



EDGAR WRIGHT'S LONDON AFTER DARK

# Peeping Tom

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

Never has Eastmancolor felt so woozily, vividly hypnotic than in Michael Powell's controversial shocker. It's as easy to be seduced by the luscious visuals as the poor victims of Carl Boehm's psychopath are drawn into their deadly photoshoots. Dark as it is in subject matter, the blazing primary colours of Soho and Fitzrovia depicted on screen are a delight.

Edgar Wright

Part of the exasperation, if not the loathing, prompted by Michael Powell's 'nice, pure, beautiful film' (as he called it) when it first appeared in 1960 can be explained by sheer disorientation. From the title inwards, nothing that *Peeping Tom* delivers is quite what it promises (or threatens); if there is a logic to be traced beneath its surface of peculiar imprecision, it is that of the surviving airman (how does he survive?) in *A Matter of Life and Death* or of the family curse (is it really a blessing?) in *'I Know Where I'm Going!'* In other words, the film requires some indulgence from its observers in order to survive its own contradictions. Too little tolerance, and *Peeping Tom* is 'merely' about a deranged sexual pervert; too much, and it becomes – equally mysteriously – a key to the whole purpose of watching movies.

The notoriety of *Peeping Tom* as a horror film seems ill-deserved; it is resolutely understated, its death scenes unfashionably bloodless. The pin-ups by which the newsagent supplements his income also have the innocent inhibition of a long-departed era, less provocative than most contemporary greetings cards. 'You won't see that in *Sight & Sound!*' exclaims the focus-puller's colleague, waving an iconic snapshot – and, sure enough, *Sight & Sound* pointedly ignored *Peeping Tom* on first release. But today Powell's film could no longer be interpreted on whatever pretext as a corrupting influence, an insult, or a flagrant waste of talent. Already adrift from its period, set in a London where accents and grammar still ring with the stoicism of the immediately post-war, it now reads most plausibly as compassionate fable, strangely echoing in its themes and images of possessiveness, blindness and loss another of the stories that Powell filmed without Pressburger, *The Thief of Bagdad*, back in 1940. That film, too, began with (and repeatedly returned to) a piercing gaze.

Much can be made of *Peeping Tom*'s opening shot, the eye springing open both to absorb and to attack: it can be read as both fearsome and fearful, menacing and vulnerable, both an awakening and an insight, even implying that everything to follow is imaginary, perceived only by an inner eye. Always to be found, by a sadistic stretch, in the Archers trademark (an arrow piercing the pupil of the target), the recurring Powell motif promises reward and punishment, clarity of vision offset by potential malignancy of purpose. In *Peeping Tom* it is promptly associated with the lens of the camera which, after thrusting at us furtively from folds of clothing, identifies us with the killer, not with his victim. Since we have no quarrel with the luckless Dora (although emphatically no reason to like her, either), nor do we know quite how she dies, it seems at first that a useful opportunity for clarification is offered by the

repeat of the whole sequence behind the opening credits. Powell's ingenuity, however, only leads to complications.

The monochrome version is not, in fact, a repeat of the initial encounter, which seems to be (but isn't) a single tracking shot from start to finish: it is edited from a different take, while oddly repeating the glimpse (a deliberate mistake?) of the camera unit's shadow across the shop front. This time around, Dora clutches a lamppost in passing, fails to meet a fellow lodger on the stairs, and does not appear to speak before dying. It is puzzling that, given our understanding of the camera's position, she consistently looks us straight in the lens. But the main problems posed by this series of subtle non-sequiturs relate not to the murderer's identity, since he sits there in front of us, but to the questions of how and why the murder was committed. It takes most of the film to produce some answers, partly because the lurid device of the camera-tripod blade – a potent enough symbol, although perplexingly unwieldy and impractical – is less important than the parabolic mirror (strenuously concealed from us until the end) in which the victims see themselves, and partly because the explanation of the murderer's purpose proves to be no more than a clue to a range of deeper motivations.

