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‘I didn’t think I’d be working on this type of film’: *Berberian Sound Studio* and British art film as alternative film history

Paul Newland (Aberystwyth University)

Abstract

It could be said that the films of the director Peter Strickland are in many ways exemplars of a rich strain of twenty-first century British art cinema. Like work by Andrea Arnold, Steve McQueen, Jonathan Glazer, Lynne Ramsay, Ben Wheatley, and Sam Taylor-Wood, among others, Strickland’s three feature-length films to date are thought provoking, well crafted, prestige, quality productions. But in this article I want to show that while Strickland’s second feature-length film *Berberian Sound Studio* conforms to some of the commonly held understandings of the key traits of British art cinema – especially through its specific history of production and exhibition, its characterisation, its narrative structure, and its evidencing of the vision of an ‘auteur’ – it ultimately does not sit comfortably within most extant histories of British national cinema or film genre, including art cinema. More than this, though, I want to argue that in its challenge to such extant critical traditions, *Berberian Sound Studio* effectively operates as ‘art film as alternative film history’. I will demonstrate that it does this through the foregrounding of Strickland’s cine-literacy, which notices and in turn foregrounds the historically transnational nature of cinema, and, at the same time, playfully and knowingly disrupts well-established cultural categories and coherent, homogenous histories of cinema.

Keywords: art cinema; *Berberian Sound Studio*; transnational; cult; experimental; Peter Strickland

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‘I didn’t think I’d be working on this type of film’: *Berberian Sound Studio* and British art film as alternative film history

Paul Newland

It could be said that the films of the director Peter Strickland are in many ways exemplars of a rich strain of twenty-first century British art cinema. Like work by Andrea Arnold, Steve McQueen, Jonathan Glazer, Lynne Ramsay, Ben Wheatley, and Sam Taylor-Wood, among others, Strickland’s three feature-length films to date are thought provoking, well-crafted, thought-provoking, quality productions. In this article I want to show that while Strickland’s second feature-length film *Berberian Sound Studio* conforms to some of the commonly held understandings of the key traits of British art cinema – especially through its specific history of production and exhibition, its characterisation, its narrative structure, and its evidencing of the vision of an ‘auteur’ – it ultimately does not sit comfortably within most extant histories of British national cinema or film genre. More than this, though, I want to argue that in its challenge to such extant critical traditions, *Berberian Sound Studio* effectively operates as ‘art film as alternative film history’. I will demonstrate that it does this through the foregrounding of Strickland’s cine-literacy, which notices and in turn foregrounds the historically transnational nature of cinema, and, at the same time, playfully and knowingly disrupts well-established cultural categories and coherent, homogenous histories of cinema. I will argue that not unlike recent scholarly work by the likes of Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (2010), Mark Betz (2003; 2009), David Andrews (2013) and Andrew Tudor (2005), Peter Strickland’s *Berberian Sound Studio* effectively works to actively re-think not only discourses of British art cinema but also discourses of national and transnational cinema, experimental cinema, cult cinema and trash cinema. It opens up these discourses to new critical - but also, importantly, artistic - interrogation.

In their 2007 edited collection *The New Film History*, James Chapman, Mark Glancey and Sue Harper explain ‘There are two paradigms within the old or traditional film history: one focused on the history of film as an art form, the other on the idea of film as a reflection or mirror of society.’ (2007: 2) They argue for the continued establishment of ‘New Film History’, stating: ‘There is greater attention to the cultural dynamics of film production and an awareness of the extent to which the style and content of films are determined by the context of production.’ (2007: 6) I want to argue here that with *Berberian Sound Studio*, Peter Strickland effectively announces himself as one such new film historian, demonstrating, just as much as academic film scholars do, what Chapman, Glancey and Harper describe as ‘a commitment to expanding historical knowledge and a concern to understand films both as texts and in context.’ (2007: 8) Strickland’s film *Berberian Sound Studio* memorably engages with and reinterprets a range of aspects of film history, echoing recent developments in the appreciation of the transnational nature of much filmmaking, while also raising questions about how far ‘art’ films might have crossed over with exploitation and trash cinema, for example, and how far discourses of ‘cult’ provide other rich and useful ways of thinking about film history.

