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Nationhood, the Arthurian Myth, and the (De)Construction of Mythical England in Ben Wheatley's *Kill List*

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Abstract. Arthurian mythology has often been employed to articulate notions of nationhood, identity, and nationalism. In the recent wave of nationalist nostalgia, myths, such as Arthur's, have been put forth as core narratives to return to, articulating the longing for a primitivist, pastoral, pre-modern England. The Contemporary British political landscape has seen a rise of neo-imperialism, overlooking how Britain and its polarisation seem to be closer in spirit now to the Civil War than to the times of hegemonic splendour. This article analyses how Wheatley's 2011 *Kill List* reappropriates Arthurian mythology by subverting its usual purpose of reaffirming a hegemonic sense of nationhood. The analysis uses three main methods: defining myth in contemporary England and its cultural products, establishing a correlation between Folk Horror and the Arthurian legend, and studying Arthurian myths and motifs present in the film and their significance. It ultimately concludes that the Arthurian myth is used to question the blinding embrace of national mythology and the darker face of England's nationhood.
Keywords: Arthurian mythology; nationhood; identity; Folk Horror; nationalism.

[es] La (De) construcción de la Inglaterra Mítica en Kill List de Ben Wheatley

Resumen. La mitología artúrica se ha empleado a menudo para articular nociones de nación, identidad y nacionalismo. En la reciente ola de nostalgia nacionalista, los mitos, como el de Arturo, se han propuesto como narrativas centrales a las que volver, articulando el anhelo de una Inglaterra primitivista, pastoral y premoderna. El panorama posterior al Brexit ha visto un aumento del neoimperialismo, pasando por alto cómo Gran Bretaña y su polarización parecen estar más cerca en espíritu ahora de la Guerra Civil que de los tiempos de esplendor hegemónico. Este artículo analiza cómo la película *Kill List* de Wheatley (2011) se reapropia de la mitología artúrica subvirtiendo su propósito habitual de reafirmar un sentido hegemónico de nación. El análisis utiliza tres métodos principales: definir el mito en la Inglaterra contemporánea y sus productos culturales, establecer una correlación entre Folk Horror y la leyenda artúrica, y estudiar los mitos y motivos artúricos presentes en la película y su significado. En última instancia, se concluye que el mito artúrico se utiliza para cuestionar el abrazo cegador de la mitología nacional y la cara más oscura de la nacionalidad inglesa.
Palabras clave: Mitología Artúrica; esencia nacional; identidad; Horror Folk; nacionalismo.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to craft a political reading of Ben Wheatley's *Kill List* (2011), an urban folk horror film, so as to analyse how it adopts Arthurian mythology and its themes to debunk the hegemonic and nostalgic sense of traditional Englishness that most Arthurian films reinforce. From a very different and distinctive genre, *Kill List* uses Arthurian folklore to examine the key topics of the English modern sense of nationhood: political power, polarisation, and class hierarchies. This study will explore the film's negotiation between the Arthurian myth and the political readings of the British nation; considering, firstly, the interactions between the film medium and its ideological potency as a mythical reconstructor and a national enhancer, looking into the discourses and ideas that have cemented a hegemonic version of English nationalism. Secondly, the article will study the convergences between Arthurian mythology and Folk Horror, focusing on their study of the links between past and present and their reading of national essentialism. The analysis of the film will be made in two ways: by examining the Arthurian references,

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symbols, similarities, and subversions; and through the comparison and consideration of such symbols to the political allusions and narrative of the film, especially the setting and the political era. Violence functions in *Kill List* as a catalyser of political passions lit by those in the highest strata of society, using the desperation of a depressed man, who finds in the Arthurian myth evasion and solace from his desperation. In a decade of profound political turbulences and deep social unrest, the film examines the arising of violence through overly simplistic speeches as well as twisted mythical beliefs. Ultimately, this article will prove how Arthurian mythology is used in *Kill List* to deconstruct and question nationalistic myths of the foundation and inner workings of the nation, drawing a complex and nuanced portrait of the dark side of modern Britain and some of the causes behind its primitivist identity revival.

