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Staging Mysteries: Transnational Medievalist Performance in the Twentieth Century

Author
Neuss, Carla E

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Staging Mysteries:

Transnational Medievalist Performance in the Twentieth Century

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in Theater and Performance Studies

by

Carla Neuss

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Staging Mysteries:

Transnational Medievalist Performance in the Twentieth Century

by

Carla Neuss

Doctor of Philosophy in Theatre and Performance Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2021

Professor Sean Metzger, Chair

This dissertation traces adapted forms of the medieval mystery cycle tradition within different transnational moments of social, political, and cultural crisis. In redirecting the spiritually didactic aims of medieval performance, the modern mysteries that constitute this project illuminate how medieval theatre functions as an historical imaginary for the transformative potential of performance.

This project investigates three twentieth-century adaptations of the medieval mystery cycle tradition: Alexander Scriabin's unfinished multi-genre performance, *Mysterium* (c. 1910); Jean Paul Sartre's first play, *Bariona* (1940); and a South African production of the Chester Mystery Cycle, *Yiimimangaliso* (2000). Chapter 2 demonstrates how *Mysterium* sought to enact a distinctly medieval imaginary of spiritual unity epitomized by the Russian religious value of *sobornost.'* In analyzing its Russian Symbolist aesthetics, I argue that the *Mysterium* was designed phenomenologically to enact social transformation on the eve of the Soviet revolution

through "affective atmosphere." Chapter 3 discusses Jean-Paul Sartre's relatively unknown play *Bariona* as an adaptation of the medieval French nativity play tradition produced during World War II. This chapter situates *Bariona* within the longstanding tradition of French medievalist performance as a contested political site within the national consciousness. By analyzing its carceral creation in a POW camp, I argue that *Bariona* enacted a spiritual and liberatory efficacy through the phenomenology of the gaze. Chapter 4 discusses *Yiimimangaliso,* a South African adaptation of the Middle English Chester Mystery Cycle, as form of post-colonial syncretic theatre. Staged in the wake of apartheid, *Yiimimangaliso*'s disparate domestic and international reception demonstrates how the "unmodern" is exoticized and consumed in both medieval and racialized forms while enacting a new notions of nationhood.

Though stemming from vastly different genealogies, these performances converge on their invocation of the medieval mystery as a performed imaginary of cultural and national unity during times of national rupture. By tracing their respective generation and reception, this project argues for the "mystery" as a theatrical modality that seeks to interpellate spectators into new, transformative subjectivities that disrupt binaries between secular and sacred during moments of social, political, and cultural change.

The dissertation of Carla Neuss is approved.

Maaike Bleeker

Suk-Young Kim

Christine Chism

Sean Metzger, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2021

Table of Contents

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Vita

EDUCATION

M.Phil. University of Oxford, 2011
English Literature (650-1550)

B.A. U.C. Berkeley, 2008
English Literature

PUBLICATIONS

2022 "Negotiating Key Terms" in *The Methuen Drama Handbook of Gender and Theatre,* ed. Roberta Mock and Sean Metzger, (London: Methuen & Co.) – *forthcoming 2022*

2021 "Going 'Live' Again: Reflections on Zoom, Co-Presence, & Liveness in a (Post) Pandemic World," *Theatre Survey* 62, issue 3 – *in press*

2021 "Learning to Learn: Didactic Efficacy and Cognitive Dissonance in the Chester Cycle," *Exemplaria* 33.1 – *in press*

2020 "The Apocalypse Will Be Staged: Transformational Efficacy and Affective Atmosphere in Scriabin's *Mysterium,*" *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 35, No. 2 (Fall 2020): 133-151.

2020 "Interview with South African director, Mark Dornford-May", *Theatre Journal* 72, No. 4 (Dec. 2020): E-11 – E-18.

2019 *"Performing Psychologies: Imagination, Creativity, and Dramas of the Mind.* Edited by Nicola Shaughnessy and Philip Barnard (review)" *Theatre Journal* 71, No. 3, (Dec. 2019): 530-531.

2018 "Dry Land by Ruby Rae Spiegel (review)", *Theatre Journal* 70, No. 3, (Sept 2018): 399-401.

2018 "Review: David Scott Kastan's *A Will to Believe: Shakespeare and Religion", Performance, Religion, and Spirituality* 1, No. 2, (Spring 2018): 192-194.

SELECTED CONFERENCE ACTIVITY

2021 "Yiimimangaliso: The Chester Mystery Cycle in Post-Apartheid South Africa" (General Session Presenter - International Congress for Medieval Studies, May 2021)

2021 "Come Look At The Baby: Co-presence and Affective Atmosphere in Live Performance" – (Forum Session Presenter – MLA 2021)

2020 "Repetitions of the Medieval in Contemporary Performance"(Working Session Convenor - American Society for Theatre Research [ASTR 2020])

2019 "An Event That Creates Faith: Destabilizing Secularity through South African Medievalist Performance"(Working Session Presenter - ASTR 2019)

2019 "Staging the Miraculous: Cognitive Dissonance and the Didactic Impetus in the Chester Mystery Cycle" (General Session Presenter - International Congress for Medieval Studies 2019)

2018 "Cognitive and Affective Intersections in the Arousals of Performance" (Working Session Primary Convenor - ASTR 2018)

2018 "The Revolution Will Have Music: Music, Theatre, and the Sacred" (Panel Presenter - ATHE 2018)

2018 "Medieval Dissonance: Didacticism & Cognitive Dissonance in the Medieval Mystery Cycle Tradition" (Panel Presenter - Cognitive Futures in the Arts and Humanities 2018)

2017 "A South African Mystery Cycle: Affective Didacticism & Cognitive Dissonance in *Yiimimangaliso"* (Working Session Presenter - ASTR 2017)

2017 "Liveness: The Art and Science of In-Person Experiences" (Invited Talk - Pacific Coast Builders Conference 2017)

FELLOWSHIPS & AWARDS

2020 Dissertation Year Fellowship, UCLA

2020 Reach for the Stars Award, UCLA

2019 Collegium of University Teaching Fellows, UCLA

2019 Helen Krich Chinoy Dissertation Fellowship, ASTR

2019 Georgia Frontiere Scholarship, UCLA

2018 Graduate Research Mentorship, UCLA

2018 Tim Robbins Award in Playwriting, UCLA

2016 Graduate Dean's Scholar Award, UCLA

SERVICE

2021 Editorial Board, *Comitatu*s 52

2019 Assistant Editor, *Theatre Journal,* (2019-2020)

2019 Steering Committee Member, UCLA TAPS Graduate Student Conference (2019-2021)

Chapter 1 - Introduction

On January 6th, 2021, rioters stormed the U.S. capital; in addition to MAGA caps and confederate flags, the rioters showcased Viking styled hats and ancient Norse tattoos that invoked an imaginary of the medieval Europe and its white supremacists associations.[1] Such imaginaries about the "Middle Ages" are far from new; within the last two decades, the medieval imaginary has resurged across American cultural production, from Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy to the explosion of medievalist online roleplaying video games like *World of Warcraft* and *Elder Scrolls*. Within the waning years of the twentieth century and early decades of the twenty-first, political medievalisms have proliferated in the guises of the War on Terror as a "Crusade", the barbarous torture perpetuated at Guantanamo Bay, and the larger "clash of civilizations" heralded by Samuel P. Huntington.[2] "Neomedievalism" has emerged as a new discourse in political theory that anticipates the globalized political landscape fracturing into a medieval model of powerful city-states.[3] And with the global onslaught of COVID-19, the medievalist legacy of the Black Plague has recirculated amidst popular and academic publications.[4]

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[1] "Marauders in the US Capitol: Alt-right Viking Wannabes & Weaponized Medievalism," *Medieval Studies Research Blog*, University of Notre Dame Medieval Institute, January 15, 2021, http://sites.nd.edu/manuscript-studies/2021/01/15/marauders-in-the-capitol-alt-right-viking-wannabes-weaponized-medievalism-in-american-white-nationalism/

[2] Huntington, Samuel P., *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

[3] See Philip G. Cerny, "Neomedievalism, civil war and the new security dilemma: Globalisation as durable disorder," *Civil Wars*, 1:1 (Spring 1998): 36-64; Stephen J. Kobrin, "Back to the Future: Neomedievalism and the Postmodern Digital World Economy," *Journal of International Affairs* 51, no. 2, (Spring 1998): 361–386, and Neil Winn, *Neo-Medievalism and Civil Wars* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2004).

[4] Nühket Varlık, "Rethinking the history of plague in the time of COVID-19," *Centuarus,* 62, issue 2 (May 2020): 285-293.

As a temporal imaginary, the "Middle Ages" and the "medieval" have provided fodder for an ever-expanding range of cultural production, political rhetoric, and nationalist ideation. As the era that preceded the "modern", the medieval functions as a vehicle that both valorizes and abjects notions of the past for the purposes of the present. Theatre and performance have not been excepted from this pattern; as Marvin Carlson observes, "The theatre has been obsessed always with things that return…everything in the theatre…is now and has always been haunted and that haunting has been an essential part of the theatre's meaning to and reception by its audiences in all times and places."[5]

This project investigates the haunting of the medieval within performance through the ongoing legacy and appropriation of the medieval mystery cycle tradition. In interrogating the afterlives of the medieval "mystery", this project asks why and how mystery cycles have been persistently adapted and appropriated across twentieth-century, transnational contexts. A tool of devotion and doctrine, medieval theatre's religious didacticism risks being reduced within theatre historiography to hegemonic impetuses. However, in its continued appropriation as a theatrical modality, the legacy of the mystery cycle tradition functions both through and beyond aims of spiritual indoctrination.

This project interrogates the persistence and resilience of the mystery through the lens of what Erica Fischer-Lichte has termed "transformative efficacy." Originating in Western Europe, mystery cycles staged the Christian biblical narrative with the purpose of turning spectators towards spiritual devotion; in its post-medieval afterlives, the mystery has been deployed

[5] Marvin A. Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre As Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 15.

towards new forms of transformation.[6] This project argues for the mystery as theatrical modality that seeks to interpellate spectators into new, transformative subjectivities that disrupt the binary between secular and sacred during moments of social, political, and cultural change.

While much medievalist performance persists in ritualized and repeated forms, the case studies that constitute this project are singular, emergent adaptations of the mystery cycle tradition: Alexander Scriabin's Russian Symbolist drama, *Mysterium* (c. 1915), Jean-Paul Sartre's nativity play *Bariona* (1940), and Isango Ensemble's South African adaptation of the Chester Mystery Cycle, *Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries* (2000). In choosing these particular performances, I eschew other ongoing forms of ritualized, medievalist performance that derive from the mystery cycle tradition. Such performances have persisted since the medieval period or been revived throughout the twentieth century such as the Oberammergau Passion Play, performed every ten years in Germany since 1684;[7] the York and Chester Mystery Plays, revived at the 1951 Festival of Britain and subsequently produced in York every five years;[8] and the Mystery Play of Elche, played annually in Alicante, Spain since 1266.[9] Outside the West, the influence of settler colonialism also gave rise to annual medievalist traditions like the Sri Lankan *pashku* plays staged each Easter[10] and the Mexican Christmas processional performances of *Las Posadas* and *Los Pastores*.[11] The ongoing and recurring performance traditions have been the

[6] By post-medieval, I refer the last five hundred years of history in line with other medieval scholars who defer to this term rather than relying on the term "modern" due to its varying temporal constructions.

[7] See K. J. Wetmore, Jr., *The Oberammergau Passion Play: Essays on the 2010 Performance and the Centuries-Long Tradition* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017).

[8] Margaret Rogerson, "Medieval Mystery Plays in the Modern World: A Question of Relevance?" *The Yearbook of English Studies* 43 (2013): 343.

[9] Alberta Wilson, Server, "The Mystery Play of Elche," *Hispania* 40, no. 4, (December 1957): 430-433.

[10] Anthony Fernandopulle, "The Origin and Development of the Tradition of the Passion play in Sri Lanka," *Kulatilaka Kumarasinghe – Critical Gaze* (2014): 532-547.

[11] Claire Sponsler, *Ritual Imports: Performing Medieval Drama in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004),

subject of valuable scholarly research. The case studies that constitute this project, however, are characterized not by the ritualized repetition found in these aforementioned medievalist theatre traditions but rather by their singular emergence during times of crisis, upheaval, and transition.

Detached from other, often contemporaneous, performance traditions of biblical theatre, Scriabin's *Mysterium*, Sartre's *Bariona*, and Isango Ensemble's *Yiimimangaliso* turn to the medieval within secular rather than ritualized contexts. Their individual invocation of the medieval imaginary through the theatrical form of the mystery cycle emerges in response to specific political, social, and cultural transitions but share the impetus to transform audiences into a shared subjectivity defined by solidarity. Developed between the 1905 and 1917 Russian revolutions, Scriabin's multi-genre *Gesamtkunstwerk, Mysterium,* aimed to instigate an apocalypse through a spiritualized performance ritual. A retelling of medieval French nativity plays, *Bariona* was written and staged during Sartre's internment as a prisoner-of-war camp during the Nazi occupation of France as an attempt to enact liberation. Isango Ensemble's syncretic adaptation of the Chester Mystery Cycle, *Yiimimangaliso*, emerged in the wake of apartheid as the newly democratic South African republic strove toward reconciliation, reparation, and the construction of a unified national identity. Situated just before, during, or immediately after periods of national upheaval, these modern mysteries each reinvent the medieval mystery with the aim of catalyzing social transformation during times of crisis and transition—or what I have termed, borrowing from Todd McGowan and Paul Eisenstein, rupture.

Spanning disparate geographies and temporalities within the twentieth century, this dissertation analyzes the recurrence of the medieval mystery in performance during national and historical ruptures to ask the following: how has the medieval imaginary circulated globally

28.

within performance in the form of the mystery cycle tradition? How do these performances leverage the spiritual didacticism of the "mystery" towards transforming spectators in different ways? How does the mystery function to interpellate spectators into distinct states of solidarity during times of rupture? In answering these questions, I argue that the "mystery" can be read as a post-medieval, surrogated performance modality that is leveraged during periods of national and political rupture to stage a phenomenological encounter that repurposes the spiritual didacticism of the mystery cycle tradition. By appropriating a model of performative spiritual efficacy in an attempt to interpellate spectators into a transcendent collective, I theorize the "mystery" as an ongoing theatrical modality that is deployed across transnational contexts to manifest specific forms of social solidarity in the face political, social, and cultural ruptures.

The History of the "Mystery"

To theorize the "mystery", I turn first to its various lexical meanings. Within the Western theatre canon, the term "mystery" refers to the European tradition that dramatized the biblical narrative through plays during the twelfth through sixteenth centuries. The term "mystery" itself, however, presents an etymological Gordian knot. The term's first appearance in English in 1350 served to describe God in a poem by William of Shoreham;[12] the Oxford English Dictionary in this instance defines "mystery" in a theological sense, denoting "mystical presence or nature" that is "hidden."[13] Additional theological texts throughout the mid- to late Middle Ages alternatingly use the term to refer to "a religious truth known only by divine revelation", "a doctrine of faith involving difficulties which human reason is incapable of solving," or a "rite or sacrament of the

[12] William of Shoreham *Poems* (1902) 24 "Ac one god aryȝt hyt nomeþ, Þat body ine hys mysterye." "mystery, n.1." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/124644 .

[13] "mystery, n.1." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/124644 .

Christian church" particularly the Eucharist.[14] By 1384, however, the term was also used non-theologically to describe more generally "something inexplicable or beyond human comprehension; a person or thing evoking awe or wonder but not well known or understood."[15] If we consider the word's transmission into Anglo-Norman from the Old French and ultimately Latin, its meanings proliferate further. While in its Latin form—as in its Greek predecessor—"mysterium" means "secret service, rite, or worship", it was frequently alternated in Classical Latin with the term "minister" meaning servant or assistant.[16] From this substitution emerged the neologism "ministerium" which connoted " 'the office or functions of a minister' and also more broadly 'an office occupation, work, labor, employment, administration.' "[17] Drawing on this evidence, nineteenth-century medieval drama scholar E.K. Chambers challenged the traditional association the term "mysteries" to religious rite, arguing instead for its derivation from the labor guilds of medieval period that produced mystery cycles.[18] F.M. Salter echoed Chambers' interpretation in his 1955 monograph *Mediaeval Drama in Chester:*

> The French word *mystere* (modern *métier*) signified a craft; and the word mystery as signifying a craft or occupation is common in English as early as 1375. When the religious plays have been taken over the mystery or craft guilds, they are called mystery plays.[19]

[14] "mystery, n.1." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/124644.

