

“THEY’RE BAD PEOPLE – THEY SHOULD SUFFER”:

POST-BRITISH CRIME FILMS AND THE ETHICS OF RETRIBUTIVE VIOLENCE

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In recent years, British popular genre cinema has displayed a tendency to allegorise the ethical questions resulting from the nation’s social and political challenges of the 21st century.¹ Whether it is the Blair government’s decision to join the US in the Iraq war in 2003 and the ensuing disillusionment with democracy and the futility of public protest, the austerity measures and subsequently increasing social divisions in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008, the ongoing process of Scottish and Welsh devolution that challenges the very notion of a United Kingdom, Britain finds itself in a stage that Michael Gardiner has described as “post-British.”² On the level of the nation-state, and especially with regard to Scottish and Welsh devolution, the post-British process can be identified as the “democratic restructuring of each nation within union *and* each nation still affected by Anglophone imperialism”³, while the social structure of Britain is still marked by the internal fault lines of class divisions of class.

The notion of “post-Britain” has been addressed in British film studies. William Brown has suggested that Britain’s cinematic output in the 21st century offers a “paradoxically post-British” perspective which is reflected in subject matter, ideological points of view and modes of production.⁴ As Brown argues, such post-British perspectives can particularly be found in popular genre films such as *28 Days Later* (2002) and *V for Vendetta* (2006).⁵ In the following, I will argue that this post-British sensibility in contemporary national genre cinema is aligned with urgent ethical questions regarding the nation state on both the British level as well as within a larger European context. By focussing on two recent examples of British crime films – Nick Love’s *Outlaw* (2007) and Ben Wheatley’s *Kill List* (2011) – I want to show how British genre cinema deals with the ethical questions that Thomas Elsaesser has addressed in his recent book *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy* (2019). Contemporary Britain is a textbook example of what Thomas Elsaesser identifies as Europe’s current political and ethical challenges which consist in three deficits: the “democracy deficit”, the “multicultural diversity deficit” and the “social justice deficit.”⁶ As Elsaesser argues, these deficits amount to “intractable ethical dilemmas”⁷ in that they constitute ideological discrepancies between what Europe as a political project is expected and supposed to be and what large sections of the public consider to be faulty or amiss. These challenges are taken up in the “thought experiments” of contemporary European cinema.⁸ While Elsaesser primarily considers films that could be labelled “art cinema”, I will show how these two commercial British films can similarly be considered as thought experiments. As I will demonstrate, their experimental nature relates both to the way they address post-British political issues and the way they deal with the conventions of the crime film.

Outlaw and *Kill List* allegorise the political and ethical dilemmas of 21st-century Britain in their depiction of retributive violence committed by vigilantes in the wake of Britain's involvement in the Iraq war. The two films focus on "post-heroic"⁹ characters who have lost faith in Britain's institutions such as democratic politics or the justice system. They are thus representative of a number of 21st-century British genre films that deal with vigilantism as a means of individuals to overcome the perceived deficits of the political and juridical institutions, among them films such as Dan Reed's *Straightheads* (aka *Closure*, 2007) and Daniel Barber's *Harry Brown* (2009). The group of vigilantes in *Outlaw* and the contract killers turned vigilantes in *Kill List* can be considered to grapple with the "unchallenged totality of consensus" which Britain tried to maintain since World War II.¹⁰ *Outlaw* paints the picture of a fundamentally corrupt justice system which lets the streets roam with acquitted offenders, while *Kill List*'s narrative ultimately reveals central institutions of power to be run by a Pagan cult, and the two contract killers' final job turns out to be a ritual of sacrifice. *Kill List* thus inscribes itself in the tradition of British popular genre cinema, particularly the folk horror cycle that includes films such as Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973), another seminal anti-authoritarian film about human sacrifice.

In both films, characters come to the conclusion that the only way to reach any kind of ethical standards within a disintegrating national community is to resort to vigilantism and retributive violence. This kind of retributive violence not only points to a crisis of politics, ethics as well as politics *as* ethics. As I will argue in the following, the two films engage the audience in an ethical thought experiment precisely in their depictions of retributive violence – a violence which, as I claim, is enacted by the protagonists as compensation for Britain's failure to maintain ethical principles and integrity in recent international conflict. That is, the war on terror Britain engaged in alongside the US is allegorically brought home. Love and Wheatley's films can thus be interpreted in the context of the ethical turn described by Alain Badiou¹¹ and Jacques Rancière¹² and which Elsaesser has identified as a key aspect in contemporary European cinema.¹³ As I will show, Love and Wheatley engage with ethical questions in a twofold manner. First, on the diegetic level, their characters navigate the post-British ethico-political vacuum and thus deal with the personal and collective ethical dilemmas that Elsaesser addresses in his book. Secondly, these dilemmas are transferred on the relationship between the film and their audience by addressing the "ethics of spectatorship"¹⁴ in scenes of extreme violence. It is in these scenes that the two films unfold their full (if not unproblematic) potentials as 'films as ethics', for here their thought experiments transcend the confines of popular genre conventions.

FILM AS ETHICAL THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

For Elsaesser contemporary European cinema is in a unique position because it is no longer expected to express images of the nation in the face of Hollywood's global commercial dominance now that it is increasingly being subsumed into the category of 'world cinema' where it competes with "other na-

tional or transnational cinemas.”¹⁵ Since it now has lost its economic and innovative aesthetic relevance, it can concentrate on new tasks – namely “to be ‘European’ in a post-national sense, that is, to contribute to the continent’s political experiment, which has rarely seemed more precarious.”¹⁶ Cinema’s capacity for philosophical thought experiments is the outcome of this liberation from artistic and ideological responsibilities. In that context, European politics and European cinema become “the recto and the verso of each other.”¹⁷ Cinema is thus able to engage with the political dilemmas of contemporary Europe that manifest itself in both philosophy and film in three major tropes: “‘the empty centre of sovereignty’ (lack of accountability and crisis of authority), ‘stranger/neighbour/other’ (multicultural diversity/xenophobia), and ‘equality is only possible in death’ (equality before the law and the limits of social justice).”¹⁸