2. Mythical Nation

Myths have proven to be one of the most effective and powerful ways through which nations articulate their idiosyncrasies and sense of selfhood. The case of the UK is no exception to the previous considerations. Tom Nairn links the nation's reliance on historical myths to the absence of a true, national English essence, still stuck in Ancient Regimes: "The continuity of England's incredible myth-consciousness, and her political decay, are the products of a material history - the shrinking material basis of an imperialist order still trapped in its own historical contradictions" (286). Through the establishment of a powerful sense of English mythos, Great Britain has structured its sense of self as a nation mostly by erasing its plurinational and heterogeneous traits: "The confusion of English with British can have significant consequences for myths of the English" (Kumar 203). Valls elaborates on the consequences of such interchangeability: "Representing Britishness as synonymous with Englishness alters the rational, enlightened paradigm of the British project into an invariable referent (Englishness) characteristic of a supposedly fixed and immutable set of values" (73-74). The supposedly fixed set of values is usually traditional speeches linked to English conservativeness, rooted in contradictory myths and self-validating, nostalgic ideologies. As Alex Niven suggests: "England is a historical entity that has, since the Industrial Revolution at the latest, crossed over completely into *mythopoeia*, high confusion, and self-contradiction" (Niven 3). Modern England has witnessed how some political discourses have been exhibiting and claiming national myths as the source to return to the glorious past. The so-called 'British Renaissance', as Lord Frost said, Chief Negotiator for Exiting the European Union from 2019 to 2020, referred to a common conception among Brexit sympathisers, and even classic conservatives, that the country has to return to its roots, so as to restore its former glory, always prioritising English identity over Scottish or Welsh. England has structured the articulation of its identity through myth and essentialism, a method that, nonetheless, is not remotely new. Robert Saunders has traced it back to post-World War II conservative ideology: "Like so much of Brexit ideology, this owed a debt to the godfather of the Eurosceptic Right, Enoch Powell. Powell was an early proponent of the idea that 'all history is myth' – not in the sense that it was untrue, but in that the stories told about the past carry political meanings, which exert power in the present" (1161). This power has been vindicated lately in current political discourses that bring back the idea of English exceptionalism.

It is in the reconstruction of this mythical England that films have been awarded a decisive role. In crisis since its loss of hegemonic world dominance, the nation has resorted to its films to reaffirm its crumbling and conflicting identity. It is one of the reasons for the abundance of Arthurian films or a classic tendency in British film: the war film, like Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* (2017) or Sam Mendes' *1917* (2019), for they remain the last glorious episodes of British history. Moreover, both genres use myth as a national enhancer: "The myth it always turns on is that of the British war film: a race of heroes who know their place, and tug their forelocks all the way to Hell and back". (Nairn 298). The post-war period and the loss of colonies saw the national decline in favour of some other world powers such as the United States or the USSR. It is in the filmic medium, with its ability to reconstruct past glories, re-enacting a sort of collective memory, that Britain found the most powerful and effective way to sow the seeds of nostalgic and primitivist discourses. Dealing with the agrarian myth of Merry England, another traditional and hyper-replicated English myth, Tom Brass examines cinema's ability to create visual collectiveness:

> Such a view conflates the modernity of form with that of content and consequently fails to comprehend the extent to which film, by its very nature, is able to enhance the claims to reality of a content which in material terms is non-existent/unreal. It is for this reason that cinema might be described as the medium not just of popular culture but of populism in general and the agrarian myth in particular. That is, a capacity to combine a technologically modern form with a politically reactionary content, and thus to project as real - and to persuade as to its authenticity - a set of images about that which-is-unreal. (6)

Brass' claim is insightful for it highlights cinema's double nature as a representative of popular culture, whose triumph amongst all social strata remains especially meaningful in an originally aristocratic society such as the English, and as the creator of that contingency and visual memory capable of making the unreal visible. Not only can films trans-

mit reactionary and populist ideas, but they can also reflect and replicate any ideological discourse of the moment, something overlooked by Brass.