It is worth pointing out initially that Peter Strickland’s nationality, transnational life experience, and career to date, are equally resistant to easy categorisation. He was born in England, to a Greek mother and English father, and grew up in Reading, Berkshire. He now lives in Budapest, Hungary, where he was for a time a teacher of English as a foreign language (James and Wood 2012: 32). Strickland’s first feature film, the self-funded *Katalin Varga* (2009), was shot in rural Transylvania, and was chosen for the main Berlinale competition. His third feature film *The Duke of Burgundy* (2014) was also shot in Hungary. When I interviewed Strickland in November 2013 - during the period in which he was

working on *The Duke of Burgundy* - I asked him about how far it was his intention to develop *Berberian Sound Studio* in a transnational context. He replied:

‘I never cared much about the country a film originated from unless it was specific to the story. I’m half-Greek, so I guess my sense of patriotism is somewhat diluted, but that’s not to say I’m not patriotic. I just find myself rooting for great cinema, not cinema just because it’s from my country. *Berberian* was mostly made from British money with some German money thrown in, it mostly featured Italians (bar the odd Romanian, Greek, Slovak and Hungarian) and all shot and post-produced in the UK. My new film is made from mostly British money, but all shot and edited in Hungary with no English actors. It’s all very fluid and I’m very lucky to work that way. Without the support I get from the UK, I wouldn’t be working now. As a viewer, I do get a lot out of cinema that is inherently British even if it’s not made by English blood, as in Emeric Pressburger or even Skolimowski with a film such as *Deep End* that was mostly shot in Germany.’

(Peter Strickland interviewed by Paul Newland 12/11/2013)

It is evident then that Strickland’s intention has been to engage with cinema as a cultural form that has a long and complex, fluid, and ultimately uncontainable history. But it is also evident that Strickland - a fan of a wide range of films and music – is keen to engage in the process of *shaping* our knowledge of cinema history, by uncovering previously unseen histories and connections between these histories, and using these fluid histories to inform and drive the narratives, themes and visual and sonic aesthetics of his films.

Berberian Sound Studio is a film about a shy, reserved, bachelor British foley artist and sound engineer, Gilderoy (Toby Jones), who travels to the Berberian film studio in Italy

to work on a film he believes to be about horses. It soon becomes obvious to Gilderoy that he has in fact been employed to work his sonic magic on a giallo film (the fictional *The Equestrian Vortex*). The film's director, Santini (Antonio Mancino), instructs Gilderoy to provide Foley work for the torture sequences, and to mix voices from session artists Silvia (Fatma Mohamed) and Claudia (Eugenia Caruso) into the score. Alone and out of his depth, and intensely disturbed by the film sequences he is working on, Gilderoy suffers a psychological breakdown.

We are denied sight of Gilderoy's home space in Britain (James and Wood 2012: 36). Instead, all of the action is set in Italy. Toby Jones, who plays Gilderoy, has astutely pointed out that 'The return ticket [to England] is the hook back into his own life – he is denied that, and so he becomes uprooted.' (Macnab 2012: 35) Gilderoy's personal crisis in the film thus develops out of his exile from home (suburban southern England) and all it stands for. He is thrown into an alien culture. He finds himself in a place that has different ways of doing things; having to engage with different systems of behaviour. Like the chiffchaffs in his garden back in Dorking (mentioned in letters he receives from his mother), Gilderoy effectively becomes a small migratory creature. Also like the chiffchaffs, he is weak, and susceptible to predators. But, unlike the chiffchaffs, he does not have the required skills to cope with his migration. It is precisely because of his profession in the 1970s film industry that he has to move across national borders. Ironically, then, while *Berberian Sound Studio* celebrates a very complex and rich history of transnational filmmaking, its narrative centres on the experiences of a man who finds he is not equipped with the flexibility required to work across cultures and national – and for that matter, generic - boundaries. Interestingly, the first lines of dialogue between Gilderoy and Elena (Tonia Sotiropoulou), the Italian studio secretary, focus on his struggle to communicate in this alien location. During their second meeting (regarding his attempt to secure reimbursement for his flight from England),

Gilderoy says ‘Maybe there has been some innocent confusion. Nobody’s fault. Language and things.’ While language ‘and things’ continue to disrupt Gilderoy’s sense of self and identity, Strickland’s film revels in its appreciation of what occurs in cinema when boundaries – national, social, cultural, historical, generic, textual and contextual – break down.

