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# Reading The Scream in Berberian Sound Studio and the films of Peter Strickland

By Matthew Melia

In a previously published chapter *The Scream in Visual Culture: The Scream as Fearful Response*[\[1\]](#) I observed that images of screaming proliferate in 20th century visual and auditory culture, in painting and film, sound recording and music, and suggested that screaming is an impulsive, immediate and spontaneous response to physical and psychological cruelty and suffering as well as to traumatic or ecstatic human experience. However, screaming is not just an individual, automatic response to personal suffering, fright, joy etc. but when meted out abundantly in culture through images and other forms of representation, screamers and screaming become universal or collective responses to the multiple crises and traumas of the era, and a synonym for both the cruel individual and collective human experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Human Scream is at the hub of our understanding of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It resounds and echoes across the era, across the scope of historical and cultural experience – a universal response wholly apposite to the social, economic and political cruelties, architectures, changes and historical traumas of the era.[\[2\]](#)

In 20<sup>th</sup> century culture there is an abundance of screams and screamers. Consider, for instance, the paintings of the Irish artist Francis Bacon, whose images of boxed-in, silent screamers, resonate iconographically in English director and sound artist/designer Peter Strickland's film *Berberian Sound Studio* (2012) in which again we are shown images of screaming bodies enclosed within the sound booths of the studio (Figure 1) or the agonised scream which emits from 'Mouth' (a disembodied mouth hanging in a void of darkness) in the avant-garde Irish writer, novelist and dramatist Samuel Beckett's monologue *Not I* (1973), or the fractured voices, screams and glossolalia[\[3\]](#) of surrealist, writer and dramatist Antonin Artaud's final (censored and therefore silenced) recorded work for radio, *To Have Done With The Judgement of God* (1947); his final apocalyptic attempt to realise a 'Theatre of Cruelty'[\[4\]](#). Both Beckett and Artaud will later help frame a discussion of the scream in Strickland's work where they have an emphatic presence.

Of course the scream is not the sole possession of the avant-garde and the experimental. It is also part of the furniture of popular cinema, particularly horror cinema: an integral part of its apparatus and

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ornamentation – a narrative reaction to something horrifying or monstrous: the slashing blade of a serial killer, a giant monster rampaging across a sprawling urban metropolis; a sudden confrontation with the undead. It has a narrative function, telling the audience where and when to be afraid, an indicator as to the climax of a frightening sequence and an instance of catharsis and release. It mediates our reaction to the terrifying scenario before us. In considering the scream as part of the furniture of popular cinema, we may note here the ubiquity of both the “Wilhelm Scream” (which Professor Benjamin Wright notes has six variants) and the “Howie Scream”—two stock sound affects which have reverberated across movies since the early 1950s and the early 1980s respectively. In discussing the Wilhelm scream Wright observes:

Among the dense layers of sound effects, music and dialogue of the films is a stock sound affect that has transcended its status as a relic of old Hollywood to become a fixture of contemporary cinema...the Wilhelm scream.[5]

Furthermore, he observes the Wilhelm scream’s first use in the western *Distant Drums* (Raoul Walsh, USA, 1951,) and its much later use in films such as *Return of the Jedi* (Richard Marquand, USA, 1983):

As a sonic signature, the Wilhelm shriek binds together decades of film sound history...Wilhelm is both a paean to the studio era and a testament to the art of sound editing.[6]

The Wilhelm and Howie screams are fixed responses, fixed points across a variety of genres and cinematic forms. The same two screams have also, at the same time, been heard across a variety of contexts, their meaning and signification changing according to scenario. Sonically, the scream remains the same. However, as Wright suggests, “a scream by any other name is just a scream”[7], but no one scream *is* ever the same; they differ in tone, pitch, frequency, urgency, volume and duration, and are formed in relation to the experience they respond to. Screams are responses which resist, replace and displace reasoned and articulate expression, certainly this is the case in both the works of both Artaud and Beckett.

Peter Strickland is a contemporary director and sound artist/designer whose work re-interrogates this 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural and cinematic phenomenon of the scream from a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective. In Strickland’s films the scream is post-modern: reimagined, recast, deconstructed and re-mediated via a set of diegetic and non-diegetic devices, which forcefully separate the scream from the screamer, who is left as an inert, catatonic presence. This article seeks not only to discuss the role and presence of the scream in Strickland’s cinema but also to

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recognise the influence of the Irish dramatist and writer Samuel Beckett and the dissident surrealist and founder of the Theatre of Cruelty, Antonin Artaud within Strickland's cinema. For both, the act and representation of screaming is bound up closely with cruelty (an ambiguous and multivalent term within their writing, drama and imagery), space, dis-embodiment, the search for and evanescence of personal subjectivity, and identity.

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Strickland's first major film *Katalin Varga* (2009) is the story of Katalin, the eponymous Romanian-Hungarian woman who is ostracised by her husband and community when it is revealed she has been raped and the parentage of her young son, Orbán, is called into question. She sets off on a doomed, picaresque journey, by horse and cart across the landscape of the Carpathian Mountains in order to confront her rapist (this doom-laden quest bears the influence of Thomas Hardy in the bleakness of its representation of rural life and landscape). Her quest takes her through violent, rural communities to the heart of his family home, where we learn that he is apparently not a monster but a loving and remorseful family man. The Scream presented in *Katalin Varga* is prophetic of the trauma to come and haunts the soundtrack, or soundscape, of the film. It takes the form of non-diegetic ghostly, reverberating, distant howls, moans and screams, layered one on top of the other, a harmony of choral voices and electronic sound. The Scream occurs as she and Orbán cross the landscape, blowing across the surface of both the landscape and the film itself like the wind, turning it into a haunted space. In his review in *The Independent*, critic Jonathan Romney observed:

The film's most overly offbeat aspect is its soundtrack, with an other-worldly score, part choral, part electronic, by Steven Stapleton and Geoff Cox, and a genuinely enigmatic sound design: the climactic tragedy is announced, unnervingly, by an insistent tapping, as if the local woodpeckers are getting restless.[\[8\]](#)

However, the scream embedded into the film's soundtrack starkly contrasts with the long periods of silence, as well as with the seeming inertia of the film's characters. Scholar Jean Martin observes of Strickland's films that "Strickland doesn't put dialogue at the centre of his films. This creates space for the audio—visual elements".[\[9\]](#) One of the distinctive aspects of Strickland's work is the way in which diegetic sounds are pushed high in the sound mix, amplified and intensified, almost to the point becoming part of, if not *the* non-diegetic soundtrack. In *Katalin Varga*, the abstract sounds of the landscape replace conventional soundtrack music, and the layered textures of the scream ironically confer upon it a musicality. The emphatic presence of diegetic

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sound is also central to Strickland's next film *Berberian Sound Studio*. Jean Martin, in his article "Landscape, Soundscape, Taskscape in the films *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Katalin Varga* (2009)" makes a number of salient observations, suggesting that:

The composers Geoffrey Cox and Steven Stapleton succeed in metaphorically evoking Katalin's inner world of thoughts and emotions through electroacoustic soundscapes. Often these scenes are acoustically set in a bath of strongly manipulated voice drones. The large, but slightly dark, sonic space is a symbol for Katalin's mental state, which has been darkened through the traumatic experience of her rape as a young woman... This inner sonic space of Katalin is occasionally inhabited by her voice: she whispers fragments of an inner monologue. This enormous soundscape in surround, a metaphor for Katalin's dreams and hopes, collapses abruptly into mono, when Katalin is catapulted back into the film reality... A good example for the metaphorical use of a sound is an open fire during a rural dance party. Music and other location sounds fade away until we can only hear the intense cracking of the burning wood over the now familiar spheric electronic sounds as a metaphor for Katalin's tension and turmoil.[\[10\]](#)

Katalin's traumatised and hushed fragmentary inner dialogue reflects the textual presence of Samuel Beckett whose dramatic writing, particularly, in his later, shorter dramas (from the mid 1960s) deals with the inner monologue of the characters and its traumatised, verbal articulation. In *Katalin Varga*, Katalin's moment of traumatised verbal exposition occurs when she reveals, in monologue (a la Beckett), the experience of her rape to her unwitting rapist and his wife when out rowing, a scene which will eventually lead to the wife's suicide and to her own final, sudden, brutal murder.

Screaming is a psychologically, emotionally and physically exhausting act. In Beckett's dramatic monologue *Not I*, each piercing and painful scream emitted by 'Mouth' is in response to her failed attempt to rationalise and articulate the traumatic events of her existence, and to reclaim some her own evanescent subjectivity. In this monologue a disembodied 'Mouth', lacking any other physical form, hangs in an empty void of darkness. Identity is tied to physical presence and the inability to realise and recognise personal subjectivity leads to a complete erasure of the self. Each scream is met with, that most Beckettian of tropes, the anguished pause. In *Breath* (1969), a 25-second-long piece, a single disembodied cry is followed by the inhalation and exhalation of breath echoing across a stage strewn with rubbish.

Strickland's three major films to date[\[11\]](#), in particular *Berberian Sound Studio*, explore not only the scream and its containment but also the

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detritus of that scream: silence. *Berberian Sound Studio* we follow Gilderoy, an unassuming and withdrawn sound engineer as he travels to an Italian sound studio from his home in Dorking, fresh from mixing the sound for a nature documentary about his native Box Hill, to do post-production work on a film called *The Equestrian Vortex*. He wrongly assumes this to be a film about horses, where in fact the Mephistophelian (Satanic imagery pervades the film) production supervisor Francesco, informs him, on arrival, that it's a violent Giallo horror film about the revenge of a group of undead witches, featuring graphic depictions of human torture and sadistic cruelty (hair wrenching, mutilation and sexual violation with a red-hot poker).

During the film the scream is trapped and contained via the medium of tape<sup>[12]</sup> while the screamers are encased within their sound booths, open mouthed, screaming but silent (as if anguished by the very act of having their scream torn from them). Like the suggested, but unseen, red hot poker within the film's meta narrative, disembodied screams perforate, rip and penetrate the fabric of the film and they echo across the 'haunted' spaces: the studio at the centre of the film as well as the "film within a film" ("*The Equestrian Vortex*"), at the centre of the narrative. Screams are part of the architecture of this film, and depictions of evanescence, decay and putrefaction proliferate across the films as the camera lingers over images of vegetables left to rot after being discarded from the Foley desk where they have been used to create the sound effects to images of torture and suffering.



Figure 1: a screamer in *Berberian Sound Studio*, bearing resemblance to

In *The Duke of Burgundy*, a film which centres around the co-dependent, BDSM, relationship of a Lepidopterist and her housemaid, the scream manifests itself as the synthesised pitch of a cricket moth (a sound usually inaudible to the human ear). In one key sequence during the lecture given by Cynthia (Sidse Babett Knudsen), she identifies the pitch (scream) as a maker of identity and subjectivity. The pitch, modulated and synthesised, for human aural consumption, plays both diegetically and non-diegetically across the film as the camera pans across an inert and impassive female audience (among whom are placed mannequins both in homage to Fassbinder's film, *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant*, (1972) a similar tale of a co-dependent female sexual relationship), and as meta-textual objects of power and control.[\[13\]](#) In *Katalin Varga*, the scream emerges as an extra-diegetic howl which echoes across the surface of the film as Katalin and her son travel, by cart, across the desiccated Carpathian landscape. In all three films, the scream emits from both within the diegesis and is imposed on top of it. Technology is used to control and contort its pitch, volume, direction. If the scream is an automatic and instinctual response, here, in Strickland's films, it is also artificially controlled, synthesised and manipulated.

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Jean Martin has broken critical ground on the cinema of Peter Strickland. In discussing the innovative nature of Strickland's films, Strickland's work as a sound artist and the individual soundscapes/soundtracks used in the three films, Martin observes:

Strickland's audio-visual aesthetic emerges from his choice of topics and the way he tells stories in his films. He deals with complex ideas and the emotional effects on the protagonists, for example injustice, revenge, freedom, power, love and fear, or the nature of repetition. Strickland is not interested in action. Instead he creates audio-visual tableaux, where a situation and protagonist's mood is shown almost out of time. He creates space and time for these situations, using strong images, for example mysterious forest borders in dim light, accompanied by long, complex musical drones or ambient music.[\[14\]](#)

In Peter Strickland's films the scream does not simply function as a piece of cinematic horror furniture. In fact his films show an ambiguous relationship to the genre. They certainly appropriate horrific imagery, tropes and motifs, moments of cruelty and sadism (both consensual and non-consensual) but they also refer back to a set of art-cult texts (see below), deliberately problematising the issue of genre. In his films, the scream is unpacked and interrogated as an expression of human trauma,



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as a main component of horror cinema. This is particularly true in *Berberian Sound Studio* for its abstract, sonic nature and musicality. Here the scream draws together two seemingly opposite traditions: the popular (and cult) with the experimental and avant-garde where in both, as I have already discussed, it has a clear presence. Strickland's films exist at the intersection of art and exploitation cinema[15], as do many of his cinematic points of reference.

Furthermore, the narratives and mise-en-scène of these films also exist in a vacuum: temporally displaced and locked 'out of time'. In *Berberian Sound Studio*, the close-ups of antiquated sound-mixing equipment and tape recorders as well as its narrative that revolves around the sound editing and post production of a violent Italian Giallo horror film could suggest that the film is narratively located in the 1970s. The film, like the studio itself, is a hermetically sealed and haunted space; the scream here is a ghostly presence which reverberates across it signifying something both present and absent.

*Katalin Varga* also feels disconnected from any contemporary setting. Its rural location and setting anchors it to numerous cinematic and artistic traditions, including that of folk horror cinema. The film's soundscape is suggestive of a ghostly, haunted landscape. The rural setting and landscape, this author argues, is also indicative of a traumatised post-communist Romania still locked in the past, unable to fully catch up with the present. The film's seeming location in the past is also re-enforced by the reference to 19<sup>th</sup> century European realist painting[16] as well as the use of Caravaggesque[17] interior lighting and chiaroscuro.