3. Arhurian Folk Horror

Although Britain is constituted by many national myths, one of the most frequently replicated in film and literature and most referenced in current discourses is, undoubtedly, the Matter of Britain and Arthurian mythology. Arthurian mythology has been evoked by the recent wave of nationalism as a symbol of that pastoral, premodern Britain. Cinema has encouraged this fervour for King Arthur by using its myth to articulate different ideologies and perceptions of nationhood. The myth can also encourage a reductionist perspective of a national past, as Christopher Snyder argues: "Arthurian films tend to simplify and reduce literary and historical complexities and focus on a single character or issue (e.g., the Holy Grail, the Arthur-Guinevere-Lancelot love triangle, or Excalibur as the symbol of political power)" (8). Hence, myths, particularly the Arthurian myth, possess political and effective powers of narration. They are composed of simple principles and common affirmations that triumph amongst the general public. Some Arthurian films have seen their mythical essence serving the purpose of articulating an exacerbated nationalistic identity to construct defined, specific senses of nationhood according to the establishing principles of a specific ideology, deeply rooted in nostalgia. Their effectiveness, as it happens in most myths, resides not only in their oversimplifications, but in their ability to conceive life in binary and dialectical oppositions and therefore to establish ideological, collective, and cultural frontiers.

It is not uncommon to find elements of Arthurian mythology among a wide variety of genres, not only proper Arthurian films, for their allure transcends genre categorisations. As Eleanor Farrell puts it:

> The widespread knowledge of the elements of Arthurian myth in Western culture is understandably used by storytellers of all genres, both in retelling the tales of King Arthur and his knights, and in showing the universal appeal and relevance of these themes to our own lives. A good film treatment can present the familiar themes of love, loyalty, spirituality, and honor in a fresh way, either within the context of the Arthurian universe or by transplanting the symbols and themes to another time or place. (64)

Farrell effectively points to the multiplicity of topics within Arthurian tradition. There also exist multiple stories and versions of the myth (Nennius, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Thomas Malory…). Nonetheless, most stories follow the Malorian tradition of the 15th century. Following the Malorian tradition, perhaps the most important reinterpretation is that of Tennyson, the one used for this article, as Tennyson's Arthur was supposed to be the embodiment of manhood, rigour, and duty; something the protagonist of *Kill List* lacks and longs for. Despite the complexity of the Arthurian myth and its many versions, the symbols and themes chosen are often repeated and oversimplified in favour of biased narrations, with the notable exception of some films questioning the standardised version. The Arthurian myth has become commodified to offer mild entertainment in most cases. Besides the familiar elements Farrell referred to, the Matter of Britain has been given a political reading, for it narrates Arthur's battles against invaders, one of the many foundational myths of the country. Therefore, as John Aberth points out, the Arthurian myth has become tabula rasa for different dogmas to highlight their preferred values: "King Arthur of history became an ideal blank slate on which succeeding ages could write their own versions of his legend that suited their particular tastes and ideological needs" (5). The usual elements of the mythical quest or the code of knighthood provide such narrations with a link between the nation's past and present. From fantasy (*Indiana Jones* films) to comedy (*The Black Knight*), it is not unusual for different genre films to blur the notions of past and present while adding a seasoning of Arthurian mythology in the meantime. It is rarer, however, to find those elements in a genre such as Folk Horror.

As with any genre, Folk Horror is not easy to define, but there are common traits shared by most of its films: an eerie and isolated landscape or citizens sharing a devious morality away from the codes of modernity, as a result of that distance from social progress. The genre, whose major point of success was in the decade of the 1970s, usually presents a darker side of the much standardised, idealised, and stereotyped British rural countryside. It commonly remerges in times of social unrest and identity crisis, for it demystifies simplistic and nostalgic vindications of the past and the nation. Andy Paciorek references many theories on the links between Folk Horror, social unrest, and political disillusionment: "The Folk Horror of that period emerged from a sense of post-hippy disillusionment in which the ideals of back-to-the-land movement no longer seemed ideal" (13). Adam Scovell, probably Folk Horror's most influential theorist, comments on the genre's ability to merge past and present: "Folk Horror often mimics this idea of looking back, where the past and the present mix and create horror through anachronisms and uncomfortable tautologies between eras" (Scovell 20). The ties between past and present, the political readings and social divisions of the landscape, or the obsession with the uncanny and the hidden, are essential elements of Folk Horror narrations. Alberto Andrés Calvo explores the genre's ability to create that horrific eeriness:

> Part of the horrific aspects of these films is that the events usually take place in the outside and in broad

> daylight, thus subverting horror's predominant setting. The dark and closed spaces favoured by horror take the backseat; horrific events happen not only outside and during the day but also in communal settings (83).