The status of *Berberian Sound Studio* as ‘art film as alternative film history’ is evident not least in the way that it nostalgically celebrates analogue film technology, especially through its near fetishization of tape machines, synthesizers and oscillators (often lovingly shot operating in close up), and its focus on the specificities of pre-digital craftsmanship, such as in the sequences when the camera slowly scans handwritten cue sheets (see Lucca 2; see also James 2012: 32). But despite its concentration on the historical function of now largely obsolescent analogue film technology, *Berberian Sound Studio* was shot on digital intermediate (2K), and its sound is Dolby Digital. These technologies imbue the film with the sheen of much contemporary, quality cinema.

Berberian Sound Studio was shot in Britain - at Three Mills Studios, Bow, near Stratford, in east London. It was funded by sources in the UK and Germany including the UK Film Council, Screen Yorkshire, and gff KG (Geissendorfer Film- und Fernsehproduktion KG), and was produced by Warp X and Illuminations Films. Warp X has also recently produced critically acclaimed films such as Ben Wheatley’s *Kill List* (2011), *Tyrannosaur* (Paddy Considine, 2011) and *All Tomorrow’s Parties* (Jonathan Caouette, 2009). Illuminations Films has been behind films such as *Mekong Hotel* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2012), *Patience (After Sebald)* (Grant Gee, 2012), *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2010), *London Orbital* (Iain Sinclair and Chris Petit, 2002), and Chris Petit’s *Radio On Remix* (TV, 1998). So Warp X and Illuminations are two production companies, working in Britain, supporting the non-

mainstream work of global filmmakers. Both companies back films that are ostensibly ‘art’ films (and are marketed as such), but that also reside within a wide range of genres including drama, horror, documentary, experimental, social realism, and fantasy. Both companies demonstrate links to the worlds of music and literature – they are not *contained* by cinema, then, but instead approach cinema as one aspect of a complex nexus of contemporary, niche, global cultural production. Both companies have also evidently developed prestige status. So it is important to stress that the industrial genesis of *Berberian Sound Studio* – and the involvement of Warp and Illuminations - places it within a particular set of cultural (or indeed subcultural) discourses that guarantee it an element of cultural capital at the level of significant contemporary, transnational ‘art’.

***Berberian Sound Studio* as transnational filmmaking**

In the past ten years or so, a number of scholars have argued for a more open and fluid consideration of films that, while taking account of aspects of their identities in terms of concepts of the ‘national’, ultimately aspire to move towards discourses of the post-national or transnational. For example, as Valentina Vitali and Paul Willeman have argued, ‘Films are clusters of narrative strategies that position spectators within layered conceptions of the nation-state inevitably in tension with each other.’ (Vitali and Willeman 2006: 9) Higbee and Song Hwee Lim have also argued for a vision of transnational cinema that ‘under- stands the potential for local, regional and diasporic film cultures to affect, subvert and transform national and transnational cinemas.’ (Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim 2010: 18) In many respects, not least through its funding from diverse international sources, its English protagonist, its international cast, and its Italian setting, *Berberian Sound Studio* resonates with this recent critical emphasis on seeing films not necessarily as the products of homogenous and coherent national film industries. More than this, though, *Berberian Sound Studio* allows us to re-engage with - and thus appreciate again - the distinctly transnational

nature of much filmmaking in the 1970s in particular.

Focusing on what he sees as a fluid European cinema that very often moves across national borders and conceptual boundaries, Tim Bergfelder argues that ‘the characteristics of European cinema, by any definition, should include liminality and marginality.’ (Bergfelder 2005: 320) Furthermore, Bergfelder points out that ‘Rather than focusing exclusively on separate national formations, a history of European cinema might well begin by exploring the interrelationship between cultural and geographical centres and margins, and by tracing the migratory movements between these poles.’ (Bergfelder 2005: 320) In other words, the idea of a fixed national cinema is unrealistic and ultimately undesirable: ‘national film cultures and migrant perspectives (themselves rarely ‘pure’) are always locked in a reciprocal process of interaction.’ (Bergfelder 2005: 320) *Berberian Sound Studio* effectively makes a similar point, in a range of ways, textually and contextually. Interestingly, Bergfelder offers the producer Alexander Korda as an example of a migrant figure in the history of European cinema (2005: 321), an example that becomes instructive when one comes to consider the Hungarian contexts of Strickland’s work to date, but also of course the migrant status of figure of Gilderoy in *Berberian Sound Studio*. Bergfelder demonstrates that migrant figures working across national cinema is nothing new: ‘Beginning in the immediate post-war period, and accelerating from the mid 1950s onwards, most European film industries witnessed a decline in purely national productions, and a rise in bilateral, or multinational co-productions.’ (Bergfelder 2000: 133) As a filmic engagement with a new, alternative film history, *Berberian Sound Studio* effectively proceeds from a similar critical position, foregrounding as it does the transnational nature of much film production in the 1970s.

