special place in Mark Lewis' world; she stands for the normality, the release from the constant repetition of his scenario, the peace that he longs for. How does she come to have this special place? Everything implicates her in a matrix of things to do with his mother which we may call the time of the mother, the time of the reflection in the mirror, before triangulation, a time of a nascent relation to others and its promise of tenderness. A time which promised the humanisation of the monster, Mark Lewis. In the first meeting with Helen everything is in flux visually and something happens to make her special. Since Helen functions as the place of demand - she wants to see his films as a birthday present, then she wants an explanation of them, she wants help for photographs for a children's story she has written - she is an appropriate place where the imaginary and the symbolic might intersect, where Mark Lewis can try to get a foothold, a place where he might build an ego, a refuge from his ego ideal, from fear and the camera, his master signifiers. A place from which he could tell his story differently, perhaps tell a different story. So Mark Lewis does not want to run the risk of photographing Helen.

But we must note that the project of making the documentary is not displaced. Rather, the effect of the encounter with Helen adds an urgent necessity to the task of finishing the documentary, the only way Mark Lewis can conceive of finding peace. So we must note that Helen is not the place of Mark Lewis' desire. His desire remains elsewhere; it remains co-ordinated with the camera and with fear, his master signifiers. Helen kisses Mark; Mark Lewis kisses the camera.

What of the spectator in all this? These scenes with Helen work in a quite different way to capture the spectator in a play of perverse looking. They include Helen watching the films of Mark his father made and this time it is Helen's voyeuristic pleasure and her own recoil from it that implicate the spectator. Reynold Humphries has pointed out that when we see the father handing his son a camera:

The child immediately starts filming those who are filming him, ie, he points the camera at their camera and, by extension, at the camera of the *enunciation*: at Helen, at us. 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...<sup>2</sup>

Which is to say that the object look falls. The mechanism which produces this is just one of a number of ways in which Michael Powell harasses us into a certain

spectatorial vigilance, a harrasment which extends throughout the film. While this vigilance concerns the separation from the object, a final intervention in the relay of perverse looks is necessary and it is Helen who will figure narratively in the film's definitive intervention.

If Helen is the motive to hasten the final documentary, her blind mother is the one who is the determination of its suicide form. This mother could be herself quite frightening; certainly, she produces panic in Mark Lewis and there is one particular scene that I want to comment on. In his projection room, Mark Lewis is watching the film of a murder; he hears a sound and he switches on the spotlight to reveal the blind mother tripoded against the wall with her stick. This provocative presence in his inner sanctum is threatening. Mark Lewis panics in front of this woman castrated by her blindness but armed with her weapon with its pointed tip. This much is fairly obvious. But what can we say of the look? It is too simple to say that the blind cannot look. What makes the mother a terrifying figure is that she also stands for the look. But it is not the look the pervert seeks. The aim of the pervert is to make vision and the look coincide; here, we have instead the blind woman as the look, the look when vision has been subtracted. The look is not locked into the Other; the look falls there. This, of course, is the Lacanian idea of separation.

Now the spectator does not remain unaffected by this woman who stands for castration and the fall of the look. She interrupts our desire to see what Mark Lewis wants to see for we too, are threatened by the non-coincidence of vision and look and the castration that this separation of the look unveils.

This woman 'sees', knows. She has 'seen' the darkroom through the nightly visits as she lies in her room below and Mark Lewis remarks that she would know immediately if he were lying. Her 'seeing' is the screen of knowledge that he must pierce through in order to attain his *jouissance*. When she taunts him about what it is he watches all the time, he switches on the film of the murder that her abrupt entry had interrupted. Following the injunction 'take me to your cinema' he leads this blind woman toward the screen. Perhaps this is a test: will she see his secret or will the murder documentary bring reassurance of the truth of *jouissance* and the lie of castration? The test fails him. For the documentary reveals the failure of another 'opportunity' and he moans that the lights always fade too soon.

But this test also fails the spectator, though not for the same reasons. Remember, we have just seen him take the blind woman to his 'cinema' and we are there, as before, taking at him looking at the screen. Except that this time there is one more spectator; we are in fact looking at the blind woman looking at Mark Lewis looking at the terrified face of the stand-in he has submitted to his enjoyment. On the bottom right-hand corner of the screen isn't she the anamorphic stain in the picture, marking the fall of the object? She is not a blot in the exact sense in which Lacan elucidates the idea of anamorphosis in Holbein's picture of The Ambassadors; she does not disclose the function of the stain at the moment of our turning away. But I think we have here another mechanism of the fall of the look which sustains and is sustained by what we know of her.

What we learn is not, however, for Mark Lewis. Having failed once more to document the murder scenario he panics and grabs the available opportunity to him, which is of course the mother. He starts and unsheaths the blade, but it won't work. He cannot put this woman into his exhibitionist scenario; her blindness refuses inclusion in the documentary that he continuously seeks to complete. In her case the

lights have always already failed. Yes, she is frightened, but he cannot get a blind woman to see her own terror. How can he escalate the terror and produce the ultimate division without a response to his distorting reflector? She will always be the incomplete Other who is not invested with the object. This marks the moment when he registers that all future opportunities will end in failure. One could say that he realises that the object will not be realised, that the *jouissance* of the Other cannot be guaranteed.

