MONSTRUM 1, no. 1 (April 2018) | ISSN 2561-5629

Peeping Tom: The Petrifying Gaze of Mechanical Medusa

Virginie Selavy

When *Peeping Tom* was released in 1960, it provoked moral outrage among British critics, who were traditionally intolerant of anything situated outside of the boundaries of strict realism, above all if it depicted violence. Since Ian Johnson and Raymond Durgnat championed the film in the mid-1960s, it has been recognized as a masterwork of the period and one of director Michael Powell's most accomplished films. It has been the subject of numerous essays, which have, for the main part, followed the paths opened up by Johnson and Durgnat. The latter cast Michael Powell as a romantic (1965/1978), an idea that was developed by authors such as David Thomson (1980) and Peter Wollen (1994), who focused on Powell's "romantic imagination" and the heightened aestheticism of *Peeping Tom*. Johnson's ground-breaking "A Pin to See the Peepshow" (1963) offered a Freudian reading of the film revolving around castration fears, phallic symbols and the Oedipal complex, while also discussing voyeurism and self-reflexivity. This strand of criticism has dominated the discussion of *Peeping Tom*, as seen in the work of N.A. Morris (1990), William Johnson (1980), Reynold Humphries (1979), Anthony Harrild (1981) and Baptiste Roux (2001), as well as in the psychoanalytical feminist criticism of Kaja Silverman (1988), Ilsa J. Bick (1993) and Laura Mulvey (2005).

Peeping Tom itself encourages the psychoanalytical and self-reflexive approach, right from the choice of title. The initial intention of scriptwriter Leo Marks had been to make a film about Sigmund Freud, but the project was abandoned because another producer had already acquired the rights for a Freud biopic (Powell, 1959/2003: 20). The murderous behaviour of the central character, Mark Lewis (Carl Boehm), is explained in psychoanalytical terms, a result of the abuse he suffered as a child at the hands of his father. The film even introduces the character of a mildly ridiculous psychiatrist into the plot to give a helpful explanation of "scopophilia," "the morbid urge to gaze." As Mark's particular perversion

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is to film his victims while he kills them, his psychological disorder is easily interpreted as a reflexive metaphor: his films-within-the-film seem to highlight the obsession with watching and have been interpreted as exposing the voyeurism of the cinematic apparatus itself.

Psychoanalysis and self-reflexivity offer useful insights into the film, and yet it seems almost too easy, too obvious, to exclusively interpret *Peeping Tom* along these lines,[1] and this reading does not seem sufficient to explain the film's lasting impact. Although *Peeping Tom* is clearly about watching, its focus appears to be less on the specific psychopathology of voyeurism, or on the voyeurism inherent to (horror) cinema, but rather more widely on the relation between terror and vision. This connection is supported by a comment Powell made in a 1968 interview with Bertrand Tavernier published in *Midi-Minuit Fantastique*:

> I think that the camera is very frightening. If you think that *Peeping Tom*'s camera acquires such a personality that it becomes a source of terror like the lens, I'm extremely pleased because that is exactly what I feel myself. […] I don't think there is anything more frightening than a camera, a camera which is filming and which is watching you. (Powell, 1968/2003: 28)

This fascination with a machine of vision endowed with some form of sentience is in keeping with the *fantastique* streak that runs throughout Powell's work. In conjunction with Emeric Pressburger, Powell had already explored the shifting boundaries between animate and inanimate in the ballet shoes that possess Moira Shearer in *The Red Shoes* (1948), or in the character of Olympia the automaton in *The Tales of Hoffman* (1951), for instance. *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946) blurs the frontier that separates the living and the dead, while *Black Narcissus* (1947) plunges supposedly civilised Christianity into a wild pagan world whose sensuality chaotically disrupts its cloistered structure. Through the interest in *fantastique*, folk and fairy tales that runs throughout his work, Powell consistently confronts rational order with the dark, murky undergrowth of irrational fears and desires. Revisiting key figures or narratives of the human imaginary, he filters and refashions them through the modern technological medium of cinema.