Scholars such as John Hill and Andrew Higson have applied such transnational and post-national thinking more specifically to historical approaches to the British film industry.

For Higson, ‘The cinemas established in specific nation-states are rarely autonomous cultural industries and the film business has long operated on a regional, national and transnational basis.’ (Higson 2000: 61) And as Hill puts it, ‘it can be argued that the changed economic circumstances of the British film industry have led to a certain decline of ‘national’ cinema insofar as the national address which earlier commercial British cinema appeared to have is no longer evident.’ (Hill 2006: 104) While in some ways a British film, and certainly a European film, *Berberian Sound Studio* does not primarily address the British nation or indeed British national identity. Rather, as I will show, it appears to address or indeed hail a niche, cult audience; a contemporary, near-global fan culture that stretches beyond cinema to music; an audience which does not necessarily distinguish between highbrow and lowbrow culture (‘art’ and ‘trash’) in any straightforwardly mappable way.

***Berberian Sound Studio* as art cinema**

While it is clearly a transnational film that excavates a complex history of transnational filmmaking to such a degree that it becomes new, alternative film history in and of itself, in some ways it might be argued that *Berberian Sound Studio* is an art film through-and-through, in that it shares certain characteristics of a large corpus of films that have been historically defined in these terms. In his still-important journal article ‘Art Cinema as Institution’ (1981) Steve Neale noticed that

The first important general point to note about Art Cinema is that it always tends to involve balance between a national aspect on the one hand and an international aspect on the other: at the level of the market, at the level of the discourses of film theory and film criticism, at the level of the discourses involved in the articulation of policies (either within the industry or within the state) at the level of legislation, and at the level of the films themselves. (Neale 1981: 34)

The success of *Last Tango in Paris* (Bernardo Bertolucci) in 1972 exemplified the increasing internationalization of art cinema that had been taking place since the 1950s (Nowell-Smith 1998: 574). One might also point to the producer Carlo Ponti's agreement with MGM for three transnational films by Michelangelo Antonioni, *Blow up* (1966), *Zabriskie Point* (1969) and *The Passenger* (1975), but also the production of prestige films such as Visconti's *The Leopard* (1962) with an international cast (released by Fox), and the 1970s and 1980s work of directors such as Nicolas Roeg and Stanley Kubrick in particular. In some ways, as we will see, *Berberian Sound Studio* can be read as a self-reflexive exemplar of this tradition of serious, international, or indeed post-national or transnational, modernist, 'art' filmmaking.

Steve Neale also raised the important issue of how far art cinema situates *itself* as 'art' through its protocols of exhibition and competition:

Art Cinema also, in its cultural and aesthetic aspirations, relies heavily upon an appeal to the 'universal' values of culture and art. And this is very much reflected in the existence of international film festivals, where international distribution is sought for these films, and where their status as 'Art' is confirmed as re-stated through the existence of prizes and awards, themselves neatly balancing the criteria of artistic merit and commercial potential. (Neale 1981: 35)

In some ways this view might still hold true if mapped onto contemporary industrial and cultural models exemplified by the production and distribution of *Berberian Sound Studio*. After all, this is a film that was screened at the Edinburgh Film Festival, and was officially selected for the Toronto and New York film festivals. It won the Best International Film Award at the Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema. So it has been positioned through its entry into festival and its exhibition elsewhere as 'quality' filmmaking.