In *The Duke of Burgundy*, the enclosed female world of the film is stylistically located within the milieu of both the 1970s European female melodrama and erotic exploitation film. In an interview, Strickland cited the influence of both Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Jess Franco's *A Virgin Among the Living Dead* (1973). Strickland's film, offers the viewer a set of composed tableaux (owing as much in this respect to Kubrick as Fassbinder and Franco). Furthermore, Beckett's presence is felt here too. Cynthia's daily routine of ablutions recalls that of Winnie in *Happy Days* (1961) (as she, buried up to her waste in sand, unpacks her toothbrush and other items to begin 'another happy day.') Like Winnie, *Waiting for Godot's* (1949) Vladimir and Estragon, Krapp (*Krapp's Last Tape* 1958) and other Beckett characters, both women at the heart of the film are locked in a cyclical relationship and narrative: the film ends as it begins.

Strickland's films anticipate the current zeitgeist in contemporary horror cinema in which narratives, particularly post-modern narratives, reference and pay homage to a set of European and American cinematic

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horror as well as cult-horror traditions, and which are temporally dislocated and ambiguous: David Robert Mitchell's *It Follows* (2014), Anna Biller's *The Love Witch* (2016) or Carol Morley's Ken Russell-esque *The Falling* (2014), are all examples of this trend in which the worlds of the films stylistically and deliberately reference the cinematic style of the past, but remain hermetically sealed off from both past *and* present (or become a space in which the two collide). *The Love Witch*, for instance, homages the European erotic exploitation cinema of the late 1960s and 1970 in its overall style, performance, colour scheme and mise-en-scène. In interviews Biller has cited a range of diverse sources as points of reference including not only Russ Meyer, Mario Bava and Jess Franco, but also Pier Paolo Pasolini and Michael Powell.<sup>[18]</sup> Yet in the film, characters anachronistically use modern day mobile phones.

However locating Strickland as part of this new wave of directors—whose work seeks to locate itself within a milieu of cult art and exploitation cinema—is to an extent somewhat problematic, given that his films engage with the horror genre as part of a much wider matrix of experimental and cultural influences and points of reference (see below).

If directors such as Ben Wheatley explicitly set out to homage the horror tropes of British cinema, or Nicolas Winding Refn, with a film such as *The Neon Demon* (2016) which appropriates the Gialli style by hybridising it with more than a touch of Stanley Kubrick and Ken Russell, then Strickland's work aims to meta-textually deconstruct and interrogate the mechanics and apparatus of this cinema rather than simply homage. His films inhabit a niche network of cultural texts in which screaming and the scream itself are central. In these texts, screams are not simply part of the narrative furniture, they are the central drive of the film frequently displacing and replacing the narrative. Strickland consciously appropriates a visual intellectual avant-garde tradition of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century in which the scream negotiates debates over disembodiment, identity and subjectivity.

Ben Wheatley's *A Field In England* (2014) provides an interesting point of contemporary comparison in its rendering of the scream. Alchemist's assistant Whitehead (Reece Shearsmith), is tortured off-screen by rival alchemist O'Neill (Michael Smiley). From within the tent we hear a prolonged ear splitting scream followed by silence during which Whitehead emerges from the tent, tethered by a long rope, catatonic, and with a terrifying grin on his face. Here again the scream is contrasted with a painful silence, and furthermore the image of Whitehead tied to a rope being led by O'Neill arguably recalls the image of master/slave Pozzo and Lucky in Beckett's seminal drama of the absurd *Waiting For Godot*. Wheatley's film recalls imagery from *Waiting for Godot* on several occasions. Given Strickland's own concern within Beckettian imagery and the themes of circularity, repetition, physical containment this is



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particular relevant, as I shall discuss with reference to the *The Duke of Burgundy*. We may hypothesise that 21<sup>st</sup> century horror cinema is more and more looking to the absurd and to the ‘horrific’ imagery inherent in Beckett’s work as a point of reference.

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Turning now to a fuller discussion of the film *Berberian Sound Studio*, it is firstly worth noting that in an interview with *Cinema-Scope*[\[19\]](#) Strickland has acknowledged a wider set of somewhat esoteric and experimental influences over his approach to sound, voice—and therefore the scream—in film; the 20<sup>th</sup> century post-modernist sound artist and mezzo-soprano Cathy Berberian and her work with Luciano Berio; Delia Derbyshire and the BBC Radiophonic Orchestra; the composers Karlheinz Stockhausen and Kristof Penderecki (whose *De natura sonoris No. 1* (1966) also featured prominently as part of the soundtrack to Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining*); free jazz and Musique concrète.

In this interview Strickland discusses the relevance of Berberian to his work and acknowledges the crossover between the experimental sound art of 1970s and the world of the exploitation film:

You could find links between them at somewhere like the Studio di Fonologia, which was Luciano Berio’s studio in Milan. He was also the husband of Cathy Berberian, and part of what sparked all the whole film was my listening to “Visage,” a track they did together in 1961. It’s about 20 minutes of howling and just sounds very possessed. It was never in a horror film, but I got to thinking, what if it was? I was also thinking of people like Bruno Maderna, who was hanging out with John Cage and Luigi Nono but also doing soundtracks to things like *Death Laid an Egg* (1968). Or even Ennio Morricone, who was part of the Gruppo di Improvvisazione di Nuova Consonanza, which was like the Italian version of AMM [a long-lived British free improvisation group]. So you had this weird connection between the high art, academic or experimental music, and exploitation soundtracks.[\[20\]](#)

*Visage* is a piece comprised of glossolalia, howls, and screams overlaying a ghostly emptiness influenced directly by the later recorded work of Antonin Artaud, notably his final work *To Have Done with The Judgement of God* (1947), which is an apocalyptic and fragmentary recording for radio where the voice is interspersed with guttural cries, piercing shrieks and screams, glossailia and bruitages. At one point in *Berberian Sound Studio*, we see and hear one of the female voice artists vocalising a barrage of abstract noises, howls and shrieks, in the manner of both Berberian and Artaud. It can be argued that in this shot Strickland writes Berberian herself into the film.

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Artaud intended to use the recording and the medium of radio to invade the private space of the listener at home. It was the final act in an ongoing project for the Theatre of Cruelty. In his first manifesto for the Theatre of Cruelty Artaud stated:

There can be no spectacle without an element of cruelty. In our present degenerative state metapsychics must be made to enter the mind through the body.[\[21\]](#)

Artaud's biographer Stephen Barber describes Artaud's radio recording thus:

Artaud's final recording is a polyphony of screams and language, of assonant and obtuse rhythms, of insurgent elements of chance, and of outbursts of a black, apocalyptic laughter which mocks religion...The Scream is at the core of Artaud's recording: it emerges from, projects and visualises the body. In the space of the recording the interaction between Artaud's scream and the silences which surround it work to generate a volatile and tactile material of sound, image and absence.[\[22\]](#)

If we are to consider the term 'haunted' a la Derrida (in his discussion of Hauntology, Derrida understands the haunting as something that is both present and absent) the recorded scream may fit this description. Artaud's recording is a haunted space in which the scream is captured, disembodied from the screamer, and yet simultaneously set free. The scream, usually a reaction to cruelty, becomes part of the mechanics of cruelty.