From this perspective, it is possible to see in the frightening "watching" camera of *Peeping Tom* an echo of one of the most archaic figures of terror in Western culture: the ancient Greek monster Medusa. Not only does Medusa embody "the most primitive fears of the kind that men have dreaded since earliest times" (Feldman, 1965: 490), it does so through a complex relationship to the gaze. Even though it has been

relatively neglected in discussions of the film, fear, in relation to vision, is the central theme in *Peeping Tom*: the abuse suffered by Mark and his consequent murderous psychosis are a result of his father's experiments on fear, which he documented on camera. As Mark compulsively continues this study by filming his victims, he delves into the very nature of fear. "Do you know what the most frightening thing in the world is?" asks Mark. "It's fear." This startling circular statement points to the disturbing irreducibility of absolute terror, and to one of the fundamental aspects of the Medusa myth. In this reciprocal quality of fear, as well as in the film's equation of seeing with dying, the complex mirror effects, and the association of terror with the sight of the female sex, echoes of the deadly Gorgon resonate throughout.

Medusa has been mentioned in connection with *Peeping Tom* in two previous articles. Laura Mulvey makes reference to the Greek myth to describe the scene in which Mark reveals the secret of the murders to Helen, comparing the set-up of the killing to "the moment when the Medusa's castrating look was turned towards her, reflected in Perseus's shield" (2005: 154-55). However, she does not elaborate further, and continues her analysis of the film in terms of male voyeurism and the "sadistic gaze," which, according to her, Marks and Powell suggest is "inevitably present in the cinema" (2005: 145). Philippe Dubois briefly links the Gorgon and *Peeping Tom* in his piece on the "Medusa effect of photography in film" (1983), which explores the idea that the act of photographing is similar to Medusa's gaze in that it fixes and paralyses the living figure. Focusing mainly on Michael Curtiz's *The Mystery of the Wax Museum* (1933), he shows how the face of Fay Wray, frozen by fear, provides a compelling illustration of the Medusa-like process of photographic petrification that is effected by cinema. At the beginning of his article, Dubois notes a linguistic analogy (in both French and English) between photographic shot and gun shot, and describes *Peeping Tom* as the fullest expression of the "condensation between filming, killing and watching" (1983: 13). He concludes his short commentary on the film with the following: "This is essentially about an ancient *topos*, a mythological bedrock, a phantasy inscribed within the whole human imagination" (1983: 13). Tracing these obscure mythological roots and their full ramifications in *Peeping Tom* is what interests me here.

The Deadly Power of the Gaze

The coincidence between watching and killing is the most obvious thematic link between Medusa and *Peeping Tom*. To film someone—to

"shoot" them, reprising Dubois's linguistic remark—results in their death. The camera is like Medusa, its gaze deadly for whoever looks at it. In *Peeping Tom*, the Medusa-like quality of the camera is emphasized by the blade and the mirror that are attached to one of its tripod legs (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Viv facing Mark's camera-mirror-spike

The blade makes the deadliness of the gaze literal: as the women filmed by Mark look at the camera, they are stabbed to death. The mirror is what induces the unusual expression of intense fright on the victims' faces, noted by the police, who suggest that it must be caused by something worse than the realisation of their imminent death. As in the Greek myth, looking is key to the terror provoked by Medusa.

Undermining a simple self-reflexive interpretation of the film, this Medusa quality does not characterise all cameras and the cinematic apparatus generally, but only Mark's own particular camera, a 16mm Bell and Howell Filmo. When Mark is moved by the new model Lorraine's deformed lip during the nude photo shoot, he takes out his own camera to film her even though he has been taking pictures with the 8x10 view camera until then. When Mark films the actress Viv in the film studio, he does so with his special camera rather than the 35mm Mitchell that is already on the set, and which he uses in his professional capacity as a focus puller.[2] Made of elements that do not naturally belong together, Mark's camera-mirror-spike is a monstrous composite being. Throughout her various representations, Medusa always combines elements that belong to opposite realms, human and animal, male and female, hideous and beautiful. In a modern version of its hybrid nature, the unnatural appendage of the camera-mirror-spike forms an integral part of Mark, as is made clear when Helen, the young woman who has befriended him, calls it an "extra limb." The deadly glare of the Gorgon does not come from just any camera, but from the half-human, half-mechanical creature that Mark forms with his personal camera.