Steve Neale also points out the importance of signifiers of an authorial voice to art cinema: ‘The name of the author can function as a ‘brand name’ [...]’ (Neale 1981: 36) Moreover, as David Bordwell puts it, ‘the art cinema foregrounds the author as a structure in the film’s system.’ (Bordwell 1998: 719) Strickland appears to have been very happy to claim the authorship of his work, often agreeing to be interviewed about it by cinema scholars and journalists. So, looking at well-rehearsed critical discourses of art cinema, *Berberian Sound Studio* might indeed be claimed as a contemporary art film.

Berberian Sound Studio is also arguably an art film because it can be situated within a lineage of meta-films, film specifically about filmmaking. That is, it is undoubtedly a film directly engaged with the nature of cinema as a modern representational device (Sexton 2015: 23). The film begins with footage of whirring projectors, which becomes a recurring trope throughout. As such, historical links can be drawn between *Berberian Sound Studio* and enduringly influential films such as *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960), *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966), but also Fellini’s *8 ½* (1963), Truffaut’s *Day for Night* (1973), Hopper’s *The Last Movie* (1971), and Godard’s *Le Mepris* (1963) (Bordwell: 718; see also Betz 2009: 7).

According to extant critical discourses of art cinema, *Berberian Sound Studio* might also be considered as an exemplar of an art film because it deals with the modernist concern of the fragmentation of the self, through the narrative device of Gilderoy’s descent into madness. John Orr argues that in what he calls post-war neo-modernist cinema ‘resemblance has a double focus, the relationship of subject to object on screen, and the relationship of star to spectator in the act of viewing.’ (Orr 1998: 72) For Orr, Bergman’s *Persona* (1966) offers a powerful example of the screen operating as split subject. Moreover, as David Bordwell point out of characters in modernist art films, ‘The hero becomes a supersensitive individual, one of those people on whom nothing is lost.’ (Bordwell 1998: 719) We might be reminded

here of the international work of other cinematic migrants, Roman Polanski and Jerzy Skolimowski, and their films such as *Repulsion* (1965) and *Deep End* (1970). Gilderoy is certainly one such alienated figure, and might be thought of as ‘abstract’ – a man ‘whose past and inner drives are not determining factors of what happens to him [...]’ (Kovács 2007: 65) For András Kovács this is ‘a genuine modernist invention.’ (Kovács 2007: 65)

The representation of sex has also been a key aspect of the development of art cinema. As Neale points out, ‘it could be maintained that from the mid-1960s onward Art Cinema has stabilised itself around a new genre: the soft-core art film.’ (Neale 1981: 33) Neale lists examples such as *Last Tango in Paris* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972), *Belle de Jour* (Luis Bunuel, 1967) and the work of Pasolini in particular in this regard. But *Berberian Sound Studio* resists this aspect of art cinema. There is no sex to speak of in the film. Sex is merely suggested – it is something Gilderoy does not clearly engage in, or perhaps even think about. While we do see what might or might not be a point-of-view shot of Elena (Tonia Sotiropoulou) from behind, in heels and tight skirt, walking down a studio corridor in front of Gilderoy, more often Gilderoy is shot awkwardly setting up microphones for the female voice artists, for example, clearly uncomfortable about being this close to them in the sound booth. As such, Toby Jones’s Gilderoy is more a man in the mould of British *Carry On* actors Kenneth Connor and Charles Hawtrey than a typical European art house male lead.

***Berberian Sound Studio*, exploitation and trash cinema**

So, as we have seen, *Berberian Sound Studio* can be said to encapsulate a range of art house credentials according to the taxonomies of extant critical discourse, while at the same time always such resisting simple categorisation, and even working – as ‘art film as alternative film history’ - to show us how far such categorisation is not always helpful and indeed can be seen to be inaccurate. Peter Strickland also obviously takes great pleasure in blurring high

and low art distinctions in his films. The key here is the fact that *Berberian Sound Studio* is engaged with the world of Italian gothic filmmaking – and the giallo in particular. Strickland has acknowledged that the film was obviously influenced by the gothic horror *Black Sunday* (Bava, 1960) and *Suspiria* (Dario Argento, 1976), for example. And he further weaved giallo intertextuality into *Berberian Sound Studio* by casting the British actress Suzy Kendall to provide blood-curdling screams, she had, many years before, appeared in key giallo films such as *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (Dario Argento, 1969), *Torso* (Sergio Martino, 1973) and *Spasmo* (Umberto Lenzi, 1974).