We may add to this confluence of influence the work of television writer Nigel Kneale and director Jerzy Skolimowski and their experimental horror TV drama *The Stone Tape* (Kneale, 1975), and horror film *The Shout* (Skolimowski, 1978). In Nigel Kneale's 1972 teleplay *The Stone Tape* (directed by Hammer stalwart Peter Sasdy), written for the BBC's seasonal, annual, *Ghost Stories for Christmas*, the screaming apparition of a Victorian chambermaid reveals itself atop a set of stairs (which lead nowhere), to an electronics research group exploring new ways of recording sound (in the hope it will give them the lead over their Japanese competition). The ghoulish vision appears as a recorded (televisual) image superimposed upon the space around it like some indistinct, unstable signal from the past, both present and absent, and looped ad infinitum. The narrative reveals that in fact this vision is a recording of a terrifying past event embedded in the very stone of the old castle's walls. In 2015 Strickland produced a radio adaptation of *The Stone Tape*, using new recording techniques and innovative binaural sound. By doing so, it not only acknowledged Kneale's influence but also added a new layer of meta-textuality; a drama about an experiment with

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recording that unearths a previous 'stone' recording, re-written and adapted for the 21<sup>st</sup> century using new innovative three-dimensional recording techniques.

Skolimowski's *The Shout*, (1978) also deals with another withdrawn sound engineer and composer (John Hurt) intent on capturing the deadly aboriginal 'terror' shout which his mysterious guest (Alan Bates) claims to be able to unleash. Carson Lund observes:

Hurt is an independent experimental musician who is gradually shaken from his concentration by a mysterious Aboriginal brute capable of producing (with his own mouth!) a sound much purer than anything Hurt's character has ever dreamed of. [Tony] Jones was in his early forties for *Berberian Sound Studio* and Hurt was in his late 30s when he shot *The Shout*, and together the films form a double-edged portrait of middle-aged men struggling for control—of their art, of meaning, and of themselves. Peter Strickland and Jerzy Skolimowski's films create deeply expressive aesthetic environments that compliment their characters' contrasting trajectories, but in both cases, the lush visuals approximate only half the density and invention in the films' soundtracks.[\[23\]](#)

*Berberian Sound Studio* is a complex web of converging narratives in which the line between fiction and reality becomes increasingly blurred, and the concentric narratives of the film fold into one another. In *Berberian Sound Studio* Gilderoy is required to mix the voices and the screams of the female voice artists (segregated from the rest of the studio in a confining sound booth) and do the foley work (smashing and attacking vegetables, sizzling oil, pulling out stems) to supply the sound effects for the gruesome and sadistic imagery on screen. The audience, however, is never privy to the imagery of *The Equestrian Vortex*, instead Strickland foregrounds the creation of the sound effects in the studio to create the image in our minds as the fruit and vegetables are brutally and violently violated and destroyed by the Fulci-esque foley artist, Massimo (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Massimo the Foley Artist (Josef Cseres)

Confronted with the shocking violence he sees before him on the screen, his role in its perpetration, and his own isolation, Gilderoy's identity begins to crumble and breakdown along with the identity of the film itself (in this respect Nicholas Roeg and Donald Cammell's *Performance* (1970) is a clear point of reference). As the two narratives of the *Berberian Sound Studio* and its film within the film, *The Equestrian Vortex*, begin to bleed into one another. The sound studio itself becomes as a torture chamber with the producer and director, and latterly the increasingly complicit Gilderoy, as the torturers and the female voice artists their victims. The apparatus and mechanics of post-production (feedback played directly into ear pieces for instance) are used sadistically and intensively to impose the male creators will upon the female in the search for the perfect scream.

The film opens with a brief montage of imagery: film whirring through a projector, the blurred studio sign reading "Silenzio" (Figure 3) in demonic red warning letters. We first encounter Gilderoy at the beginning of the film, as he arrives at the studio. The film begins with a Beckettian exchange. He begins to ask the studio receptionist if she speaks English: "Do you speak...?" She abruptly cuts him off, "No". This exchange is then followed by a piercing scream from the nearby studio where they are sound recording for the film. Here, the film establishes the destabilisation and displacement of rational articulation by the scream. In Beckett's *Not I*, "Mouth's" scream punctuates a faltering and breathless attempt to express, realise and articulate the facts of her

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traumatic existence and experience. Each scream is followed by the direction 'silence.' In Strickland's film, the film's narrative, and its screams, are also brutally punctuated by the shots of the studio warning lights 'Silenzio' (see below image.)



Figure 3: "SILENZIO"

The titles sequence of the film locates it within the realm of horror cinema. With its blood red and black layered collage of violent occult imagery, the film homages not only 1970s European exploitation cinema but also references, aesthetically and stylistically, the title sequence of Michael Reeves' seminal British folk horror film *Witchfinder General* (1968). The title sequence which opens the film, however, is that of *The Equestrian Vortex*. *Berberian Sound Studio* has no title sequence, and the actors are not credited at this point. Hence from the very beginning of the film Strickland weaves together the film's set of meta narratives.

Douglas Khan suggests that:

In their natural habitat screams are heard or experienced during momentous occasions: childbirth; life threatening situations (and those perceived as such); psychic or psychological torture, terror, anguish; sex expressed as pleasure or pain; the fury of an argument; the persecution and slaughter of animals. Screams demand an urgent or empathetic response and thereby create a concentrated social space bounded by their audibility... Even prolonged, agonized human screams, which press

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on the hearer's consciousness convey only a limited dimension of the sufferers' experience. It may be for this reason, that images of the human scream recur fairly often in the visual arts, which for the most part avoid depictions of auditory experience.[\[24\]](#)

The narrative space of cinema, by definition, cannot be a 'natural habitat' for the scream as within this space it is planned, strategized, calculated and carefully placed. In post-production, its intensity, range, length etc. is carefully controlled and manipulated in order to elicit a response from the viewer (empathy, terror, fright, sadness, nausea). Throughout *Berberian Sound Studio* we are reminded of the tension between screaming as a natural, physical, spontaneous and exhausting act and its pre-meditated implementation within the frame when at several key moments the camera fetishes and lingers over Gilderoy's sound maps, flow charts, plans and notation. As the film progresses, and the meta narratives fold into one another, Gilderoy's notes take on the appearance of post-modernist 'musical' notation, scientific notation and, significantly, occult symbols, forming themselves into satanic goat like visage (see Figure 4)



Figure 4: Gilderoy's satanic sound chart

Furthermore, the camera fetishes the spinning spools of tape, the sound recording equipment; the alchemist's tools (Gilderoy has almost occult mastery and power over sound). Within the meta-textual framework of the film, these machines will later become the instruments of torture used on the female voice artists. Throughout *Berberian Sound*



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*Studio*, Gilderoy is presented as both an Enlightenment scientist conducting experiments with sound (see Figure 5 which draws on the work of the 18<sup>th</sup> century British artist Joseph Wright of Derby[25]) AND a black magician or alchemist with supernatural power and control of sound and voice. At the start of the film on his meeting with production supervisor Francesco, he is beckoned into the studio and told “The world of sound awaits you... a world that requires all your magic powers”.