Thanks to his complex set-up, Mark subjects his victims to Medusa's glaring eye while diverting its mortal power away from him, like Perseus in the Greek legend. There are many variants of the story, but central to all is the necessity of deflecting Medusa's gaze in order to vanquish her. In one version, Perseus uses his shield as a mirror; in another he looks at Medusa's reflection in water (Vernant, 1998: 78). In *Peeping Tom*, the camera and the mirror are used as deflectors. A modern, non-heroic version of Perseus, Mark is able to catch the reflection of unspeakable dread, of Medusa's face, in his camera, without being petrified as he films his victims watching themselves die in the mirror. The screen in his dark room acts as another kind of deflecting device: it allows him to replay the encounter with Medusa captured in his victims' fear, protected from its direct impact.

Just as in the myth, not returning Medusa's gaze is crucial. The character who can best fight Mark's camera is Mrs. Stephens, a blind woman living in Mark's building with her daughter Helen. Her infirmity means that Mrs. Stephens sees what cannot be seen about Mark. Hearing him move upstairs in his room she knows that his filming is "unhealthy." When she intrudes into Mark's intensely personal dark room, the roles are reversed. As Mark menacingly prepares to film her, she lifts up her sharp stick, which recalls the spike on Mark's camera, to defend herself. Countering his blade with her own, she is also armed with non-vision against his deadly camera. The latter is the strongest weapon: Mark finds that filming her is useless to his purpose, as she cannot see her own fear in the mirror, and thus she is able to defeat his murderous set-up.

Medusa the Radical Other

Going one step further than the ancient Greek hero, Mark uses his elaborate device, not simply to face the monstrous Gorgon, but to record something that should normally remain beyond human experience. His victims face the image of their own selves deformed by terror, as they are about to be destroyed. They no longer recognise what they see because they are already other, transfigured by the fear of their passing, suspended between life and death. The most frightening thing in the film is not death itself, it is seeing oneself dying; it is the terror of looking at one's own self and seeing it altered. This is what explains the striking expression of terror on the victims' faces. The mirroring set-up of the camera leads to a confrontation with the terrifying otherness of the dying self.

This is brought home by one of the most shocking images in *Peeping Tom*. Towards the end of the film, as an anguished Helen presses Mark to reveal what he did to his victims to scare them so much, Mark lifts the

camera up towards her. The next image shows Helen's face, distorted in the mirror, finally revealing what the victims have been seeing at the moment of their killing. While the murders are shown with much restraint, Helen's deformed face is brutally and unexpectedly thrust at the viewer, fear warping her features, altering them into a grotesque grimace that no longer looks like her, making this the most disturbing image in the film. "If Death has a face, they saw that too," says Mark about his victims.