These tropes are taken up in European cinema in the context of “‘as if’ scenarios, often in order to explore and expose intractable ethical dilemmas” by asking “[w]hat if we imagine a scenario that enacts one or several of these core values of democracy, by putting them to the test in contemporary Europe?”¹⁹ Elsaesser goes on to argue that these cinematic ‘what if’ scenarios explore the ethical questions that arise from the aforementioned deficits and dilemmas. They thus tie in with current philosophical questions about “the political.”²⁰ Elsaesser considers the questions by engaging with recent debates over ethics based on competing schools of contemporary continental philosophy, namely the trajectory based on Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida²¹ and the one pursued by Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière,²² both of which are in turn critical of the Levinasian and Derridean ideas of ethics and have taken to task the “ethical turn” due to its tendency towards becoming a problematically Eurocentric, neoliberal consensus (and thus a hegemonic formation) which does not properly account for specific situations outside the matrix of European cultural hegemony.

Elsaesser proposes a distinction between ethics mark 1 and ethics mark 2. Ethics mark 1 thus “would encompass both the authority and respect a person commands, on the basis of his or her actions, as well as the principles that govern the good life, the ‘examined life’ worth living.”²³ The second definition of ethics would pertain to the notion prevalent in the ‘ethical turn’, namely the notion of ethics as a “supplement” that “tries to fill the perceived absence of normativity in multiculturalism.”²⁴ This is the type of ethics that Badiou²⁵ and Rancière²⁶ have challenged in their writings, especially when it comes to military and humanitarian intervention in international conflicts in the 1990s and the post-9/11 era. While Badiou criticises the normative Western attitude towards ethics as a normative, all-encompassing principle that defines “evil” by departing from a historical catastrophe (in which case ethics is the means to avoid the repetition of such catastrophes irrespective of historical, cultural and political specificities), Rancière, especially in his post-2001 writings, challenges the universal ethics of the war on terror which pits “infinite justice” against “infinite Evil” based on the implementation of a dubious ethical consensus which is

the constitution of an absolute, extra-judicial right for the victim of infinite Evil. Whoever inherits the victim's absolute right thereby becomes the defender of that absolute right. The unlimited nature of the wrong suffered by a victim justifies the unlimitedness of the right of its defender. This process was brought to completion by the American retribution for the absolute crime committed against American lives.²⁷

The role of Britain in the war on terror, which is one of the central aspects in Nick Love and Ben Wheatley's films can, as I will argue in my analysis, be considered with respect to this ethical turn which rests on "the emergence of a post-ideological politics of the moral emotions."²⁸

The role of cinema as thought experiment consists in critically interrogating the impasses produced by such an ethical consensus. It can do so by creating "post-heroic" narratives, as Elsaesser proposes in a re-formulation of Rancièrian dissensus: "A post-heroic narrative – in contrast to recovering such old or new universals that seek to find common ground between the different religions, or posit shared mutual responsibilities and interests – is more likely [...] to affirm incompatible interests, dissensus rather than consensus, and incommensurable values."²⁹ In that respect, the post-heroic shares similarities with Gardiner's notion of post-Britishness in that the post-heroic narrative replaces the "heroic narrative around [the] 'birth of a nation'"³⁰ and instead suggests that "antagonisms, dissensus and disagreement can still be mutually beneficial."³¹

OUTLAW

The democratic deficit and its accompanying trope of the empty centre of sovereignty as well as the deficit of social justice and equality are the ones that resonate most strongly in the two films I want to look at in this article. Both *Outlaw* and *Kill List* are pervaded by a strong sense of lost trust in and disillusionment with the notion of representative democracy and social justice. *Outlaw* establishes its male protagonists as broken individuals betrayed by the "powers that be." Danny Bryant, a soldier who fought in the Falklands, Afghanistan and Iraq, returns home after duty to find his wife cheating on him and his neighbourhood dominated by "chavs"³² who harass him. The discourse surrounding anti-social (white) and chavs in particular is crucial for understanding the political and social climate in Britain at the time and has found its way into a wide range of cultural production of the time, especially into contemporary genre cinema. The chav as a demonised figure of social and cultural malaise features prominently in crime films such as the aforementioned *Harry Brown*, but has particularly been used as an antagonist in horror films such as James Watkins' *Eden Lake* (2008) and Paul Andrew Williams' *Cherry Tree Lane* (2010).³³ Later, when he talks to his former mentor, he reflects on the futility of his service abroad to supposedly ensure the nation's safety from global conflict when the nation itself is riddled with corruption and violence from the inside: "I wanna do something; it's a

dirty fucking world. Otherwise, what was I doing out there?” Meanwhile, insecure office worker Gene Dekker struggles with the trauma of having been beaten up and humiliated in front of his fiancée by a random gang of thugs after an altercation at a traffic stop and with bullying at work. Similarly, prosecution barrister Cedric Munroe is intimidated by gang members who urge him to withdraw from his case against crime boss Terry Manning.

All of them are eventually brought together by circumstance after hotel security guard Simon convinces Bryant to put together and train a team of vigilantes. Simon is a key character for the film’s ethical thought experiment since he at first is an impassive observer. His office is plastered with newspaper articles that testify to a general “breakdown of law and order in this country”, an impression supported by the film’s use of TV footage covering the Iraq War abroad as well as the pervasive “yob culture” on Britain’s streets. Simon, himself a convicted ex-hooligan, experiences the world through this media coverage as well as through the panopticon of security cameras he has installed throughout the hotel. Not only does Simon provide a connecting point for all the other characters in the film’s narrative, he also becomes crucial in the film’s more meta-reflexive aspects. Simon is a watcher (or, rather, a pathological voyeur who masks his compulsion with an ethical purpose) who, like the audience, must position himself ethically in relation to the images he sees. His personal conclusion from what he witnesses is to take action by side-stepping the law and the country’s ethical consensus. This meta-reflexivity is emphasised on the formal level by the use of an almost constant nervous zooming effect which makes watching *Outlaw* an unnerving experience.