Figure 5: Gilderoy, the Enlightenment Scientist / Alchemist

Later, in one of the rare instances that we leave the studio, we are shown Gilderoy hunched over a spinning tape recorder in an image that recalls Beckett’s melancholic but comic play *Krapp’s Last Tape*. In the play, Krapp, an old man on his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, listens to recordings he has made in previous years, his memory contained within the spools of tape. Ulrika Maude writes in *Beckett, Technology and The Body* that,

The play’s temporal sedimentation is brought about by the manipulation of the tapes. The noises on stage mark the present tense, while the different dimensions of the past are conjured up by the recorded voice. Beckett wanted to ensure the body leaves its trace on the tape recording: he made the difference in voice quality explicit by indicating that the voice on tape should ‘clearly be Krapp’s at a much earlier time’.[26]

She cites scholar Katherine Hayles:

Katherine Hayles writes: “The play between the voices is an aural

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invitation to the audience to speculate on differences and similarities, across time and technology, even before the voices articulate words and sentences.’[27]

In *Berberian Sound Studio*, the image of Krapp hunched over his tape recorder is re-enacted by Gilderoy. These tapes, however, do not contain the memories of yesterday but the agonised, pained screams captured in the studio. The images of the antiquated tape recording equipment also cause the viewer to reflect upon cinematic and technological evolution, to bridge the gap between time and technology. The scream contained within displaces the Beckettian memory and its verbal, reasoned articulation (the voices contained on the tape of the younger Krapp are more articulate than his older self, who rarely speaks throughout the play other than to comically utter the word ‘Spooool’[28]), banishing it to without the tape as the camera picks up Gilderoy’s photographs pinned to the wall. Strickland uses similar imagery in *The Duke of Burgundy* prior to the scene in which Cynthia gives her lepidopterology lecture. Shots of Gilderoy’s hands at the mixing desk are replaced by shots of Cynthia looking into the tool of her trade, a microscope. Given the small number of films Strickland has made so far, they may be connected within an inter-textual matrix: both Hilda Petèr (*Katalin Varga*) and Chiara D’Anna (Evelyn in *The Duke of Burgundy*, Figure 6) appear as screaming, tortured voice artists, as if *Berberian Sound Studio* is the point at which his first and most recent film collapse into. Furthermore *The Duke of Burgundy* recalls imagery from *Berberian Sound Studio*, Gilderoy’s charts and sound maps are replaced by Cynthia’s butterfly charts. She too is at the centre of a struggle for power and control, but if Gilderoy by the end of the film is subsumed into it as torturer and wielder of power, then by the end of *The Duke of Burgundy*, conversely we are left to ask whether or not Cynthia is the one in a position of dominance in her relationship with the seemingly child-like and submissive Evelyn.

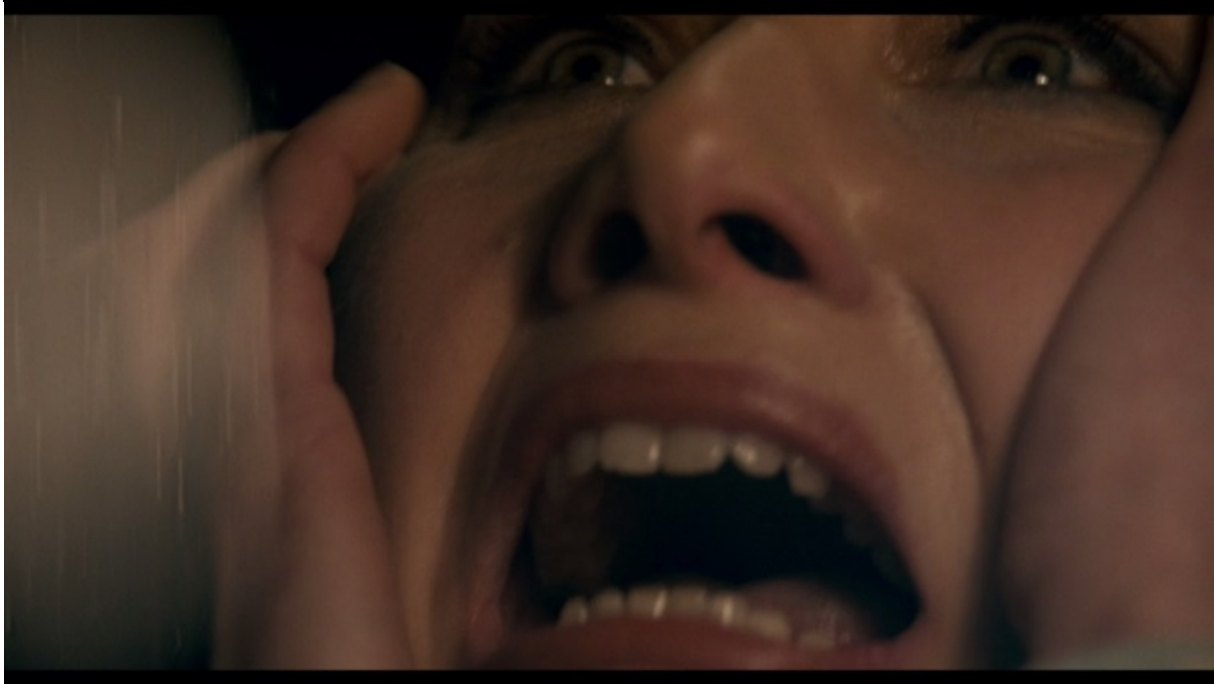


Figure 6: Chiara D'Anna, *Berberian Sound Studio*

Throughout 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century visual culture, tape has been represented as a haunted medium, prone to erosion, deterioration and evanescence, the recorded image has been equated with the ghostly and haunted (consider Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998)). Earlier we cited the influential example of Nigel Kneale's *The Stone Tape*. In *Berberian Sound Studio*, tape has a similar supernatural presence. In one scene Gilderoy is seen to have set up an elaborate system of connected tape recorders spooling tape around the sound booth in order to achieve the desired recording affect. As the tape spools, the image of Gilderoy appears to flicker like a deteriorating recording, a fading image (see Figure 7 ).