Rather than criticising the community and enhancing individuality, what the films of the genre usually problematise are mass beliefs, like hippy dogmas in Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973), one of the classical examples of the genre. Calvo's allusion to broad daylight also points out the idea of commonality rather than communality, of something horrific and violent behind everyday life without having to create special conditions for violence to arise. Howard David Ingham also highlights this component, defining folk horror works as a "very curious juxtaposition of the prosaic and the uncanny. The ordinary, the everyday, and the strange coexist closely, and folk horror, even when it's set in a past age, has, for all that it's isolated, a feeling of proximity that goes with it" (3). It is precisely the summoning of all the previously mentioned elements (ideas of nationhood, debunking of national idealisations and mass beliefs, everyday violence…) that make the genre ideal to disclose and explore the topics and symbols of Arthurian mythology, as *Kill List* exemplifies. Ben Wheatley is often mentioned as one of the new Folk Horror auteurs. Even if the director delights in mixing genres, many of his films share Folk Horror's characteristic traits, such as the eerie and isolated atmosphere, the political readings of growing disillusionment, or the horrific dark side of Pastoral, idealised England. It is certainly the case in *Kill List*, where the English filmmaker subverts some of Folk Horror's traditional characteristics while highlighting others and maintaining its essence.

4. Kill List

Ben Wheatly was born and raised in the South of England, in a traditionally conservative district, Basildon. He started his career as an animator but soon pursued his filmic passions. Kill List is his second and most acclaimed film, belonging to his early filmography alongside *Down Terrace* (2009) and *Sightseers* (2013), where flirtations with Folk Horror and explorations of everyday violence are common. Wheatley has explored some other genres like dystopian sci-fi in the adaptations of J.G. Ballard's *High Rise* (2016) or the comedic, existential drama *Happy New Year, Colin Bursted* (2018)

Kill List is the story of Jay, an unemployed veteran soldier who lives in the gloomy suburbs of Sheffield with his wife and son. Jay is unemployed and depressed, unable to overcome the trauma of his past endeavours. Discontent with her life and anxious about the family's financial issues, Jay's wife forces him to take a job as a hitman again alongside his best friend, Gal. This time, Jay and Gal are given an odd task by a mysterious boss; they need to eliminate three targets belonging to three different strata of society: a librarian, a priest, and an MP. With each killing, the spiral of violence increases, and Jay's delusional anxieties take over his view and perceptions of the world, crystallising in the horrendous and climactic ending.