While many critics have heavily criticised the film for its speculative tone as well as for its seemingly odd and sometimes implausible narrative and stylistic choices³⁴, a point could be made in favour of unnerving stylistic devices such as the almost constant zooming effects in that they highlight the mediated approach to violence and, like the many surveillance cameras used in the United Kingdom, the film’s cinematography constantly probes and observes what is going on in the film’s world. Thus, Simon becomes a reflector in the film’s ethical experiment. Initially, he voices the desire for retribution and justice that many viewers might feel after the harrowing stabbing of Cedric’s pregnant wife, a turning point in the narrative. When the vigilante project gains traction, however, Simon reveals his sleazy side and once they exact retribution on the first delinquents, he is the one most eager to sadistically torture and execute the victims while the others show more qualms. Audience sympathies gradually shift towards the more remorseful characters, especially when Simon starts to express his jingoist, anti-Islamic and racist sentiments which are rebuked by the rest of the group. Significantly, when he undermines Bryant’s authority and jeopardises the group’s integrity, Bryant sets an example by executing him.

The execution of Simon is a crucial turning point for the use of violence among the vigilantes. While all of them are motivated by a profound sense of frustration (with the “powers that be”, Britain’s seemingly twisted ethical consensus), injustice and humiliation (all of them are personally affected by the corrupt state of things, and for all of them, their sense of masculinity seems to be at stake),

Simon is the one who seems to be the most unstable, and in the eyes of the others, he seems to enjoy violence a bit too much. In fact, he seems to be as abject as the “paedophiles, dealers, bullies, junkies, scum, cunts” that the vigilantes want to put to justice. Thus, setting an example by executing him becomes a way for Bryant to reassert his authority and also to disrupt the cycle of violence set in motion by him and his followers. Love’s version of Britain is one of a society on the brink of chaos in which a Girardian primitive pattern of violence and counterviolence in which the state’s monopoly on violence has been replaced by “reciprocal violence, the violence that really hurts, setting man against man and threatening the total destruction of the community.”³⁵ It is an apocalyptic image of post-Britishness in which the authority and legitimacy of the British state, its legal and representative systems, are put into question in the face of internal chaos and international shame in the form of the Iraq war. The film thus touches on the public disillusionment with the British government after the UK joined the war despite significant public protest and seems to map this disillusionment onto Britain’s internal conflicts and differences, among others in terms of social class. The disaffected thugs and chavs that roam the streets of London betray the persistent class divisions in British society. The questions implied by this scenario are: given the decision to ignore massive public protest and to join the war regardless, what does this say about the integrity of Britain’s sense of democracy? Why, consequently, should people still feel connected to parliamentary politics and social contracts? Why should the domestic legal system be any better if “infinite justice”³⁶ is flawed on the international level?

This tabloid newspaper vision of a “broken Britain” (to use a phrase used by *The Sun* since 2007 and subsequently taken up by Prime Minister David Cameron with regard to the same type of “yob culture” and inadequate policing which the film’s characters bemoan) is the backdrop for the film’s thought experiment about what would happen if a few people would put to the test what a majority of people seem to think: that official law is insufficiently implemented by corrupt institutions and can be warped to such a degree that it benefits the perpetrators more than the victims. As Bryant puts it in one of his pep talks: “I’ve got the confidence to fight back, but if you want to spend the rest of your life being bullied and raped by cunts like Blair... I am talking about legitimate targets, I’m talking about the people that hurt you.” However, by fighting back against “cunts like Blair”, and by rejecting official law and ethical consensus expressed in the allegedly “humanitarian” war on terror³⁷, the violent death of “legitimate targets” could also set in motion a series of reciprocal violence. This is the danger that Bryant and his group face. By executing the dissenter Simon, Bryant not only punishes the “wrong” (i.e. jingoist, racist, sadistic) kind of vigilante, he also stages a symbolic sacrifice which establishes a new code of ethics that replaces official law and restricts the chain of reciprocal violence endangering the new post-British community to come.

Love’s *Outlaw* is, of course, deliberately using B-movie tropes and has been considered by I.Q. Hunter as a prime example of contemporary British trash cinema.³⁸ Its premise has been heavily criticised in reviews at the time of release, with Peter Bradshaw calling it “ugly, naïve, and deeply unpleasant [...] crime-revenge-porn”³⁹ and Ryan Gilbey accusing it of being “exploitative” and “crypto-

racist.”⁴⁰ Yet, I would argue that even while the film certainly has its flaws, its b-movie sensibility and its “pornographic” nature is exactly what constitutes its ethical experiment. The probing (and thereby “pornographic”) camera I described earlier offers the film up to thinking about the ethics of spectatorship even when the film walks a fine line in trying to find a nuanced balance in depicting different forms of legitimate and illegitimate (or “good” and “bad”⁴¹) violence. This, of course, is rooted in the film’s indebtedness to genre conventions. Love tries to balance between the viewers’ desire for the spectacle of retributive violence while at the same time withholding and complicating this very desire as ethically problematic, reflected in the main characters’ conflicted attitudes towards this violence. This is most evident in the characters’ first attempts at acting out their desire for retribution and “proper” justice by inflicting pain on those who hurt them. Apart from the ex-soldier Bryant, none of them is trained in fighting, they do not come to violence as easily and effortlessly as prototypical movie vigilantes played by Clint Eastwood or Charles Bronson.⁴² Their first fights are choreographed in an awkward, hesitant and almost embarrassing way, which is contrasted with the film’s final moment of violence, which belongs to Gene, played by Nick Love regular Danny Dyer. With a triumphant smile, Gene shoots a crime lord in the face after he says a line he has heard repeatedly throughout the film: “you ain’t got the bollocks, son.” The final moment is thus one of an empowerment through violence, an ending at once in line with its b-movie credentials and at the same time a testimony to its ambivalent ethical experiment.

