

“BERBERIAN SOUND STUDIO” (TIFF Movie Review)

Written by Chris Alexander

Tuesday, 04 September 2012 09:58



The word “homage” is a battered old mare when it comes to horror, with many a filmmaker confusing the term—which can most appropriately be applied to directors like Brian De Palma or Quentin Tarantino, who graft elements and DNA of pictures they admire onto fresh frameworks—with ripoff. Look at the “grindhouse” phenomenon, a dubious and meaningless label that has given birth to an endless parade of pink-tinted, fake-aged visuals and replicant movements creating works that are by now rather tired, unimaginative and poor Xeroxes of the accidentally awesome trash classics they ape.

The *gialli* thrillers—those glorious, slick, fluid, erotic and bloody movies that seeped out of Italy during the 1970s—have long been hat-tipped by filmmakers favoring black leather gloves, funky prog-rock scores and elaborate murder setpieces. But again, you cannot go back, and there is a dishonesty about these kinds of postmodern throwbacks.

On the surface, Peter Strickland’s new creeper BERBERIAN SOUND STUDIO (which has its North American premiere next Monday and Tuesday, September 10 and 11 at the [Toronto International Film Festival](#)

, and plays the New York Film Festival in October) seems to be such a tribute to the *giallo*

, and while it’s certainly not a ripoff, homage is not an appropriate handle either. Neither is thriller. Or horror film. Or drama or comedy, though the movie certainly contains elements of all of these genres. And while there is a shadowy unseen figure getting his black leather gloves worshipped in prowling close-ups, those hands don’t kill anyone; rather, they shift mechanisms on massive 35mm projectors. And that’s what makes the film such a triumph for lovers of Italian horror movies, of the

giallo

form: BERBERIAN SOUND STUDIO takes imagery and moods from those pictures and presents them as fetish objects in a completely radical and experimental art-house fever dream. It’s a deconstruction, sure, but also something else, something you’ve never seen before.

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The film stars Toby Jones (so good as Truman Capote in *INFAMOUS*) as British sound engineer Gilderoy, a meek genius who is hired to design the complex, squishy, shrieky soundscape for an over-the-top Italian knockoff of what sounds like *THE DEVILS* by way of *THE EXORCIST*, at the greasy titular studio. The year is 1976, one of the last good years of Italian exploitation, and as we are well aware, histrionic riffs on popular religious horror films were legion back then. This one is particularly nasty, directed by the narcissistic filmmaker Santini (Antonio Mancino)—but in an ingenious twist, we the audience never see a frame of the flick, save for an absolutely delirious opening-credits sequence (with intense music by UK rock band Broadcast) that in turn serves as the quasi-credits of *BERBERIAN SOUND STUDIO* itself.



As Gilderoy—a milquetoast who has previously traded only in children’s shows and farm documentaries—is called on to stab melons, smash vegetables, antagonize starlets into dubbed screaming fits and burn various materials in order to emulate the sounds of depravity on screen, he very quickly starts to lose his marbles. With Santini’s oppressive, sexually abusive shadow smothering the production, myriad maddening technical glitches bedeviling the crew and tensions at a general high, Gilderoy pines for his mother and his quiet country life. Or does he? Concepts of reality and delusion eventually smash like the glass Gilderoy is called on to break, and by the end of the picture, nothing makes much sense...

And thank God for that, because pedestrian concepts of narrative cohesion would rob this movie of its freeform and yet carefully controlled soul.

BERBERIAN SOUND STUDIO is one the most incredible films about the sound of horror I have ever seen. I can think of only one other picture remotely like it: Jerzy Skolimowski’s 1978 chiller *THE SHOUT*, in which John Hurt portrays an experimental musician antagonized by a monstrous, screaming Alan Bates. But *BERBERIAN* differs from that or any other picture in that is designed to disorient the viewer with rich, erotic—but not exploitive—visuals while

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bending the mind and ear with an endless onslaught of brain-bleeding frequencies, bizarre murmurs, screeches and even dead silences. It’s like the studio itself is hell, and you the viewer are trapped in it, paying the price for dancing with the sort of devils who churn out unsavory pictures like the kind Santini trades in.

Even casual filmgoers will get off on BERBERIAN’s visuals and kinky aesthetic—which is not to say they’ll enjoy it. It’s not an easy film to like. And as one astute colleague of mine said, because of the fact that it drips *giallo* tropes and ’70s Italian horror motifs, it is rather “inside baseball,” but that’s what makes it so brilliant. No one has ever inverted the European horror film with such wit, eloquence and purpose to challenge its audience. If you love this subgenre, you’ll feel like BERBERIAN was made exclusively for you.

I certainly know I did.