Although Arthurian mythology is neither the main theme of the film nor its most obvious storyline, many Arthurian symbols and references can be found underlying the entire narration. The first and most obvious symbol is the analogy between Jay and King Arthur. In the scene of the bedtime story, Jay tells his son about him and Gal as knights, paralleling his figure with that of Arthur's. Initially, Jay encompasses Joseph Campbell's classic *Hero's Journey* (2003): he is given a task, a quest to accomplish, so as to get to a final apotheosis that makes him excel among his fellow men. Jay's figure constantly mirrors that of Arthur's. The protagonist himself seems to be obsessed with Arthurian figures, romanticising Arthurian mythology. He buys his son medieval swords to fight with, when their cat dies, Jay intends to call their new dog Arthur or Gwynnie. Moreover, when his son asks for a bedtime story about King Arthur, he tells him one about himself as King Arthur. His traditional masculinity is invested in those idealised figures and times, and, feeling purposeless, he longs for a task to carry out: "It is tough for a man to know where to stand these days" (Wheatley). It is not casual that the protagonist escapes from his dreadful conditions by appealing to and trying to replicate a myth. Jay is in crisis; just like the nation he belongs to; his pillars have crumbled, and he has been left feeling powerless and with an overwhelming sense of purposelessness. Fintan O'Toole comments on how Brexit and its nationalistic appeal were designed to attract people like Jay, missing a sense of place: "At the heart of Brexit's appeal to most of those who voted for it was an idea of national sovereignty and a sense of place" (123). Unable to be the provider of the family, Jay is questioned and even mocked by his wife, just as Arthur's worth was also mocked and questioned before his enthronement. Tennyson also reflects those challenges to Arthur's manhood, embodied in the figure of Pelleas, who emerges as the Red Knight and questions the king: "Lo! art thou not that eunuch-hearted King/ Who fain had clipt free manhood from the world" (494). Therefore, both Jay's and Arthur's manliness are questioned by an antagonist, in Arthur's case the Red Knight, and in Jay's case his wife. Describing the main characteristics of Tennyson's Arthur once he becomes king, Taylor Driggers details many characteristics also present in Jay's delusional character, for both come from the subalternity of those left behind, and Jay exhibits a messiah complex just like Arthur was characterised as a messianic figure: "Tennyson, on the other hand, elevates Arthur to a near-perfect status(...) Tennyson reminds us of Arthur perfection, again and again, often referring to him as "the blameless Arthur".

Indeed, Tennyson's Arthur seems to be a messianic figure" (135). This conception of the chosen one, the conscript saviour who is meant to execute the unachievable assignment, is constantly referenced throughout *Kill List*, pointing towards the toxicity of the idea of exceptionalism, both at a national and an individual level. It seems at the very beginning that Jay takes the job by chance. Due to his financial difficulties, he is forced to accept Gal's offer. However, when Fiona (Gal's girlfriend) draws an odd pagan symbol in his mirror and steals a handkerchief stained with his blood from shaving, the audience is shown the possibility of Jay's designation for the job being no random affair. With every killing, all the deceased ones thank him, as if talking to the messiah. It is an honour for them to be executed by the chosen one, even if, at that time of the narration, only Jay believes that he is such, as he is unaware of why he has been hired to do the job. Therefore, there is a constant link throughout the film between the ideas of exceptionalism and violence. The chosen one becomes such through violent deeds.

A number of allusions to the crusades and to The Knights of the Round table can be also identified. In the first killing, the group of Evangelic Christians that Jay and Gal encounter while having breakfast at the hotel are singing *Onward Christian Soldiers*. When Gal perceives Jay's excessive excitement and devotion to executing the task, he declares: "This is not a crusade, you know" (Wheatley). Nevertheless, it is a crusade for Jay, for whom the chance of releasing all his repressed violence and anger provokes a gradual disintegration of his sanity. Diego Boza points out how a part of British Media has also characterised Brexit as a crusade, since it is a usual tactic when exacerbating nationalism: "Daily Express considered Brexit a real crusade in which this tabloid was another soldier (…) and its front cover, on 23 June 2016, contained two sentences: "Your country needs you. Vote Leave today", paraphrasing Lord Kitchener's statement during IGM" (12). Jay thinks of himself as needed by those who have hired him, unaware of the situation at first and completely maniac at the end. Here lies the first subversion of the myth; unlike Arthur, Jay is no messiah but a puppet for the highest strata of society to restore a primitivist order based on violence.

