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Berberian Sound Studio

(15)

TUES 6 SEP, 19:15 - FILM CLUB

Director: Peter Strickland/2012 / UK/France /92 mins/ English / Toby Jones, Antonio Mancino, Guido Adorni, Cosimo Fusco

'Peter Strickland's brilliant Berberian Sound Studio is a horror movie that suggests what may occur in the instance of a film itself becoming the ultimate monster terrorizing the poor individual at its center. In this case, it's Gilderoy (Toby Jones), an English sound designer in Italy on hand to create the elaborate soundscapes for *The Equestrian Vortex*, a gory giallo that the audience never even glimpses. Specializing in placid nature documentaries, Gilderoy is out of his element, both artistically and socially, which may or may not contribute to his gradual breakdown. Strickland employs an enduring, if also disturbing, playfulness in dwelling on the artifice behind making a horror film, but as this falsity is exposed Strickland simultaneously constructs a psychological freak-out directly undermining his image/sound association explored throughout and linking Gilderoy with his creator.

In Strickland's world, sound is the bridge between fiction and reality, the physical and the imagined. The savage acts heard throughout *The Equestrian Vortex*, such as dismemberment or breaking bones, are created through the use of chopping lettuce and snapping celery. In associating a display of violence with a simple vegetable, Berberian Sound Studio's deceptive semiotics provide humorous gags to the audience, but to Gilderoy, whose comfort lies in the peacefulness of nature, these moviemaking techniques may compromise his fragile stability. As Strickland implies, if fruits and vegetables can become a proxy for brutality, then, to that effect, what can't? Perhaps Gilderoy takes it seriously when the giallo's director, the womanizing blowhard Santini (Antonio Mancino), tells him that what they're creating is honest and real. Strickland keeps us at such a distance from Gilderoy that any interpretation of his mental state seems valid. Whatever backstory there is involves his mother's letters detailing newborn chicks that grow increasingly violent, itself another instance of harmlessness correlated with depravity. It's not for nothing that the entirety of Berberian Sound Studio takes place within cramped and cluttered interiors, further bearing down on Gilderoy's psyche.

To limit the film as one based exclusively in sound seems to detract from its other senses-assaulting pleasures, as its composed of the clashing and meshing of textures both sonic and visual. Strickland cites Austrian filmmaker Peter Tscherkassky as an influence, and the latter's 2000 short film *Outer Space* provides the most explicit visual/aesthetic connection to Berberian Sound Studio's latter third. Using footage from the 1982 horror film *The Entity* starring Barbara Hershey, Tscherkassky's short reedits the movie (to the tune of his own unique styling) to give



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the impression that Hershey isn't being stalked by some unseen diegetic force, but by the actual film she's appearing in.

Like Tscherkassky, Strickland creates sequences in a similar manner that recalls a film reel unspooling and then burning from the nitrate, even implicating the same reflexive idea that abounds throughout *Outer Space*. Through a melding of some unexplained paranoia gnawing at Gilderoy and the practical effects he's been reluctantly toiling over, Strickland utilizes these techniques he had been subverting to appear complicit in Gilderoy's unraveling, personified in the fully cinematic breakdown of both character and film. Strickland manages to appropriate *Berberian Sound Studio* as both a deeply unsettling character study that attacks our perception of the "hero" while still maintaining the illusion that everything is just a movie.

In that regard, Strickland's lack of exploring Gilderoy's psyche and positing the audience as being always on the outside looking in makes perfect sense, as Gilderoy finds himself in the same position by having been (possibly) watching *Berberian Sound Studio* instead of *The Equestrian Vortex*, unable to control the course of the film. In the enigmatic closing image, as Gilderoy stares at a blank white screen, it may be seen as an invitation of sorts to decipher its infinite number of readings and theories in a film meant only to be experienced rather than unlocked. Or, perhaps, he's finally achieved a full awareness of his status of being just another character in a movie, merely waiting for the next reel to start.'

Wes Green, *Slant Magazine*

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