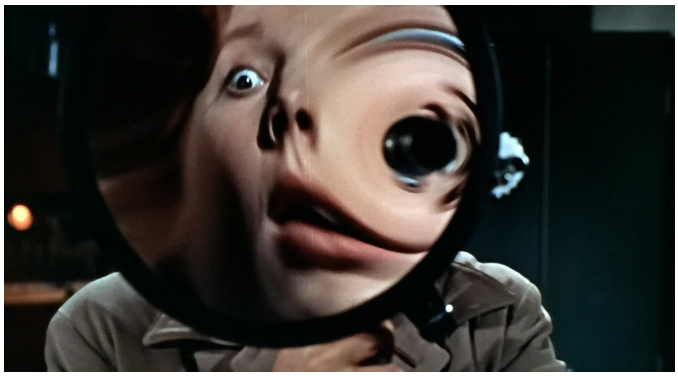

Figure 2: The distorted reflection of Helen's face

The confrontation with otherness is what lies at the heart of the Medusa myth, according to Jean-Pierre Vernant. For the ancient Greeks, the Gorgon is one of the divine figures that represents alterity, "what is other in relation to the living creature, to the human being (*ānthrōpos*), to the civilised, to the adult male (*anèr*), to the Greek, to the citizen" (Vernant, 1998: 12). The Gorgon specifically conveys "extreme alterity, the terrifying horror of what is absolutely other, the unspeakable, the unthinkable, pure chaos: for man, the confrontation with death, to which Gorgô's eye subjects those who meet her gaze" (Vernant, 1998: 12). But the reason why the Gorgon is so terrifying is that the frightful other it reflects is oneself. The Gorgon functions like a mirror of one's own "radical alterity": "when I stare into Gorgô's eyes, I see myself, or rather, what is already other in myself: what is beyond myself, not upwards, towards the sun of beauty, but downwards, towards the blinding night of chaos: face to face with death" (Vernant, 1998: 105). Terror is thus the emergence of the other in one's own self, as death breaks down the integrity of ordered identity and gives way to an unrecognisable fragmented being.

The idea of looking at the otherness of death in oneself runs through *Peeping Tom*. It is explored not only through the victims, but also more crucially through Mark. Through the safety of his deflected setup, Mark can watch his dying victims and in their fearful image confront the terror of seeing his own self as "absolutely other." Every time he kills, he faces

the fear of his own death. This is echoed in the scene where Mark watches himself as a scared child in his father's film. Each of the murders is a rehearsal for his own long-awaited and dreaded encounter with Medusa, with the face of death, this time frontal and no longer deflected, his perfectly stage-managed suicide providing the climax of his life-long "documentary of fear."[3]

As all of his victims are women, Mark's confrontation with alterity is double: as he films them dying, he faces the Other in his own self as dead, and as female. The confrontation with death disintegrates the essential characteristics on which the perception of one's identity rely. Mark's victims stand in for his childhood self, occupying his former place as the fearful object of study, their female gender making explicit the alteration of the self. It is worth noting that Mark's soft voice and gentle manners have a feminine quality, and the identification between him and his female victims is made clear visually when he is projecting the film of Viv's murder in his dark room. In despair at the fact that the film has "failed," he goes up to the screen and holds up his arms against it, so that Viv's terrorised face is projected onto his back, her fear inscribed on his very body (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Viv's fear projected on Mark's back

Glaring Eyes and Gaping Mouths

All of his victims, whether Viv, Dora the prostitute, or the nude model Milly, are desirable women. It was his father who first connected fear, death and sex in Mark's mind when he was a little boy. In the film shot by his father that Mark shows to Helen, his father throws a lizard onto Mark's bed in order to capture the child's resulting fear. The father then films little Mark staring at the body of his dead mother and attending her funeral, and

this is followed by beach holiday footage of his attractive young stepmother "bursting all out of her very brief bikini" (Johnson, 1963: 38). Mark's subsequent murderous impulses towards women have been ascribed by Johnson (1963: 38), Durgnat (1978: 71), Morris (1990: 92), Silverman (1988: 33) and Mulvey (2005: 146) to his Oedipal complex, but the Medusa myth opens up a different perspective.

In his *Theogony*, Hesiod describes how, immediately after Perseus decapitated Medusa, Chrysaor and Pegasus sprang from her neck. In his version of the story, an intimate connection is made between the Gorgon's head, birth and death. To this is added the fact that Hesiod describes Medusa as the only mortal of the three Gorgons, but also the only one of the three sisters who is a sexual being: it is her union with Poseidon that engenders Chrysaor and Pegasus (1914: lines 270-285). Vernant highlights the strong connection between the Gorgons and the Satyrs and the "raw, brutal representation of sex, female or male," which provokes "sacred fear and liberating laughter" (1998: 32). For him, there are clear "interferences between Gorgô's face and the image of the female sex," comparing her to the ambiguous mythical character of Baubô (Vernant, 1998: 32-33). Paul Laporte also talks about "the complementarity of unmitigated life and unmitigated death as symbolized by the Satyrs and Gorgons respectively" (1969: 62). Jean Clair pinpoints the key connection at the heart of the mythical figure: "the terror it embodies can be as much that of our birth as that of our ending […] For that reason she governs our most archaic impulses" (1989: 55).

