

The Power of Sound to Confound and Deceive: An Exploration of the Psychotropic Soundscape of *Berberian Sound Studio*

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Abstract

The genre of horror has stirred much controversy and debate due to its representations of violence, and the psychological and potential detrimental effects that over exposure may evoke in viewers. Indeed, these issues pertain most significantly to the sub-genre of exploitation horror, which has frequently been derided as sensational and vulgar. Peter Strickland's latest feature film, *Berberian Sound Studio*, is a compelling and engaging reflection on portrayals of violence and how, through the processes of creation and consumption, we may be implicated in this horror.

Berberian Sound Studio is both a homage to and critique of *giallo* cinema, the Italian exploitation variant of horror that was popular 1970s. *Giallo* cinema is notorious for its grotesque profusion and excessive violence. However, Strickland subverts this convention through his decision to communicate the horror exclusively through sound. Strickland's motion picture, set in an Italian postproduction sound studio, serves to expose the deceptive and elusive nature of sound and the power of association and context that is central to cinematic sound production. Moreover, the film demonstrates how sonic representations of violence can evoke an imaginative engagement that is often beyond our conscious awareness.

My essay explores the ominous and insightful soundscape of *Berberian Sound Studio* and how it effectively establishes a tone of horror that is all at once morbidly sinister and alluringly cryptic. Moreover, I will examine the sonic portrayals of violence and how its effects pertain to psychoanalysis of the horror genre and current film theory. Through my analysis of the psychotropic sonic realm of *Berberian Sound Studio*, I aim to generate an awareness of the powerful affective potential of sound in film. Indeed, my essay reveals how cinematic sound as a pervasive and insidious medium can stimulate both imaginative and somatic empathy in the viewer, resulting in an intensely emotional, phenomenological experience.