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Ambient Literature as an Act of Faith in the York Medieval Mystery Cycle

Miriam Helmers

Tom Abba, Jonathan Dovey, and Kate Pullinger's *Ambient Literature: Towards a New Poetics of Situated Writing and Reading Practice* (2021) claims to incorporate the 'everyday shared world' into the reading experience in ways that other media cannot hope to reproduce, using digital platforms to foreground readers' responses to their material surroundings.¹ While the authors of *Ambient Literature* admit that reading and writing have always been situated practices, their analysis of this situatedness is largely limited to urban life in the past 300 years.² Although the book's methodology is explained, it is possible that the significance of ambient literature may unintentionally be limited by the assumption that modern, contemporary and digital technologies have the monopoly on ambient literature, that is, 'situated writing practices in which text is able to respond to the site of reading'.³ This article anticipates this and seeks to prevent conceptual amnesia by using the ambient literature as a critical framework to discuss the medieval production of the York Corpus Christi mystery cycle and, in particular, the *Crucifixion* pageant which was performed on wagons in bustling and public city spaces. This article will focus primarily on presenting the technological and narrative elements of this ambient 14th-16th century dramaturgy as a critical framework to judge the survivability of literary ambience beyond the temporal social and material realities of an 'everyday shared world' (□). In the later parts of the article, case-studies of modern reproductions of the medieval mystery play will show how a situated literary ambience resists anachronistic manipulation.

As this article will show, the community focus of the York cycle—its performance in public spaces, movement through the city, monopolisation on site- and community-specific knowledge—means that this dramaturgy was also ambient focussed. It sought to 'gather data' from its audience—prior to and during its performance—in order to create an interactive community experience. Although not as overtly interactive as the digital projects showcased

¹ *Ambient Literature: Towards a New Poetics of Situated Writing and Reading Practices*, ed. by Tom Abba, Jonathan Dovey, and Kate Pullinger (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), p. 2 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-41456-6>> [accessed 19 February 2021].

² *Ibid.*, p. 5, 11.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

in *Ambient Literature*, which depend largely on physical participation at an individual level, the early ambient technologies nevertheless achieved the same end. They undoubtedly reminded their audience that ‘the work, the text or the experience, is in permanent dialogue with the world, so that rather than [being] submerged in some alternate reality we are engaged with the world with a heightened sense of engagement and mobilization’.⁴ While we cannot know to what extent medieval spectators actually experienced this heightened sense of engagement and mobilization, the York plays were directed and structured to remind audiences to engage with the material and social fabric of their everyday lives which were intertwined.

The very structure and content of the plays emerged from a central tenet of medieval life: the practice of traditional Christian piety. The York mystery cycle arose in the 1370s around the liturgical feast of Corpus Christi, which was the ‘greatest feast of the late medieval church’.⁵ The feast was instituted in 1264 (although promulgated in York in 1332) precisely to highlight the doctrine of *transubstantiation*⁶ and counteract dissenting voices. It is already difficult to separate the material and spiritual nature of this feast, concretely situated as it is in time (Thursday after Trinity Sunday or 23 May to 24 June, depending on when Easter falls), and accompanied by many physical manifestations of piety. At the core of the celebration, for example, was the believed-to-be actual presence of Jesus Christ in the most revered materiality of the Host.⁷

Not only were spiritual and material experiences closely linked, so too were the material performances of the feast and the Corpus Christi pageant. A Corpus Christi procession with the Host displayed in a reliquary preceded the mystery cycle until 1426 when it was finally impossible to have both events on the same day.⁸ The procession and the many pageants, performed on mobile structures (pageant wagons), would have followed similar routes along the city streets, explaining the eventual impossibility for both events to occur on

⁴ Ibid., p. 19

⁵ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400-1580* (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 3.

⁶ The act of *transubstantiation* during the Catholic Mass (according to medieval and present-day Catholic belief) changes the substances of bread and wine into the substance of the body and blood of Jesus Christ – otherwise called the sacrament of the Eucharist.

⁷ The wafer of bread consecrated during Catholic Mass is known as the Host.