While an ending like this might play into the hands of those critics who have accused Nick Love and his film of celebrating masculine empowerment, proto-fascism and vigilante violence, it might as well be argued that the ending of the film leaves it up to the audience to figure out the answers to the open-ended ethical questions on offer. Two things can thus ultimately be said in conclusion to *Outlaw* as an ethical thought experiment. First, the film can be considered as an example of what could be called populist genre cinema. *Outlaw*, as I. Q. Hunter has argued, “sets out to be politically relevant, incendiary” and offers a “*Daily Mail*-ish vision of Britain as a lawless dystopia overrun with gangsters and hoodies”.⁴³ This is indicative of the democratic deficit at the heart of European cinema’s ethical thought experiments: the established institutions supposed to uphold European ideals of democracy and security cannot actually do so in Love’s vision of Britain, and “[s]ocial change is impossible except at the end of a gun”.⁴⁴ This populist sentiment is also apparent in the film’s mode of production. A making-of extra on the Blu-ray release shows how Nick Love and his frequent actor Danny Dyer called on their fanbase to be extras in the film’s crowd scenes via social media. The (exclusively male) fans are shown to be excited to take part in their favourite filmmaker and actor’s new project. It becomes clear that the film speaks to a certain audience and that they are taken seriously by the filmmakers in a way that suggests that *Outlaw* is a film for the people and by the people – a sentiment that inevitably escapes the mainstream critics that derided the film, and which gains additional significance in the light of the film’s political and ethical project. There is thus a performative aspect to *Outlaw* in that its polemic idea of what political and democratic participation should look like reach be-

yond the filmic text and implicate at least its die-hard fan audience, if not the critics (who, however, are in turn derided paratextually in Love and Dyer's audio commentary, also available on the home video release).⁴⁵

This immediately ties in with the second conclusion, which concerns the ethical implications of the relationship between audience and genre cinema. In contrast to what the aforementioned appalled reviews of the film imply, namely that it is a detestable, "ugly" vindication of vigilante retributive violence, I would argue that *Outlaw* does precisely what many genre films do: other than teaching the audience a clear and unambiguous lesson about the dubious ethics of retributive violence, it leaves it to the audience to answer the ethical questions raised by the film. Very much like Rob Zombie's *The Devil's Rejects* (2005), an homage to grindhouse cinema which engages the audience by daring it to empathise with a family of deranged sadistic killers, *Outlaw* is ultimately another example of a trash or B-movie cinema that is an ethical thought experiment precisely because of its very status as grindhouse-y trash cinema. An argument by Jeremy Morris about the moral implications of retributive violence in torture-horror films such as *The Devil's Rejects* holds equally true for Love's *Outlaw*: "Torture-horror requires an audience both capable of empathy with the victims and able to share something of the joy of the torturers, however unsavory. [...] the audience must experience both of these conflicting sentiments. Being conflicted in that way is not the mark of immorality; on the contrary, it is a moral vindication of the audience."⁴⁶

KILL LIST

Kill List is not primarily a vigilante crime film. Rather, it offers a mix of genre tropes, which on first viewing deliberately confuses audiences. First, it seems to be a hitman movie, with its two main characters Jay and Gal being hired by the dubious "Client" to assassinate a range of target designated as "the Priest", "the Librarian" and "the MP." The film soon veers off into horror territory after a turn of events in which Jay turns the assassination of "the Librarian" into an act of vigilantism after learning that he is responsible for the filming and distribution of snuff films. Wheatley's film takes the thought experiment on post-British vigilantism a few steps further than Nick Love by moving past the tabloid press vision of broken Britain and by transgressing the boundaries of the crime genre into a folk horror⁴⁷ version of post-British politics while it shares *Outlaw*'s concern with the spectre of the Iraq war. The film opens with semi-retired hitman Jay arguing with his wife Shel about their drying money reserves. Jay hasn't been working for the past eight months due to a supposed back injury and PTSD. Later, during a dinner party with Jay's partner Gal and his new girlfriend Fiona, the family's dire financial situation is taken up again. When Jay asks Fiona to elaborate on what she does for a living, she explains that she works as a human resources manager, a "hatchet person." When Fiona explains that her job and the "dirty work" to be done especially during the current post-2008 recession are "not personal", Jay mumbles that sacking people is "probably personal to them – and their families."

This conversation carries meaning for the rest of the film not only in terms of characterisation, but also in a number of other ways, which only become clear to the viewer upon second viewing. When, in the film's disturbing conclusion, it is revealed that Fiona had been a member of the nameless Pagan cult that eventually sacrifices Jay's family, her job in "human resources" assumes a new meaning, as does her explanation that "there's a lot of dirty work to be done." In the overall context of the film, this line is a macabre foreshadowing: Jay and his family, by being sacrificed for a cult whose purpose is left largely unexplained throughout the film, have indeed been "sacked" by Fiona, the "hatchet person." The conversation, however, also sketches the film's ethical coordinates. On the one hand, Jay and Gal's rightful indignation and condescension towards "hatchet persons" and the practice of "sacking" can be read as ironic considering their own profession as hitmen and soldiers: They, too, "sack" people for a living, and thus are literally "hatchet men." However, the joke will eventually be on them since Fiona and her fellow cult members also turn out to be actual killers. On the other hand, Jay's disdain for Fiona's job does not only spring from his own current experience of impending economic precarity (if he was an employee in a business, a human resources manager like Fiona would certainly consider him "under-performing"), but also betrays what could be considered his moral compass (despite his questionable line of work) that will later guide his actions and be put to the test when it comes to the film's central scene of violent retribution.

In this context, *Kill List* starts to make sense as an allegory of austerity Britain in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and ensuing questions of social justice. As Fiona comments, when Shel somewhat nonsensically remarks that "the 80s recession was a lot more glamorous" to counterbalance the awkwardness of the dinner situation, "this [i.e. the current recession] is much worse – a lot of dirty work to be done." This situates the recent recession in Britain within a national and historical narrative – a narrative that by now seems to have become so bleak and confused that even past times of economic recession become the subject of nostalgic yearning which is complicated in the film by the fact that, despite Jay and Shel's temporary financial troubles, the two couples seem not to be immediately affected by the financial crisis. In fact, an earlier conversation revolved around Jay and Shel's jacuzzi – hardly a symptom of being stricken by poverty. However, as Adam Nayman argues, "[t]here is a parable here of the house-poor lower-middle class inadvertently doing the dirty work for the ruling elite."⁴⁸

The warped sense of history of Shel's comment on the "glamorous" 80s recession is also echoed in Jay's comparison of the austerity measures to the exclusionary and genocidal politics of the Nazis – an attempt to gain the moral high ground in the conversation: "I wish I could have had a go at them – difficult to know where a man stands these days", he adds, alluding to his past tour in Iraq. Just like his wife, he yearns for a time when it was supposedly easier to ethically navigate the world. With his wish to "have a go" at the Nazis, he evokes the Churchillian "unchallenged totality of consensus during and after World War II"⁴⁹ when Britain seemed on the right side of history rather than part of the muddled affair of the war on terror.

