

Peeping Tom (1901)

Pathe Frères' 1901 French short film Peeping Tom is a creative and amusing film which explores several racy themes on the very essence of voyeurism. It tells the simple story of a janitor who is cleaning a hotel and one evening he decides to peek through the keyholes of several rooms of the guests and secretly watch them during their private moments. The first room he peeps in on is an attractive woman who is letting her hair down, putting on perfume and viewing herself in a hand mirror. The second room he peeps through shows an unattractive looking woman removing her garment slowly revealing that she is actually a man. That of course disgusts the janitor as you can see a grotesque reaction on his face. The third key hole he looks into seems to show a husband and wife celebrating a romantic dinner together. When the janitor decides to look into the last door's key hole a man walks out and catches the janitor spying and after the man has a quick physical confrontation with the janitor, the janitor falls down the stairs. Technically the film is done in one shot except for the Analytical shots of the keyhole which look into the rooms of the guests; with these POV shots being very fresh and innovative for its time.

Peeping Tom clearly describes what Tom Gunning is saying in his article 'The Cinema of Attraction.' Early cinema at that time was not dominated by a narrative as much as it's motive to show pure exhibitionism. A lot of these early shorts before 1907 were more voyeuristic and racy images of people exposing their most private and intimate moments and were less about the narrativization of cinema. This clearly was the attraction for these types of films at this time which were vaudeville non narrative acts to serve as a guilty pleasure for the viewer. Most of these early films were more spectacle over narrative as many of the characters are clearly aware of the audience watching them, which is quite similar to watching a live entertainment on a stage. There are many times in Peeping Tom where the janitor turns to the audience and visually describes what he is seeing with his physical actions and expresses how he feels about what he saw through his facial expressions. Gunning stated that because of these types of cheap entertainments, this was precisely why this form of entertainment was attacked by several reform groups when they were presented in the Nickelodeon theatres in the early teens.

Maxim Gorky in his article 'Kingdom of Shadows' seemed to love being a spectator in the beautiful moving images of the works of Lumiere and yet predicted that eventually these types of moving pictures of pedestrians in Paris, the rush of an oncoming train and a young couple with their newborn baby would eventually be replaced by a genre more suited for the low brow audience with titles like "As she Undresses" and "Madam at Her Bath". And yet, it is inevitable that the mass market would gear towards that type of entertainment since the system of attraction of pure exhibitionism has always been an essential part of filmmaking. Gunning brings up that in the earliest years of exhibition the cinema itself was an attraction with a curiosity for the public to get involved in a voyeuristic aspect of narrative cinema; similar to the peeping in a Kinetoscope which clearly is its intention for the audience is to see something private. Peeping

Tom perfectly illustrates these kinds of films and is somewhat of a commentary on these types of entertainments. The story of Peeping Tom even points out that if the audience gives in to these type of voyeuristic curiosities, they may find themselves seeing things that they we don't want to see or know about. Peeping Tom also expresses how the viewer is just as guilty as the main character because we participate with the main characters unmoral peeping and at the same time are entertained by his shameful act.

Like James Stewart in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, the janitor in *Peeping Tom* gets so caught up in his peeping that it eventually gets himself in a situation that is way over his head; and even though *Rear Window* is a thriller and *Peeping Tom* is a comedy, it's themes of voyeurism are very similar. It's obvious that the janitor must be punished at the end of the film; but shouldn't we be punished as well for participating with him? That is why several of these early films weren't looked at as a respected art form and more of a guilty pleasure of entertainment, until D.W. Griffith radically revised the film format and made it a respectable source of entertainment with more dramatic and complex like narratives which were taken more from the theater. Cinema is and always will be an entertainment for the mass audience and when going into a film we are in many ways just like the janitor in *Peeping Tom*; delving into the personal lives and moments of characters with them unknowingly knowing we are watching them.