⁸ Alexandra F. Johnston, ‘The Procession and Play of Corpus Christi in York after 1426’, *Leeds Studies in English*, 7 (1973), 55–62 (pp. 1-2) <<http://www.proquest.com/docview/1302221643/citation/B9FF688247414B92PQ/1>> [accessed 29 June 2021]. The Corpus Christi pageants are recorded in the civic Register from the 1370s to 1569. York was one of the cities that held on the longest to the traditional Catholic piety after the time of Reformation, explaining the enduring of the plays even after the cancelation of the liturgical feast itself in 1548; cf. Clifford Davidson, *Corpus Christi Plays at York: A Context for Religious Drama* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 2013), p. 1, 18; the texts we have are from the Register of 1460s/70s; cf. Pamela King, *The York Mystery Cycle and the Worship of the City* (Michigan: D.S. Brewer, 2006), p. 2).

the same day. The routes of both the Corpus Christi procession and the drama cycle were similar likely because they were the most convenient routes for the wagons to take through the town; yet there is an imitative factor in the play-cycle ‘processing’ on pageant wagons through the streets of York.⁹

Clifford Davidson also remarks that in the *York Memorandum Book A/Y* the civic register records the specific positioning of the various guilds in the Eucharistic procession, just as the guilds would take charge of a different pageant for the drama cycle.¹⁰ He shows how each of the guilds contributed to the staging of the plays through their craft (the Shipwrights for the *Building of Noah’s Ark*, the Taverners for the *Marriage in Cana*, the Bakers for the *Last Supper*, etc.), and thus, ‘each guild maintained its role of presenting an essential fragment of sacred story, often a fragment also pointing to its social and economic role in the city’.¹¹ Both Eucharistic and dramatic processions pointed to the division of labour in the everyday life of the city.¹² The pageant wagons, maintained by the separate guilds, were thus ambient technologies, drawing the audience into the significance of the liturgical feast-day and connecting it with their everyday work.

The pageant wagons were also ambient technologies in the way they made the situated reader (as actor or spectator) a ‘key determinant of the text’.¹³ Notwithstanding the smooth transition from one pageant to another, thanks to the pre-set mobile platforms (analogous to contemporary digital platforms), each performance of the pageant would necessarily change according to the different station and time of day.¹⁴ The actors would need to adjust according to unpredictable elements such as space, natural lighting, and surrounding noise-levels while the audience would need to move closer or further away from the wagon-stage depending on whether the pageant utilized only the wagon platform or called for action on the street (as in the pageant for Christ’s entry into Jerusalem). The boundaries between actor and audience spaces thus did not simply collapse in the pageants but were mutable and constantly reconfigured.

⁹ Davidson, *Corpus Christi Plays at York*, p. 99.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 130-1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹² Sarah Beckwith explores this in ch. 3 of *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003): ‘Work, Markets, Civic Structure: Organizing the York Corpus Christi Plays.’

¹³ Abba, Dovey, and Pullinger, p. 20.

¹⁴ Alexandra F. Johnston notes from the 1998 reproduction of the York plays in Toronto, ‘we learned that playing conditions were very different at different times of the day. The quality of the light, the heat, the crowds, the noise from the life of the city around us all varied during the day’ (‘York, 1998: What We Learned’, *Early Theatre*, 3.1 (2000), 199–203 (p. 201) <link.gale.com/apps/doc/A228909135/LitRC?u=ucl_ttda&sid=bookmark-LitRC&xid=9de51895> [accessed 29 June 2021]).

This type of re-adjustment for actors and audiences alike was noted by Alexandra Johnston in the 1977 reproduction of the York plays in Toronto. Entering into her own imaginative reproduction, she imagines how this may have felt in medieval York:

This form of drama is, above all, intimate. In the narrow medieval streets of York, each audience gathered at a station received a pageant into its midst and sent it on its way again. Actors and audience were one in a corporate celebration.¹⁵

The pageant wagons facilitated a ‘corporate celebration’ in another sense by literally incorporating the audience into the action of the play by proximity. One recent version of the York *Crucifixion* shows a possible staging where the nailing to the cross takes place in the area in front of the wagon before the crucified Christ is transferred to the wagon platform and the cross raised into its mortice.¹⁶ In this setting, the audience would have been close to the act of crucifixion itself and would perhaps have been rendered as participants in the act: onlookers.