In their psychoanalytical interpretations, Freud and his friend Sándor Ferenczi also see in Medusa's head an image for female genitals, but they reduce the rich metaphysical scope of the myth to a narrow reading of it as representing male castrating anxieties. In his very short 1922 text, Freud equates decapitation with castration, and snakes with penises (1955: 273). Ferenczi, writing around the same time, claims that the multiplication of penis symbols signifies precisely the opposite, and that Medusa's head is "the frightful impression made on the child by the penis-less (castrated) genital" (2003: 87). Vernant vigorously rebuts these assertions: "Beheading does not seem to equal castration to me. […] I know that the [Medusa] head is bristling with snakes. But the symbolic values of the snake—infernal and chthonic—cannot be reduced to the penis. Generally, when the Greeks want to evoke a phallus in their imagery, they do so openly and rather overplay it, and when they use metaphors, they resort to birds, not snakes" (Vernant, 1998: 96).

Through the connection between Medusa's head and the female sex, the myth plunges into the furthest reaches of the human mystery and represents, not simply the neuroses of one gender, but a deep, existential

terror felt by all humans. Medusa represents the dread one experiences at the passage from life to death, but also from inexistence into existence. Across her various representations, she straddles boundaries between the mortal and the immortal, the human and the inhuman. The story of Perseus makes these elements, already present in the more ancient figure of Gorgô, clear: Medusa is the unfathomable site of transition between life and death, whose mystery is so sacred and so awful that one cannot face it straight on, or without overwhelming terror. This is key to the conflation between Medusa's face and the female sex. The vulva, the dark hole out of which mortal life springs, is the symbol of that passage between existence and inexistence: out of it comes life, and therefore the promise of death. Gazing at the vulva is thus to look at the forbidden sight of one's own arcane origin, and one's own return to the unknowable void of non-existence.

From this perspective, Mark's victims can be seen as images of Medusa, of the female body as the mysterious, terrifying site for the deep, dark nexus of sex and death. The point of departure for this is the death of the mother: Mark watches the lifeless body that gave him life, filmed by his father. This is followed by the beautiful body of the young stepmother, full of sexual vitality, like an irresistibly attractive deadly trap, bursting with the potential for life, and consequently, death. It is significant that these scenes are prefaced by the sequence of the lizard thrown on Mark's bed (See Figure 4). The lizard, recalling the snakes on Medusa's head, bears the same chthonic charge, and is less a phallic image than an archaic symbol for the forces of death, which comes from the deepest recesses of the human imagination.

Figure 4: Capturing Fear: The lizard on Mark's bed

The connection between Medusa's head and the female sex resonates in Mark's victims through the film's strong focus on the mouth, a

metaphorical displacement for the vulva. The pre-credit murder sequence ends with a zoom into the dead prostitute's mouth, as though the film proposed to plunge us into the gaping black hole of death, and the gaping black hole of the female sex, her mouth being the image for both simultaneously in this scene. During the nude photo shoot, Mark becomes fascinated with the deformed lip of new girl Lorraine. The sight of her mouth prompts him to comment on her eyes: "eyes full of…," his voice trails off without finishing his sentence—fear? Considering his constant and obsessive preoccupation throughout the film, "fear" is what seems to be implied. Silverman perceptively remarks: "Significantly, the facial contortion caused by Dora's [sic] harelip makes her look very much like the twisted faces reflected in the mirror attached to Mark's camera" (1988: 34). Lorraine's bruised lip is the visible mark of her Medusa quality in a double sense: her monstrous mouth, like that of the Gorgon, is a terrifying image of the female sex as threshold of life and death; but as the nature of this deformation is not fully elucidated and may have been caused by a beating ("maybe you can fix my bruises too," says Lorraine, after Millie has asked a moment earlier if Mark can make sure her bruises, inflicted by her jealous fiancé the previous night, do not show in the pictures), it is also the mark of her violent encounter with the Gorgon, as though fear had brutally imprinted this distortion on her face, a reflection of which Mark seems to perceive in her eyes.