This makes *Kill List* a scenario that is paradigmatic of the ethical turn outlined by Badiou and Rancière. It is indicative of the “reversal of the flow of time” which Rancière identifies as one of the features of this turn: “the time turned towards an end to be accomplished – progress, emancipation or the Other – is replaced by that turned towards the catastrophe behind us.”⁵⁰ This “catastrophe behind us” is the historical “radical Evil” of the Nazis and the extermination of the European Jews, which, according to Badiou, has become the “incommensurable measure of Evil” which serves as the “only way to access Evil in general.”⁵¹ This measuring of Evil (rather than approaching ethics from a definition of what is “Good”) based on a historical singularity is for Badiou the fundamental problem of the ethical turn he describes because it makes it impossible to define ethics in terms of a specific situatedness in what he calls a “truth-process.”⁵²

If, according to Elsaesser, contemporary European cinema faces the challenge to be “‘European’ in a post-national sense, that is, to contribute to the continent's political experiment, which has rarely seemed more precarious”⁵³, then *Kill List* seems to take up this challenge from a particularly British (or post-British) angle. Its ‘thought experiment’ is located in the ‘what if’ of the disillusionment with British democracy and politics in the time after the financial crisis and the failed ethical project of the military intervention in Iraq. This is precisely the culmination of what Rancière attributes to the time of the ethical turn – “our consensual and humanitarian time” whose formula “[o]nly evil repays evil” led to the invasion of Iraq, based on the misrepresentation of false facts by the Bush and Blair governments.⁵⁴ This melange of unease and disillusionment – with parliamentary politics, the rights and wrongs of humanitarian interventions, the validity of the economic system – is the starting point for *Kill List*’s cinematic thought experiment, whose “research questions” might be paraphrased as, “what happens to a man who no longer knows where to stand these days?”, “what will happen to his ethical compass?” and “can the social contract be rewritten?” With respect to the last question, it is worth noting that the dubious character for whom Jay and Gal work themselves through the titular “kill list”, and who is only known as “the Client”, formulates the purpose of their job as “reconstruction.” This “reconstruction” consists in “secular and religious figureheads freshly slain.”⁵⁵ Yet, it also “alludes specifically to Britain’s post-World War II history [...], but seems here to be about the reshuffling of the social and economic deck since the 1970s.”⁵⁶ The term “reconstruction” therefore seems to echo the earlier dinner conversation about the ethical integrity of Britain’s role in World War II and at the same time seems to be more semantically ambiguous, leaving room for allegorical interpretations.

It is to this end of “reconstruction” that the sacrifices in the film are being performed. First, the victims on the Client’s “kill list” can be considered sacrifices, especially since they seem to expect their violent deaths at the hands of Jay: the Priest, the Librarian and the MP all knowingly look at Jay, with the first two even thanking him for killing them. What the exact function of these sacrifices for the cult is remains vague – it can only be assumed that these victims are key figures representative of Britain’s social, spiritual and political order, which is being subjected to “reconstruction.” In this sequence of sacrificial murders, the killing of the Librarian constitutes a turning point in the film’s narra-

tive and characterisation. Having observed the hideout of their next victim, Jay and Gal inspect the Librarian's secret archives, which apparently comprise a stash of what must be assumed to be snuff tapes. What these tapes show is not visually revealed to the audience, but the tortured screams on the tapes and Gal and Jay's reactions to them – shock, disgust, anger and tears – indicate that they must involve minors. Supposedly, they are some kind of snuff film tapes, and they push Jay – who wasn't the emotionally most stable to begin with – over the edge. Subsequently, Jay makes it his mission to not simply shoot the Librarian like their first victim, but to punish him for his crimes, very much like the “nonces” that the “outlaws” in Love's film set out to execute. The torture and murder of the Librarian turn into a case of vigilantism: Jay smashes the Librarian's skull with several hammer blows which are captured in what appears to the audience as a single, unedited take with shockingly convincing in-camera practical effects.

The scene is remarkable in formal terms since, as Nayman notes, “[i]n a film mostly defined by its editing, Wheatley lets the assault play out in a single, static shot that's so convincingly choreographed that anybody not viscerally overwhelmed by the sight of splattering brain matter is probably wondering how on Earth the filmmakers pulled it off.”⁵⁷ The technicality of the shot showing Jay split the Librarian's skull is, I would argue, instrumental in the ethical thought experiment of the film. With Sonia Lupher, I contend that the scene is central for the genre twists that Wheatley installs throughout the film. At first, *Kill List* appears to be a “family drama-turned-crime film” which then gradually evolves into a horror film, and “moments of shock placed strategically throughout the film” announce this change in tone and genre from an atmospheric slow burn into visceral horror.⁵⁸ What is more, not only are film genres upended as points of orientation – with the hammer scene, “Wheatley emphasizes his desire to communicate to his audience that he, the director, is as unreliable as his protagonist.”⁵⁹ The unreliability of Jay as a character, of *Kill List* as a genre film, and Wheatley as the directorial authority over the proceedings in front of the camera feed into the ethical experiment of the film, since the audience here is challenged in terms of their reactions.