[15] "mystery, n.1." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/124644 . Accessed 25 February 2021.

[16] Emma Maggie Solberg, "A History of the 'Mysteries'," *Early Theatre* 19, no. 1 (2016):), 16-17.

[17] Solberg, , "A History of the 'Mysteries'," 17.

[18] Solberg, , "A History of the 'Mysteries'," 17.

[19] F.M. Salter, *Mediaeval Drama in Chester (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955),* 9.

However, the term "mystery"—whether in its religious or civic sense—was not attributed to religious theatre until the eighteenth century. While ancient Dionysian rites were had been deemed "mysteries" as early as 1700, the term did not specifically connote what could be called "theatre" but rather the older sense of "secret rites."[20] Publisher Robert Dodsley was historically attributed with introducing the term as referring to a specific theatrical form into English in his 1744 *Select Collection of Old Plays*.[21] However, as Emma Maggie Solberg has recently shown, Italian commedia dell'arte actor, Luigi Riccoboni, preceded Dodsley in using the term to describe religious theatre; in his 1741 book, *An Historical and Critical Account of the Theatres in Europe*, Riccoboni cites *mystères* as "medieval religious plays written in Italian, Spanish, French, English, Dutch, Flemish, and German."[22] It was through translating Riccoboni's text that Dodsley introduced the "mystery" to the English lexicon as referring to a specific form of biblical, cyclical drama of the Middle Ages. While the term connotes various meanings in each of its European contexts, Riccoboni's conceptualization of *mystères* as a pan-European performance practice situates "mystery" as, in the words of Solberg, "a transnational term to describe a transnational phenomenon."[23] This project, in this sense, returns to the mystery as a transnational phenomenon, broadening its post-medieval legacy beyond Western Europe.

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[20] See the reference to the "Sacred Mysteries of Bacchus" in Diodorus, George Booth, James Gibbs, Fulvio Orsini, Lorenz Rhodoman, Henri . Valois, and Photius. *The Historical Library of Diodorus the Sicilian: In Fifteen Books : the First Five Contain the Antiquities of Egypt, Asia, Africa, Greece, the Islands, and Europe : the Last Ten an Historical Account of the Affairs of the Persians, Grecians, Macedonians, and Other Parts of the World : to Which Are Added the Fragments of Diodorus That Are Found in the Bibliotheca of Photius Together with Those Publish'd by H. Valesius, L. Rhodomannus, and F. Ursinus*. London: Printed by Edw. Jones, for Awnsham and John Churchill, 1700, 10.

[21] Solberg, "A History of the 'Mysteries'," 11, 28.

[22] Solberg, "A History of the 'Mysteries'," 28.

[23] Solberg, "A History of the 'Mysteries'," 28.

Through its Greek, Latin, French, Anglo-Norman, and finally English roots, the "mystery" as a theatrical modality is intrinsically intertwined with the notion of the sacred. Secret and hidden, its unknowability connotes a spiritual element that is mystical over theological, affective over logical. Its etymological connection to rites and rituals presents the same impetus towards efficacy over entertainment that Richard Schechner identified in his "efficacy and entertainment braid."[24] As efficacious performance, the mystery does not merely represent but *does* in a performative sense. Secondly, the medieval mysteries—unlike the Dionysian mystery rites—enacted their efficacy through theatre, rather than liturgy or ritual. While the origins of medieval drama (though contested) have often been argued as emergent from early medieval liturgy, the mystery cycles of the late Middle Ages were unequivocally "theatre"—or in the words of their contemporary critics "miraclis pleyinge."[25] Declarative in their didactic aims (a point I shall return to), the mystery cycle tradition professed its own spiritually efficacious purpose. In this way, the mystery cycle tradition presents an opportunity to interrogate theatrical efficacy not through an anachronistic lens but through their own articulated objectives for indoctrination and religious devotion. Characterized by their spiritual didacticism, mystery cycles provide a pre-modern exemplar for theatrical efficacy—one that twentieth-century theatre practitioners like Brecht and Schechner have sought to repurpose for post-medieval, secular ends.[26] Thus, to investigate the efficacy of theatre's present, I turn to a model

[24] Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988), 103.

[25] Clifford Davidson, *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), 35.

[26] Brecht refers explicitly to medieval theatre as one of his inspirations in his essays "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction" (1957) and "A Short Organum for the Theatre" (1949). Schechner first coined the term theatrical efficacy upon seeing a 1963 production of the medieval *Play of Daniel*, which he praised as demonstrating "the efficacy of the theatrical act, in its holy truth; see Richard Schechner, "Intentions, Problems, Proposals", *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Summer, 1963): 5.

for its efficacy in the past, tracing medievalist stagings of mysteries across transnational contexts to explicate why and how the mystery as a form continues to be reinvented towards transformation within performance.

What Were the Mystery Cycles?

Like the Middle Ages themselves, the medieval mystery cycle tradition has extended its reach as a historical, Western European export far beyond its origins. Produced across Europe between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, mystery cycles were characterized by the dramatic enactment of the biblical, Christian narrative. Staged centuries prior to the invention of the printing press and the attendant growth in literacy, the mystery cycles presented an annual liturgical event—tied in most cases to the Feast of Corpus Christi—that recapitulated the Bible in vernacular European languages, offering spectators direct linguistic access to a text that was otherwise presented only in Latin. As the surviving Banns of the Chester Mystery Cycle attest, these cycles were unabashed in their spiritually didactic aims, with their declared purpose being "for the Augmentation and increase of the holy and catholic faith of our savior Jesus Christ and to exhort the minds of the common people to good devotion and wholesome doctrine."[27] As "quick [living] books"[28], the mystery cycle tradition leveraged theatrical performance through what Pamela King has called a "conspiracy of the verbal and the visual" to teach both Christian doctrine and devotional practice. By affectively engaging the "minds of the common people" towards devotion and doctrine, mystery cycles deployed the textual, auditory, spatial, and social

[27] Original text reads: "for the Augmentacon and incresse of the holy and catholyk faith of our sauyor Cryst Jesu and to exhort the myndes of the comen people to gud deucon and holsom doctrine" in F. M. Salter, *The Trial and Flagellation: with other studies in the Chester cycle.* (Malone Society, London, 1935), 132.

[28] Original text reads: "quike bookis" (Davidson, *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, 45.)

elements of performance for the "augmentation and increase" of faith.[29] By the early modern period, the mystery cycle tradition was controversial, increasingly weaponized by both Protestant and Catholic factions in the wake of the Reformation, ultimately leading to political authorities banning the production of biblical drama. Though often overshadowed within theatre historiography by classical and Renaissance drama, the medieval mystery cycle tradition has reemerged in adapted and appropriated forms continually since the sixteenth century. In tracing its recapitulation across three transnational, twentieth-century contexts, this dissertation investigates how this religious theatre tradition from the past has been leveraged within performance throughout the period most often deemed "the modern."

The Medieval Imaginary & Medievalism

Spanning anywhere from 400 to 1600 CE, the "Middle Ages" occupy a complex temporal and historical imaginary, one that functions as a binary with the notion of the "modern." To consider the "medieval", its attendant associations, and its appropriation within twentieth century dramatic practice requires analysis of its function within discourses of modernity. The terms "medieval" and "the Middle Ages" emerged subsequent to the period they attempt to define; in this way, the "Middle Ages" serve as a temporal imaginary that, in Stephanie Trigg's words, "only become visible and apparent to us only and precisely because we perceive ourselves as having left them behind, as having moved on."[30] While Petrarch famously referred to his own era in fourteenth century Italy as the end of the "Dark Ages", the phrase "the Middle Ages" began only circulating in Latin as *medium aveum* (literally translated as "half age") during the

[29] Pamela M. King, "Morality Plays," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 238.

[30] Stephanie Trigg, "Medievalism and theories of temporality" in *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, ed. Louise D'Arcens, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 201.

early modern period; the term "medieval" itself did not emerge until the nineteenth century.[31] Both terms suggest an indeterminate temporality—an age that is rendered "half" or "middle" only in reference to that which it precedes: the "modern." As a catch-all term used to define the thousand-year period between the end of the classical era and the beginning of the Renaissance, the "medieval", as articulated by literary scholar Tison Pugh, "emerges as an invention of those who came after it; its entire construction is, essentially, a fantasy."[32] As Margreta de Grazia notes, the term "modern" itself also holds no intrinsic sematic value—its root in the Latin *modernus* means simply recent or current;

> [The term modern] functioned as a *deictic*, an empty variable whose content derived from the conditions of its enunciation…The term was roughly synonymous with such rolling markers of contemporaneity as *present*, *recent*, and…*new*. Whatever existed in time…had to have been as some point modern, if only temporarily.[33]

From these roots, the concepts of the "medieval" and the "modern" have been reified into a mutually dependent and dichotomous historical imaginary. The "medieval" developed in Western thought as the Other to the normative modernity that it succeeded. Kathleen Davis explicates this process of periodization:

> Periodization, if it is to have a historical legacy, results from a *double* movement: the first, a contestatory process of identification *with* an epoch, the categories of which is simultaneously constitutes…and the second a rejection of that epoch identified in this reduced, condensed form.[34]

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[31] Fred C. Robinson, "Medieval, the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 59:4 (1984): 745-756.

[32] Tison Pugh and Angela J. Weisl, *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present*, (London: Routledge, 2013), 1.

[33] Margreta de Grazia, "The Modern Divide: From Either Side," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 453.

[34] Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 30-31.

The "process of identification" yields the formation of the "medieval", which is simultaneously rejected in order to foreground the "modern." Various scholars have traced the periodization of the medieval in relation to the modern, attributing it to different historical moments characterized by distinct impetuses. Davis ascribes the reification of the "medieval imaginary" to the rise of colonialism in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, focusing especially on the concepts of secularization and feudalism as foundational to contemporary discourses on sovereignty and slavery. In this turn, she argues, the modern free subject was presaged on the past medieval feudal subject, reifying a political notion of the medieval that modernity is defined against.[35] The Eurocentrism of this construction of the "medieval" and "modern" was weaponized, bolstering nationalist narratives of the European Middle Ages in service of justifying settler colonialism and oppression of non-Western peoples. Lisa Lampert-Weissig traces the medieval imaginary within literary studies to the nineteenth century as resulting from emergent nationalist movements and the search for a legitimizing "national essence."[36] These are just two examples of contrasting genealogies of the "medieval" that are invoked to different ends. Within Western periodization, the medieval took on ambivalent connotations; David Matthews categorizes the medieval imaginary into two distinct aspects, the "grotesque" and the "romantic", in which the former category suggests "barbaric violence, irrational religiosity, intellectual stagnation, and artistic naiveté" while the latter serves as a "wellspring of eternal, national virtues" deployed in service of supporting the origin narratives of European nation-states.[37] In his famous essay *Dreaming of the Middle Ages* (1986), Umberto Eco delineates ten

[35] Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty,* 8.

[36] Lisa Lampert-Weissig, *Medieval Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 26 -27.

[37] Candace Barrington, "Global medievalism and translation" in *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, ed. Louise D'Arcens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 182-3.

different constructed imaginaries of the Middle Ages, all of which are deployed towards different purposes in post-medieval contexts.[38] In the recent turn towards a "global Middle Ages", scholars of Eastern Eurasia, the Islamic Mediterranean, and Africa have challenged the Eurocentrism of medieval studies to encompass non-Western contexts through the lens of what Janet Abu-Lughod terms the "medieval world system."[39] Such work has opened up new areas of study addressing "how cultures beyond Europe and its settler colonial societies have interpreted their own place in a putative 'medieval world system', their colonial inheritance of long European pasts, and their own past empires coeval with the European Middle Ages."[40] This project builds on such scholarship by bringing a transnational lens to the study of the global circulation and adaptation of the medieval mystery cycle tradition.

This brief genealogy of the medieval imaginary situates this project's transnational focus on medievalist performance as one of many forms of medievalism. Louise D'Arcens broadly defines medievalism as "the reception, interpretation or recreation of the European Middle Ages in post-medieval cultures."[41] Recent edited collections on medievalism have sought to trace and catalogue ever-proliferating forms of medievalism, ranging from novels to films, video games to amusement parks. Scholars are increasingly broadening the lens of medievalism to include

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[38] See David Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History* (Cambridge: D.S. BREWER, 2017). In his essay "Dreaming of the Middle Ages, Eco's ten categories are listed as: 1) pretext, 2) ironical visitation, 3)barbaric age, 4) romanticism, 5) philosophia perennis, 6) national identities, 7) Decadentism, 8) philological reconstruction, 9) tradition, and 10) Millenarianism. See Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality,* trans. William Weaver (London: Picador, 1987), 61-72.

[39] See Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System 1250-1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[40] Louise D'Arcens, "Medievalism: From Nationalist and Colonial past to Global Future," *Parergon* 36.2 (2019):181.

[41] Louise D'Arcens, "Introduction", in *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism,* ed. Louise D'Arcens (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2016)*,* 1.

cultural productions beyond the West, often through the lens of post-colonialism. Such valuable studies include Kathleen Davis and Nadia Altschul's *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World* (2009), Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* (2001), Lisa Lampert-Weissig's *Medieval Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (2010), and Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams' *Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages* (2010). These works trace a wide range of medievalist case studies but often elide medieval drama, and the mystery cycle tradition in particular, in favor of medievalisms drawn from literature, such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* or *Beowulf*.

Yet studies of medieval drama have proliferated since the inception of medieval studies as a discipline in the late nineteenth century. Such works has often followed national genealogies, with much of early English literary scholarship attempting to producing teleological, developmental genealogies that frame medieval drama as giving rise to Renaissance/Shakespearean theatre. In the twentieth century, key figures such as V.A., Kolve, Clifford Davidson, David Mills, and R.M. Lumiansky have been central in producing complete edited texts of the early English mystery cycles and initiating historiographic research on their production through the Records of Early English Drama (R.E.E.D.) project. The development of medieval drama studies as a subsection of medieval literary studies more broadly (particularly in English) has yielded essential scholarship on medieval devotional practice, historiography of theatrical production, and medieval religious and cultural expression more broadly; recent research on mystery cycles has focused on reappraising the mystery cycle tradition beyond its overt religious didacticism, instead focusing on minoritarian subjectivity, civic performance, and affective embodiment.[42]

[42] Here I am thinking of such works as Pamela M. King's *The York Mystery Cycle and the Worship of the City* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), Jody Enders' *Death by Drama and Other Medieval Legends* (Chicago: University

In centering on the afterlives of the mystery cycle tradition as *medievalist* drama, this project aligns with the work of scholars such as John R. Elliott Jr., Katie Normington, Sarah Beckwith, and Claire Sponsler. John R. Elliott Jr.'s *Playing God: Medieval Mysteries on the Modern Stage* (1989) presents one of the earliest studies on the subject of modern iterations of mystery cycle, in which he traces the demise of their performance in the sixteenth century, the influence of the Oberammergau Passion Play in the Victorian era, and the revival of the English mystery cycle performance between 1901 and 1980. Katie Normington's 2007 work *Modern Mysteries: Contemporary Production of Medieval English Cycle Drama* continues the genealogy initiated by Elliott, focusing on contemporary British productions of mystery cycle into the 21st century. Sarah Beckwith's *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* deftly excavates the "sacramental theatre" of medieval York in relation to twentieth century iterations of "incarnational theatre", such as the 1951 reenactment of the York Cycle at St. Mary's Abbey and the 1989 film *Jesus of Montreal*. While this dissertation aligns with these scholar's interest in modern and contemporary iterations of the mystery cycle tradition, its scope exceeds their shared focus on British drama. In its global range of case studies. In this way, this project is perhaps most resonant with Claire Sponsler's *Ritual Imports: Performing Medieval Drama in America* (2004). With central case studies ranging from Native American ritual to New England parades, Sponsler excavates the hidden traces of medieval drama across hybridized forms of ongoing American performance, deploying Joseph Roach's theory of surrogation to address minoritarian (re)clamations of medieval theatre in diverse and creolized forms.