But the giallo is not an easy genre to tie down to specifics. As Gary Needham insightfully puts it, the giallo ‘functions in a more peculiar and flexible manner as a conceptual category with highly moveable and permeable boundaries that shift from year to year [...]’ (Needham 2008: 295). Importantly, it is also a genre that incorporates aspects of art cinema alongside horror. As such, it is always already a hybrid genre. As Joan Hawkins usefully points out, ‘hybrid genres like art-horror films simply point up the problems which have historically characterized all attempts at genre definition.’ (Hawkins 2008: 131) Indeed, Mark Betz has uncovered a long history correspondence between art cinema and exploitation cinema, or of what he calls ‘shared discourses and means of address’ of high and low cinema (Betz 2003: 204) Writing about the 1960s, Betz argues ‘Clear-cut distinctions between high and low are difficult to establish in most marketing materials for European art films of this period. They are quite fluid and porous texts.’ (Betz 2003: 210) It is also true to say that the ‘value’ in such films appears to shift historically. In the case of the giallo homage *Berberian Sound Studio*, Jamie Sexton points out that ‘the film chimes with broader views towards Italian gialli (and associated horror) that has been praised and which has contributed to its rising artistic status.’ (Sexton 2015: 23) That is, *Berberian Sound Studio* encourages us to look again at the merits of these often historically maligned films, and to perhaps see the ‘art’

in them. In Sexton's words, 'Abstract, stylised sequences, complex narratives and soundtracks are three components that have been particularly celebrated by enthusiasts of these films and have helped to elevate their artistic status.' (Sexton 2015: 23) *Berberian Sound Studio* also evidently works on one level to celebrate gialli and the work of British artists engaged in the production of these films.

While it conforms to many of the extant generic criteria that would mark it as an art film, then, and it celebrates the giallo tradition in Italy (in its artiness as well as its trashiness), *Berberian Sound Studio* is also very clearly evocative of a period of transnational 'trash' or exploitation filmmaking that has not been written about much by film historians to date. During the 1970s a number of low budget films were made that crossed national borders, but which also often, while ostensibly 'horror' or 'exploitation', resisted simple generic distinctions. Here we might think of films such as *A Candle for the Devil* (Eugenio Martin, 1973), which sees a young English woman, Laura Barkley (Judy Geeson), visiting a hotel run by sadistic Spanish sisters who killed her own sister. We might also think of *Horror Express* (also directed by Eugenio Martin, 1972), a Spanish/British film starring Christopher Lee, Peter Cushing and Telly Savalas, shot in Madrid, but primarily set on the Trans-Siberian Express, between Shanghai and Moscow. And we might think of *Incense for the Damned* aka *Bloodsuckers* aka *Doctors Wear Scarlet* (Robert Hartford-Davies, 1971), starring Patrick Macnee, Peter Cushing and Edward Woodward, that moves between Britain and Greece.

I.Q. Hunter's important recent work on British trash cinema argues for a 'taking seriously' of films that have not traditionally been seen to be of cultural value, while also at the same time nailing flag to mast of academic irreverence and the seeming pleasure in baiting all those who take things just a little bit too seriously in Film Studies as a discipline. Hunter notes the issue of the differences that develop between the original intended audiences for films and what later become their cult audiences (Hunter 2013: 3). It is also instructive to

consider *Berberian Sound Studio* as a knowingly paracinematic text, by drawing on the work of Jeffrey Sconce, who argues that ‘the explicit manifesto of paracinematic culture is to valorize all forms of cinematic ‘trash’, whether such films have been either explicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate film culture.’ (Sconce 1995: 372) But more than this, *Berberian Sound Studio* serves to highlight the artistry and craft that often went into films that have since been described as trash. The primary way in which it does this is through its concentration on the extraordinary work done on the soundtracks of some of these films.