Jay's final task is equally horrific, killing a hunchback. Once he executes it, he realises that the hunchback is his wife carrying his child piggyback. This is foreshadowed at the very beginning of the film when Shel and Sam fight Jay with the foam swords and the wife is carrying the kid in the same manner. Jay turns out to be the *Restitutor Orbis* but not for a rule of peace and prosperity but of violence and carnage. Sonia Lupher notes Jay's lack of reaction to his dreadful killing: "Like the Amazing Wizards shorts, the film ends with a combination of irony, horror, and nonchalance from the characters (Jay's shock, presumably, prevents him from reacting)" (33). Rather than his shock, what prevents Jay from reacting is his desensitization to violence, unable to respond in a humane way after his numerous killings. Regarding violence, it is worthwhile mentioning that the movie was released in 2011; a year characterised by its violent uprising, social unrest, and nationalist demands. Despite the fact that Jay mirrors Arthur, idealising the figure and sharing common traits, there is a subversion of the myth. This supposed messiah turns out to be a delusional man suffering from anger issues and PTSD: "For people who feel anxious about the threat of losing their status, self-pity is attractive because it combines righteous anger with reassurance." (O'Toole 69). Jay, due to his bad circumstances falls into self-pity and longs for control, for a sense of purpose that can recompose his crumbling identity. Moreover, Arthur's myth is also subverted in the way the ending is told in *Kill List*. In Tennyson's poem*, Morte d'Arthur,* King Arthur's last words before dying are, "The old order changeth, yielding place to new" (Tennyson 55). However, at the end of the film, the old order is not yielding a place to the new, as Tennyson suggested. Instead, once Jay is crowned leader of the strange cult that gathers in the fields and that supposedly hired him, the old order of feudal times is restored. Those who are taking back control are the ones who have always owned it.

Jay is not the only figure to parallel a character in Arthurian mythology. His best friend is referred to as Gal, which could be an abbreviation for Gallagher, given the character's origins. Nevertheless, Gal sounds eerily similar to Galahad, King Arthur's best knight, and there are a few similarities between the two characters. Firstly, Galahad is the one to embark on the Quest for the Holy Grail, despite King Arthur's initial reticence. Likewise, Gal offers the job to Jay, and the protagonist is initially unsure whether to accept it or not. In the Arthurian tradition, Sir Galahad is always referenced as the ideal knight, a model of virtue, purity, and devotion. So high is Galahad's purity that when The Knights of the Round Table are tested during the Quest for the Holy Grail, his is the only one that still stands. Tennyson emphasizes this usually by referring to Sir Galahad with the epithets 'clean' or 'pure': "And pure Sir Galahad to uplift the maid" (Tennyson 379). In *Kill List,* Gal, in yet another departure from the myth, is no saint or example of virtue or purity. Like Jay, he is a retired soldier who now earns his living as a hitman. However, Gal's nationality and his important link to religion, as he is Irish and seems to have witnessed the Troubles, provide the narration with more political significance. It is not casual that Gal, who functions like Sir Galahad, as some sort of conscience for Jay, is Northern Irish, for he also represents a dialectical questioning of Jay's English character and tendency towards myth and idealisation. The dinner scene reveals these differences in identity articulation. In an attempt to sustain their crumbling marriage and absolutely jaded existence, Jay and Shel invite Gal and his girlfriend Fiona to dinner, hoping to spend a quiet evening away from the problems of their marriage. Before starting to eat, Gal tries to

say grace, encountering Swedish Shel's refusal: "Not at my table" (Wheatley), creating the first moment of awkwardness. Later, they discuss the previously mentioned purposelessness of Jay in his life and his longing of having lived and fought in WWII. Slightly annoyed at Jay's comments, Gal replies: "A tour of duty in Belfast would have done you a world of good" (Wheatley). Gal's comment and annoyance imply that Jay has an idealised version of conflict and what violence means to those who are forced to endure it. After that, Fiona confesses her inability to understand the Irish conflict, adding, "I mean, it's all the same religion, so" (Wheatley). Gal refutes this affirmation, as well as questioning the latter claim that both parties involved in the conflict are Christian: "that's debatable" (Wheatley). Religion remains crucial for the understanding of the Irish conflict and for articulating identity in Northern Ireland: "In Northern Ireland, religion has played a similar role as a 'key ethnic marker' (see McGarry and O'Leary 1995: 171–213) (…), it redefines religion as a 'cultural' rather than as a theological phenomenon" (Coakley 277-278). There is a profound ignorance of the Irish conflict that makes it easier for all the attendants of the dinner but Gal to minimise it. It is not a question of disdain towards religion but a question of disdain towards those happenings that they consider unimportant for them, for their English essence. While all of this is happening, Jay remains self-absorbed, thinking about his military service in Iraq. While Gal is no role model of Christian devotion, the English characters' aversion to religion and inability to understand the roots and depths of the Irish conflict seems apparent, and even impolite, as they are sitting next to Gal. The modern Sir Galahad is a Northern Irish hitman, who, however, does possess a stronger moral consciousness than Jay. Gal is the one to detect Jay's downward spiral and confront him for his ruthless violence and moral justification: "I can't fucking work with you anymore if you're going to go fucking over the top every time you get a fucking lumper in your hand" (...) You're going in there like a fucking psycho on crack" (Wheatley). The Irishman's willingness to quit the job clashes with Jay's revengeful madness. Eve Garrard distinguishes between different kinds of evil acts in everyday life: "The implication here is that there is a qualitative, not merely quantitative difference between evil acts and other wrongful ones; evil acts are not just *very* bad or wrongful acts, but rather ones possessing some especially horrific qualities" (321). While Gal's actions cannot be qualified as higher acts or even just the wrongful actions Garrard mentions, at least, as Galahad, he holds a higher and truer moral consciousness. He executes the task he has been hired for; he does not dwell on excessive violence, as Jay does. Thus Jay's actions, and not Gal's, can be qualified as evil because they contain the horrific qualities Garrard references. There is a difference between the two men in the way they use and deal with violence.