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of Chicago Press, 2002), and Jill Stevenson's *Performance, Cognitive Theory and Devotional Culture: Sensual Piety in Late Medieval York* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) as well as more recent publications that foreground questions of sexuality (see Emma Maggie Solberg, "Madonna, Whore: Mary's Sexuality in the N-Town Plays," 2014), the body (see Estella Ciobanu, *Representations of the Body in Middle English Biblical Drama,* 2018), and the grotesque (Ernst Gerhardt, "The Towneley 'First Shepherds' Play': Its 'Grotesque' Feast Revisited," 2019).

By extending the considerations of such scholarship to transnational mysteries, this project eschews the national demarcations of previous research to expand the lens of medievalism by interrogating how the medieval imaginary is deployed during times of political rupture through the lens of the mystery cycle. In this way, it presents (to date) the first transnational study of medievalist drama with regards to the mystery cycle tradition. More importantly, it broadens in its analysis what Solberg cites as the original scope of the "mystery" as a theatrical form: as a "transnational phenomenon" from its inception in medieval Europe, the reach of the mystery cycle tradition has extended beyond both the West and the Middle Ages themselves. Global Christianity, settler colonialism, and theatre itself have disseminated the mystery transnationally as both a Western historical performance mode and a tool for proselytization in the centuries since the medieval period. As the locus of global Christianity has shifted from away from western Europe to the global South,[43] biblical and devotional performance practices, like the mystery cycle tradition, are being reclaimed and reinvented by new subjectivities and positionalities beyond the West. In tracing the "mystery" across twentieth-century Russia, France, and ultimately South Africa, this project traces the dissemination, adaptation, and appropriation of the mystery as a theatrical form that invokes the medieval imaginary towards transforming spectators within periods of national rupture towards new forms of social solidarity.

Key Terms & Concepts

In tracing the medieval mystery cycle tradition across three distinct countries and decades in the twentieth century, I employ three central critical frameworks to illuminate the convergences

[43] "Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population", Pew Research Center (2011) https://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/.

between Scriabin's *Mysterium*, Sartre's *Bariona*, and Isango Ensemble's *Yiimimangaliso*. All three draw inspiration from medieval dramatic texts and traditions, explicitly invoking the language of "mystery" in their titles or descriptions. In line with the mystery cycle tradition, they center on religious or spiritual content, often drawing directly from the Christian biblical narrative.[44] And, as mentioned earlier, each was disassociated from concurrent ritualized or liturgical tradition, emerging instead as singular performance events in direct response to their political-historical context. Building on these synchronicities, I approach these case studies and their surviving archives through three hermeneutic lenses: efficacy and transformation, rupture and solidarity, and phenomenology and spectatorship. Beyond and through their initial similarities as modern "mysteries", these performances employ the mystery to enact spectatorial transformation with the aim of eliciting social solidarity in moments of rupture, interpellating audiences into new conceptions of subjectivity through spiritual performance.

Efficacy & Transformation

The concept of efficacy can be traced to the earliest theorizations of theatre's purposes and effects—from Aristotle, for whom such aims were encapsulated by catharsis, to Bharat Muni, author of the *Natyasastra*, who prescribed drama for the joint purpose of "instruction" and "diversion."[45] Drawing on these ritualistic roots of performance, Richard Schechner sought to categorize theatre along his "efficacy and entertainment braid", defining theatrical efficacy as the capacity "effect transformations" in both performers and spectators.[46] Through their joint study

[44] Scriabin's *Mysterium* foregrounds a mystical, rather than biblical narrative, but as Chapter 1 details, the *Mysterium* was intertwined with Russian Symbolist Christian ideals.

[45] Bharata Muni and Manomohan Ghosh, *Natyasastra*, (Calcutta: Manisha Granthalaya, 1956). 15.

[46] Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 116. Schechner deployed this theorization of transformative efficacy within his own work as a theatre practitioner, most famously in his controversial performance *Dionysus in '69*, where he sought to dissolve the separation between audience and performer to mixed results. In his 1970 review of Dionysus

of rituals, Schechner and Victor Turner defined such efficacious transformation within performance as changing people from "not only…[from] one status to another but from one identity to another."[47] Intrinsic to this process was Turner's conceptualization of *communitas*, an emergent form of collective unity within the liminality of ritual performance. Within communitas, participants give "recognition to an essential and generic human bond" that yields a sense of unity between "the whole man in relation to other whole men."[48] Erica Fischer-Lichte has more recently concretized this notion, defining "transformative efficacy" as theatre's capacity to effect transformation in spectators through their "physiological, affective, volitional, energetic, and motor reactions".[49] Situating her analysis within the "performative" turn in mid-century avant-garde theatre, Fischer-Lichte argues that "transformative efficacy" ultimately serves to transform "spectators into actors."[50] While Fischer-Lichte makes a persuasive argument for the performative turn effectively subsuming semiotic meaning to the immediate, material meaning of performance, the transformation she articulates is tautological in relationship to Schechner's notion of efficacy in terms of transforming identities. If efficacious performance seeks to transform the identity of spectators but that new identity is merely that of performer, then theatrical efficacy functions to simply create performers.

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in '69, Dan Isaac states "Sexual assault upon individual members of the audience is almost a trademark of Schechner's work." See Dan Isaac, "Dionysus in 69 by Richard Schechner - review *Educational Theatre Journal* 22, no. 4 (December 1970): 434.

[47] Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 111.

[48] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press,1969),* 97, 127.

[49] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2008), 17.

[50] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance,* 15.

Scholars such as Jill Dolan also invoke efficacy to name impetuses within performance that are utopic or resistant, political and/or minoritarian. For Dolan, theatrical efficacy shifts away from the individual subject towards the social and political community: in Dolan's words, performance's "efficacy…[is] a way to think about its social potential" toward the goals of "radical democracy", "improved social relations" and ultimately, "a much better world."[51] While she deploys the language of "transformation" in her description of efficacy, Dolan's ideal for efficacy is "emotional" in hopes of galvanizing audiences towards specific political projects; for her, "being moved emotionally is a necessary precursor to political movement."[52]

Across their different projects, Schechner, Fischer-Lichte, and Dolan consider efficacy within performance towards different but distinctly secular ends. Donnalee Dox has described this tendency within modern performance as one in which (predominantly Western) theatre practitioners—from Peter Brook to Jerzy Grotowski to Eugenio Barba—leverage "the potential for performance to reconstitute religious rituals and belief" toward "the process [of] sacralizing theater without affirming the sacred."[53] This dissertation aligns with Dox's call to reconsider the sacred and spiritual in performance by reapproaching the "mystery" as a distinctly spiritual mode of transformation within performance. The case studies that constitute this project each envision or enact specific forms of spiritual efficacy within their respective contexts: Scriabin sought to instigate a cosmic, apocalyptic awakening through his *Mysterium*; Sartre's *Bariona* led to the conversion of spectators to Catholicism; and *Yiimimangaliso* was received by audiences as

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[51] Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor, Mich: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 15, 11, 14, 6.

[52] Jill Dolan, "Performance, Utopia, and the "Utopian Performative," *Theatre Journal* 53, No. 3, (Oct. 2001): 459.

[53] Donnalee Dox, *Reckoning with Spirit in the Paradigm of Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 4.

reviving the relevance of Christianity for a contemporary, secular Britain. Together, they present an opportunity to reconsider theatrical efficacy in terms of spiritual transformation: *Mysterium*, *Bariona*, and *Yiimimangaliso's* spiritual effects challenge secularist formulations of theatrical efficacy, enacting transformation beyond the goals of political change or spectatorial participation. Rather, these performances enact transformation through their spiritual effects by engaging the "mystery" as a theatrical mode. In this way, they presents the means to interrogate theatrical efficacy, its aesthetic manifestations, and its phenomenological impact on spectators while, in deploying the medieval imaginary via the mystery cycle tradition, also recentering spirituality in response to their respective historical contexts during periods of rupture.

Rupture & Solidarity

As previously stated, the turn toward the medieval within each of this project's case studies converge in times of political crisis, social upheaval, and cultural transition. Such moments—from Scriabin's Tsarist Russia on the brink of the Soviet revolution, to Sartre's Nazi-occupied France just prior to the beginning of the Fourth Republic, to South Africa's nascent democracy in the wake of apartheid—exemplify the theorization of rupture as articulated by Paul Eisenstein and Todd McGowan.

Situating their intervention within political philosophy, Eisenstein and McGowan challenge a traditional focus on the distribution of power within political history. Instead, they define ruptures as singular moments that suspend the progressive continuity of history, yielding new cultural values that function as the organizing principle for politics; thus, rupture "occurs prior to power relations and creates the values that underwrite them", making it the generative phenomenon behind political change.[54] While political revolution is perhaps the most obvious

[54] Paul Eisenstein and Todd McGowan, *Rupture: On the Emergence of the Political* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 4.

example of rupture (though Eisenstein and McGowan nuance the idea that all revolutions truly function as ruptures), the authors argue that rupture manifests more broadly as an interruption to the continuity of history and "the flow of social life."[55] Identifying Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt as key theorists whose work anticipates their own, Eisenstein and McGowan cite Benjamin's notion of "the interruption of the progressive flow of history"[56] and Arendt's valorization of "break[s] in chronology"[57] as symptomatic of rupture. For Eisenstein and McGowan, ruptures constitute the historical force that reorients "social relations" and inaugurates new "political values."[58] In this way, the political is merely the visible manifestation of the new, emergent values that are emergent from rupture on a conceptual level, leading them to define political history as "marked by the moments when thinkers recognized the values inherent in the signifying rupture and brought them to the fore of politics."[59]

For the purposes of this project, I draw on Eisenstein and McGowan's formulation of rupture to reframe the historical events surrounding each case study as not merely political but broader moments of social, cultural, and ideological shift. The unstable ground of transition that characterized the decline of imperial Russia, the Nazi occupation of France, and reinvention of South African democracy in the aftermath of apartheid yielded a climate from which these performances, and their reinvention of the mystery, emerged. I deploy rupture in this sense as a lens that approaches political, social, and cultural change as a holistic and intertwined matrix

[55] Eisenstein and McGowan, *Rupture,* 3.

[56] Eisenstein and McGowan, *Rupture,* 26.

[57] Eisenstein and McGowan, *Rupture,* 28.

[58] Eisenstein and McGowan, *Rupture,* 22.

[59] Eisenstein and McGowan, *Rupture,* 29.

which yielded a particular turn towards the medieval and the spiritual through performance. However, I resist Eisenstein and McGowan's linear and causal articulation of rupture; upturning previous theorizations of political change, these authors present a top-down model of conceptual and philosophical rupture as percolating subsequently into political forms. In the case studies under my consideration, I frame rupture as the nexus of conceptual and historical forces that converge and manifest through multiple aspects of society rhizomatically. I use rupture, in this sense, to frame the turn to the medieval mystery as a mode of transformation that responds to a shifting sense of collective, social identity. In their iterations of the mystery, these three case studies each seek to enact societal solidarity in the face of national rupture. Reflecting yet superseding the political in their aims and effects, *Mysterium Bariona*, and *Yiimimangaliso's* enacts their calls for solidarity in culturally specific, spiritualized ways: in Russia, as *sobornost'*, in France as *unité*, and in South Africa as *ubuntu*. Their shared turn to the medieval mystery in periods of rupture manifests as an overarching call to these culturally indigenous concepts of spiritual solidarity, leveraged within the theatrical encounter towards transforming spectators as subjects.

In detailing several philosophical ruptures that yielded specific political effects, Eisenstein and McGowan give special attention to solidarity, attributing it directly to the rise of Christianity:

> Christianity lifts religious belief out of its attachment to a particular group of people and envisions solidarity existing across any social or political distinctions. Christian solidarity—the solidarity as such—exists outside any legal order and interrupts this order. The death and resurrection of Christ interrupts the dominance of law and creates solidarity in this interruption. While law requires a division between inside and outside, citizen and foreigner, or law follower and criminal, Christ reveals these divisions as inconsequential and creates a bond among believers that is indifferent to the law's demand for division.[60]

[60] Eisenstein and McGowan, *Rupture,* 30.

The authors assert that the while the Church over history has lost any "authentic Christian solidarity" by ossifying into a hegemonic, doctrinal institution, they defend the ideological authenticity of the faith as situated in its "transition from the life lived in sin to the life lived in Christ." This transition, they argue, constitutes a rupture that yields a "shared transformation" of identity that produces solidarity.[61] Solidarity, in this way, is emergent only from the sustained "trauma of having a ruptured identity" in a social rather than individual sense.[62] Ultimately, Eisenstein and McGowan argue that the solidarity that emerges from Christianity "is a solidarity without ground because the bond that exists in nothing but the shared absence of ground. What holds us together as a group is our break from the security of an established identity."[63]

Though they do not draw this parallel, Eisenstein and McGowan's theorization of solidarity echoes key aspects of Turner's communitas. By breaking from the "security of an established identity", solidarity emerges from rupture just as communitas emerges from ritualistic rites of passage; what Eisenstein and McGowan attribute to the conceptual rupture of Christianity within Western history, Turner and Schechner observe in the transformative performance of ritual. In paralleling solidarity and communitas, I don't seek to privilege one framework or equate them (indeed, they have central differences); however, the mystery cycle tradition encapsulates both impetuses, staging the Christian narrative within performance derived from ritual to enact solidarity/communitas. Within the case studies that constitute this project,

[61] Eisenstein and McGowan, *Rupture,* 93.

[62] Eisenstein and McGowan, *Rupture,* 94.

[63] Eisenstein and McGowan, *Rupture,* 94.

this convergence is leveraged within periods of national rupture as a means of architecting solidarity and communitas for spectators.

Phenomenology & Spectatorship

To investigate these modern mysteries and their attempts to enact solidarity, I turn to phenomenology as a methodology. With its central claims derived from Husserl, phenomenology asserts that consciousness emerges in relation to objects, the environment, and the world at large, forming a fundamentally relational approach to analyzing experience, perception, and meaning-making. As Maaike Bleeker has argued, these central concerns of phenomenology align with those of performance: "Concerned primarily with the structures of experience and perception, phenomenology speaks to fundamental concerns of performance-making, starting with questions about how audience members encounter performances."[64] By centering the embodied, perceiving spectator as the locus of meaning-making within performance, phenomenological analysis offers an alternative to semiotic frameworks. In approaching theatre foremost as a perceptual rather than signifying encounter between spectator and performance, Bert O. States argues:

> The problem with semiotics is that addressing theater as a system of codes [is] it necessarily dissects the perceptual impression [that it] makes on the spectators…the danger of a linguistic approach to theater is that one is apt to look past the site of our sensory engagement with its empirical objects.[65]

In turning away from signification towards a perceptual approach to performance, States argues for theatre's efficacy beyond textuality through its "affective corporeality as the carrier of meanings."[66] Stanton B. Garner has expanded on this, describing phenomenological analyses of

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[64] Maaike Bleeker, Jon F. Sherman, and Eirini Nedelkopoulou. *Performance and Phenomenology: Traditions and Transformations* (NY: Routledge, 2018), 4.

[65] Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 7.

[66] States, 27.

performance as providing a "twin perspective on the world as it is perceived and inhabited, and the emphasis on *embodied* subjectivity."[67] Garner's argument foregrounds my own use of phenomenology to analyze the reception of historical performances: phenomenology, he states, "has the potential to give history a living face:"[68]

> It can explore the particular modes of attention engaged by history, the ways in which history is both manifested and constituted in personal and intersubjective fields. In this way phenomenology can offer the cultural or materialist critic access to the individual and social life-world within which history arises and manifests itself.[69]

In approaching three case studies situated in distinct historical and national contexts, this project faces the challenge of interrogating the efficacy of performances whose extant archives often elide direct analysis of audience reception. By "reveal[ing] the perspectival aspect intrinsic to any act of perception conducted by an embodied subject," phenomenological analysis enables me to approach the surviving remains of these case studies to reconstitute how transformation was envisioned and/or manifested within the perceptual encounter between spectators and each performance. [70] In this way, this dissertation extend the stakes of Jill Stevenson's 2010 monograph on medieval sensual piety and the York Mystery Cycle to transnational, twentieth-century medievalist performance. For Stevenson, "phenomenological inquiry, which redirects attention from an allegedly objective conception of the world to an understanding of the world as perceived by subjects, offers us constructive ways to explore how these effects may have

[67]Stanton B. Garner, *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 3.

[68] Garner, *Bodied Spaces,* 8.

[69] Garner, *Bodied Spaces,* 10.