Figure 5: Dora, the prostitute, trapped in the cross-hairs

Both mouths and eyes are frequently emphasized in close-ups throughout *Peeping Tom*, and they are the two most prominent characteristics of the Gorgon's pictorial representation in ancient Greek culture, as noted by J.H. Croon (1955: 13), Thalia Feldman (1965: 488) and Madeleine Glennon (2017). The very first image of the film is of an eye opening in close-up, and it precedes the murder that ends in the prostitute's wide-open mouth (Figure 5, just above). This introductory sequence thus condenses the human face into the same two key parts used

to represent the Gorgon, the eye, with its association to sight as knowledge, and the mouth, with its sexual connotation, giving a startlingly succinct distillation of the concerns of the film, which are also central to the myth.

The Most Frightening Thing: Fear

According to Croon, the "glaring eyes" and "protruding tongue" of the Gorgon's head "have been compared with identical hideous faces among many primitive peoples, which are derived from masks with an apotropaic function" (1955: 13). This function of Medusa's head as a "dangerous threat meant to deter other dangerous threats, an image of evil to repel evil" (Glennon, 2017) has been widely discussed, among others by Feldman (1965: 388), and Walter Friedlaender (1974: 88). The symbolic potency of the vulva is one of the reasons connected to this use of ancient representations of the Gorgon's head. The display of sexual organs (male and female) to ward off evil is not specific to the Greeks but is found across many ancient cultures, in the figures of Yoni in India or Sheelagh-na-gigs in Ireland, for instance (Marglin, 1987: 530-535). The link between representations of the Gorgon's head and the exposure of female genitals to provoke sacred terror has been made by Vernant (1998: 32-33) and Louis Marin (1997: 184). In the Perseus story, the Greek hero uses Medusa's severed head to repel enemies, and eventually gives it to Athena who puts it on her shield (Figure 6). Perseus, scared by Medusa, then uses

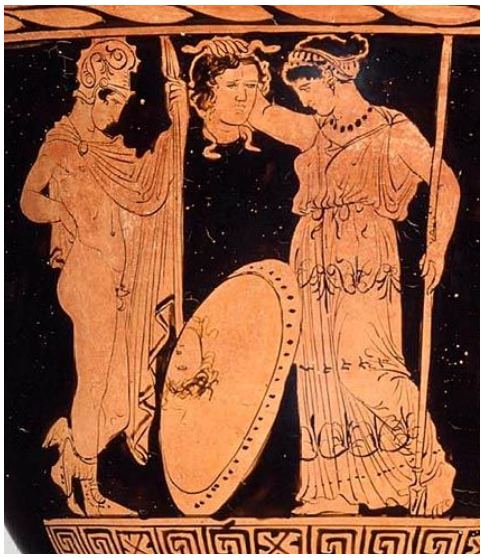

Figure 6: Medusa, c. 400-385 BCE (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

her to scare his opponents once he has vanquished her. Rooted in deep mythological sediments, the figure of the Gorgon points to archaic practices, in which what has provoked terror in one is used to keep terror away.

This profound link between frightened and frightener is at the heart of the myth, according to Vernant. Among many other examples, he describes the legend in which Herakles was possessed by infernal powers and his face turned into the Gorgon's face, which horrified those around him. Experiencing the most intense fear within himself, he in turn provoked terror in others (Vernant, 1998: 59-63). We should remember that of the three Gorgons, Medusa is the mortal one. It seems no accident that one of the most potent figures of fear in Greek mythology should be mortal. It may be precisely because she is mortal that she can so formidably represent the fear of annihilation.

This fundamental aspect of the myth is spectacularly expressed in one of the most memorable representations of the monstrous figure, Caravaggio's *Head of the Medusa* (circa 1597-98). He painted it on "canvas stretched over a convex shield of poplar wood" (Kitson, 1969: 91), which Friedlaender notes was not uncommon in that period (1974: 88). Hair made of tangled snakes, blood dripping from the neck, mouth wide open, the severed head of Medusa looks past the spectator with an expression of intense fright, as if it could see some invisible object of dread. It is the pure horror in those eyes that makes the painting so unforgettable: the face of terror is a terrified face. Echoing the complex play of fear in the ancient figure of the Gorgon, Caravaggio represents Medusa, a frightening monster, as a frightened being (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Caravaggio's *Head of the Medusa*, 1597 (Uffizi, Florence)