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Figure 7: Gilderoy appears as a recorded image

Jean Martin suggests the film's titular studio is itself a "sterile" place, an *unnatural* environment or space for the scream to manifest itself. One of the most striking images is that of Gilderoy behind his mixing desk controlling and manipulating the screams of the voice actresses segregated and imprisoned in the sound booth. The musical director and the producer are perpetually unsatisfied by their efforts and cruelly force them to repeat the act ad nauseum. Here Strickland's thematic interest in power, control and subservience, later explored in *The Duke of Burgundy*, is apparent. Beckett is concerned with the cruelty enacted on the performer by agents of creation and control, with the cruel processes of theatre and bodily occupation (which is significant within the post war context of his own writing and personal experience).<sup>[29]</sup> In *The Duke of Burgundy*, Evelyn leaves explicit directions for how and when she is to be confined in the chest, the clothes Evelyn is to wear as they roleplay; Harold Pinter's TV play *The Lover* (ITV, 1962) I would argue is a point of reference for the sexual roleplay in the film. These explicit instructions remind us of the explicit and detailed stage directions and exertion of control that Beckett himself was famous for and which may be observed in the published notebooks and archived material at Reading University.

Furthermore cinema history is littered with male directors 'torturing' their female leads with endless, punishing takes: Alfred Hitchcock and Tippi Hedren during the filming of *The Birds* (1963) or the alleged treatment of Shelly Duvall by Stanley Kubrick during the filming of *The Shining* (1980).<sup>[30]</sup> In *The Voice on Film*, composer Michel Chion

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suggests that the “screaming point, in a male-directed film, immediately poses the question of mastery, of the mastery of this scream”[31], that male directed cinema is a “Cinema of Sadists”[32] .

In *Berberian Sound Studio* the previously horrified and unwilling Gilderoy, in the final act is co-opted into acts of torture within the studio (which displace the violent images of torture in *The Equestrian Vortex*) when as Jean Martin describes:

To generate a genuine scream in the sterile environment of a recording studio is nearly impossible, so Corragio, the director and (reluctantly) Gilderoy have to take extreme measures to make the lead actress genuinely scream, by bullying or by technical means: at some point Gilderoy feeds a distorted unpleasant sound into her earphones and increases the volume to pain levels.[33]

Chion identifies, within the cinematic space, what he calls ‘The Screaming point’:

The scream generally gushes forth from the mouth of a woman [The scream he argues is therefore gendered]...above all it must fall at an appointed spot, explode at a precise moment at the crossroads of converging plotlines, at the end of an often convoluted trajectory but calculated to give maximum impact.[34]

In *Berberian Sound Studio*, Strickland problematises this idea by folding several layers of meta narrative into one another, making the ‘screaming point’ more difficult to identify and locate. There are two narratives at work in the film which gradually fold into one another: the post production of *The Equestrian Vortex* and *The Equestrian Vortex* itself, which we, as viewers of the first narrative follow by proxy via the dialogue of the voice artists and more viscerally through the foley work. As Martin describes:

We hear the soundtrack and see the recording of new sounds. Stalks of celery are twisted for the sound of cracking bones, melons are smashed to represent the cracking of a human skull, and cabbage is stabbed. These acts of aggression are symbolic for the torture scenes on screen: the viewer sees fruit and vegetables, created by nature brutally destroyed. Equally, the natural human voice, spoken by female actresses, is tortured. The actresses are forced to repeat endlessly the screaming, which never satisfies the sadistic technical director.[35]

Chion, when writing about the Scream primarily is discussing Brian De Palma’s *Blow Out* (1981) but what he writes is nevertheless applicable to an analysis of *Berberian Sound Studio*

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[The Scream] becomes a sort of ineffable black hole toward which there converges an entire fantastic, preposterous, extravagant mechanism – the celebration, the political crime, the sexual murder and the whole film – all this made in order to be consumed and disrupted in the unthinkable and instantaneity of the scream. The Screaming point is a point of the unthinkable inside the thought, of the indeterminate inside the spoken, of unrepresentability inside the representable. It occupies a point in time, but has no duration within it. It suspends the time of its possible duration, it's a rip in the fabric of time. The Scream embodies a fantasy of the auditory absolute, it is seen to saturate the soundtrack and deafen the listener. It might even be unheard by the screamer.[\[36\]](#)

In one sequence, the 'screaming point' is deliberately pushed further out of reach as the the image diminishes with each successive shot (see Figures 8,9,10). We are shown the image of a female sound artist, encased in a glass box reminiscent of the paintings of Francis Bacon, whose scream is repurposed as a ghostly electronic sound. With each successive shot, the image is pushed further back into the depth of the frame, hanging, Beckett-like, in a black void.