[70] Garner, *Bodied Spaces,* 12.

functioned as devotional cues for medieval spectators."[71]As Stevenson demonstrates, phenomenological methods of analysis provides the means for approaching questions of spectatorship and spirituality within theatre of both the Middle Ages and its twentieth century, medievalist successors. Drawing on such scholarship, my use of phenomenology in this project reclaims its transcendent origins in Husserl through the investigation of performance's spiritual effects on spectators, but with an eye towards the material, embodied, perceptual, and relational facets of the performance encounter encapsulated by subsequent phenomenologies.

For the purposes of this project, I will be building on these scholars' conception of performance as a phenomenological encounter between spectator and performer to investigate how these performances are rendered efficacious in their appropriation of the medieval mystery cycle tradition. I deploy different phenomenological frameworks to analyze the respective archive of each case study, applying Mikel Dufrenne and Gernot Böhme's concept of atmospheres in my reading of Scriabin's *Mysterium*, Sartre and Foucault's phenomenology of "the look *[le regard]*" in my approach to *Bariona*, and Linda Martín Alcoff's and Sianne Ngai's phenomenology of race as a perceptual practice in relation to *Yiimimangaliso*. While these frameworks vary in their application and aims, they align in their approach to embodied and affective perception within the performance encounter. In their spiritual effects, these performances operate across valences that are affective and perceptual over cognitive and logical, yielding efficacies that are immediate and embodied rather than signifying and semiotic. This project thus bridges divergent discourses in phenomenology—the transcendent and spiritual

[71] Stevenson, *Performance, Cognitive Theory and Devotional Culture,* 17.

with the embodied and perceptual—arguing for their convergence within the transformative efficacy enacted by three medievalist mysteries in the twentieth century.

Together, these concepts—efficacy and transformation, rupture and solidarity, phenomenology and spectatorship—form the theoretical framework for my analysis of three modern mysteries. Traversing the beginning, middle, and end of the twentieth century, *Mysterium*, *Bariona*, and *Yiimimangaliso* posit a revaluation of transformation and efficacy within performance. By eschewing the secularism of previous scholarship, this project investigates how the mystery cycle tradition has been adapted and appropriated to enact solidarity during periods of rupture, architecting spectatorial transformation through the phenomenologies of the performance encounter.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 – Staging the Apocalypse: Spiritual Transformation and Affective Atmosphere in Scriabin's *Mysterium*

From 1904 to 1915, Russian Symbolist composer Alexander Scriabin crafted a multi-genre performance conceived as a "ritual enacting the miracle of terrestrial and cosmic transformation."[72] Drawing inspiration from Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* operas and Russian Symbolist aesthetics, Scriabin designed *Mysterium* around a dissonant chord that he believed himself to have been the first musician to discover; the plans for the performance included music, dance, text, dialogue, color, and incense all working in aesthetic accord to bring about what scholars have described as nothing less than an apocalypse. Aimed at "sealing both the fullness of the time that has come to pass and the birth of a new man", *Mysterium* remained

[72] Simon Morrison, "Skryabin and the Impossible," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 284.

unfinished at Scriabin's death in 1915.[73] Developed between the 1905 and 1917 Russian revolutions, *Mysterium* emerged within the ruptures of the decline of imperial Russia and was defined by its goal for enacting the Russian ideal of *sobornost'* through performance. While Scriabin's legacy as a composer has been excavated by musicologists, his vision for the theatrical performance that would be the *Mysterium* has been relatively neglected by theatre historians. This chapter approaches the theatrical performance that would have been the *Mysterium* from the lens of medievalist performance in the context of the developing ruptures in Russian socio-political life and the turn towards the utopic, spiritual ideal of *sobornost'*.

Beginning by tracing the genealogy of the medieval imaginary within Russian theatre, this chapter situates Scriabin's theatrical vision within the Symbolist turn to theatre as a sacred ritual capable of enacting social and spiritual transformation, epitomized by the Russian ideal of *sobornost'* as a collective, co-present form of social unity. *Mysterium's* aims and design, however, surpassed its Symbolist predecessors in its singular use of aesthetics. This chapter proceeds to enact a close reading of *Mysterium* drawing on its extant archive which survives only in the forms of an unfinished poetic libretto, musical sketches, and the published recollections of Scriabin's key interlocutors. A known synesthete, Scriabin architected the *Mysterium* to engage each of the five senses with the overarching aim of creating a "Cosmic conflagration of matter, time, and space, and the union of the spirit with the Anima Supra-mundi: the Cosmic Over-Soul."[74]

[73] V. I. Ivanov, Robert Bird, and Michael Wachtel, *Selected Essays* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 213.

[74] Morrison, "Skryabin and the Impossible," 301.

While grandiosity of his aims have often been pilloried, I argue that Scriabin's vision for apocalyptic unity through a theatrical performance encounter enacts its vision of transformative efficacy through what I term *affective atmosphere*. In coupling affect and atmosphere, I converge preexisting formulations of affect with the phenomenological concept of atmosphere to redefine the concept of efficacy in performance in terms of materiality.[75] Drawing on the work of Theresa Brennan, Mikel Dufrenne, and Gernot Böhme, I argue that affective atmosphere suggests a different reading of the *Mysterium*: rather than mere artistic delusion, the *Mysterium* reveals itself to be a highly intentional production of a material atmosphere through sensory aesthetics, aimed at producing a specific form of transformative efficacy to enact a medieval imaginary of *sobornost'* in the face of the disintegration of Tsarist Russia. In fundamentally leveraging the materiality of aesthetics towards spiritual ends, Scriabin's mystery reframes theatrical efficacy in terms of the material in order to subsume spectators into a transformative state of mystical solidarity toward apocalyptic ends.

Chapter 2 - Enacting Freedom: Liberatory Efficacy, Medievalist Unity, and the Carceral Gaze in Sartre's *Bariona*

In December 1940, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote to Simone de Beauvoir stating, "I'm writing my first serious play…and it's about the Nativity."[76] The play (Sartre's first piece of dramatic writing) was *Bariona: Son of Thunder* was performed over Christmas 1940 while Sartre was a prisoner of war under the Nazis in Trier, Germany. Interned at the prisoner of war camp Stalag 12D, Sartre wrote, directed, and performed in his nativity play to an audience of several thousand

[75] My formulation of affective atmosphere converges with Ben Anderson's helpful literature review of the concept which situates it within discourses of political revolution but draws on many of the same sources. See Anderson, Ben, "Affective Atmospheres," *Emotion, Space and Society*, no. 2 (2009): 77-81.

[76] Sartre, Jean-Paul, Simone. Beauvoir, Lee Fahnestock, and Norman MacAfee. *Quiet Moments in a War: The Letters of Jean-Paul Sartre to Simone De Beauvoir* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994), 244-245.

prisoners, some of whom converted to Christianity as a result. Subsequently, Sartre banned *Bariona's* production and publication, only reluctantly allowing a limited-edition print of the text in 1962. While *Bariona* has received some critical attention from Sartre scholars (often seeking to reconcile the play's Christian narrative with its author's avowed atheism), it has yet to be analyzed as a piece of medievalist performance produced during the national rupture of the Nazi occupation of France.

In this chapter, I approach Sartre's turn to the medieval nativity play as enacting a dual efficacy that is both liberatory and spiritual. Contextualizing *Bariona's* emergence within the rupture of French defeat and the Vichy regime, I trace the robust genealogy of French medievalist performance in which the "medieval" came to be a politically contested site of the French national imaginary. Dual reclamation of the medieval imaginary by the political left and right situated the "mystery" as a touchstone for French nationalism, one that would be specifically invoked during the existential threat to French sovereignty posed by the German occupation in World War II. Within this context, Sartre's turn towards the medieval in the midst of the carceral conditions of Stalag 12D reframes *Bariona* as enacting a medieval ideal of unity. Through conjoined phenomenological analysis of Sartre's "the look *[le regard]*" and Foucault's carceral gaze, I argue that *Bariona's* spiritual effects were concomitant with its liberatory message. Surrogating the salvific narrative of Christ towards a transcendent ideal of pre-modern unity, *Bariona* enacts a liberatory, spiritual encounter for spectators, one that leverages the medieval imaginary through and beyond the crisis of French national identity to a fundamental reconception of the relationship between Self and Other. In its spiritual effects, *Bariona* constituted a fraught Sartrean ideal of theatre's potential for transformative efficacy through its ability to reconstitute an otherwise lost form of prebourgeois solidarity.

Chapter 3 – Performing the Unmodern: *Yiimimangaliso* and South African Medievalist Performance

In its final chapter, this project turns to a 2000 production of the Chester Mystery cycle by the South African theatre company, Isango Ensemble. With a cast of amateur actors, a set consisting of beer crates and a bale of hay, and dialogue in a variety of African languages, *Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries* premiered in South Africa before touring in the UK in 2001. Over the course of its run at the Spier Festival in South Africa's Stellenbosch wine region, the production's response was lukewarm, with reviewers describing it as "amateurish"[77] and "too long."[78] Only six years after the end of apartheid, the portrayal of God by a black actor still angered white audience members, several of whom walked out of the performance in protest and accused the director of "Africanizing" the biblical narrative. Six months later the production premiered in London and was an unprecedented success. British reviews lauded it as "spectacular" and "extraordinary" with *The Times* reporting the nightly standing ovations wherein "hundreds of jaded journalists forgot their cynicism and sprang to their feet."[79] Its UK reception was particularly praised for its perceived spirituality; writing for *The Guardian*, Michael Billington characterized the play itself as "an event that creates faith", with another review claiming that the production had "done what the Church of England has been striving to do for decades and given Christianity an audience."[80]

[77] Robert Grieg, "Focus blurred and detail lost in premature debut," *The Sunday Independent*, Dec. 17, 2000, 19.

[78] Jill Fletcher, "Mysteries Make Moving Theatre," *Cape Argus*, Dec. 18, 2000, A4.

[79] Fiona Chisholm, *A Short History of Dimpho Di Kopane: A South African Lyric Theatre Company* (New York, 2004), 119.

[80] Chisholm, *A Short History of Dimpho Di Kopane,* 119.

The production ultimately transferred to the West End for a sellout run and has toured internationally in 2001-2, 2009, 2014, and, prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, in 2020.

This chapter interrogates *Yiimimangaliso's* spiritual resonance for British spectators as juxtaposed with its controversial South African reception. While British audiences experienced a renewed encounter with their own religiously didactic theatrical tradition, South African audiences perceived a progressive, socially didactic message through the politics of representation and race. Framing *Yiimimangaliso* as an example post-colonial syncretic theatre, I trace South African forms of medievalism within post-colonial discourse in which the medieval imaginary offers a form of progressive potentiality as an alternative to Western, secular modernity. Reading this impetus into the rupture constituted by the fall of the apartheid and birth of the new South African democracy, I situate *Yiimimangaliso's* emergence during the presidency of Thabo Mbeki and his so-called "African Renaissance" of the early 2000's. Turning away from questions of political reparation and redress as epitomized by Nelson Mandela and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Mbeki sought to enact an African Renaissance underpinned by the African virtue of *ubuntu*. Most often translated as "human-ness and humaneness", ubuntu became a social, political, and cultural value that the new South African government asserted as the foundation for a unified, post-apartheid South African national identity. I read *Yiimimangaliso's* turn to the Chester Mystery Cycle through the political appropriation of ubuntu as an indigenous ideal for national solidarity deployed towards reifying a new form of post-apartheid nationalism. In light of this contextualization, I reapproach *Yiimimangaliso's* disparate reception in South Africa and the U.K. through the lens of phenomenologies of race. Using Sianne Ngai's notion of racial "animatedness" and Linda Martín Alcoff's theory of racial embodiment, I argue that *Yiimimangaliso's* distinct political and

spiritual efficacies operate through racialization as a perceptual practice within the performance encounter wherein the black bodies of its performers are read as "unmodern" in their perceived religious authenticity. This final case study thus extends questions of transformative efficacy to (post)colonial audiences, modeling how efficacy is varyingly constituted in relation to notions of temporality, nationality, and the racialized other.

Conclusion

In tracing these three modern mysteries across their contexts of rupture, this project points to the "mystery" as a surrogated form of the medieval imaginary that emerges as an exemplar of a specific form of efficacy within twentieth century theatre. Across their different temporal and national contexts, these case studies deploy the mystery to enact transformations through phenomenological methods during times of national rupture to produce culturally specific, spiritualized states of solidarity. Their recourse to medieval religious drama ultimately approaches transformation within the performance encounter as spiritual and transcendent, even in attempts to deploy it towards secular, political ends. Thus, I conclude by offering a new definition of the "mystery" as a theatrical mode: drawing on its historical genealogy, the mystery functions as theatrical modality that—as in its original form in the Middle Ages—deploys performance towards a state of spiritual solidarity. It interpellates spectators into a new state of subjectivity characterized by solidarity—in the forms of *sobornost'*, *unité*, or *ubuntu*—in response to the distinct ruptures of its broader societal context. In moments of political upheaval, national crisis, and cultural transition, the "mystery" reemerges in ever proliferating forms, using its inheritance of spiritual didacticism towards architecting an ideal of solidarity that ultimately extends beyond the parameters of national identity towards a utopic of global humanity. Thus in its scope, the mystery constitutes an attempt at individual and collective transformation through

theatre, exceeding the limits of the secular to reclaim the sacred. As a recurring mode of efficacy in performance, the mystery has and continues to enact transformations that return theatre to its roots in mystical ritual and performatively produces new iterations of spectatorial solidarity in the face of historical rupture.

Chapter 2
Staging the Apocalypse:
Spiritual Transformation and Affective Atmosphere in Scriabin's *Mysterium*

On a silent, star-filled night, a stone amphitheater rises out of the Himalayan foothills. Surrounded by a crystalline moat, its pillars ascend to the sky—it has no roof but the constellations. Clouds of incense waft from within, tainting the air with a heady scent. A dissonant hum is heard, swelling into crescendo—strings, trumpets, drums, bells, voices—each merging together into a deafening climax. A ripple of energy surges through the audience, a gathering comprised of the entire world population. Something—some kind of performance—has commenced; a performance that will continue unceasing for seven days and nights; a performance that will end this broken age and usher in a new, enlightened humanity. The air itself vibrates with anticipation: the Apocalypse has begun.

Such is how I imagine the unprecedented vision that Russian composer Alexander Scriabin attempted to realize at the beginning of the twentieth century. Entitled *Mysterium*, Scriabin intended this multi-genre performance to be his greatest masterpiece—a theatrical encounter that would, in its creator's words, "enact the miracle of terrestrial and cosmic transformation."[81] Built around a dissonant chord hitherto unknown in Western music, *Mysterium* consisted of music, dance, and dialogue working together to bring about a mystical revelation aimed at "sealing both the fullness of the time that has come to pass and the birth of a new man."[82] Scriabin believed that *Mysterium* would initiate "the final apocalypse, a Cosmic conflagration of matter, time, and space"[83], bringing "the history of the world to a cataclysmic

[81] Morrison, "Skryabin and the Impossible," 284.

[82] Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, 213.

[83] Morrison, "Skryabin and the Impossible," 301.

close."[84] To the dismay of his supporters, Scriabin died in 1915, his life cut short by blood poisoning at the age of forty-two, leaving *Mysterium* unfinished.

As the first modern mystery under this project's consideration, *Mysterium* presents a highly spiritual vision for transformation within performance. While never completed (much less performed), Scriabin's declared purposes and *Mysterium's* design were unequivocally mystical and spiritually revelatory. By fundamentally reuniting "Spirit" and "Matter" through a radical theory of aesthetics, Scriabin's *Mysterium* initiates my analysis by positing a performance encounter that would transform spectators into a new state of subjectivity defined by the Russian ideal of *sobornost'*, a mystical-religious state of transformative solidarity. Conceived in the waning years of Tsarist Russia, *Mysterium* constitutes a response to the nascent rupture of the Soviet revolution by envisioning a transcendent state of *sobornost'* that would transform not only Russia but all of humanity.

Previous scholarship on Scriabin and *Mysterium* has most often explored the composer's legacy through the lens of musicology.[85] Simon Morrison has excavated *Mysterium's* genesis, development, and legacy from the perspective of music history.[86] Other scholars, such as Ralph E. Matlaw and Malcolm Brown, have delineated the Symbolist influence on Scriabin's work, drawing valuable connections between the Symbolists and Scriabin's mystical approach to music.[87] However, *Mysterium* has remained largely unexcavated by theatre historians, in part due

[84] Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 315.