The feeling of intense dread exuded by the Caravaggio painting becomes even more startling knowing that it may be one of the artist's early self-portraits, painted using a mirror (Friedlaender, 1974: 87). In the picture, Medusa is not a bestial monster, but a human face, the reflection of the painter himself, his head cut off, engulfed in the horrors of the infernal snakes and the streams of red blood spurting out of his neck. In keeping with Vernant's analysis of the Gorgon as a figure of alterity, Caravaggio represents his own self as other, painting his terrified mirrored image as a terrifying inhuman monster, his living features as a decapitated head, his male features into the face of the female Medusa. This captures the fundamental nature of the Gorgon as a liminal figure, a conflation of opposites, embodying within itself the frontiers that divide realms, itself a threshold, a gate between those realms. It is within this framework that the reciprocity of fear represented by Medusa can be understood: the bodiless head, caught between states of existence, is seized by an unfathomable terror, which it communicates to those who see it.

The visual illusion created by the picture is crucial in conveying this. The surface of the shield on which Medusa's head is painted is convex, curved outwards, but Clair explains that Caravaggio created the illusion of a concave surface, curving inwards. This "reversal of the visual parameters" gives spectacular relief to Medusa's head, which appears detached from its background (1989: 110). Using the newly developed perspective, Caravaggio reinterprets the visual set-up that underpins the myth for his time. The reversal of the shield's curvature is also connected to Medusa's gaze. What makes the painting so haunting is the impression that its eyes are looking inwards, not at an external, but at an internal object of terror: Medusa is scared by its own dying self. In a startling extension of the complex function of the shield in the Medusa myth, the shield here, instead of curving out to protect against threats, curves in as though to vainly try to guard against internal terror, and in so doing projects Medusa's terrifying head even more vividly out at the spectator.

Let us now return to *Peeping Tom* and our opening quote: "Do you know what the most frightening thing in the world is?" "It's fear." The reciprocity that is central to the myth lies at the heart of the film. Mark, scared by his father, scares his victims. Just as in Caravaggio's painting, the most frightening character in the film is also the most frightened. Mark has turned the instrument of vision that his father used to terrorise him, the camera, into the instrument he uses to terrorise, like Perseus brandishing Medusa's severed head against his opponents. The crucial moment where this transition happens is filmed by the young stepmother, and takes place just after we have seen her on the beach. Under instructions, she films the father give Mark his first camera, showing him how to use it. The father

gives his son a device that will deflect the fear that his own camera has instilled in him.

As a consequence, *Peeping Tom* differs from other similarly themed films in its treatment of the relationship between male killer and female victim. The opening murder of the prostitute may give the initial impression that the eye is associated with the active male killer, as is often the case, and the mouth with the passive female victim. But the line between predatory vision and helpless fear that often characterises narratives of that type is blurred in Powell's film. In *Peeping Tom,* vision is a defining feature of both the killer and the victim. The murders are complex moments of coincidence between frightener and frightened. Mark scares his victims, but their dread echoes his own childhood fears. The victims are scared less by the meek Mark than by their own image reflected in the mirror on the camera. In those scenes, Mark and his victims are simultaneously frighteners and frightened. This double relation of the terroriser and the terrorised to vision is a central part of both *Peeping Tom* and the Medusa myth.

Mirrors and the Mechanical Gaze

The reciprocity and mirroring at the centre of the Medusa myth are amplified by the medium of film, just like Caravaggio's painting added fascinating visual layers to it thanks to the new optical parameters developed in his time. Clair notes that the figure of Medusa regained popularity as a pictorial subject in the mid-Renaissance period "because it is structurally linked to the invention of *perspectiva artificialis*. It symbolises its functioning" (1989: 103). *Peeping Tom* similarly revisits the essential motifs of the Medusa myth through the modern visual apparatus of the cinema.