This leads to the issue of the ethics of spectatorship when watching scenes of extreme violence. William Brown, in relation to a similar aesthetics of violence and conflicted spectatorship in Thomas Clay's *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* (2005), has argued that it is especially the form of the unedited long take in “extreme cinema” that encourages an “ethical mode of spectatorship”: “This ethical mode of engagement is not brought about by films featuring onscreen violence or sexual violence per se. Instead it is most consciously brought about in films that depict violence in what I term a ‘cruel fashion’ – films in which violence is explicit, often framed in long shot, and depicted at length.”⁶⁰ While *Kill List* does not necessarily constitute a prime example of what Brown, following Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall⁶¹, labels European extreme cinema, its hammer scene, I would argue, is indebted to the visceral aesthetics and ethics of the “new extremity” of European filmmakers such as Ulrich Seidl, Claire Denis, Gaspar Noé, Virginie Despentes and others. What is central about the ethical implications of such scenes is, according to Brown, their repulsive quality. They do not lend them-

selves to pleasurable, exciting viewing and thus suggest an “ethics of revulsion.”⁶² This particular ethical mode can be connected to what Elsaesser has termed “ethics mark 1”, since it is concerned with the question of self-examination on the side of the audience which might be paraphrased as: what is the “good” or morally appropriate way of engaging with this particular scene or film? This question also concerns more general issues of audience sympathy and engagement. Apart from the films of the “new extremity”, which are generally considered to couple art film sensibilities with conventions of genre film (and are thus often considered to be more worthy of complex aesthetic discussion than pure genre films), such questions have been raised by torture-horror films such as James Wan’s *Saw* (2004), Eli Roth’s *Hostel* (2005) and Rob Zombie’s *The Devil’s Rejects* (2005). As Jeremy Morris has argued, these films are remarkable for how they “[entangle] moral questions about torture with moral questions about its own audience. [...]. The implication of the audience through the torturer’s purposes and experiences is both essential to the genre and a primary source of its appeal.”⁶³ Linking Morris’ argument with Elsaesser’s, one could argue that torture horror as a subgenre is always a kind of ethical challenge, which limits its thought experiment not only to diegetic and formal elements, but always implicates the audience in its ethical questions. *Kill List*’s hammer scene exemplifies this aspect and thus extends its genre-bending mind game by not only viscerally and emotionally affecting the audience, but by addressing it as a player in this game.

Audience sympathy is stretched even before this scene since, after all, viewers are supposed to empathise with two men who make a living as professional killers. Yet, they do have family lives and relationships like any other average person and are thus relatable in any other way, very much like the gangsters in the films of Martin Scorsese and others. The first scenes have warmed us to these characters, their everyday problems and concerns. Yet, there is a mystery and dread looming over everything in the forms of open plot questions and a haunting soundtrack, which thwarts some of the more innocent scenes. Viewers are further challenged by sudden changes in genre registers and tone, which complicate the decoding of what we see. With film violence in particular, the way an act of violence in a film is decoded by the audience rests to a fundamental degree on genre semiotics. Thus, as James Kendrick has argued, the decoding of film violence is dependent on the context and tone of the scene and “will suggest to the viewer, on both denotative and connotative levels, how the violence should be read.”⁶⁴ Since genre “has become the dominant means by which most viewers understand and make sense of popular movies, it is also one of the central semiotic and referential frames within which audiences decode scenes of violence.”⁶⁵ Consequently, when a film plays with genre conventions as ruthlessly as *Kill List*, this also has repercussions in terms of the film’s ethics. Genre conventions can mark the depicted acts of violence as morally legitimate or illegitimate, aesthetically pleasurable or unpleasurable. Once *Kill List*’s narrative reaches the turning point of the hammer scene, such semiotic and ethical frames of reference are upended.

The scene – if what it shows is considered as an act of retributive, vigilante violence – is also complicated by the lack of context the narrative provides the audience with on the nature of the Librar-

ian's crimes. As mentioned before, it seems to be clear that the tapes he collects document some kind of act of (sexual?) violence against minors. If *Kill List* was a revenge thriller like, say, Michael Winner's *Death Wish* (1974) or James Wan's *Death Sentence* (2007), the film would have spent enough screen time on the depiction of the atrocious crimes (or their consequences for the victims) in order to "validate" the act of retribution and the violent, maybe even sadistic means the vigilante protagonist makes use of. Patrick Fuery identifies three stages of the cinematic revenge narrative: "the causal sequence, the acting out, the revelation", the first of which establishes the act of injustice, which "justifies the revenge", and it is in the third part that "power is asserted and satisfaction gained."⁶⁶ It is for those reasons that Marcus Stiglegger locates in revenge films a seductive element: the viewer is seduced into enjoying transgressive acts of violence which are on the surface validated by the preceding acts of injustice.⁶⁷ *Kill List*, however, does not quite operate in that way: the audience is not sufficiently introduced to the context of the Librarian's crimes, and we only see Gal and Jay's reactions to the tapes, but not the tapes themselves (as, for instance, in Paul Schrader's *Hardcore* [1979] or in Joel Schumacher's *8mm* [1999]), so they cannot make the emotional experience which would make the cinematic seduction complete and the act of retributive violence satisfying. In that respect, *Kill List* bears some similarity with Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* (2002), which turned the subgenre of rape-revenge films upside down by first showing the atrocious act of retributive violence out of context (and, as it eventually turned out, directed against the wrong person). *Kill List* likewise employs alienating, yet seductive strategies and, as Stiglegger notes about *Irréversible*, the viewer is "turned into the victim of their own expectations and need for identification and rational explanations of the unfathomable event."⁶⁸

In this seduction lies the experiment with what Elsaesser calls "ethics mark 1."⁶⁹ The question implied in the atrocious hammer scene is: is Jay ethically right to take the life of a person who supposedly has committed unspeakable crimes? Does it redeem him, considering that he has probably killed numerous people before for money? When he and Gal burn the Librarian's body as well as his monstrous archives, Jay, looking into the flames, proclaims that it "doesn't feel wrong. They're bad people – they should suffer". This seems to reflect his own internal debate about the rightfulness of his actions, his examination of his own life and the principles guiding his actions: maybe it should feel wrong, but it doesn't, considering the fact that the actions of my victim are infinitely worse than mine. Of course, all this is morally dubious, not only because of the questionable act of vigilantism itself, but also because Jay would have killed the Librarian anyway, no matter his personal qualities and criminal record. In that light, Jay's framing of the killing as a "rightful" act (or at least one that "doesn't feel wrong") could be considered as an attempt to restore ethical integrity in a life which, as the film's first act suggested, has been kicked off balance before the narrative sets in.