[85] See the work of Anna Gawboy, James M. Baker, Anatole Leikin, as well as the *Journal of the Scriabin Society of America*.

[86] In addition to his article "Skryabin and the Impossible," see Simon A. Morrison *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[87] see Ralph E. Matlaw, "Scriabin and Russian Symbolism," *Comparative Literature* 31, no. 1 (Winter, 1979): 1-23, and Malcolm Brown, "Skriabin and Russian 'Mystic' Symbolism," *19th-Century Music* 3, no. 1 (July 1979): 42-51.

to the predominance of Scriabin's legacy as a composer rather than a theatre practitioner; indeed, at no other point in his career did Scriabin engage with theatre.[88] Yet, unlike his earlier compositions, Scriabin envisioned *Mysterium* as a theatrical performance, fully incorporating the dramatic elements of character, dialogue, and plot. *Mysterium's* unfinished and unperformed status also leaves its extant archive in a state that challenges many traditional methodologies of performance research. The resulting dearth of theatre scholarship on *Mysterium* has reified its status as primarily a musical composition rather than the multifaceted performance encounter it was intended to be. With its apocalyptic aims and superlative aesthetic vision, *Mysterium* exceeds musicological analysis and invites new consideration from the perspective of performance studies. In what Pannill Camp has termed "performance nonevents", *Mysterium's* surviving remains—an unfinished poetic libretto, some musical sketches, the composer's personal notebooks, and the published recollections of his key interlocutors—present the opportunity for a "critical construction of the nonevent."[89]

This chapter approaches *Mysterium* as an imagined exemplar for transformation within performance, defined by its goal to "provoke the final apocalypse, a Cosmic conflagration of matter, time, and space, and the union of the spirit with the Anima Supra-mundi: the Cosmic Over-Soul."[90] Both material and spiritual, this transformation towards the solidarity of *sobornost'* can be traced directly to the medieval imaginary as it manifested within Russian Symbolism. As a self-declared mystery, *Mysterium* posits a radical theory of aesthetics as

[88] However, due to the scale of his ambitions, Scriabin would have "resented being remembered merely as a composer." See James M. Baker, *The Music of Alexander Scriabin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), vii, 270.

[89] Pannill Camp, "The Poetics of Performance Nonevents," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 32, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 147.

[90] Morrison, "Skryabin and the Impossible," 301.

spiritually transformative. This chapter interrogates the genealogy and aesthetic methods of Scriabin's vision for transformation through the performance encounter: How was *Mysterium* going to achieve its apocalyptic ends? What was the envisioned role for aesthetics in catalyzing such a transformation? How did the highly sensory and material aesthetic design for *Mysterium* function in relation to a hoped-for, spiritual apocalypse? In answering these questions, I argue that *Mysterium's* appropriation of the "mystery" posits a methodology for transformative performance through what I term *affective atmosphere*. By constructing its aesthetic design through a radical phenomenology of the material and the spiritual, *Mysterium's* affective atmosphere manifests out of the medieval mystery cycle tradition within the context of national rupture during the decline of imperial Russia. While Scriabin's aims have been considered ambitious at best and insane at worst[91], his medievalist, apocalyptic nonevent leaves us with an imagined exemplar of the transformative potential of performance through the interplay between aesthetics, the senses, and the medieval imaginary.

Unlike Sartre's *Bariona* and Isango Ensemble's *Yiimimangaliso*, Scriabin's *Mysterium* does not obviously present as a form of medievalism; while these other case studies draw directly on medieval texts and conventions, *Mysterium* was conceived as a performance without any earthly precedent. Scriabin's own syncretic spiritualism—which combined aspects of theosophy, Nietzschean philosophy, Hinduism, and mystical anarchism—avoids identification as anything recognizably Christian, let alone medieval. However, several defining aspects of *Mysterium's* conception present clear parallels with the medieval mystery cycle tradition; firstly, Scriabin directly invokes notion of the mystery cycle in his choice of title, *mysterium*—the Latin

[91] Unsurprisingly, Scriabin was frequently accused of insanity; see Lincoln Ballard, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion: History, Performance and Lore* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 19, 114; and Anatole Leikin, *The Performing Style of Alexander Scriabin*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 278.

term denoting sacred rituals conveying religious truth.[92] Secondly, in staging the Apocalypse, *Mysterium* shares an eschatological impulse that constituted the terminus of medieval mystery cycles—Christ's Return and the Last Judgment. Finally, *Mysterium* emerged within the historiographic context of a wide-spread medievalist revival that characterized Silver Age Russia and its growing state political instability leading up to the 1917 Revolution.[93] By tracing the confluence of the revival of medievalist performance, eschatological expectancy in Silver Age Russia, and Symbolist notions of spiritual transformation, I argue that *Mysterium* manifests directly out of the medievalist impulse within Symbolist Russian theatre. Surpassing the aspirations of his contemporaries, Scriabin's vision for *Mysterium* epitomizes the spiritual and apocalyptic medievalism that emerged within the social and political ruptures of Russia on the brink of revolution.

Rupture & Apocalypse in Silver Age Russia

While eschatological anticipation characterized much of Europe in the final years of the nineteenth century, a series of major political changes within imperial Russia led to an ongoing climate of apocalypticism that ultimately produced the Symbolist turn to the medieval imaginary. With his 1861 emancipation of the serfdom, Tsar Alexander II unfurled plans for rapid modernization of Russian society; such plans were abruptly halted with his assassination in 1881 and his successor, Alexander III, quickly reversed much of the liberalizing progress that characterized his predecessor's reign.[94] Stymied between the end of the old feudal order and

[92] "mystery, n.1." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/124644 .

[93] By the Silver Age, I am referring to the period from roughly 1905 to 1917 as used by Spencer Golub in his essay "The Silver Age, 1905-1917," in *A History of Russian Theatre*, ed. Robert Leach (Cambridge: Cambridge University. Press, 2006): 278-301.

[94] S. A. Smith, *Russia in Revolution: An Empire in Crisis, 180-1928* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 9.

incomplete modernization, Russia's humiliating defeat in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5) only fueled nascent apocalyptic fears. As argued by Richard Price, Tsar Nicholas II had approached the Russo-Japanese War as the fulfillment of the early ninetieth century prophecies of St. Serafim of Sarvo (canonized in 1903) which asserted divine ordination for Russia to conquer and Christianize the Far East.[95] Vladimir Solovyov, a nineteenth-century philosopher and mystic considered the father of Russian Symbolism, had also envisioned the prophetic victory of Russia:

> Solovyov imagined a future Mongol or Japanese conquest of Christian Russia, the arrival of the Antichrist from the East, and an end of time in which pagan cities would be engulfed in fire, the dead resurrected, Christ returned, and Jews and Christians reconciled to each other. For Solovyov, Moscow would be the Third Rome, center of the last empire of Christianity.[96]

The shock of Russian defeat triggered already simmering political unrest with unmet demands for constitutional reform leading to January 9th's "Bloody Sunday" and the 1905 Revolution. Russia's military defeat, however, did not dissuade the early twentieth-century Symbolist movement from its prophetic inclinations; rather it was reframed as merely a delay in Russia's divinely ordained victory, serving to heighten eschatological anticipation. The Symbolists interpreted the revolutionary impulse, quelled only temporarily by partial tsarist reforms, as the sign of an impending apocalypse that would be heralded by transformative art. As James Billington observes:

> Nowhere else in Europe was the volume and intensity of apocalyptic literature comparable to that found in Russia during the reign of Nicholas II. The stunning defeat by Japan in 1904-05 and ensuing revolution left an extraordinarily large number of Russians with the feeling that life as they had known it was coming to an end.[97]

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[95] Richard Price, "The Canonization of Serafim of Sarov: Piety, Prophecy and Politics in Late Imperial Russia," *Studies in Church History* 47 (2011): 362.

[96] Robert C. Williams, "The Russian Revolution and the End of Time: 1900-1940", *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Neue Folge, Bd. 43, H. 3 (1995): 369.

[97] James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 514.

This sense of an impending end was foundational to Russian Symbolist movement; poet Dmitrii Merezhkovsky pronounced, "We believe in the end, we see the end, we desire the end, for we ourselves are the end, or at least the beginning of the end."[98] Various other members of the movement, including Viacheslav Ivanov, Andrei Bely, and Alexander Blok, echoed this sentiment, proclaiming that "the Last Judgment is beginning," "the end is already near, the unexpected will soon place," and heralding "approaching end of Universal History."[99]

The outbreak of World War I, and ultimately the 1917 Revolution, only served to reinforce the sense of apocalypse. This series of political ruptures were initially met with hope and even enthusiasm by the Symbolists, who saw them as signs not only of the end times and Christ's return but as indicating the spiritually ordained role of Russia in leading the entire world to spiritual unity in Christianity. The Slavophilic ideology of thinkers like Ivanov viewed Russia as spiritual inheritor of true Christianity, framing the conflict with Germany in World War I as an ideological battle between Russian faith and Western European rationalism .[100] However, by the time of 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and its accompanying state-sanctioned atheism, the majority of Symbolists saw the new state as being taken over by demonic spiritual forces, with Ivanov even deeming Lenin the Antichrist.[101]

For these Symbolist thinkers, the political paroxysms that gripped Russia in the early twentieth century were read through a distinctly Christian, apocalyptic lens; these events were

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[98] Williams, "The Russian Revolution and the End of Time," 370.

[99] Williams, "The Russian Revolution and the End of Time," 370.

[100] Ben Hellman, *Poets of Hope and Despair: The Russian Symbolists in War and Revolution, 1914-1918* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2018), 165.

[101] Williams, "The Russian Revolution and the End of Time," 373.

read as signaling the impending "beginning of a new spiritual epoch" whose terminus was "the establishment of universal Christianity."[102] In this sense, the Symbolists viewed such social and political ruptures as symptomatic of a larger spiritual shift would spiritually transform Russian society and humanity at large. Such transformation would fulfill the potential of the Russian ideology of *sobornost'* as a jointly spiritual and political ideal, a point to which I will return. It was within this apocalyptic climate that the medieval imaginary manifested to an unprecedented extent, fusing together notions of both a return to a pre-Western Russian ideal and a vision for a transformed future as exemplified by Scriabin's *Mysterium*.

The Russian Medievalist Impulse

Scholars frequently note the difficulty of defining Russia's own "Middle Ages," observing the challenges of applying temporal constructions like the "medieval", "Renaissance", and "Enlightenment" beyond Western Europe.[103] Rather, the genealogy of Russia's Christianization, unification, and early eighteenth-century turn towards modernization under Peter the Great presents a prolonged "Middle Age" uninterrupted by a "Renaissance", eventually arriving at an imported version of Western Europe's "Enlightenment." This period, if it can be called "medieval", spans well beyond the West's Middle Ages, beginning with Christianization in 998 AD[104] and lasting until Peter the Great's return from Western Europe in 1698.[105] Russia's feudal system of serfdom, not abolished until 1861, can also be read to extend this period well into the

[102] Hellman, *Poets of Hope and Despair,* 87.

[103] See Valentine Tschebotarioff-Bill, "National Feudalism in Muscovy" *The Russian Review* 9, no. 3 (July 1950): 209-218; Yelena N. Severina, "The Ritual Culture of Late Imperial Russia: Performing the Middle Ages" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2018); and Katherine Mae Rose, "Multivalent Russian Medievalism: Old Russia Through New Eyes" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2016).

[104] Severina, "The Ritual Culture of Late Imperial Russia," 5.

[105] Rose, "Multivalent Russian Medievalism," 3.

nineteenth century; as Tschebotarioff-Bill has argued, if key aspects of the "medieval" are the predominance of religion and agrarian society, these qualities characterized Russia well into the reforms of Tsar Alexander II during the latter half of the nineteenth century. As a result, Russian medievalism remains an elusive topic of study; the Russian medieval imaginary, its genealogy, and its cultural manifestations traverse the lines Western liberalism and Russian imperialism, drawing inspiration in turn from the early nineteenth-century Slavophile movement's valorization of an idealized Russia past as well as from Western Europe's late nineteenth-century nostalgia for the medieval as a pre-industrial utopia.

With the absence of a clearly defined "Middle Ages", Russian medievalist theatre also challenges discrete theatrical genealogies; as Catriona Kelly argues observes, " 'The theatre', in its central Western sense of scripted drama staged by paid performer in specific arenas for a playing audience, is not a cultural institution indigenous to Russia."[106] Drawing from longstanding Byzantine theology, the Russian Orthodox Church was stringently anti-theatrical; as Andrew Walker White has argued, the Eastern Orthodox Church maintained the early Christian disdain for practices that suggested "*hypocrisia,* 'play-acting'", while the Roman Catholic Church gradually embraced such theatrical practices.[107] As a result, the Western European turn towards religious performance as a form of civic and devotional practice in the Middle Ages was absent from the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition. There were, of course, various performance practices that did flourish in medieval Russia, most famously that of the *skomorokhi* who are often viewed as the oldest indigenous Russian performance tradition.[108]

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[106] Catriona Kelly, "The Origins of the Russian Theatre," in *A History of Russian Theatre*, ed. Robert Leach, Viktor Borovskij, and Andy Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 18.

[107] Andrew Walker White, "The Artifice of Eternity: A Study of Liturgical and Theatrical Practices in Byzantium," (PhD diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2006), 218.

[108] Kelly, "The Origins of the Russian Theatre," 18.

Surviving Russian sources document the *skomorokhi* as itinerant minstrels that performed throughout Russia as early as the eleventh century.[109] Their performances involved music, acrobatics, song, and storytelling, with most extant ecclesiastical sources decrying their bawdy lyricism and irreverence. While some accounts suggest that the *skomorokhi* had a religious function, sixteenth-century sources accused them of subverting the conjoined authority of church and state, resulting in their relegation to the fringes of society. By the mid-seventeenth century, *skomorokhi* had all but disappeared following Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich's 1648 edit banning the profession.[110]

While this genealogy testifies to the absence of anything akin to the tradition of religious drama of Western Europe, some forms of dramatic ritual existed late in Russia's "Middle Ages." The *Furnace Play*, a liturgical drama staged between the mid-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, functioned within the Russian liturgical calendar in ways not dissimilar from the Latinate *Quem Quaeritis* plays of tenth-century Western Europe.[111] Stemming from Byzantine liturgical tradition, the *Furnace Play* stages the biblical episode of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the Book of Daniel and their miraculous survival in the fiery furnace of King Nebuchadnezzar. The drama was staged annually as part of the morning liturgy in the week leading up to Christmas and was interwoven into the church service over the course of two days. While the parts of the three men were played by choirboys or clerics, the antagonistic roles of the Chaldeans were often portrayed by *skomorokhi* who were especially hired for the role because of

[109] Kelly, "The Origins of the Russian Theatre," 19.

[110] Kelly, "The Origins of the Russian Theatre," 28.

[111] Andrew Walker White, *Performing Orthodox Ritual in Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 184.

their malevolent connotations within Russian society.[112] Russian literary scholars have taken pains to distinguish the *Furnace Play* from any equivalency with the Western European mystery cycle tradition, namely on the grounds of their distinctly different approaches to representation. As summarized by Marina Swobada, this view posits that:

> In the *mysteria*, the Latins were attempting to recreate the illusion of Biblical events, creating not a picture, or an icon, but reproducing it as the real thing…the desire for reality was foreign to the Furnace play…[they] attempted to produce the Biblical story following the Biblical text, but only as a symbolic representation.[113]

Swobada has astutely argued against this reading, tracing the *Furnace Play's* evolution from its liturgical Byzantine roots to its "carnivalization" beyond the confines of the Russian Christmas liturgy in seventeenth-century Russia. Both arguments, however, rely on an essentialization of notions of ritual, theatre, and performance that function to a reify teleological reading of the development of theatre. Regardless of such debates, the *Furnace Play* stands as a singular example of Russian liturgical drama, but simultaneously highlights the absence of a broader religious dramatic tradition in medieval Russia. If the Latinate *Quem Quaeritis* play functioned as a precursor to the Western mystery cycle tradition, the *Furnace Play* was not succeeded by a similarly robust legacy of Russian religious theatre. Instead, its legacy was taken up in the form of private "school dramas", rewritten into a westernized form by Simeon Polotskii in the 1670's under the patronage of Tsar Aleksei.[114] Such school dramas proliferated in the seventeenth century, wherein children of the Russian nobility who were educated at church schools often performed religious, didactic plays that staged scenes from the Bible. Such school dramas

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[112] Marina Swobada, "The Furnace Play and the Development of Liturgical Drama in Russia," *The Russian Review* 61, no. 2 (April 2002): 229.