On leaving, the mother talks of the 'instinct' and she notes dryly that it is a pity that it can't be photographed. Here is an other who gives him a consultation and says that 'all this filming isn't healthy' and that he will have to get help, will have to talk to someone.

What is the consequence of all this? Mark Lewis tried to film and kill the mother – 'its for Helen' as he says to her – in order to finish his documentary, but his encounter determines him to put into operation something he had known he would have to do for a long time, namely, to include himself in it as the last victim.

Does this mean that Mark Lewis is now differently situated in relation to the object? Is his last act different from the preceding ones? Is he bravely turning the cameras and the blade point on himself to face what he has hitherto avoided, his own division? Is there here some psychical shift, some ethical step?

Let me state my thesis: there is no drama of separation from the object here, only the movement of acting out which by itself changes nothing but which in fact completes it. Mark Lewis does not extricate himself from his dilemma by giving up the hope of the one more time and it will work. He just makes sure the one more time will be the last time; the last time as the one more time which works. Now in acting out as it is understood in analysis there is a particular relation to the object. It is at one and the same time an acting out, outside, the scene of analysis and an acting for the Other, that is the analyst. Acting out is transference without an analyst; when there is no one to speak to, there is only the Other to act in front of. When the analyst qua object leaves the analytic scene, the analysand bypasses knowledge and looks for the object in the real. Acting out could take the form of smelling your analyst. Lacan alludes to smell (*l'odeur*) as object. What is happening if you smell your analyst is an acting out, for the Other doesn't smell.

Is Mark Lewis' final act an acting out? One could well argue that all perverse scenarios are acting out and that Mark Lewis' last scenario is not essentially different from the others in its relation to the object unmediated by knowledge. We can clearly see how the pervert has pierced the screen of knowledge. For as Jean Clavreul has argued, the fundamental disavowal that is at the heart of all perversion is a disavowal of the lack of knowledge that preceded the sight of the absence of the penis in the mother. A lack of knowledge causes the child to look in the first place; the lack of knowledge as the cause of the scopophilic drive. What is disavowed is that the child did not know and wanted to know. Which in turn means that the father is not recognised as having the knowledge before the child. This is how the pervert occupies the position of one who will never again be deprived of knowledge, particularly knowledge about eroticism. Then, as Clavreul says, 'This knowledge about eroticism feels assured of obtaining the other's *jouissance* under any circumstances'.<sup>3</sup> This short-circuiting of the dimension of knowledge that is coordinated with the Other means that the pervert has to seek an eye complicit with him, blind to what is happening, an eye that will remain fascinated and seduced.

The pervert is already, always acting outside the Other and yet for the Other. So the suicide scenario is not to be distinguished from the others by virtue of being a piece of acting out. Mark Lewis remains a pervert to his deadly end. If anything marks the final scenes, then, it must be its difference from acting out. It is the scene with Helen immediately preceding the suicide scenario that is different, the revelation of the distorting mirror, not just to Helen, but for the first time to us. Helen has changed something in Mark Lewis concerning what he desires his relation to knowledge to be. He is doomed, yet he manages a different telling of his story. It is in this scene that Mark Lewis, at the limit of temptation, even while utilising the very instruments of his enjoyment, does not seek complicity from Helen. Hers is an eye that he wishes not to fascinate and seduce. He tells his pervert's secret and he knows she will not turn a blind eye. There is no threat to Helen in this scene where he holds the blade at her throat. It is his telling his story in the only way he can - fitfully and in large part in images and actions; but it is a telling all the same, a telling the blind mother had bade him do. So in addition to the documentary he is about to complete, he leaves a story behind. The pity of it is that it in no way diminishes his own disavowal of knowledge. His acting out remains a one-way ticket with no way back to the symbolic. Perhaps, if Mark Lewis now knows something new it is that his documentary can never be his return ticket to the symbolic. The intervention of the women represent the fact that his act, killing, is only a postponement of his destiny. So he goes to meet his solution, his death, and thus to meet his Maker, his father. As the screen darkens, a small voice says 'Goodnight daddy; hold my hand'.

These are the last words in the film; mine, however, must be about Helen and her part in the scene where she is told the story and confronted with her own distorted reflection in the mirror. Clearly, she survives castration. The mirror is like the Medusa's head and though Helen has to look at it, she then turns her head away. The fascination of the image fails; Helen is not petrified. She is not stiff either with terror or with enjoyment. She fails to be the pervert's partner; she effects a separation from the perverse scenario. The woman looks and survives because she can confront castration. We are freed from Mark Lewis' scenario.

#### ENDNOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Williams, 'When the Woman Looks' in Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, Linda Williams (Eds), Re-vision, American Film Institute, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Reynold Humphries, 'Peeping Tom: Voyeurism, the Camera and the Spectator', Film Reader, 1980, vol. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Clavreul, 'The Perverse Couple' in S. Schneiderman, Returning to Freud, Yale University Press, 1980.