Other similarities with Arthurian mythology, in terms of symbols, can be found in *Kill List.* Jay and Gal reside on the outskirts of northern industrial Sheffield. The elected setting seems no random affair, as the north of England has violently endured the effects of deindustrialisation, state abandonment, and dereliction. Geopolitical affections have switched towards more nationalistic and conservative options, as a consequence of the abandonment of the left. Gillian Evans comments on this transition:

> For working-class voters in the Labour heartlands of the Midlands and north of England, this was a double betrayal. Abandoned by the ruling government and facing a loss of solidarity from working-class voters who moved instead toward the new consensus of self-determination through personal gain, the urban postindustrial working classes then had to endure the final insult, namely the complete failure of the New Labour government (216)

Ever since the Thatcher years and the subsequent New Labour, northern populations have been abandoned. The high rate of Leave vote and sympathy in northern cities has not been a new phenomenon but rather the culmination of one; it had been brewing for years, disappointment after disappointment with every cabinet, every government and their decisions.

The shots depict a landscape of isolation but, unlike in most Folk Horror films, in urban communities. The depiction of Sheffield's periphery and all the places the protagonists visit has a strong feeling of alienation and estrangement. It is as if the space has lost its identity and seems, to a certain degree, phantasmagorical. It provokes an uncanny feeling of familiarity and detachment at the same time, where everything seems to have lost its essence. Jay and Gal wander through England on their murderous pilgrimage, witnessing the dullness and abjections of a ghostly and lifeless country. The haunted and grey place defined by absence and the violence of the unseen seems quite resemblant to another mythical place until the messiah, King Arthur, set his foot on it. Tennyson in his epic poem parallels the life of the landscape with that of Arthur's, barren and lifeless whenever Arthur is not yet king or is about to die: "Look'd one black dot against the verge of dawn/ And on the mere the wailing died away. But when that moan had past for evermore, The stillness of the dead world's winter dawn" (571). Indeed, in *Kill List,* the audience is shown how the places Jay and Gal visit are defined by ruins and absence, both moral and situational, something that mirrors the protagonist's state of mind. The last killing, the killing of the MP, represents a change of scenery. Jay and Gal access the MP's statehouse through some subterranean tunnel, almost with the implication of entering a more oneiric, idyllic, and pastoral world. The landscape changes substantially after accessing the MP's state and they encounter the cult. No longer is the audience shown shots of industrial landscapes or grey suburban conurbations; the landscape turns into green

meadows and deep forests, reminiscing of the pastoral England the cult is trying to bring back.