***Berberian Sound Studio* as celebration of film sound and music**

Peter Strickland has spoken often of his wide-ranging and eclectic, international music influences including Ennio Morricone, Bruno Nicolai, Riz Ortolani, Stelvio Cipriani, Fabio Frizzi, Claudio Gizzi, Goblin, Luc Ferrari, The Bohman Brothers, Cathy Berberian, Katalin Ladik, Jean-Michel Van Schouwburg, Luigi Nono, Jim O’Rourke, Nurse with Wound, Faust, Merzbow, Trevor Wishart, early Whitehouse, early Franco Battiato and Broadcast (James and Wood 2012: 34). Strickland has also evidently been influenced by giallo soundtracks – which he has noted were ‘very advanced for the time with their use of drone, *musique concrete*, free jazz and dissonance.’ (James and Wood 2012: 32). As Strickland pointed out to me in an interview,

‘What was more considered was the notion of avant-garde music finding a niche in exploitation cinema. The atonal, dissonant nature of some avant-garde music lends itself to fantastical imagery and with *Berberian* it was a case of joining the dots.

Bruno Maderna is a great example of someone who on the one hand worked with Luigi Nono and Luciano Berio, but also worked with Giulio Questi. The sound poetry made by Katalin Ladik and Jean-Michel Van Schouwburg in *Berberian* is an example of that kind of sound framed in a horror context.’

(Strickland interviewed by Paul Newland)

Berberian Sound Studio – named after avant-garde musician and composer Cathy Berberian – uncovers and indeed foregrounds the fact that a number of transnational exploitation films of the 1970s saw celebrated avant-garde composers working on their soundtracks. Examples of such films include *Holocaust 2000* (Alberto de Martino, 1977), a British/Italian horror starring Kirk Douglas, that features music by Ennio Morricone, and *The Devil's Men* aka *The Land of the Minotaur* (Costas Carayiannis, 1976), a Greek horror film starring Donald Pleasance and Peter Cushing, that features music by Brian Eno. The still little-known history of such film music provided one of the keys to *Berberian Sound Studio* for Strickland. He told Jason Wood, for example, that the film ‘began as a joke when I made a one-minute film with [experimental musicians] The Bohman Brothers in 2005.’ (James and Wood 2012: 32) In a key admission elsewhere, Strickland has stated that ‘*Berberian Sound Studio* came out of that strange sonic no man’s land between academia and exploitation.’ (James and Wood 2012: 32) This is another one of the many ways in which *Berberian Sound Studio* begins to disrupt many historical understandings of cinema, and to thus function as film as alternative film history.

***Berberian Sound Studio* as a film looking for cultists**

The employment of music in the *Berberian Sound Studio* allows us to consider it within the developing critical discourse of cult cinema, and, especially, how far ‘cult’ offers an intriguing historical perspective on film history. We now have a range of definitions for cult films. For Mathijs and Mendik (2008: 2-3), the ‘anatomy’ of a cult film might include ‘innovation’, ‘badness’, ‘transgression’, ‘genre’, ‘intertextuality’, ‘loose ends’, ‘nostalgia’, and/or ‘gore’. And the ‘consumption’ of cult films differs radically from mainstream cinema Mathijs and Mendik (2008: 4), and can incorporate ‘active celebration’, ‘communion and

community', 'liveness', 'commitment', 'rebellion' and/or 'alternative canonization'. The 'political economy' of a cult film can be evidenced by its 'production legends and accidents', its 'promotion' (specialist events and limited access), and its 'reception tales and tails' (Mathijs and Mendik 2008: 7-8). And the 'cultural status' of a cult film can be fuelled by its 'strangeness', its status as 'allegory', the 'cultural sensitivities', and its 'politics' (Mathijs and Mendik 2008: 9-11). Here we should also keep in mind the importance of reception in formulation of definitions of cult cinema (Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 13-25) and, especially, the issue of cult versus 'normal' consumption. The festival success of *Berberian Sound Studio* - but not box office success - clearly speaks of the film's potential for cult status (Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 41-5).

Moreover, Mathijs and Sexton insightfully write that 'a film that wants to be cult needs to look for cultists.' (Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 31) I would argue here that there is evidence of *Berberian Sound Studio* intentionally 'hailing' cult film fans. It is dealing in metaculture. As such it is effectively culture about (cult)ure (see Urban 2001: 3). Strickland, it seems, has actively drawn upon cult film history to imbue this film with cult value (Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 235). Matt Hills writes elsewhere of the development of such 'production/textual strategies' (Hills 2008: 449) Peter Strickland, like Tim Burton and Joe Dante, is a filmmaker who self-consciously drawn upon cult cinema within their work (see Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 236). In *Berberian Sound Studio*, but also in his other films to date, Strickland demonstrates how far 'cult' can be utilised as not only a structuring and aesthetic device but also an approach to the marketing and distribution of art films.