Just as the liturgical feast of Corpus Christi influenced the material situatedness of the pageant wagons, which served to physically locate the audience in front of the enacted ‘mysteries,’ so too popular piety influenced the narrative structure of the plays, which then provided audiences with access to different source materials. In this way the play-texts were ambient technologies analogous to James Attlee’s ambient literature project *The Cartographer’s Confession*, which gives the reader access to the source materials for a fictional film.¹⁷ In the case of the Corpus Christi cycle, the mysteries would not have been considered fictional but rather truths of faith, and the text-sources were recognisable as a part of the spectators’ daily lives and the scripture and popular piety they encountered.

The scriptural sources were evident from the subject matter of each pageant: forty-seven plays staged the Christian ‘history of salvation’ – the creation of the world to the last judgement – that had the events of the life and death of Christ at its centre. There was certainly a didactic purpose to the plays which presented the events of salvation history in the vernacular rather than the Latin of the liturgy. As Davidson says, ‘the Corpus Christi

¹⁵ Alexandra F. Johnston, ‘The York Corpus Christi Play: A Dramatic Structure Based on Performance Practice’, in *The Theatre in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Herman Braet, John Noive, and Gilbert Tournoy (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 1985), pp. 362–73 (p. 366).

¹⁶ ‘York Mystery Play “Crucifixion”’, *YouTube* <<https://youtu.be/tIImNnV1Ty0>> [accessed 12 March 2021].

¹⁷ James Atlee, ‘The Cartographer’s Confession’, *Ambient Literature* <<https://research.ambientlit.com/cartographersconfession>> [accessed 29 June 2021].

plays were designed to *bring to memory* the events of salvation history,¹⁸ as was the sculpture and stained-glass art in churches.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the play-texts were not static. There was creative license to invent dialogues out of the original biblical narratives, and these grew out of many years' worth of performances and changes within and between the guilds. The *Crucifixion* play, for example, was an amalgam of two earlier plays (the stretching out of Christ on the cross and then the raising of the cross), and it seems that the play-text was rewritten in 1422 with new guilds in mind.²⁰ It was this creative license that drew on the popular piety of the time.

Pamela King makes a strong case for how popular piety, especially pious practices connected with adoration of the Host, influenced the structure of the drama. The audience, used to adoring Christ hidden in the Host, 'were treated to less theologically "real" but more directly visually available representations of [Jesus] in the pageants'.²¹ Many of the dialogues, for instance, imitate the 'elevation prayers' that lay people would pray at the moment of the consecration and elevation of the Host at Mass (the 'sacring'). King observes that the thirty-five greetings in the York cycle, mostly directed to Christ, are very similar in form to the elevation prayers at Mass.²² Gestures imitating the elevation of the Host would also have made this connection visible.²³ The raising of the cross in the *Crucifixion* pageant is a clear echo of the moment of elevation, albeit with comic elements that will be addressed later.

Eamon Duffy explains how the Mass was at the centre of medieval piety, and that the most important moment of the Mass came at the sacring. For the lay people, seeing the Host elevated stirred their pious imagination to see Christ elevated on the cross: 'As kneeling congregations raised their eyes to see the Host held high above the priest's head at the sacring, they were transported to Calvary itself.'²⁴ Duffy's evidence for this pious conflation of the cross and the Host are the elevation prayers mentioned above, which became an almost necessary aspect of the laity's participation in the Mass.²⁵ He gives an example from fourteenth-century *Lay Folk's Mass Book*:

¹⁸ *The York Corpus Christi Plays*, ed. by Clifford Davidson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2011) <doi:10.2307/j.ctv138434b> [accessed 23 June 2021], p. 8; emphasis in original.

¹⁹ Davidson explores this connection in ch. 2 of *The Corpus Christi Plays at York*: 'The York Plays and Visual Piety.'

²⁰ Davidson, *Corpus Christi Plays at York*, p. 66.

²¹ King, p. 20.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²³ King imagines the actor for the Virgin Mary 'elevating' the baby Jesus in the Nativity pageant, while saying words of greeting to him (p. 24).