[113] Swobada, "The Furnace Play," 222.

[114] Swobada, "The Furnace Play," 221.

perhaps most nearly approximate the Western mystery cycle tradition but their private production, narrow reception, and occurrence several centuries later places this tradition outside of direct comparison with the mystery cycles in the West.

With the advent of Peter the Great westernization project in the late 1690s, professional, state sanctioned theatre was introduced to Russia for the first time through the tsar's patronage of foreign theatrical troupes. These performers ranged from puppeteers, clowns, and pantomimes as well as classical actors; however, due to the Russian Orthodox Church's strictures, such performances rarely involved religious material.[115] Thus, Peter the Great's "forced modernization" of Russia introduced "theatre" as a foreign import

. This legacy would inflect Russian theatre into the nineteenth century through the burgeoning Slavophile movement. Following the Russian victory in Napoleonic Wars, theatre practitioners such as Zotov sought to reclaim Russian theatre apart from "Western European—especially French—influence in order to resurrect allegedly authentic cultural traditions and create new mythologies of Russian superiority" while also attempting to "preserve the most advantageous effects of Western influence."[116] Theatre, in this way, functioned as an exogenous import but one that Russian theatre practitioners sought to find ways to reclaim well into the nineteenth century.

The Medievalist Turn in the Nineteenth Century

The Russian turn to medieval religious theatre during the nineteenth century was multi-faceted; the medieval period was imagined as a "pre-rational and mystical epoch"[117] that defined itself

[115] Kelly, "The Origins of the Russian Theatre," 29.

[116] Catherine A. Schuler, *Theatre and Identity in Imperial Russia* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), 4-5.

[117] Severina, "The Ritual Culture of Late Imperial Russia," 88.

against a modern Western Europe whose materialism had led to a "fragmented humanity."[118] It was within this national climate, following the fall of Napoleon and rise of Slavophilism, that the medieval imaginary and the mystery cycle tradition were appropriated within Russian theatre. Without an indigenous form of religious theatre upon which to draw, Russian theatre practitioners approached the mystery as a theatrical mode that, for the first time, "allowed them to explore spirituality" within the dramatic medium.[119]

Izhorsky (1835) by poet Wilhelm Küchelbecker is one of the earliest examples of the revival of the medieval mystery play in Russian literature.[120] A Russian of Baltic-German descent who was close friends with Pushkin, Küchelbecker composed the play while imprisoned following his involvement in the Decembrist uprising of 1825. Heavily reflecting the influence of Goethe's *Faust*, *Izhorsky* centers on the story of a disaffected hero whose encounter with three demons leads him on a journey to seek redemption. From the outset, Küchelbecker defined the play as a "mystery", drawing direct inspiration from various forms of medieval performance; in his surviving writings, he argues for a revival of the medieval mystery play tradition in the style of "the artless allegorical popular spectacles of Hans Sachs, the *Frères de la Passion*, the English minstrels, the German mastersingers" as well as "the *Sacramentales* of Calderon."[121] The wide range of medieval traditions he cites combines a variety of performance modes including song,

[118] Janko Lavrin, "Vladimir Soloviev and Slavophilism," *The Russian Review 20*, no. 1 (January 1961): 12.

[119] Severina, "The Ritual Culture of Late Imperial Russia," 85.

[120] See Simon Karlinsky, "Küchelbecker's Trilogy, Izhorsky, As an Example of the Romantic Revival of the Medieval Mystery Play," in *Freedom from Violence and Lies: Essays on Russian Poetry and Music by Simon Karlinsky*, Simon Karlinsky, Robert P. Hughes, Thomas A. Koster, Richard Taruskin (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 62-76.

[121] Michael Green, "The Russian Symbolist Theater: Some Connections," *Pacific Coast Philology* 12 (October 1977): 13.

minstrelsy, and liturgical drama. Condensing various performance traditions into an essentialized notion of the "medieval", Küchelbecker failed to distinguish between mystery, morality, and saints plays, conflating all medieval performance modes into the broad notion of a "mystery" play. However, Küchelbecker did directly draw on mystery cycles in his vision for the staging of *Izhorsky*, incorporating the medieval French style of "mansion" staging in which the playing space is divided into three vertical levels representing heaven, the world, and hell.[122] *Izhorsky's* status as "the only example in Russian literature of a Romantic mystery play" illuminates the beginnings of the notion of the "medieval mystery" in the Russian medievalist imagination; instead of the Western European practice of staging the biblical narrative directly, the "mystery" within the nineteenth-century Russian medievalist imagination expanded to a catch-all concept for all types of medieval performance.[123] The "mystery" was thus came to refer to a type of medievalist, spiritual performance, one that permitted "the combination on the stage of everyday life with the world of the mystical and supernatural."[124] It is this conception of the mystery play as uniquely modeling the coupling between religion, spirituality, and theater that characterized medievalist dramas of the Symbolists.

Symbolist Medievalist Drama

Following the Romantic period, the medieval mystery play reemerged robustly at the end of the nineteenth century with the first wave of Symbolists.[125] Rejecting the realist theatre of Ibsen and

[122] Green, "The Russian Symbolist Theater," 13.

[123] Karlinsky, "Küchelbecker's Trilogy," 65.

[124] Karlinsky, "Küchelbecker's Trilogy," 66.

[125] Hellman delineates between the "first" and "second" waves of Symbolism; the first wave, which included Merezhkovsky and Gippius, was made of up of primarily poets whose work was published rather than performed in the late 1890's. (Hellman, 7.)

Stanislavsky in favor of a mystical, religious theatre, first wave Symbolists Nikolai Minsky (1855-1937) and Dimitri Merezhkovsky (1865-1941) initiated the appropriation of the medieval mystery play for a new generation of Russian writers in the final decades of the nineteenth century. In 1880, Minsky penned a short "mystery play" written in verse titled "The Sun", which stages a debate about God and the nature of good and evil.[126] Here again, the epithet of a "mystery play" signals a theatrical performance concerned with questions of faith, theology, and devotion rather than drama specifically drawn from biblical source material. Merezhkovsky, a friend of Minsky and the central figure of first wave Russian Symbolism, also turned to the medieval throughout his writing. One such example is his 1892 play "Christ and Man's Soul" adapted from a thirteenth century text by Italian mystic and playwright, Jacopone da Todi,[127] whose religious poetry and ballads have been heralded as key precursors to the development of the medieval mystery play tradition on the Italian peninsula.[128] In adapting da Todi's source material, Merezhkovsky's work helped initiate the Symbolists' turn towards original medieval texts as inspiration rather than conflating medieval performance across genres.

The so-called second wave of Russian Symbolists of the early twentieth century sought to extend Symbolism beyond a "literary movement" to "an approach to life and the instrument for a religious mysticism" whose audience was "the whole of humankind," deploying the "mystery" as a theatrical mode of spiritual transformation.[129] Viacheslav Ivanov (1866-1949) issued a call

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[126] George Kalbouss, "The Birth of Modern Russian Drama," in *Russian and Slavic Literature: Selected Papers in the Humanities from the Banff '74 International Conference*, ed. Richard Freeborn, T.T. Milner-Gulland, and Charles Ward (Cambridge, Mass: Slavica, 1976): 177.

[127] Kalbouss, "The Birth of Modern Russian Drama," 180.

[128] See , V. Louise Katainen, "Jacopone da Todi, Poet and Mystic: A Review of the History of the Criticism," *Mystics Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (June 1996): 46-57.

[129] Hellman, *Poets of Hope and Despair,* 8.

for the revival of the theatrical "mystery", combining the performance tradition of the medieval mystery cycles with that of ancient Greek Dionysian cultic rites; "Therefore divine and heroic tragedy, such as was ancient tragedy, and mysterium, more or less analogous to medieval mystery plays, most closely correspond to the forms that we expect the synthetic rite to take."[130] In turning to the medieval, Ivanov viewed the Middle Ages as epitomizing a theatrical tradition that truly integrated faith and spirituality into performance:

> Throughout the Middle Ages, the dominant force was religion, which was understood narrowly in the kingdom of scholastics but more broadly and freely in the realm of art. To the limited extent that the Middle Ages pondered aesthetic theory, it was said that in the work of art matter breathes, is made transparent, and reveals to the gaze its divine nature…the Renaissance marked the complete secularization of art.[131]

Rejecting the secular turn that he attributes to the Renaissance, Ivanov summarizes the medieval imaginary that grew within second wave Symbolism; key Symbolist writers including Mikhail Kuzmin, Aleksei Remizov, Alexander Blok, and Andre Bely all approached the theatrical model of the "mystery" as constituting the "synthetic rite" that would combine religion, spiritual transformation, and theatre. In the words of Michael Green, Remizov laid "the foundations of a modern mystery, modeled on the mystery plays of the Middle Ages; Kuzmin writes plays in the spirit of the medieval drama, and is also 'reconstructing' the French comic theater; Bely is trying to create an original modern mystery."[132] Green here refers implicitly to Remizov's plays *The Play of the Devil* (1907) and *The Tragedy of Judas* (1910), both modeled after medieval "mysteries." Defining theatre as "a cult, a communion within whose mysteries lies hidden the

[130] Ivanov, *Selected Essays,* 108.

[131] Ivanov, *Selected Essays,* 218.

[132] Green, "The Russian Symbolist Theater," 12.

Atonement", Remizov pored over medieval apocryphal texts to construct *The Tragedy of Judas*, a retelling of the role of Judas in the Christian salvation narrative incorporating elements of the tragedy of Oedipus and Russian folklore modeled on the medieval passion play.[133]

Kuzmin's medievalism, on the other hand, manifested as a "romantic revival of the genre of medieval mystery and miracle plays" in *The History of the Knight of d'Alessio* (1905) and his three saints plays.[134] The former of these works is seen as a "romantic variant of the medieval mystery play" that draws jointly on Goethe's *Faust* and the legend of Don Juan. The plot of the play most closely follows medieval texts in the courtly romance tradition, centering on an itinerant knight who travels under the watchful eye of his guardian spirit to avoid temptation.[135] Here, Kuzmin's characterization of *The History of the Knight of d'Alessio* as a mystery reverts to the broader conception of the "mystery" found in the Romantic work of Küchelbecker. Kuzmin's three saints plays more aptly claim the epithet of "mystery" due to their religious content but still focus on non-biblical material through the saints lives of Eudoxia, Alexis, and Martinian; they more accurately emulate original medieval saint's and miracle plays by staging the temptations and devotion of their eponymous characters.[136]

The medievalist plays of Alexander Blok (1880-1921) engage with both of these senses of the "mystery"—the romantic, knightly variant and the more textually derived adaption based

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[133] George Kalbouss, "From Mystery to Fantasy: An Attempt to Categorize the Plays of Russian Symbolists", *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 8, no. 4, (Winter 1974): 489.

[134] John E. Malmstad, *Studies in the Life and Works of Mixail Kuzmin* (Wien: Gesellschaft zur Förderung Slawistischer Studien, 1989), 19.

[135] Malmstad, *Studies in the Life and Works of Mixail Kuzmin,* 20.

[136] Green's characterization here conflates the term "mystery" again to broadly mean a play engaging with Christian religious themes; saints play are known among medieval scholars as their own tradition distinct from that of mystery plays.

on specific medieval source material. His 1913 play *The Rose and Cross* stages a tale of a dejected knight and his lady, drawing on medievalist notions of a Gothic pastoral with imagery of "a dilapidated castle and a windswept beach, the bells of a sunken city and a ghost in a dungeon, a peasant dance around a decorated tree and a song contest in a flowering dale."[137] The play, however, was in fact set in the eighteenth century, essentially functioning as Symbolist medievalist rendition of an earlier Romantic medievalism that conflates a "mystery" with any dramatic text displaying religious content and medieval imagery. However, Blok also turned directly to medieval texts, producing the first Russian translation of Rutebeuf's thirteenth-century play *Le Miracle de Theophile*, a saint's play tracing St. Theophile's deal with the Devil and subsequent redemption.

The work of Andrei Bely (1880-1934) signals the Symbolist turn to apocalyptic theatre through the framework of the mystery. A close friend of Scriabin, Bely proclaimed the "approaching end of Universal History" and called for "the spiritual transformation of the world."[138] Characterized by Daniel Gerould as "the chief representative of the Russian eschatological mode", Bely sought to create a "modern mysterium" around the theme of the "coming of the Antichrist."[139] Bely only completed two short fragments of his larger vision—*He Who Has Come* (1903) and *The Jaws of the Night (A Fragment of a Planned Mystery)* (1907). Staging an Orthodox Christian vision of the apocalypse in which believers await deliverance from the Antichrist, these works function as prophetic, future-oriented mysteries rather than

[137] Morrison, *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement,* 18.

[138] Daniel Gerould, "The Apocalyptic Mode and the Terror of History: Turn-of-the-Century Russian and Polish Millenarian Drama," *Theater* 29, no. 3 (November 1999): 51.

[139] Gerould, "The Apocalyptic Mode and the Terror of History," 51.

reinvoking medieval mystery cycle of the past. Bely ultimately turned away from theatre, penning two apocalyptic novels—*The Silver Dove* (1910) and *Petersburg* (1913). However, his earlier attempts to realize a modern mystery in performance signal the shift in Symbolist medieval from adapting medieval texts towards creating original work inspired by the eschatology of the medieval mystery tradition. In this way, Bely's work functions as a precursor to the aims and strategies that would be realized in *Mysterium*.

Evreinov's Ancient Theatre

While these aforementioned plays varied widely in their invocation of the notion of both "medieval" and "mystery", the work of director Nikolai Evreinov (1879-1953) succeeded in actually staging medievalist drama; however, his aims were theatrical rather than apocalyptic. Through his company the "Ancient Theatre", Evreinov sought to create a theatre that would model active spectatorship through participation by staging key theatrical epochs from the past. In his 1908 manifesto "Introduction to Monodrama", Evreinov demands a shift within theatre from the realism of the Moscow Arts Theatre to performance that is defined by the active participation of the audience: "The task of monodrama is almost to transport the spectator himself onto the stage, to see to it that he feels himself at one with the true participant."[140] Evreinov turned to medieval theatre as the exemplar for participatory spectatorship for several reasons. Like his contemporaries, he acknowledged both ancient Greek and medieval theatre as together representing an ideal for a more active, communal audience; "The twentieth-century audience lacks the sense of community, the spiritual cohesiveness of the Ancient Greek and

[140] Laurence Senelick, *Russian Dramatic Theory from Pushkin to the Symbolists: An Anthology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 197.

medieval audiences."[141] However, he privileged medieval theatre due to its Christian roots and its legacy in Western theatre; he even asserted a genealogical link between Russian *skomoroxi* (clowns) and medieval jongleurs, reflecting his desire to trace an ancestral claim to Western theatre within Russian performance.[142] Ultimately, Evreinov valorized medieval theatre as not only the preeminent exemplar of communal, participatory theatre of the past but as a model for turning contemporary Russian theatre away from the dominance of realism towards a transformative performance encounter that would unite spectator and performer in "spiritual cohesiveness."

In light of these goals, Evreinov's Ancient Theatre presents the clearest instance of the staging of medievalist drama in early twentieth century Russia. With its overarching purpose of depicting "societies in which theatre was an integral part of life and as such transformed life", Evreinov planned the Ancient Theatre's repertory to trace chronologically the development of Western theatre, beginning with the Middle Ages.[143] His vision for the Ancient Theatre was reconstructive, attempting to recreate medieval performance with as much historical accuracy as possible; by reconstructing medieval theatre he strove to "reconstruct the spectator" in hopes of enacting the active, communal audience he attributed to the medieval past.[144]

In preparation for the Ancient Theatre's first season, Evreinov sent collaborators to Paris, Germany, and Switzerland to gather material on the history of medieval theatre.[145] Before the

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[141] Spencer Golub, *Evreinov: The Theatre of Paradox and Transformation* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 122.

[142] Golub, *Evreinov*, 109.

[143] Golub, *Evreinov*, 138.

[144] Golub, *Evreinov*, 122.