With respect to "ethics mark 2", that is, ethics as a "supplement", Jay's desire to know "where a man stands these days" also seems to feed into his motivation for retributive violence. Metonymically, the killing of the librarian rights the wrongs of Jay's complicity in Britain's misappropriation of "infi-

nite justice.”⁷⁰ By the time *Kill List* was released in 2011, trust in this “infinite justice” and its ethical consensus was dramatically undermined in the British public, and the Iraq Inquiry led by Sir John Chilcot had been launched in 2009 by then-Prime Minister Gordon Brown to find out “whether it was right and necessary to invade Iraq in March 2003” and concluded in 2016 with the finding that “[t]he judgements about the severity of the threat posed by Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction [...] were presented with a certainty that was not justified.”⁷¹ Symbolically, then, Jay restores the ethical consensus put into question by Blair and the British government’s involvement in an unjust war by killing someone who has committed “infinite Evil.” He appropriates the “victim’s absolute right”⁷², that is, the absolute right of those name- and faceless victims seen on the snuff tapes, and enacts it in an act of retributive violence. He thus tries to rectify what went wrong on the global stage when the US and Britain declared to introduce their universal democratic values (another expression of the ethical consensus according to Rancière and Badiou) in Iraq. Thus, by making the second killing on the Client’s list “personal”, Jay transforms the sacrificial killing in which he was supposed to be an instrument into a personal symbolic sacrifice – a sacrifice which is supposed to restore his own ethical integrity and which becomes “an outlet for the revolutionary violence that would otherwise manifest itself as actual violence against the state.”⁷³

However, Jay’s sacrificial gesture of retributive violence remains a mere testimony of his personal, political, spiritual and moral impotence. In this impotence and in its failure to change the course of events, his act of retributive violence becomes the ultimate post-British gesture: the expression of a directionless anger about one’s position in the current political order and of moral, personal and political disconnection. When in the end, Jay has killed his family as part of the final sacrifice, the endeavour of “reconstruction” seems to have reached a temporary climax. Yet, it is doubtful whether Jay will enjoy the benefits of this “reconstruction”. The end rather implies that a particular kind of financial elite will have ensured their dominance. Considering the obvious Pagan characteristics of the cult, reminiscent of the ones depicted in earlier British folk horror films such as *The Wicker Man* and Piers Haggard’s *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* (1971) while simultaneously anchored in the place-less realm of finance capital, the cult appears as the embodiment of the paradoxical character of contemporary Anglo-British identity: an identity at the same time stuck in the cultural-historical paralysis of post-Empire as it is compelled to maintain its “ethical universalism”⁷⁴ – a universalism that has set Anglo-Britishness as the universal norm of British belonging and works to cover the internal disconnect between institutional politics and the public.

Jay’s personal conflicts thus are an analogy of national ones. In that regard, the seemingly unmotivated (at least in terms of narrative) ominous establishing shots of the English countryside interspersed throughout the film become evocative of these conflicts. The violence that erupts in them in the form of the cult sacrifices as well as the brutal confrontation between Jay, Gal and the cult members, who are apparently led by the financial and ideological elites of the country, during the film’s

climax – a violence that becomes “transcendental” in the Girardian sense since it is a “ritual dispute” which prevents the “total destruction of the community”⁷⁵ – is a restorative violence.

POST-HEROIC CRIME FILMS

The Britain envisioned in Love and Wheatley’s films seems to be on the brink of a destabilising escalation of collective violence. This tendency is present in the ethically deeply compromised global conflicts the country is involved in, but also on the internal level. Jay and his family’s conflicts and tensions, which are at the centre of the first third of the movie, then, in hindsight assume a deeper meaning in that the family structure becomes an allegory of the nation and its break-up. Returning once more to the foreboding dinner conversation between Jay, Gal, Shel and Fiona supports this reading: during this conversation, the religious and political conflict in Northern Ireland is brought up when Gal jokingly suggests to say Grace in Irish and turns serious when his girlfriend mentions that she “never understood the Irish thing” since, after all, they were all members of the same religion, to which Gal replies that “it’s debatable.”⁷⁶ The topic comes up again when Gal suggests to Jay that serving in Belfast during the Troubles would have done him “the world of good”, curing him of his ethical dilemmas. In a similar way, Bryant and his gang of vigilante outlaws yearn for a simpler form of “direct” justice and enact the revenge fantasies of populist ideologies. However, none of the films’ protagonists will emerge victorious from their conflicts. Rather, violently disrupting Britain’s ethical consensus has rendered them as abject, post-heroic protagonists. In that respect, the two films’ thought experiments not only negotiate questions of ethics in a post-national, post-British Europe – they also radically challenge genre conventions and thus leave the audience with questions regarding the stability (and validity) of such traditional notions of narrative film.

¹ I would like to thank Kai L. Fischer, I.Q. Hunter, Désirée Klingner as well as the anonymous peer reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

² Michael Gardiner, *The Cultural Roots of British Devolution* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004). I have previously explored the issue of post-Britishness in relation to devolutionary literature, see Mark Schmitt, “A World Separate Yet Within: Welsh Devolution and the Paradoxes of Post-British Community in Niall Griffiths’s *Sheepshagger*,” in *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies* 26, no. 1 (2015): 93-102, and Mark Schmitt, *British White Trash: Figurations of Tainted Whiteness in the Novels of Irvine Welsh, Niall Griffiths and John King* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2018).

³ Gardiner, *Cultural Roots*, x.

⁴ William Brown, “Not Flagwaving but Flagdrowning, or Postcards from Post-Britain,” in *The British Cinema Book*, ed. Robert Murphy (London: Palgrave / BFI, 2009), 408.

⁵ Brown, “Not Flagwaving but Flagdrowning”, 412-414.

⁶ Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy: Film as Thought Experiment* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 85.

⁷ Elsaesser, *European Cinema* 86.