The multiple films-within-the-film create a great deal of ambiguity, and it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between Powell's film and Mark's films. The blurring of the different films becomes explicit when a scene between Mark and Helen ends with the word "Cut," and the next scene takes place at the film studio. What does this "Cut" refer to? Is it Powell filming the scene with Mark and Helen or is it the commercial director filming at the studio? There are in total four directors in *Peeping Tom* — Mark, the father, the commercial director and Powell—and four types of film, so that what is an apparently singular reality—the film, the director—is here vertiginously divided. The various films being made are intertwined; images are borrowed and repeated, so that the result is complete ambiguity as to the directorial authority of what we are watching. To start with, the images are clearly differentiated through the framing devices and the

opposition of colour and black and white, but, gradually, they dissolve into one another. What starts as mirroring ends up as blurring and fusing into one another. There are no longer any certainties about where one film starts and where another ends.

This ambiguity is compounded by the fact that Michael Powell himself plays the role of Mark's father while Powell's own son plays Mark as a child. Powell thus faces himself: the director of Mark's childhood films faces the director of *Peeping Tom*. Powell's camera is reflected as other in Mark's camera. Powell is reflected as other when playing Mark's father, turning his son into an other. Everything in the film, including Powell himself, faces Medusa, the self as unrecognisable other. Powell comments on his own position as director of the film by reflecting himself in Mark's father, a false figure of order attempting to impose an illusory rational explanation onto the deepest human fears at the expense of Mark's mental health, causing ultimate, deadly disorder in Mark's psyche.

The mirroring effect of the film means that, in the darkness of the cinema, the spectators themselves, like the characters they are watching, face their own selves as radical others. The complex mirroring device installed by Powell exposes and simultaneously protects the audience. Powell's camera, redoubling Mark's camera, affords us extra protection against the direct glare of the Gorgon, placing her at a safe distance, and allowing us to look at her without being petrified. However, audiences should not feel too safe, for the first thing that happens to them in *Peeping Tom* is to be watched. The film strikingly opens on the close-up image of an eye, shut, as if sleeping, while we hear a jarring, dissonant music. After a few seconds the eye suddenly opens wide, possibly in fear, the startling effect underlined by an abrupt change in the soundtrack. This is a violent reversal of positions. The eye mirrors that of the viewer, and the viewer is brutally put in the position of the viewed. In keeping with the reciprocity central to the Medusa myth, the frightened eye frightens the viewer.

Figure 8: The frightened eye of the film's opening

The aggressive use of spotlights is a further visual assault on the audience. When Mark switches a bright cinema spotlight directly onto Helen's face in his back room or on Viv in the film studio, the light is effectively turned on us, the audience. The blinding spotlight figures the deadly power of vision, of Medusa and of Mark's camera, the audience being in the position of the victim. Mark's camera is another weapon of vision used against the audience. In the opening scene with the prostitute, Mark turns his camera on and starts walking towards the screen, moving menacingly towards us. The camera is the threat, the aggressor, its deadly gaze mirroring our own. The camera-monster returns our gaze, but as Mark walks towards us, it fuses with us, forcing us to identify with it as the camera is turned on the prostitute in the following scene. Further complicating the Medusa-like reciprocity of fear at the heart of the film, this leads the audience to identify with both the victim and the aggressor, the frightened and the frightener. In that way, the spectators too are made to look into the petrifying mirror and confront their own radically altered selves, the unbearable sight deflected by the multiple screens and cameras.

In his study of pictorial representations of Medusa in Western art, Clair laments their disappearance after 1914, which he attributes to the "medicalisation" of death, and the more concrete depictions that have replaced the mythical monster in contemporary society. But such a rich, potent, occult figure is not killed off so easily, and while its more literal manifestations may have lost their evocative power in the modern world, its ancient dread has continued to flow underground, buried under the surface of rationality, secretly continuing to irrigate the human imagination. In *Peeping Tom*, it re-emerges precisely through the modern technology of vision, the archaic terror of Medusa mirrored and amplified in the mechanical glare of the camera.

Notes

[1] As David Thomson notes, the psychology in the film is "too naïve to be Powell's central concern" (1980: 261).

[2] The technical description of the various cameras that appear in the film is given by William Johnson (1980: 3).

[3] Mark considers what he is doing as a "documentary," as he tells his colleague while waiting to be interrogated by the police after Viv's murder. Scriptwriter Leo Marks had wanted this idea of a "documentary of fear" to be more explicit in the film (1998: xxi).

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- 2018 -
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