²⁴ Duffy, p. 91.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

Then shal thou do reverence
 to ihesu crist awen presence ...
 And so tho leuacioun thou behalde,
 for that is he that iudas salde,
 and sithen was scourged & don on rode,
 And for mankynde there shad his blode.²⁶

Such prayers indicate that for the medieval churchgoer adoring the Host included associating it with Christ's passion and death. Indeed, the act of transubstantiation contained in the words of the sacring shows the sacrificial nature of the act and the intimate connection of the Host with Christ's crucifixion. The words of consecration spoken separately over the bread and wine radically separate the body and blood of Christ to symbolise his sacrificial death: 'Take this, all of you, and eat of it. For this is my body which will be given up for you'; 'Take this, all of you and drink from it. For this is the chalice of my blood, the blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in memory of me'.²⁷

These words of the sacring are reflected in Christ's words on the cross in the *Crucifixion* pageant: 'Here to dead I oblige me | From that sin for to save mankind' (ll. 53-4).²⁸ The choreographed violence of the pageant also points to the radical division of Christ's body and blood in the sacring, transmitted through the dialogue and action. Even if the nails are not actually driven into Christ's hands, the violence is graphically present in the soldiers' running commentary: 'Yis, here is a stub will stiffly stand, | Through bones and sinew it shall be sought' (ll. 101-2).²⁹ The implied blood may have been painted or otherwise represented on the actor for Christ. One 15th-century French play of the crucifixion has this significant stage direction: 'There must be blood'.³⁰ For a medieval audience, this would not have been a necessarily bloodthirsty demand. There was popular devotion to the blood of Christ, and to his sufferings in general. The *Crucifixion* pageant particularly captures this devotion through the stretching out of Christ on the cross.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 91; 'Then shall thou do reverence to Jesus Christ's own presence ... And so the elevation thou beholdest, for that is he whom Judas sold, and who was scourged and put on a cross, and for mankind shed his blood'

²⁷ The English translation of the traditional Latin is taken from *Daily Roman Missal*, ed. by Rev. James Socias, 3rd edn (Illinois: Midwest Theological Forum, 2010).

²⁸ 'Here I oblige myself to death in order to save mankind from sin'; all quotations from the pageant are taken from 'The York Corpus Christi Play: The Crucifixion', in *The York Corpus Christi Play: Selected Pageants*, ed. by Christina M. Fitzgerald (Peterborough, Canada: Broadview, 2018).

²⁹ 'Yes, here is a sturdy nail that will go through bones and sinew.'

³⁰ Clifford Davidson, 'Sacred Blood and the Late Medieval Stage', *Comparative Drama*, 31.3 (1997), 436–58 (p. 448) <<https://doi.org/www.jstor.org/stable/41153875>>.

The source for the stretching of Christ with ropes can be found in what Duffy calls ‘the most popular vernacular book of the fifteenth century’:³¹ *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, by the Carthusian Nicholas Love.³² The book promoted a method of contemplating the sufferings of Christ through vivid imagination of the scenes. Like in the pageant, more dialogue is imagined than is found in the Bible. There is also a striking similarity with the pageant in the way *The Mirror* imagines Christ as being stretched on the cross. In *The Mirror*, the author imagines ‘how villainously’ the executioners stretch his hands on both sides to nail him to the cross and then lift up the cross with ‘all their might’ and let it fall in its mortice: ‘In the which fall, as you may understand, all the sinews are broken, to his sovereign pain.’³³

Most of the stage directions of the York pageants are embedded in dialogue, but the directions in the *Crucifixion* are explicit at this point: ‘They pull down on his feet with a rope, to reach the incorrectly bored hole’ (ll. 135-136). As the soldiers are stretching Christ’s arms and feet to fit the holes, the pain Christ experiences is transmitted through the dialogue:

SOLDIER 1	There cords have evil increased his pains, Ere he were till the borings brought.
SOLDIER 2	Yea, asunder are both sinews and veins On ilka side, so have we sought. (ll. 145-8) ³⁴

As in *The Mirror*’s description, the pageant’s visualisation of the sufferings of Christ through the dialogue served to arouse popular affective piety. Likely, the gestures that accompanied the words would also have drawn the audience into the scene. Commenting on Philip Butterworth’s 1992 staging of the York *Crucifixion* play, Margaret Rogerson describes how the utilisation of the dialogue and action maintained a direct connection with the audience on the ground: ‘the audience was involved in the handling of the instruments of the Passion through the stylized gestures of the actors and their direct address of dialogue associated with the props to the spectators.’³⁵ For a medieval audience, this would have meant more than an uncomfortable sensation of being somehow complicit with an execution.

³¹ Duffy, p. 235.

³² A translation of the Franciscan Saint Bonaventura’s *Meditationes Vitae Christi*.