⁸ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 86.

⁹ Elsaesser, *European Cinema* 167.

¹⁰ Claire Westall and Michael Gardiner, *The Public on the Public: The British Public as Trust, Reflexivity and Political Foreclosure* (London: Palgrave, 2014), 2.

¹¹ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2012).

¹² Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

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- ¹³ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 207-225.
- ¹⁴ William Brown, "Violence in Extreme Cinema and the Ethics of Spectatorship," *Projections* 7, no. 1 (2013): 25-42.
- ¹⁵ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 84.
- ¹⁶ Elsaesser, *European Cinema* 58.
- ¹⁷ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 83.
- ¹⁸ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 85.
- ¹⁹ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 86.
- ²⁰ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 86.
- ²¹ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 209-211.
- ²² Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 211-225.
- ²³ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 209.
- ²⁴ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 210.
- ²⁵ Badiou, *Ethics*.
- ²⁶ Rancière, *Dissensus*.
- ²⁷ Rancière, *Dissensus*, 111.
- ²⁸ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 170.
- ²⁹ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 171.
- ³⁰ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 167.
- ³¹ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 167.
- ³² Owen Jones, *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* (London: Verso, 2011).
- ³³ On chavs in horror films, cf. Johnny Walker, *Contemporary British Horror Cinema: Industry, Genre and Society* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 85-108. On chavs as a case of social stigmatisation, cf. Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (London: Zed Books, 2013), 153-178.
- ³⁴ Cf. e.g. Peter Bradshaw, "Review: *Outlaw*," *The Guardian*, 2007, accessed Jun 01, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/mar/09/thriller.periodandhistorical>. For an assessment of the critical derision of Love's film, cf. I.Q. Hunter, *British Trash Cinema* (London: Palgrave / BFI, 2013), 175.
- ³⁵ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 141.
- ³⁶ Rancière, *Dissensus*, 111.
- ³⁷ Rancière, *Dissensus*, 194.
- ³⁸ Hunter, *British Trash Cinema*, 172-175.
- ³⁹ Bradshaw, "Review: *Outlaw*."
- ⁴⁰ Ryan Gilbey, "Ten Things I Hate About Nick Love's *Outlaw*," *The Guardian*, 2007, accessed Jun 01, 2019,
- ⁴¹ James Kendrick, *Film Violence: History, Ideology, Genre* (London: Wallflower Press, 2009), 74.
- ⁴² Henry Bacon, *The Fascination of Film Violence* (London: Palgrave, 2015), 46-49.
- ⁴³ Hunter, *British Trash Cinema*, 172-173, 174.
- ⁴⁴ Hunter, *British Trash Cinema*, 175.
- ⁴⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 175 on *Outlaw*'s audio commentary which became infamous when samples of it leaked on Youtube. On Danny Dyer's status as a b-film star and the fan cult surrounding him and his persona, cf. also Sarah J. Godfrey and Johnny Walker, "From Pinter to Pimp: Danny Dyer, Class, Cultism and the Critics," *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 12, no. 1: 101-120.
- ⁴⁶ Jeremy Morris, "The Justification of Torture-Horror: Retribution and Sadism in *Saw*, *Hostel*, and *The Devil's Rejects*," ed. Thomas Fahy, *The Philosophy of Horror*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 51.
- ⁴⁷ For an interpretation of *Kill List* as a folk horror narrative, see Adam Scovell, *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (Leighton: Auteur Publishing, 2017), 176-178.
- ⁴⁸ Adam Nayman, *Ben Wheatley: Chaos and Confusion* (Philadelphia: The Critical Press, 2016), 55.
- ⁴⁹ Westall and Gardiner, *The Public on the Public*, 2.
- ⁵⁰ Rancière, *Dissensus*, 200.
- ⁵¹ Badiou, *Ethics*, 62-63.
- ⁵² Badiou, *Ethics*, 67.
- ⁵³ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 58.
- ⁵⁴ Rancière, *Dissensus*, 194.
- ⁵⁵ Nayman, *Ben Wheatley*, 55.
- ⁵⁶ Nayman, *Ben Wheatley*, 53.
- ⁵⁷ Nayman, *Ben Wheatley*, 51.

⁵⁸ Sonia Lupher, "Slow Burn, Interrupted: On Tone and Horror in Ben Wheatley's *Kill List*," *Critical Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2016): 29–35, 29.

⁵⁹ Lupher, "Slow Burn, Interrupted," 32.

⁶⁰ Brown, "Violence," 26.

⁶¹ Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall (eds.), *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013).

⁶² Brown, "Violence," 27.

⁶³ Morris, "The Justification of Torture-Horror," 52.

⁶⁴ Kendrick, *Film Violence*, 19.

⁶⁵ Kendrick, *Film Violence*, 69.

⁶⁶ Patrick Fuery, *New Developments in Film Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 19.

⁶⁷ Marcus Stiglegger, *Ritual & Verführung: Schaulust, Spektakel & Sinnlichkeit Im Film* (Berlin: Bertz & Fischer, 2006), 206–207.

⁶⁸ Stiglegger, *Ritual & Verführung*, 204 (my transl.). Original German quote: "[D]as Ziel ist es, den Zuschauer selbst zum Opfer seiner Erwartungen, seiner Identifikationsbedürfnisse und seines Ringens um eine rationale Erklärung zu machen."

⁶⁹ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 210.

⁷⁰ Rancière, *Dissensus*, 111.

⁷¹ "The Iraq Inquiry," 2016, accessed Jun 01, 2019,

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20171123123857/http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/the-inquiry/>.

⁷² Rancière, *Dissensus*, 111.

⁷³ Aaron Jolly, "Kill Lists: The Occult, Paganism and Sacrifice in Cinema as an Analogy for Political Upheaval in the 1970s and the 2010s," various authors, *Folk Horror Revival: Field Studies* (Durham: Wyrld Harvest Press, 2018), 294.

⁷⁴ Gardiner, "Brexit," 105.

⁷⁵ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 141.

⁷⁶ Northern Ireland and the Troubles are similarly evoked as a historical past haunting the British present in *Harry Brown*, another vigilante film about "broken Britain."