Deliberately or not, *Peeping Tom* encourages distrust. What are we to make, for example, of Mark's German accent, somehow acquired since his childhood (we hear tapes of the boy's immaculate English) although he has always lived in the same house? What kind of an autumn evening, close to Firework Night, is still broad daylight at 7pm, and how is it that the whole business of Milly's murder takes only as long as a postman (working unusual hours) takes to deliver a letter? Less trivially, we might wonder why Helen only meets Mark (her landlord) after she has been given, at 21, the key of the door; what might be significant about his gift of a dragonfly brooch (a reference to *The Tales of Hoffmann*? a comment on the emerging adult?); and when exactly it was that Mark's 'researches' turned him into a killer. If Dora was the first, what prompted the escalation – and what did he film before? And crucially, since *Peeping Tom* contrives to be a film about sex while scarcely mentioning the subject, how does Mark's condition relate to his lost mother, his hated stepmother, and his father's vast collection of sound tapes?

Mark's own answer to the riddle of his behaviour admits no sexual implication. 'I made them watch their own deaths,' he says of his victims, 'and if death has a face they saw that too.' This would suggest that Mark's altruistic continuation of his father's work was driven by the need to understand the ultimate fear, in anticipation of his own demise. It is invalidated by the use of the mirror in which the women would only see a wildly distorted image, in fact a reflection of how Mark sees them. Studying their deaths on film, a documentary slowly taking on the shape of a complete Powell production, Mark is distracted from his metaphysical quest by the intervention of Helen and the 'reality' of love, neatly if ironically signalled by the insistent ringing of a bell. He has to make a choice and, since this is Powell's world, the film takes priority over the relationship; he brings his father's exhaustive project to its inevitable close.

Tinkering with Freudian theories (as Powell and Leo Marks began their collaboration by doing), a more satisfactory reading might be that as a consequence of his father-obsession Mark is jealous of his stepmother and kills off her later equivalents in order to keep his father (the real 'Peeping Tom') to himself. As sex has no part in this relationship, any sexual behaviour – such as kissing couples or posing glamour-girls – has to be suppressed and

punished. At the same time, by ‘becoming’ his father, Mark can justify a tolerance towards Helen as a potential partner/mother, while Mrs Stephens, ‘seeing’ him more clearly for being blind, also has some vestige of maternal authority over him. But the enigmas of the film, like the veil that lifts across Mark’s first meeting with Helen’s mother, safely defy explanation. The most appropriate verdict comes after Mark’s reunion with death, in the form of a splendidly ambiguous Powellian comment both on the after-life and on *Peeping Tom* itself ‘There’s nothing,’ says the expert, ‘to be afraid of.’

Philip Strick, *Sight & Sound*, November 1994

PEEPING TOM

*Directed by:* Michael Powell  
©/*Production Company:* Michael Powell (Theatre) Ltd  
*Nat Cohen and Stuart Levy present*  
*a Michael Powell production*  
*Production Manager:* Al Marcus  
*Production Assistants:* Judith Coxhead, William J. Paton  
*1st Assistant Director:* Ted Sturgis  
*Continuity:* Rita Davison  
*An Original Story and Screenplay by:* Leo Marks  
*Photographed in Eastmancolor by:* Otto Heller  
*Camera Operator:* Gerry Turpin  
*Chief Electrician:* Victor E. Smith  
*Editor:* Noreen Ackland  
*Art Director:* Arthur Lawson  
*Assistant Art Director:* Ivor Beddoes  
*Set Dresser:* Don Picton  
*Construction Manager:* Ronald Udell  
*Miss Anna Massey’s Dresses by:* Polly Peck  
*Miss Moira Shearer’s Dresses by:* John Tullis of Horrockses  
*Wardrobe:* Dickie Richardson  
*Make-up:* W.J. Partleton  
*Hairdressing:* Pearl Orton  
*Hats by:* Millinery Guild  
*Music Composed and Directed by:* Brian Easdale  
*Percussion Number by:* Wally Stott  
*Dance Music by:* Freddie Phillips  
*Solo Piano:* Gordon Watson  
*Sound Recordists:* C.C. Stevens, Gordon McCallum  
*Sound Editor:* Malcolm Cooke