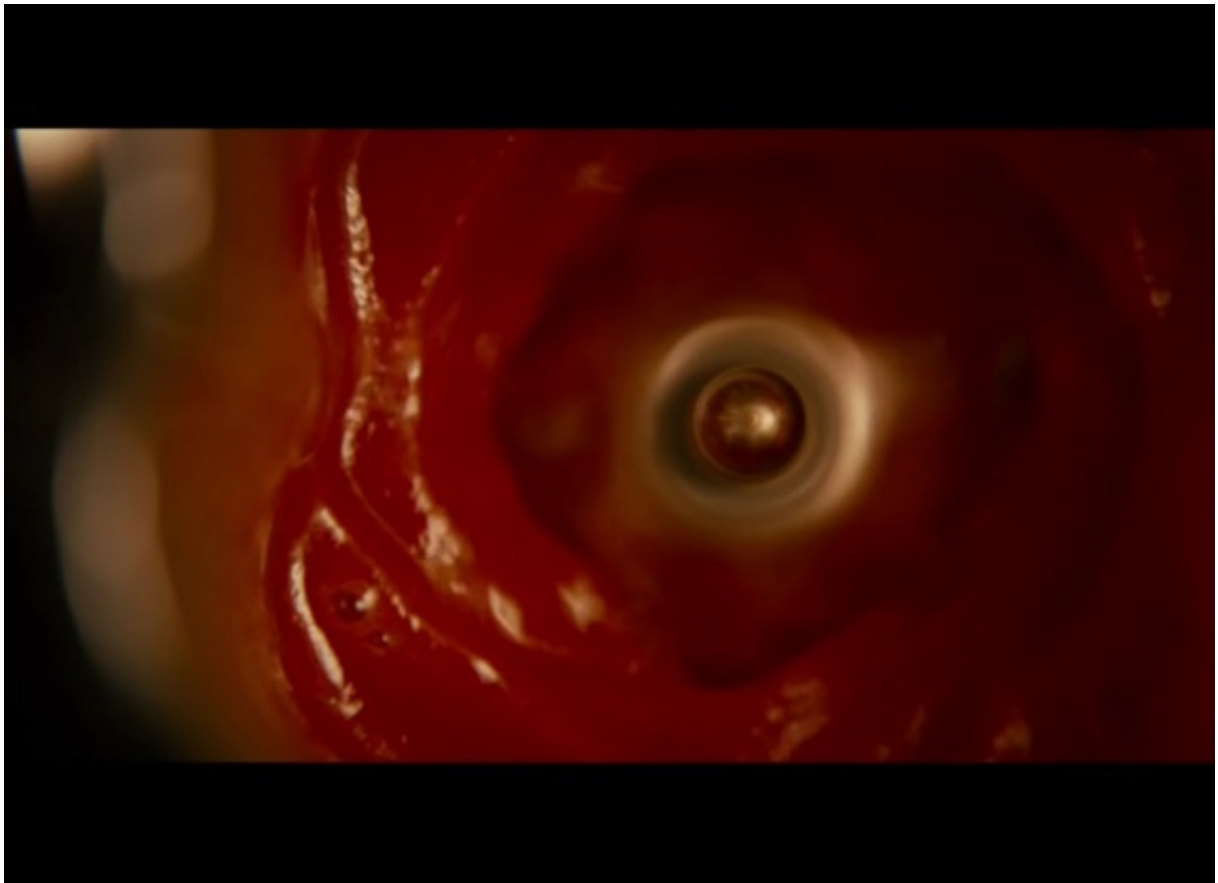
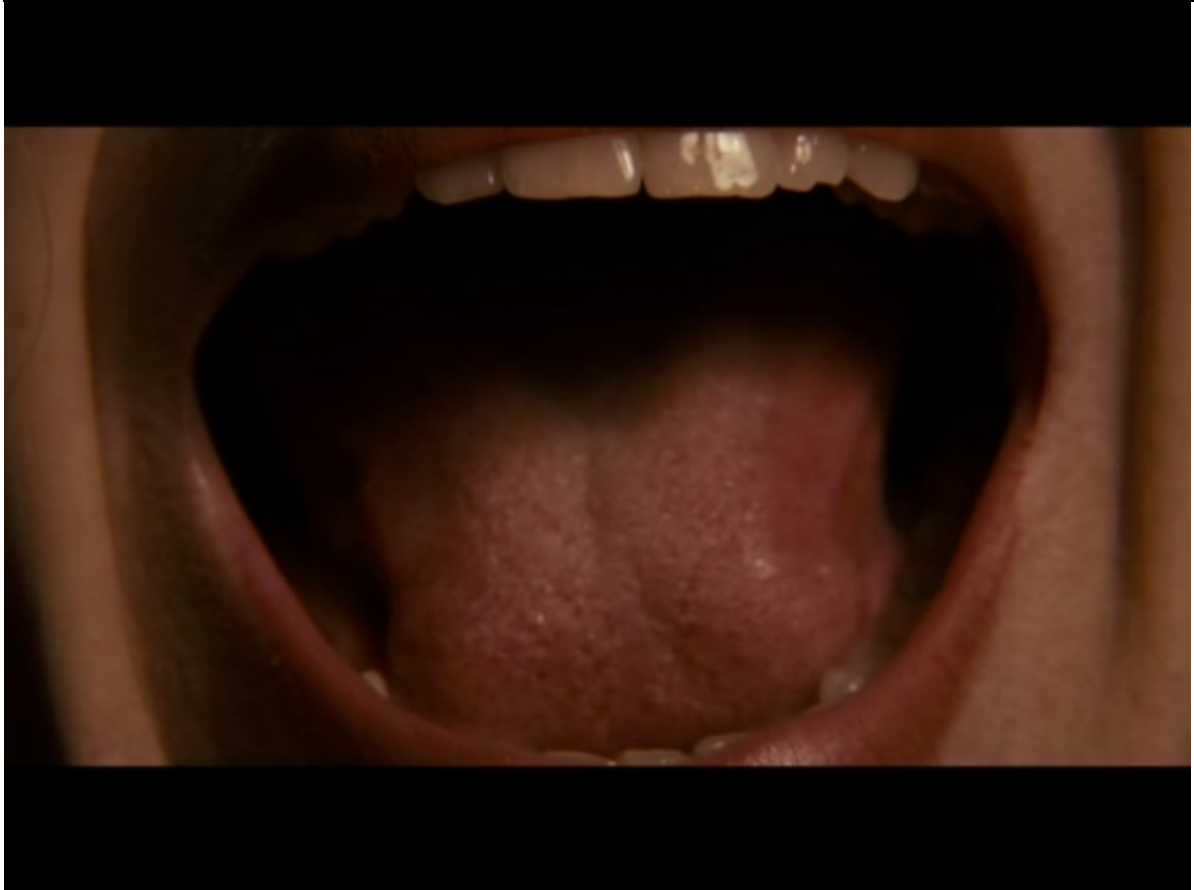


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Figures 8,9,10: the Diminshing Scream

The scream is more than just an instinctive physical response, it is metaphysical, it is not just a response to a cruel act but is in itself an act of cruelty in the way that it impinges on and invades the space of the listener. The scream in *Berberian Sound Studio* is the 'black hole' into which the film's identity and Gilderoy's identity are consumed. The open-mouthed scream (which recalls the imagery of Beckett's *Not I*) is juxtaposed with the all-consuming liquidizer on the Foley desk (Figures 11 and 12). It vocalises the tension between the melting narratives of the film and *The Equestrian Vortex*, it is an agonised response to the film's enforced separation of image whilst questioning the film's status as a horror film.



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## Figures 11 and 12: Scream and Liquidizer

In *Berberian Sound Studio*, the studio itself becomes an enclosed and hermetic space of displacement, convergence and evanescence; an occult space in which the scream displaces language but where it is also rent apart from the screamer and where identity and subjectivity are thrown into crisis and collapse: an architecture of cruelty.

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Over the course of this article, I have attempted to locate Peter Strickland's work within a complex and extensive matrix of cultural texts that hold the scream at their centre. I would like to argue that while we might suggest that Strickland and his contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century horror directors may look back to past traditions and instances within the genre, Strickland's work operates within a wider cultural matrix than most.

While there has been limited writing as yet around Strickland's work, I have hoped to break new ground by recognising the presence of both Samuel Beckett (and to a lesser extent Antonin Artaud) as a formative presence in his films. Strickland's 21<sup>st</sup> century cinematic screams are the vacuum (or *Berberian Sound Studio's* liquidizer) into which the cultural history of the scream in both popular horror and experimental culture is pulled into, broken down and interrogated from a post-modern 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective.

### Notes

[1] Matthew Melia, "The Scream in Visual culture: The Scream as Fearful Response" in *Transforming Fear, Horror and Terror: Multidisciplinary Reflections*, ed. Shona Hill and Shilinka Smith, Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary.Net Press, 2014

[2] Ibid.

[3] The reduction of language to speech like sounds, almost like speaking in tongues.

[4] Artaud's project to disrupt western narrative theatre by creating a purely gestural theatre which would displace narrative and attack the senses and psychology of the audience. Artaud believed spoken language and narrative was insufficient to contain and express the personal and social trauma. The first (and only) manifesto of the Theatre of Cruelty was his staging and adaptation of *Les Cenci* in Paris, 1935. Deemed a failure, he would evolve his project for a Theatre of Cruelty across a number of mediums and throughout his nine year asylum incarceration.

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His final audio recording *To Have Done With the Judgment of God*, recorded not long before his death was to be the final iteration of this project – radio he felt was the ideal medium for this project given its reach into the home.