[145] Golub, *Evreinov*, 110.

medieval season opened, Evreinov organized a series of lectures on medieval literature, iconography, music, and acting and oversaw the reconstruction of medieval instruments and costumes.[146] His efforts also included commissioning the transcription of several medieval texts, plays that had previously never been translated into Russian. The program included a range medieval performance modalities, including liturgical drama, a miracle play, and farces. Originally, a mystery play was also included—*The Play of Adam*, translated by Kuzmin from a twelfth century source; however, its production was banned due to the Russian Orthodox Church's prohibition of portraying canonized figures on stage, including Adam and Eve.[147] The program ultimately presented five plays in December 1907: *The Three Magi,* a liturgical drama attributed to the eleventh century; *Le Miracle de Theofile,* Rutebeuf's miracle play translated by Blok; *The Present Day Brothers*, a fifteenth century morality play; *Le Jeu de Robin et Marion*, translated from Adam de la Halle's original thirteenth century text, and finally a sixteenth century farce titled *Amusing Farces about a Tub and about a Cuckold's Hat*.[148]

The productions garnered a generally positive reception; reviewers particularly noted the compelling stage imagery (based on medieval paintings) and simplicity, which was lauded as a "return to primitives" that disrupted the more popular "factory production" of theatre in the realist school.[149] While the majority of reviewers focused on appraising the historical accuracy of the production, A. R. Kugel characterized it as "the most interesting phenomenon in the life of

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[146] Golub, *Evreinov*, 111; see also the transcribed lecture on "The Medieval Actor" in Nikolai Evreinov, *Pro Scena Sua: Režissura, Liceděi, Poslědnija Problemy Teatra* (Petersburg: Prometej, 1915), 67-76.

[147] C. Moody, "The Ancient Theatre in St Petersburg and Moscow, 1907-8 and 1911-12," *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, no. 2 (1976): 38.

[148] Moody, "The Ancient Theatre in St Petersburg and Moscow," 38.

[149] Golub, *Evreinov*, 121.

the theatre in recent times", citing the importance of religious faith within the plays.[150] Recapitulating the broader medieval imaginary that equated modernity with secularism, he states, "Modern man lacks faith but has imagination, in medieval man the situation was just the reverse," implicitly echoing the Symbolist call for a theatre that spoke directly to spirituality.[151] Evreinov went on to stage subsequent periods of historically reconstructed theatre but the project stalled after a season devoted to the Spanish Golden Age. While Evreinov's initial inspiration invoked the Symbolist ideals to use theatre to "transform life", the Ancient Theatre ultimately became a model for historical performance, known more for its theatrical innovations than its apocalyptic potential. By the 1920's, Evreinov fled Soviet Russia and settled in Paris, collaborating with French medievalist theatre directors who shared his reconstructive aims.[152]

Drawing on the momentum of the Symbolist turn towards medievalism as a model for spiritually transformative art, Evreinov's Ancient Theatre exemplifies the prevalence of the medievalist revival in Silver Age Russian theatre. From the medieval "closet dramas" of the early Symbolists to the Ancient Theatre's fully staged medieval productions, the Symbolist milieu from which Scriabin emerged demonstrably valorized medieval theatre, and the mystery play in particular, as a theatrical form that would revitalize Russian theatre by uniting the audience in communal, participatory action towards spiritual transformation. This medievalist revival in Russian Symbolist performance has been often overlooked in Symbolist scholarship, with the notable exception of work by Gregory Kalbouss.

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[150] Golub, *Evreinov*, 121.

[151] Golub, *Evreinov*, 117.

[152] Chapter 2 speaks to Evreinov's medievalist collaborations with Jacques Copeau, Charles Dullin, and Gustave Cohen.

In his 1974 article, "From Mystery to Fantasy: An Attempt to Categorize the Plays of Russian Symbolists", Kalbouss endeavors to schematize the impulse towards mystery plays within Symbolist theatre. For him, Symbolist mystery plays align themselves along three main sub-categories: closet dramas, archaized mysteries, and mythological mysteries.[153] Stylistically, he sees these dramas as sharing key characteristics:

> The characters tend to be types rather than individuals, their lines lack variation, and the dialogue is that of symbolist poetry. The most important moment in the play takes place either during a sacrifice or a religious rite designed to create a communion with some other world.[154]

For Kalbouss, the three categories of Symbolist "mysteries" were united by a desire to enact spiritual "communion", interpellating the spectator into participation in a "purgative mystery-rite."[155] In this way, he defines Symbolist "mystery plays" as a conflation of both the medieval mystery tradition and the ancient Greek Dionysian mysteries with the aim of returning theatre to "drama's religious beginnings."[156] However, this perspective elides the specificity of the medieval imaginary and its particular focus on Christianity within Russian Symbolist drama. While spiritual syncretism accompanied many aspects of Russian Symbolism, the notion of staged "mysteries" was inextricably tied up with Christian notions of eschatology, Apocalypse, and the goal of achieving spiritual unity through sobornost'. The medieval imaginary of the "mystery" ultimately served to synthesize these Symbolist ideals within performance, deploying theatre in service of the Silver Age anticipations of the coming apocalypse.

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[153] Kalbouss, "From Mystery to Fantasy," 490. Kalbouss places the works of Merezhkovsky and Minsky in the category of closet drama, the saints plays of Kuzmin, Remizov, and Evreinov in that of archaized mysteries, and that of Sologub in mythological mysteries.

[154] Kalbouss, "From Mystery to Fantasy," 490.

[155] Kalbouss, "From Mystery to Fantasy," 494.

[156] Kalbouss, "From Mystery to Fantasy," 489.

Symbolist Visions for Transformative Efficacy

From its inception, Symbolist thought on the purpose of art was intertwined with the aims of spiritual transformation that accompanied both the apocalyptic and medievalist impulses of the Silver Age. For key Symbolist thinkers such as Vladimir Solovyov, Viacheslav Ivanov, and Fyodor Sologub, the transformative potential of art was inextricable from its spiritual purposes; their respective aesthetic philosophies ultimately found their fullest manifestation in the plans for *Mysterium*, with each thinker testifying to a Symbolist ethos of art as capable of spiritually transforming spectators as well as society at large. By expanding on the central Symbolist ideal of sobornost' as well as Symbolist theories of spiritual ontology of art and active spectatorship within the performance encounter, I demonstrate how the goal of spiritual transformation was foundational to the contemporary milieu that produced Scriabin and his vision for *Mysterium*.

The role of art in effecting spiritual transformation was introduced to Russian Symbolism by Vladimir Solovyov, whose work laid the philosophical foundation for not only the transformative potential of art but for its intrinsically spiritual purpose. In his 1890 essay on "The Meaning of Art", Solovyov identifies the central malady of contemporary reality as a metaphysical rupture between "Spirit" and "Matter":

> So long as the spirit is incapable for giving direct external expression to its inner content of incarnating itself in material phenomena, and, on the other hand, so long as matter is incapable of receiving the ideal action of the spirit and of being penetrated by or transmuted into spirit, there is no true unity between these two main realms of being.[157]

For Solovyov, the divinely ordained role of art was to reunify the spiritual and the material. He saw the "present alienation between art and religion" as problematic not only for society at large but as also betraying the true function of art itself. To be fully itself, Solovyov argued, art must

[157] Vladimir S. Solovyov, *A Solovyov Anthology*, ed. S. L. Frank (London: SCM Press, 1950), 144.

be infused with a spiritual and religious purpose.[158] He prescribes a return to the original, spiritual purpose of art, delineating its ability to:

> [to] transform physical life into spiritual, i.e. into a life which, in the first place, has its own word or revelation in itself and is capable of direct outward expression; which in the second place, is capable of inwardly transforming and spiritualizing matter or of being truly incarnate with it; and which, thirdly is free from the power of the material process and therefore abides forever. Completely to embody this spiritual fullness in our actual world, to realize absolute beauty in it or to create a universal spiritual organism is the highest task of art. Clearly the fulfillment of this task must coincide with the end of the cosmic process as a whole.[159]

Solovyov points towards an apocalyptic telos—the "end of the cosmic process"—in which art fully succeeds in spiritualizing matter and materializing spirit, ultimately changing the fabric of reality itself and constituting a transformation of both the material world and individual subjects. In addition to his prophetic claims for an impending apocalypse, his writings on art repeatedly invoked this sense of eschatological expectation, arguing that art was able to "spiritualize and transfigure our actual life."[160] Thus in Solovyov's formulation, art's capacity for religious—and specifically apocalyptic—transformation is defined by its ability to reunite the material and the spiritual. This radical ontology of art hinges on its spiritually transformative potential, not simply for individuals but for reality as whole, bridging the metaphysical divide between Spirit and Matter. Through this formulation, the Symbolist vision for the transformative efficacy of theatre developed not merely in service of spiritual aims but as definitive of those aims themselves; in other words, aesthetics themselves were conceived as tied innately to notions of religion, spirituality, and transformation.

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[158] Solovyov, *A Solovyov Anthology,* 147.

[159] Solovyov, *A Solovyov Anthology,* 146-7.

[160] Solovyov, *A Solovyov Anthology,* 149.

While Solovyov ascribed this spiritually transformative potential to art in general, his Symbolist successors strove to apply his philosophy to specific artistic genres. Ivanov applied the philosopher's spiritual reading of aesthetics to theatre in particular. Deeply religious himself, Ivanov viewed the theatre as the art form most suited to enacting the spiritually transformative state of sobornost', the Russian ideal for a collective, co-present form of social and spiritual unity.[161] Drawing on previous articulations of sobornost' by the early nineteenth-century Slavophile and theologian Aleksei Khomiakov, Ivanov expanded the concept of sobornost' from a sociopolitical, religious collective to a broader affective state of "collective and universal ecstasy" that would serve ultimately as the "path to universal transfiguration."[162] Originally a poet, Ivanov turned instead to theatre, citing its unique capacity as a communal, co-present, aesthetic form to achieve spiritual communion.

Ivanov identified a model for the type of performance encounter that enacted *sobornost'* in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. Rejecting Nietzsche's atheism by reading Dionysus as a precursor to Christ, Ivanov interpreted the philosopher's description of ancient Dionysian "cultic theatre" as reflective of Solovyov's notion of the original religious purpose of art.[163] By reviving the methods of the "cultic theater" of the past, including ancient Greek and medieval theatrical models, Ivanov believed a state of *sobornost'* could be attained, manifesting as "a union of persons in which each person has his own singular, unrepeatable, and unique essence…but all

[161] *Sobornost'* itself constitutes a medievalist ideal; as Biryukov and Sergeyev note, the *sobory* of medieval Muscovy were ecclesiastical governance institutions. See Nikolai Biryukov and Victor Sergeyev, "Parliamentarianism and sobornost': Two Models of Representative Institutions in Russian Political Culture," *Discourse & Society* 4, issue 1 (January 1993): 59.

[162] Ivanov, *Selected Essays,* 219.

[163] Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, "Transcending politics: Vyachslav Ivanov's visions of Sobornost'," *California Slavic Studies* 14 (1992): 149-150.

are…united in God."[164] In his 1906 essay "Presentiments and Portents: The New Organic Era and the Theatre of the Future", Ivanov describes his goals for such a "cultic theatre" in terms of sobornost':

> We want to gather in order to create, to 'act', in a collective [*sobornyi*] manner, and not only to contemplate...the crowd of viewers must merge into a choral body similar to the mystical community of ancient 'orgies' and 'mysteries'.[165]

In this vision for a spiritually transformative theatre, Ivanov outlines its culmination in the "merging" of spectators and performers into a "mystical community" that would enable "the transfiguration and transformation of life" and achieve sobornost'.[166] Only three years later, he would meet Scriabin and the two would form a deep friendship based on the shared goal of attaining sobornost' through performance, with Ivanov becoming one of Scriabin's main interlocutors during the development of *Mysterium*.[167]

For all his valorization of the transformative potential of theatre, Ivanov's writings focus more on its ends than its means. It was Symbolist playwrights like Blok, Evreinov, Kuzmin, and Fyodor Sologub who pioneered specific theatrical strategies to achieve sobornost'. These strategies centered on realizing sobornost' within performance by eliminating the distance between performer and spectator. Compounded by a reaction against the dominance of Stanislavskian realism, Sologub proclaimed the need for theatre to return to its spiritual roots in "liturgical enactment" and "mysterious ritual" wherein the "body and soul transfigured…shall

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[164] Rosenthal, "Transcending politics," 159.

[165] Ivanov, *Selected Essays,* 104.

[166] Ivanov, *Selected Essays,* 215.

[167] Ivanov described their meeting as "a profound and luminous event in my spiritual development" in which Scriabin was "like no one else" in being "so close to me and my thought" (see Ballard, 176). Following Scriabin's death, Ivanov formed a memorial society in honor of Scriabin, devoted to reading and writing on his work (Morrison, *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement*, 237 note 40).

arrive at true unity."[168] In his 1908 essay "The Theater of a Single Will", Sologub prescribes the transformation of the spectator into a participant as necessary for arriving at this form of "true unity":

> Ere long the spectator, wearied by the alternation of spectacles alien to him wants to becomes a participant in a mysterium… the sole means of his resurrection is to participate in a mysterium, a liturgical ritual in which he can join his hand to that of his brother and sister.[169]

Echoing Ivanov's language of sobornost', Sologub identifies the need for spiritually transformative theatre to engage in spectatorial participation. To attain such participation, Sologub advocated for specific, aesthetic interventions within the performance encounter. Building on Wagner's innovation of placing the orchestra below the stage in a pit, Sologub demanded the removal of the footlights as a barrier between the audience and the stage.[170] He also expunged costume and set design, describing such element as unnecessary artifice that only contributed to spectacle.[171] Ultimately, Sologub's vision for his "theatre of a single will" returned to his earlier roots in poetry: he envisioned performances where "the author or a professional reader would sit at a table to one side of the theatre and recite the entire play including stage directions." [172] While a far cry from Scriabin's plan for *Mysterium's* multifaceted aesthetic design, Sologub's hopes for his "theatre of a single will" prefigure the spiritually transformative performance encounter that *Mysterium* would come to epitomize—one in which

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[168] Fyodor Sologub, "Theatre of a Single Will," in *Russian Dramatic Theory from Pushkin to the Symbolists: An Anthology*, ed. Laurence Senelick (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 133.

[169] Sologub, "Theatre of a Single Will," 134-5.

[170] Sologub, "Theatre of a Single Will," 135.

[171] Sologub, "Theatre of a Single Will," 135.

[172] Golub, *Evreinov*, 7.

"the throng, which came to look on, will be transfigured into the choric round dance, come to participate in the tragic action."[173]

Beginning with the founding influence of Solovyov's religious view of art through Ivanov's call for a theatre of sobornost' and Sologub's vision for active spectatorship, the Symbolist vision for transformative performance sought to interpellate spectators within the performance encounter into a state of sobornost' that would enact communal, spiritual consciousness. The effects of this transformation would result in a state of permanent, spiritual change through the confluence of spirit and matter, yielding an apocalyptic reckoning that would forever change the nature of society and reality. The interwoven Symbolist ideals of medievalism, eschatological expectancy, and sobornost' converged in a vision for a radically transformative performance encounter, one that turned to the mystery as both a model and a portent for theatre's divinely ordained role. In this sense, the medieval imaginary functioned for the Symbolists as a paradigm of efficacious performance, one that broke with the conventions of theatrical realism to return to an earlier, idealized form of spiritual communion between audience and performer. Such a communion served not merely as an aesthetic ideal for the Symbolists but as modality for the future they hoped to bring about in the face of national rupture, one characterized by communal unity (*sobornost'*) through perfect spiritual harmony, leading to a utopia that could only be fully realized through apocalypse. It is this conjoined impetus that *Mysterium* sought to manifest, surpassing its more traditional medievalist precursors to enact its transformative efficacy through unprecedented means. In this sense, *Mysterium* itself emerges from the Symbolist medievalism of the Silver Age; its radical aesthetics, its vision for complete spiritual transformation through *sobornost'*, and its astounding belief in the efficacy of the

[173] Sologub, "Theatre of a Single Will," 148.

performance encounter in bringing about apocalypse itself is based on the pervading view of the "mystery" as the performance form that would redefine both art and the world itself.

Scriabin and the Plans for *Mysterium*

In turning *Mysterium* itself, the backdrop of Symbolist medievalism seems to recede in the face of the grandiose aims of transformation and apocalypse that underpin its exceptional aesthetic design. By briefly looking at key aspects of Scriabin's biography, I trace the predominant influence of Symbolist thought, including its medievalism, which was foundational to *Mysterium's* genesis.