³³ Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, ed. by Michael G. Sargent (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1992), p. 177; the spelling in the original facsimile text has been modified for clarification

³⁴ ‘These ropes have greatly increased his pain as [his limbs] are pulled towards the holes. / Yes, the veins and sinews are torn on each side as we have sought.’

³⁵ Margaret Rogerson, *Playing a Part in History: The York Mysteries, 1951 - 2006* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2009) <<https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442688803>>, p. 120.

It would have been an opportunity to contemplate the sufferings of Christ as popular piety demanded, feeling the pain in one's own emotional involvement.

Even the comic elements mentioned earlier would have found religious meaning through affective piety, if not through liturgical piety. Sarah Beckwith connects the raising of the cross in the *Crucifixion* with the liturgy, calling it 'a grotesque enactment and revision of the act of elevation.'³⁶ The four soldiers in the pageant comically try to lift the cross three times before they are able to set it in its mortice. After the first attempt, SOLDIER 4 complains that they will never be able to lift it between the four of them: 'I ween it will never come thore; | We four raise it not right to-year' (ll.163-4).³⁷ SOLDIER 1 tells him he simply was not trying hard enough (l.166). The bantering continues in this vein after the second and third attempt as well; but finally, the cross is raised. Beckwith says, 'Christ is now invisible; then visible. It is a miming of Elevatio.'³⁸

While Beckwith reads the pageant's representation of Christ on the cross as somehow replacing the host in signification, this is problematic given that the Host would have been much more real to a medieval audience than we can imagine. Johnston says, 'Beckwith overlooks the quasi-liturgical setting in which the plays were embedded for most of their life' She points to the Eucharistic procession with the Host ('theologically the true body of Christ') that used to take place before the performances: 'The plays complemented this display of "corporis Christi"; they did not replace it.'³⁹ In other words, the liturgical context of the plays – the Mass and the Eucharist – was more powerful for the spectators than any theatrical representations. The raising of the cross in performance may have reminded the spectators of the raising of the Host at Mass, but it could never replace it in significance. Thus, any burlesque would not have deflated or replaced a pious attitude towards the Host or the sufferings of Christ. It would have been taken as part of the play-text's creative licence, and it was likely meant to entertain. An urge to laugh at the buffoonery of the soldiers may have moved some spectators to compunction as they found themselves joining in the mockery of Christ, even if at a certain remove. Kerstin Pfeiffer's study of the *Crucifixion* pageant and 'Neuropsychological perspectives on audience response' provides insight into how promoting laughter could 'encourage the emotional convergence of the audience with the merciless tormentors of Christ.'⁴⁰ Such guilty identification and the contemplation of

³⁶ Beckwith, p. 65.

³⁷ 'I reckon it will never get up there; we four will not raise it up right this year.'

³⁸ Beckwith, p. 69.

³⁹ Alexandra Johnston, 'Review of Sarah Beckwith's Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays', *Theatre Journal*, 55.1 (2003), 187–88 (p. 188) <<https://doi.org/www.jstor.org/stable/25069212>>.

⁴⁰ Kerstin Pfeiffer, 'Feeling the Passion: Neuropsychological Perspectives on Audience Response', *Postmedieval*, 3 (2012), 328–40 (p. 338) <<https://doi.org/doi:10.1057/pmed.2012.21>>.

Christ's death in the pageant immediately following would have provided a vivid emotional involvement in the sufferings of Christ as popular piety aimed to do.

Thus, the performative expression of popular piety in the pageantry narrative acted as an ambient technology to help audiences be more aware of their everyday pious practices. The visualisation of the dialogue and action aimed not to replace any signification of the religious devotions but to 'attend' to those religious devotions 'with greater, rather than reduced, intensity,' to paraphrase Abba, Dovey, and Pullinger.⁴¹ Thus, the mystery cycle's socio-religious backdrop, influencing and yet going beyond the technological and narrative structures of the medieval dramaturgy, was an essential aspect of what made it an ambient literature. Both the medieval passion plays and contemporary ambient literature texts exceed the written form, for both require their 'users' to weave in and out of scenes of daily life.