[5] Benjamin Wright “Favourite Moments of Film Sound: The Wilhelm Scream” *Offscreen*: Vol. 11, Nos. 8-9, Aug/Sept 2007, p.1

[6] Ibid. p.3

[7] Ibid, p.1.

[8] Jonathan Romney, “*Katalin Varga*, Peter Strickland, 82 mins (5)” *Independent*, Saturday October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/katalin-varga-peter-strickland-82-mins-15-1800771.html> (Last accessed: 01/05/2017)

[9] Jean Martin, “Peter Strickland’s Film Soundtracks: A World of Dreams, Nostalgia and Fear” *Glissando* (2015), Vol 26 (Soundscape), p. 160-167 (here p.5) [http://eprints.brighton.ac.uk/13872/1/Martin%20-%20Strickland\\_soundtracks-Glissando2015.pdf](http://eprints.brighton.ac.uk/13872/1/Martin%20-%20Strickland_soundtracks-Glissando2015.pdf) (Last accessed: 01/05/2017)

[10] Jean Martin, “Landscape, Soundscape and Taskscape in the films *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Katalin Varga* (2009)” *The New Soundtrack*, Volume 3 Issue 2, p.131, <http://www.soundbasis.eu/pdfs/Martin-Soundscape2013.pdf> (Last accessed: 01/05/2017)

[11] I am excluding from this discussion the 2014 Bjork concert film *Biophilia Live*

[12] Another reference to Beckett which I will discuss in more detail later

[13] Fassbinder’s film, Strickland has admitted (in the BFI article “Peter Strickland: Six Films that Influenced the Duke of Burgundy” (<http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/peter-strickland-six-films-fed-duke-burgundy>, last viewed: 14/05/2017) was a direct influence on the plot. Fassbinder positions these mannequins, subjects of control, across the mise-en-scene of the film, and Strickland does similar in homage. We might also note here that Beckett’s 1982 play *Catastrophe*, also deals with power and control in a similar way – the body of an actor (“protagonist” becomes an inert mannequin for the whims of “Director” who exerts direct control over every physical movement of the body.

[14] Jean Martin, “Peter Strickland’s Film Soundtracks: A World of Dreams, Nostalgia and Fear” *Glissando* (2015), Vol 26 (Soundscape), p.

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160-167, [http://eprints.brighton.ac.uk/13872/1/Martin%20-%20Strickland\\_soundtracks-Glissando2015.pdf](http://eprints.brighton.ac.uk/13872/1/Martin%20-%20Strickland_soundtracks-Glissando2015.pdf) (Last accessed: 01/05/2017)

[15] *Katalin Varga* echoes the rape-revenge film popular as part of the 1970s exploitation milieu; *Berberian Sound Studio*, one might argue could be considered a 'neo-Giallo' film and *The Duke of Burgundy* is informed not only by Fassbinder but also by the erotic European exploitation cinema of the late '60s through into the 1970s.

[16] In Jean-François Millet's (1814-1875) painting *The Gleaners* (1857), for instance, the landscape is depicted as a desiccated place with slim pickings for the poor as they are left to pick up what's left of the harvest.

[17] In the style of the Italian Baroque artist Michaelangelo Merisi de Caravaggio (1571-1610). A defining feature of his work is the use of internal light sources and contrasting shades of shadow and light: chiaroscuro

[18] Rodrigo Perez, "The Movies that Changed My Life, *The Love Witch* director Anna Biller", *The Playlist*, <http://theplaylist.net/love-witch-director-anna-biller-movies-changed-life-20161110/> (Last accessed: 01/05/2017)

[19] Jason Anderson, "No Sound Is Innocent: Peter Strickland's *Berberian Sound Studio*", *Cinemascope*, <http://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-magazine/no-sound-is-innocent-peter-stricklands-berberian-sound-studio/> (Last Accessed: 01/05/2017)

[20] Ibid.

[21] Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and It's Double*, London: Calder Press, 2001, p.77.

[22] Stephen Barber, *Artaud: The Screaming Body*, London: Creation Books, pp. 97-98, 1999.

[23] Carson Lund, "Notebook's 5th Writers Poll: Fantasy Double Features of 2012" <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/notebooks-5th-writers-poll-fantasy-double-features-of-2012> (Last accessed: 01/05/2017)

[24] Douglas Khan, *Noise, Water, Meat, A History of Sound in The Arts*, London: MIT press, 2001, p.346

[25] See the paintings *Experiment with a Bird in an Air Pump* (1768), *The Alchemist* (1771) and *The Orrery* (1766)



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[26] Ulrika Maude, *Beckett, Technology and The Body*, Cambridge: CUP, 2009, p.63

[27] Ibid..

[28] Samuel Beckett, " Krapp's Last Tape" in *Samuel Beckett: the Complete Dramatic Works*, London: Faber & Faber, 1990, p.216

[29] In the 1973 Royal Court production of *Not I*, with actress Billie Whitelaw in the role of "Mouth", Beckett demanded that the actress be strapped to a chair unable to move, with gauze keeping her head in place (this would lead in part to Whitelaw having a breakdown). Also see endnote 13.

[30] Kubrick famously put actor Murray Melvin through 57 takes of one scene during the filming of *Barry Lyndon*.

[31] Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (trans. Claudia Gorbman), NY: Columbia University Press, 1999, p.78.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Jean Martin, "Peter Strickland's Film Soundtracks: A World of Dreams, Nostalgia and Fear" *Glissando* (2015), Vol 26 (Soundscape), p. 160-167 (here p.5) [http://eprints.brighton.ac.uk/13872/1/Martin%20-%20Strickland\\_soundtracks-Glissando2015.pdf](http://eprints.brighton.ac.uk/13872/1/Martin%20-%20Strickland_soundtracks-Glissando2015.pdf) (Last accessed: 01/05/2017)

[34] Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (trans. Claudia Gorbman), NY: Columbia University Press, 1999, p.77.

[35] Jean Martin, "Peter Strickland's Film Soundtracks: A World of Dreams, Nostalgia and Fear" *Glissando* (2015), Vol 26 (Soundscape), p. 160-167, [http://eprints.brighton.ac.uk/13872/1/Martin%20-%20Strickland\\_soundtracks-Glissando2015.pdf](http://eprints.brighton.ac.uk/13872/1/Martin%20-%20Strickland_soundtracks-Glissando2015.pdf) (Last accessed: 01/05/2017)

[36] Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (trans. Claudia Gorbman), NY: Columbia University Press, 1999, p.76

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Distant Drums (Raoul Walsh, USA, 1951)

The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant (R.W.Fassbinder, Germany, 1972)

A Virgin Among The Living Dead (Jesus Franco, Spain, 1973)

The Shout (Jerzy Skomlimowski, UK, 1978)

The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, UK/USA, 1981)

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The Falling (Carol Morley, UK, 2014)

The Neon Demon (Nicholas Winding Refn, France/USA/Denmark, 2016)

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