Recently a number of writers have tried to chart the complex ways in which so-called art films come to operate as cult films. David Andrews argues that 'cult-art' films often partially but not wholly accepted as art films by the institutions of art cinema (Andrews 2013: 108). Furthermore, 'Cult-art movies clearly exist, as certified by the fact that movies in so

many low forms [...] have functioned as high art within the subcultures that have grown up around them. When made, circulated, and praised with flair, these cult-art movies have even generated a qualified status outside their original subcultures.’ (Andrews 2013: 112)

Moreover, Jamie Sexton notices the ways in which British exploitation cinema of the 1980s and 1990s have been ‘remediated’ as ‘cult-art movies’. (Sexton 2015: 21) We might understand *Berberian Sound Studio* as an exemplar of recent cinematic developments that have brought about an increased cult interest in films that crossover between art and trash. This has been evidenced by the successes of the British Film Institute’s Flipside label, which Mathijs and Sexton argue ‘can also be seen as manifesting a growing awareness of the overlaps between cult/art-house audiences.’ (Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 239) All this proves, for Mathijs and Sexton, that ‘we are now living in a “meta-cult” world [...]’ (Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 242). But *Berberian Sound Studio* is in some ways evidently designed as a cult movie about ‘cultness’, and thus managed to achieve this status almost immediately, without the requirement of subsequent remediation, or indeed, the amount of time traditionally required to secure a cult status.

One way in which *Berberian Sound Studio* actively courted immediate cult status, while remaining an art/trash film crossover, is through its highly stylised and carefully curated soundtrack. The fictional credit sequence for *Equestrian Vortex*, designed by Julian House (of the cult imprint Ghost Box records) (Sexton 2015: 22), is key here, as is the presence of the work of the cult band Broadcast on the soundtrack. Through its inclusion of Broadcast (a band with powerful subcultural appeal) the film chimes with the cult practice of soundtrack collecting (1970s Hammer soundtracks especially). As Sexton notes, ‘There has been a striking rise of interest in cult soundtrack recordings over the past decade or so among both record and film fans, in particular soundtracks which stem from a number of exploitation or more obscure art films made between the 1960s and early 1980s’. (Sexton

2015: 13) Italian horror cinema tends to be the most admired but cult fans, and there exists a 'marked enthusiasm for older technologies and practices' within these circles (Sexton 2015: 15). Through working with the cult British group Broadcast on the soundtrack to *Berberian Sound Studio*, and the evident influence of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop on the film, Strickland intentionally links his work to the contemporary cult of hauntology.

Conclusion

So, while at the level of production, exhibition, artistic agency and markers of quality, it might be called an art film, there is evidence that *Berberian Sound Studio* is coded or marked but was also 'designed' (indeed, even marketed) as a 'cult' film through using artists who already have considerable subcultural capital. The film thus demonstrates a distinct recognition of an audience for cult films as well as art house films (and we should not forget that some art films are cult films). As it does this, *Berberian Sound Studio* is a film that self-consciously reimagines 1970s cinema history without resorting to tired scholarly taxonomies and tautological divisions between national cinemas, genres, art and trash. This film helps us to reconsider several things, then – our current critical approaches to national cinema, European cinema, art cinema, trash cinema and cult cinema, and the critical discourses informing the historical work of film sound practitioners. It highlights - and indeed foregrounds - what Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover call the 'mongrel identity' (2010: 3) of art cinema, and evokes the ways in which it has been and still is 'a dynamic and contested terrain' (2010: 3). But while it evokes what Galt and Schoonover term the 'foundational Eurocentrism' (2010: 4) of art cinema, Peter Strickland's film does not yoke authorship to nation. It instead presents authorship as a transnational phenomenon. It also problematizes the link between art cinema and seriousness in filmmaking, by mining a complex history of transnational trash cinema, while also appealing to a cult audience. *Berberian Sound Studio* is not simply contemporary British art cinema as high culture; rather, it is a transnational art

film that operates as new, alternative film history, exploring the spaces between discourses of art, horror, exploitation, trash, filmmaking technique and tawdriness, high and low culture, while at the same time hailing a cult audience.

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