We can discover in the medieval mystery plays purposes and effects resonant with the contemporary ambient literature project, even if much of our understanding of the actual ambience of this literature relies on educated guesswork and an attempt to re-create materiality from scant documentary evidence. What remains certain is that the medieval plays answered long ago the question posed by Abba, Dovey, and Pullinger: 'Why shouldn't every major city curate its own permanent collection of place-based artworks, augmentations and installations that become part of its story through its wireless infrastructure?'⁴² The traditional Christian faith in medieval York was that 'wireless infrastructure' that influenced the very materiality of a 'permanent collection of place-based' dramatic performances. Certainly, the plays were discontinued in the sixteenth-century, but to be performed yearly for two centuries is a more permanent timeframe than an interactive exhibition that is put on display for two days of one year, as was the case with one of the projects showcased in *Ambient Literature*.⁴³ Nevertheless, once a place-based literature is discontinued, whether it be after centuries or days, can the ambient experience really be the same? In this sense, both contemporary and medieval ambient literature offer scholars sites of critical excavation, from which an original ambience can never be fully reconstructed. There will always be conjecture and guesswork surrounding a project that depends on temporary material and social structures. In the case of the Corpus Christi cycle, modern attempts to excavate medieval literary ambience have failed without the support of the socio-religious backdrop

⁴¹ Abba, Dovey, and Pullinger, p. 5: 'We locate the idea of ambient literature in an emergent tradition of cultural forms and artworks that want to connect us to place, to manipulate time and presence in order to have us attend to the world around us with greater, rather than reduced, intensity.'

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴³ Tom Abba, 'Words We Never Wrote', *Ambient Literature* <<https://research.ambientlit.com/wordsweneverwrote>> [accessed 29 June 2021]. Tom Abba's *Words We Never Wrote* appeared in the Hay Festival from 24 May to 3 June 2018 and was also on display in Arnolfini's Front Room in Bristol from 8 to 9 June 2018.

that informed the medieval dramaturgical elements. We will look briefly at examples of stage and cinematic reinventions in this last section.

In the reproductions of the medieval pageants that have been staged every three or four years since 1951, the material set-up of the pageant-wagon technology and the narrative of the plays is creatively and convincingly reproduced, although with limitations. Also, as we have seen earlier, modern reproductions have given insight into how the audience would interact with the materiality of the pageant wagons as they moved through the city. However, the ‘wireless infrastructure’ that gave the plays their social significance is missing.

The whole social order in York that facilitated the creation of the plays has obviously been absent for centuries, with its guilds and the civic and church leaders working in close collaboration. Johnston argues that in the 15th century there would have been oligarchical control of the plays by the civil authorities, with political and religious motives, which would explain the unity of themes and imagery in the cycle.⁴⁴ The plays were established as an annual fixture in the city for the liturgical feast of Corpus Christi, but also for the opportunity the pageantry provided to unite the citizens in one massive project. In 1417 the civic register declares that the plays are ‘especially for the honour and reverence of our Lord Jesus Christ and for the benefit of the [...] citizens.’⁴⁵

In other words, the plays were not designed for the benefit of academic curiosity. Even when a procession of 47 pageant wagons is successfully established in the streets of York or Toronto – an overwhelming amount of work without the original guild structure and partitioning of labour – there will still be absent a united city-wide effort to materialize one common belief system. Neither do we want this to be the case, if we aim to be a multi-cultural, multi-faith community. The point is simply that the technology and narrative of the pageantry, as we have seen, were permeated by a vision of Christian salvation history that had the belief in transubstantiation at its core, and it was this interplay of faith and performativity that made everyday life and piety influence the play-texts and vice versa. There is no doubt that one can ‘get the feeling’ of being there when witnessing one of these modern re-enactments, but this feeling is no longer intrinsically connected to Corpus Christi processions with the Host or affective popular piety.

Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* is a cinematic reinvention that does try to connect with the element of faith and Eucharistic piety: the film is a ‘modern mystery play,’ according to Ronald Madden, who argues that Gibson follows the medieval tradition of dramatizing the

⁴⁴ Alexandra F. Johnson, ‘The City as Patron: York’, in *Theatrical Patronage in Early Modern England*, ed. by Paul Whitfield White and Suzanne Westfall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 150–75.

⁴⁵ Qtd. in Davidson, *Corpus Christi Plays at York*, pp. 23–24.

history of salvation to establish emotional connections with a popular audience.⁴⁶ It is true that the film is strongly influenced by Gibson's Catholic faith, which would seem at first glance to put *The Passion* on par with the medieval play-texts. However, the ambient technologies that would make this an actual 'mystery play' fail to materialise: the situated materiality and interactive narrative of the medieval passion play are absent.