*uncredited*  
*Producer:* Michael Powell  
*Associate Producer:* Albert Fennell  
*2nd Assistant Director:* Denis Johnson  
*3rd Assistant Director:* Carl Mannin  
*Focus Puller:* Derek Browne  
*Clapper Loader:* Jim Hopewell  
*Stills:* Norman Gryspeerdt  
*1st Assistant Editor:* Alma Godfrey  
*2nd Assistant Editor:* John Rushton  
*Draughtsman:* Maurice Pelling  
*Wardrobe Assistant:* Vi Garnham  
*Studio:* Pinewood Studios

Cast

Carl Boehm (*Mark Lewis*)  
Moira Shearer (*Vivian*)  
Anna Massey (*Helen Stephens*)  
Maxine Audley (*Mrs Stephens*)  
Brenda Bruce (*Dora*)  
Miles Malleison (*elderly gentleman*)  
Esmond Knight (*Arthur Baden*)  
Martin Miller (*Dr Rosan*)  
Michael Goodliffe (*Don Jarvis*)  
Jack Watson (*Inspector Gregg*)  
Shirley Ann Field (*Diane Ashley*)  
Pamela Green (*Milly*)

*uncredited*  
Bartlett Mullins (*Mr Peters*)  
Nigel Davenport (*Sgt Miller*)  
Brian Wallace (*Tony*)  
Susan Travers (*Lorraine*)  
Maurice Durant (*publicity chief*)  
Brian Worth (*assistant director*)  
Veronica Hurst (*Miss Simpson*)  
Alan Rolfe (*store detective*)  
John Dunbar (*police doctor*)  
Guy Kingsley-Poynter (*P. Tate, cameraman*)  
Keith Baxter (*Baxter, detective*)  
Peggy Thorpe-Bates (*Mrs Partridge*)  
John Barrard (*small man*)  
Roland Curram (*young man extra*)  
Robert Crewdson (*tall shop assistant*)  
John Chappell (*clapper boy*)  
Paddy Edwardes (*girl extra*)  
Frank Singuineau (*first electrician*)  
Margaret Neal (*stepmother*)  
Michael Powell (*A.N. Lewis, Mark’s father*)  
Columba Powell (*Mark as a child*)

UK 1960©  
102 mins

EDGAR WRIGHT’S LONDON AFTER DARK

**Passport to Shame (AKA Room 43)**  
Mon 18 Oct 20:50; Sat 13 Nov 18:10  
**Peeping Tom**  
Tue 19 Oct 20:30; Sat 6 Nov 18:20  
**Beat Girl**  
Fri 22 Oct 20:40; Sun 31 Oct 16:20  
**West End Jungle + Look at Life: Market Place**  
**+ Look at Life: Rising to High Office**  
Sat 23 Oct 20:40; Sat 20 Nov 14:40  
**The Pleasure Girls + Look at Life: Members Only**  
Mon 25 Oct 20:50; Mon 29 Nov 18:20

**Frenzy**  
Wed 27 Oct 20:45; Fri 19 Nov 18:30  
**Darling**  
Thu 28 Oct 20:30; Sat 20 Nov 13:20  
**Bitter Harvest + Look at Life: Coffee Bar**  
Fri 29 Oct 18:00; Tue 9 Nov 20:45  
**The Small World of Sammy Lee + Look at Life: In Gear**  
Sat 30 Oct 20:30; Sat 6 Nov 20:45;  
Tue 23 Nov 14:30  
**Primitive London + Look at Life: Goodbye Piccadilly**  
Mon 1 Nov 20:50; Thu 25 Nov 20:50

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