In the end, Jay is crowned with a wicker mask, by the client who initially hired him, and finally worshipped him for his dedication to violence. There is a tension between the horror of the experienced, the chilling feeling of Jay getting recognition for his dreadful mask, and the final feeling of shocking calmness that everything seems produce in him, remaining completely numb. The strange calm mirrors that of Arthur when dying, while paradoxically this supposes a sort of rebirth for Jay. However, as previously mentioned, it is not the beginning of a new dawn or the change of the old order, rather, it is the old order retaking its power. The myth of Arthur is subverted and questioned so as to debunk nationalistic claims about it. Simplistic discourses that employ myths for the purpose of their own political gain are most likely to end in deceit and violence. Jay, with his impoverished background and his mental circumstances, is lured by those who are truly in power and made to believe that he is some kind of messiah. Jay represents those who blindly abide by myths, sometimes falling into elitist narratives. Although the film was released years before the Brexit referendum, it shows how a tortious version of nationalism takes advantage of social desperation and lays its roots on a deceitful version of mythical England. The idealised vision of a pastoral, pre-modern England is shown to be full of horrors and atrocities with the aim of taking the country back.

5. Conclusions

Kill List represents a new turn in the use of Arthurian mythology, for it reproduces its themes and symbols, placing them to reflect a contemporary vision of Great Britain and to question a biased version of nationhood. From a very different genre than that often used in Arthurian mythology, the film plays upon the notions of identity, the past and the present, or governance in the country. It works against the idealised, nostalgic version of a pre-modern Britain, depicting its many horrors and the dogmatic principles that this vision uncovers: the ruling of the higher strata, the moral justification of violence, or loyalty to the designated goal above everything else. Jay, obsessed with Arthurian motifs and symbology, longs for a cause to fight for. His out-of-control wish for a moral stance, alongside his PTSD and violent behaviour, prevent him from truly comprehending the magnitude and problems of the task he has been told to carry out. Unlike King Arthur, Jay becomes no king and only works as a puppet for the hidden rulers of the state, whose faces in the cult are never really shown. Niven explains the relationship between the hidden and occult and the higher strata of English society: "English existence has the feeling of being strangely muted and refracted, primarily because the real driving forces of English political life– latterly Capitalism and Imperialism– have always been such mysterious and immaterial entities" (Niven 44). Thus, *Kill List* problematises the notion of Englishness and nationhood through Arthurian symbols and motifs. Living in the past and longing for a lost order only bring chaos and insanity for the ordinary citizens, forced to carry out inhuman tasks that bring out the worst in them. It is also no coincidence that Jay is obsessed with Arthurian mythology. Not only does he idealise a figure of traditional masculinity, but also, he represents a figure from the margins, drowned by unemployment and depression, longing for a previous state of powerful hegemony. In the end, Jay represents the state of the nation, for whom the dreadful circumstances of the current state incline toward the promise of an idealised past. Through the use of Arthurian mythology, Wheatley demystifies the version of Englishness that is usually highlighted and vindicated as the single and unique primitive essence of the nation, usually cemented on pernicious readings of myths or pernicious myths: "And (the point is) the current myths of the English corporate imagination are bad ones" (Nairn 266). While it could be argued that the Arthurian myth does not qualify as new or inherently pernicious, *Kill List* depicts the danger of blindly clinging to national mythology and associating such mythology with political power. In times of national agitation, Wheatley warns against the use of myths as identity discourses since they are loaded with pervasive violence and poisonous rhetoric that can end in final carnage, and it is usually never for the ones on the highest strata of society. Violence is a recurrent tool in Wheatley's films that attempts to raise awareness of societal problems. For the British director, periodization is far less important than using underlying violence to point out issues such as class and countryside (*Sightseers*) or society's ideological polarisation (*A Field in England*). No matter the period of time depicted in his films, and many times not even specified, the similarities with the current political time are always to be found. *Kill List* remains his most blatantly political film even when politics appears through violence. When Jay asks the Client what the kill list is about, he answers with a powerful and blunt "Reconstruction" (Wheatley). Reconstruction does share the same undertones as "taking the country back" or "taking back control", oversimplified mottos promising easy solutions to complex identity questions. The population is so fed up with standard ways that they turn to the past in search of betterment. Even though the film never tries to portray the protagonist as sympathetic towards the audience, it is preoccupied with the reasons that lead him to act the way he ultimately does. *Kill List* cautions against weaponising myths, overlooking their nature, to gain political power. Hence, the film suggests a questioning reading of the current version of nationhood, resorting to mythology to deconstruct it, instead of reconstructing it.

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