Speaking of his aims with the film, Gibson says, 'I wanted to juxtapose the sacrifice of the cross with the sacrifice of the altar, which is the same thing.'⁴⁷ This identification of the sacring at Mass with the crucifixion manifests the belief behind the words of transubstantiation, as we have seen before. However, unlike the medieval playwrights, Gibson does not collect 'data' from a popular audience by thus transposing a belief on screen. Diane Sawyer remarks that less than 21% of the potential American viewers of the film in 2004 were Roman Catholic.⁴⁸ The doctrine of transubstantiation becomes a visual motif that only some would recognise.

In *The Passion*, when the soldiers brutally let fall the cross with Jesus already nailed to it, the scene cuts back to the meal with his disciples. Jesus picks up the bread at table and says (as the subtitles translate the spoken Aramaic) a version of the words of the consecration at Mass: 'Take this and eat. This is my body which is given up for you.' Then, as he lifts the bread, with the disciple John watching attentively, the scene cuts again to Christ being lifted on the cross. John is also present at the crucifixion, and the marvelling look of recognition or realization on his face, shows a clear understanding of the identification between the bread and Christ's body.⁴⁹ As Gibson comments, 'The penny drops for him at that point.'⁵⁰ The penny may not have dropped for many in the movie theatre, however. The difference between a modern vs. a medieval audience's reaction to this allusion is that most members of the modern audience would not have been immersed in Eucharistic piety since childhood.

The materiality of a cinema, or indeed the TV-room at home, is not intrinsically connected as were the pageant wagons to the materiality of a particular time every year and to a particular processional devotion to worship the Host. Rather than an experience that everyone understood to belong to a sacred space and time, Gibson's mystery play becomes

⁴⁶ Ronald Madden, 'The Passion of the Christ: A Modern Mystery Play', *Journal of Religion and Health*, 43.3 (2004), 247–52 (p. 248) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27512803>>.

⁴⁷ EWTN Global Catholic Network, 'Q&A with Mel Gibson and Jim Caviezel', *Youtube*, 2012 <www.youtube.com/watch?v=LsmYB7NR-T8> [accessed 1 March 2019].

⁴⁸ ABC News, Primetime, 'Mel Gibson's Interview on Filming The Passion of the Christ', *Youtube*, 2016 <www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_kWTdVxVeQ&t=2092s> [accessed 1 March 2019].

⁴⁹ Mel Gibson, *The Passion of the Christ* (Icon Productions, 2004); Hristo Zhivkov plays the role of the apostle John.

⁵⁰ EWTN Global Catholic Network.

available at any time and relies on a manipulation of the spectator's gaze with cinematic techniques rather than on popular piety to move the experience forward. Thus, although the film bases itself on the same liturgical backdrop, the situatedness of the Corpus Christi cycle is absent from this 'modern mystery play.' While faith is alive in Gibson's film, and is obviously alive for many present-day Catholics, it is not the same 'wireless infrastructure' that made the narrative perfectly intelligible in medieval York with no need for flashbacks.

Inevitable failure thus accompanies an effort to re-produce the medieval ambient literature. The materiality of that world, and everyday life as medieval spectators knew it, is simply not our own experience today. This does not mean that the cinematic artistry of *The Passion* or the theatrical re-productions of the mystery cycle are not valid or compelling in their own right; but they are not 'modern mystery plays,' and they are not ambient literature as the original mystery plays were.

The Cambridge Online Dictionaries new words blog defined 'ambient literature' in March 2019 as 'books that are read on an electronic device such as a tablet and which use information about the current date and time, the reader's location, weather conditions, etc. to personalise the experience for the reader'.⁵¹ However, the purpose of this paper has been to show that ambient technologies existed long before the contemporary scene. This is not to deny that there is something intrinsically contemporary about these technologies; for their audiences rely on temporary social and material structures that will eventually disintegrate. It is arguable that the ambient literatures today will join the medieval plays as literary artefacts where something is always lost in reproduction. The transience of ambient literature, that hinges so precariously on contemporaneity, draws attention to how our concept of the contemporary is perhaps the most ambient technology of all.

⁵¹ Qtd. in Abba, Dovey, and Pullinger, p. 10.

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