Born in 1871, Scriabin's life and work is usually divided into three phrases; his early career, characterized by the influence of his mentors at the Moscow Conservatory for Music, where his compositions were reminiscent of the work of composers Franz Lizst and Frederic Chopin; his middle period when he left Russia with his mistress Tatyana and lived in Switzerland, France, Italy, and Belgium, composing musical "poems" increasingly defined by chromatic tonalities; and his final period, where upon his return to Russia in 1909 he joined the Symbolist circle and devoted his energies to composing *Mysterium*.[174] Through these different phases his musical career was unified by his pronounced belief in the metaphysical capacity of music and he sought out works and thinkers that affirmed this viewpoint. Having received no formal education outside of music conservatory, Scriabin freely borrowed and synthesized ideas gleaned from a wide range of disciplines, making his own aesthetic philosophy particularly

[174] For the purposes of this chapter, I will be analyzing the extant sources of *Mysterium* as well as those of Scriabin's *Prefatory Action*. The *Prefatory Action,* also unfinished, was intended to serve as a precursor to *Mysterium*. In 1914, Scriabin turned his focus to the Prefatory Action, constructing it as a somewhat condensed version of the larger project and conceiving of it as a way to prepare audiences for the fuller experience of *on* that was to come. Though they have separate titles, the pieces are viewed by Scriabin scholars as constitutive of the same aims and overall artistic project and I will be approaching them in tandem in the current section. See Louis W. Marvick, "Two Versions of the Symbolist Apocalypse," *Criticism* 28, no. 3 (Summer 1986): 289.

syncretic. Early on, he was greatly impressed by the work of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche; from the former, he incorporated the philosophical notion of "controlling's one fate and the world around one through personal will."[175] From the latter, he absorbed the ideal of the balance between Dionysian and Apollonian impulses within art and determined himself to be a Nietzschean Superman uniquely capable of altering world history.[176] His encounter in 1898 with Moscow University philosophy professor, Prince Trubetskoy, drew him into the orbit of the Moscow Religious-Philosophical Society, which was devoted to integrating philosophy and religion by fusing the ideologies of Hegel and Solovyov.[177] During this period, Scriabin was impelled by the idea of creating sobornost' through art generally and music in particular.[178] Finally in 1905, Scriabin encountered the writings of Helena Blavatsky, the founder of theosophy. Defined broadly as an array of philosophies "professing to achieve knowledge of God by spiritual ecstasy, direct intuition, or special individual relations", theosophy furnished him with an interest in Eastern religion, particularly Hinduism, and added to his means of "interpreting the cosmos."[179] However, as Lincoln Ballard has observed, Scriabin's reliance on theosophy as his dominant religious-philosophical framework has been overstated in scholarship.[180] Rather than adhering to any particular system of religious or philosophical thought, Scriabin created his own assemblage of mystical ideology gleaned from a range of

[175] Ballard, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion,* 20.

[176] Ballard, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion,* 20.

[177] Malcolm Brown, "Skriabin and Russian 'Mystic' Symbolism", *19th-Century Music.* Vol. 3, No. 1 (Jul. 1979): 43.

[178] Ballard, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion,* 21.

[179] Ballard, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion,* 24.

[180] Ballard, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion,* 24.

sources that served to support his intuitively held beliefs on the nature of spirituality, philosophy, and art. Like Scriabin's syncretic worldview, Symbolist ideology integrated religion, art, and philosophy towards the aim of producing creative works that would enact their beliefs in art's divine transformative potential. This point of connection would provide Scriabin's apocalyptic vision for *Mysterium* with some of its strongest advocates and disciples.

Upon meeting Viacheslav Ivanov in 1909 at a musical recital for the Symbolist journal *Apollon*, Scriabin declared of the Symbolists, "I have a feeling…that these are going to be my closest friends!"[181] Through their shared interest in Solovyov and a vision idea for a theatrical rite that would enact sobornost', Ivanov soon became one of Scriabin's main artistic interlocutors over the course of *Mysterium's* development.[182] Upon his death in 1915, Ivanov established a memorial society in his honor, Scriabin's Wreath [*Venok Skryabina*],[183] penning five essays and eight poems on Scriabin, which he presented to fellow Symbolist acolytes of the composer and later published. In his essay "Scriabin's View of Art", Ivanov attests to the larger Symbolist interpretation of not only Scriabin's compositions, but Scriabin himself, as being defined by a larger spiritual significance: "

> Scriabin's appearance is direct evidence of a turning point that is coming to pass in the consciousness of humanity. I also feel that Scriabin's creative achievements and, to no less degree, his unfulfilled plans constitute a significant event in the universal life of the spirit.[184]

[181] Brown, "Skriabin and Russian 'Mystic' Symbolism," 48.

[182] Scriabin also developed closed friendships at this time with the Symbolist poets Konstantin Balmont and Jurgis Baltrušaitus (Ballard, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion,* 174).

[183] Morrison, *Russian Opera,* 237 note 40.

[184] Ivanov, *Selected Essays,* 211.

Ultimately, Ivanov and other Symbolists read Scriabin's death itself as a sign of his conjoined spiritual and artistic calling, framing him as both hero and martyr to his unfinished plans for *Mysterium*: his death proved that "the flesh of the genius proved too infirm to contain the supreme gifts of the Spirit."[185] In death, Scriabin's legacy was solidified as one of the central Symbolist luminaries, one whose vision for *Mysterium* exemplified the transformative artistic aims of the movement as a whole.

Transformation through Aesthetics

Encouraged by his Symbolist friends, Scriabin spent thirteen years architecting *Mysterium* to achieve its apocalyptically efficacious ends. Initially conceived in 1902, Scriabin framed *Mysterium* as tracing "the process of the separation and the immersion of the Spirit in matter and the return back to unity, the process of cosmic evolution and involution" while narratively depicting the "history of the universe…the history of the human races…and the history of the individual spirit."[186] Echoing Wagner's vision for reuniting the arts within a singular *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Scriabin planned to reestablish the original "harmonious synthesis" of all genres of art into an "omni-art."[187]

> In this artistic event there will not be a single spectator. All will be participants…[*Mysterium*] requires special people, special artists, a completely different new culture…The cast of performers includes, of course, an orchestra, a large mixed choir, an instrument with visual effects, dancers, a procession, incense, rhythmized textual articulation.[188]

[185] Ivanov, *Selected Essays,* 225.

[186] Aleksandr N. Scriabin, *The Notebooks of Alexander Skryabin*, trans. Simon Nicholls and Michael Pushkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2018), 43, 36.

[187] Scriabin, *The Notebooks of Alexander Skryabin,* 47.

[188] Morrison, "Skryabin and the Impossible," 292.

Like Wagner's operas, *Mysterium* combined music, dance, poetry, and elaborate set design, extending these elements to materially engage each of the senses.[189] As recounted by his brother-in-law and biographer, Boris de Schloezer: "the inclusion of all the senses into the polyphony of *Mysterium* was intended to enrich it enormously; its fabric would be differentiated into sound, color, movement, odors, and tactile actions."[190] This synesthetic approach to the design for *Mysterium* reflected not only the broader Symbolist interest in synesthesia but functioned as the means by which Scriabin intended to explicitly enact the reunion of Spirit and Matter.[191] Literalizing Solovyov's call for the spiritualization of matter and the materialization of spirit, Scriabin envisioned the material aesthetics of *Mysterium* function to dissolve "the subjective, individual 'I'", merging into "single Absolute Being…when this moment of ecstasy was achieved…[He] believed that individual desires and striving would vanish, and only a single unchanging consciousness would remain."[192] Scriabin's vision of dissolving the individual into single consciousness operated through the materiality of aesthetics. In his account of Scriabin's process of developing *Mysterium*, Schloezer quotes him stating:

> Any influence exercised by a work of art must be of a material nature. A work of art, specifically a musical work, produces an impact on matter, altering it in a certain way. This impact is physical, but…it extend[s] to all states of being, including astral and mental. Although the nature of this impact has not been thoroughly evaluated and its manifestations may not be immediately evident, they are present in the artist's creative design.[193]

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[189] Ivanov, *Selected Essays,* 226.

[190] Boris Schloezer, Nicolas Slonimsky, and Marina Scriabine, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1987), 257.

[191] For further reading on the Symbolist interest in synesthesia, see Dann, Kevin T. *Bright Colors Falsely Seen: Synaesthesia and the Search for Transcendental Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

[192] Rebecca Mitchell, *Nietzsche's Orphans: Music, Metaphysics, and the Twilights of the Russian Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 77.

[193] Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic,* 240.

In formulating a causal relationship between the "artist's creative design" and the "astral and mental" impact of art, Scriabin asserts that the "material nature" of art enables it to impact "all states of being", both material and spiritual. By engaging each of the senses on a physical level—from sonic vibrations to photons relaying light—*Mysterium*'s material impact was concomitant with its spiritual effects. With this in mind, I trace the design of each of these aesthetic elements to analyze how they were aimed at transposing material elements into spiritually unifying effects for spectators.

As a virtuosic musician and composer, Scriabin's music formed the foundation of *Mysterium*. The musical score to *Mysterium* survives only in fragments but they all center on a "mystic chord" that Scriabin considered himself the first composer to discover.[194] Also known as the Prometheus chord, the mystic chord was defined by its dissonant conflation of major and minor tonality.[195] Comprised of the notes G♭ - d - a♭ - c' - (d') - f' - b♭', the chord's singular use of both whole-tone and octatonic scale pitches was intended to "create a harmonic correspondence between external reality…and an internal, higher reality…to establish a relationship between the mobile, temporal world of perceptible phenomena and the immobile, non-temporal world of essences."[196] To bridge perceptually "external reality" and the "internal, higher reality", the mystic chord would underpin a score that included an orchestra, piano, a

[194] These surviving fragments were reconstructed into a piece by composer Alexander Nemtin titled "Preparation from the Final Mystery", recorded in 2000. See David Roberts, *The Total Work of Art in European Modernism* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2011), 141.

[195] Mitchell and Taruskin's in-depth analyses of the mystic chord demonstrate that on a musicological level, the chord is not technically dissonant but rather uniquely combines melody and harmony. However, its distinctive and jarring tonality is often described more colloquially as *dissonant*. See Mitchell, 81–84, and Taruskin, 321–59.

[196] Morrison, "Skryabin and the Impossible," 314.

large choir, and a panoply of bells. While this composition was never completed, Scriabin played long portions of his musical sketches for his friend and music critic Leonid Sabaneyev, shortly before his death. Sabeneyev's rapt description of the music illuminates key aspects of what would have been its intended effect:

> There were secretive, slow harmonies, full of an unusual sweetness and spice, shifting against a backdrop of standing fifths in the bass…I listened with a feeling of paralysis…I'd descended into an ocean of new sounds…with its magical harmonies…I felt I'd descended into an enchanted, holy kingdom, where sounds and colors merged into one fragile and fantastic chord…It all had a hue of illusion, unreality, and dreaminess—as though I'd had a sonic dream.[197]

Sabaneyev's descriptive language of enchantment, unreality, and holiness evokes a sense of the unfamiliarity and mysticism that characterized the aims of *Mysterium* itself. Scriabin also planned to incorporate sonic elements from nature into the piece, such as the sounds of wind, trees, and birds which he hoped would interweave with the music, creating a musical backdrop against which the other aesthetic elements would unfold. As recent scholarship in neuroscience and new musicology attests, the capacity of sound to arouse affective states in listeners—particularly through dissonance—suggests that the musical components of *Mysterium*'s atmosphere would stimulate such affects in its audience through the material impact of auditory vibrations.[198]

The second element of critical importance to *Mysterium* drew directly from Scriabin's own experience of synesthesia—self-described as his "color-hearing"—in which particular

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[197] Morrison, "Skryabin and the Impossible," 312.

[198] See James Kennaway, "The Long History of Neurology and Music," in *Music and the Nerves, 1700–1900*, ed. James Kennaway (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1-17; and Stefan Koelsch, "Emotion and Music," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Affective Neuroscience*, ed. Jorge Armony and Patrik Vuillemier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 286-303; as well as Paula Virtala and Mari Tervaniemi, "Neurocognitions of Major-Minor and Consonance-Dissonance," *Music Perception* 3, no. 4 (April 2017): 387–404.

musical keys were associated with corresponding colors. [199] While a neurological basis for his association between sound and color has been contested by scholars, Scriabin developed a system of "tone-color correspondence" that combined color and sound.[200] Scriabin had already implemented this system in earlier compositions through a custom-made color-organ (also known as a *tastiéra per luce* or *clavier à lumières*), which was tuned to project visually the colors that he associated with each musical note. Scriabin's 1911 orchestral piece, *Prometheus: Poem of Fire*, famously utilized these effects (though to disappointing results).[201] Despite the recent reevaluation of Scriabin's synesthesia, color and light constitute a central aspect of atmospheres as articulated by Gernot Böhme, who attributes intrinsically synesthetic properties to color itself.; color, in Böhme's words, conveys "haptic qualities" that are "atmospherically perceptible even without the concrete sense of touch…the optical features of surface formation, to absorption, diffusion, refraction."[202] This gives color what he terms "its synesthetic character," imbuing materials with the sense of "being warm, gentle, repellant, smooth, damp, obtrusive, or reserved" and affecting "several senses."[203] Despite the uncertain status of Scriabin's neurological perception of "color-tone correspondence," the affective resonances of color have

[199] Morrison, "Skryabin and the Impossible," 305.

[200] See chapter 6 in Ballard, *The Alexander Scriabin Companion: History, Performance and Lore*, 131–81. Gawboy and Townsend have aptly argued that the definition of synesthesia has narrowed over the past century such that "it is perhaps most accurate to say that Scriabin *was* a synesthete according to the way the phenomenon was framed during his own time period, but according to current definitions he was not." See Anna M. Gawboy and Justin Townsend, "Scriabin and the Possible," *Music Theory Online* 18, no. 2 (2012), Accessed May 5, 2021, https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.12.18.2/mto.12.18.2.gawboy_townsend.php .

[201] Calling for "dynamic changes of light intensity and fantastic special effects such as tongues of flame, lighting, fireworks, and sparks," *Prometheus: Poem of Fire* required elements that would only be technologically feasible decades later. See Gawboy and Townsend.

[202] Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 145.

[203] Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, 145.

been demonstrated across a wide range of disciplines, including psychology, architecture, and color studies.[204]

In addition to his plan to project lights in accordance with the sounds and harmonies of *Mysterium*'s musical score, Scriabin intended to include movement, gesture, and dance to achieve a full range of visual stimuli. Sabaneyev provides insight into Scriabin's vision of combining sound and sight in synesthetic accord:

> [Scriabin] dreamed of symphonies of lights and colours, of moving architectures made of pillars of the illuminated fumes of incense, of symphonies of aromas and touches, of the lines of a new synthetic art, starting on one artistic plane and ending on another, lines starting with the melody of sounds and finishing in gesture. He dreamed of some kind of new untapped resources of art, of whispers and noises as the components of an artistic whole, of processions and dances, of the inclusion of nature herself in an Act of consecration, of the colours of sunset and sunrise, of the gleam of start which were to take part in the last Festival of the World.[205]

Beyond simply light and color, the visual design of *Mysterium* included movement, gesture, and dance; no element would be left untapped in the comprehensiveness of Scriabin's visual plan. His design also extended to the performance space itself; committed to performing *Mysterium* in the foothills of the Himalayas, Scriabin himself drew plans for a purpose-built "temple-theatre" where the performance would take place.[206] The temple's design reflects this logic; the temple's structure would be spherical and open to the sky, surrounded by a circular pool of water, reflecting theosophist and Symbolist ideals of the symbolic perfection of spheres in which the structure would "not be monotonously fixed forever, but will be forever changing, together with

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[204] Such studies fall broadly under the category of "color meaning"; see Benjamin Wright and Lee Rainwater, "The Meanings of Color," *Journal of General Psychology* 67, no. 1 (1962): 89–99, and the journal *Color Research and Application*.

[205] Scriabin, *The Notebooks of Alexander Skryabin,* 218–19.

[206] Scriabin's choice of the Himalayas reflects his interest in Eastern religion through the influence of Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society (Matlaw,19).

the mood and movement of the Mystery."[207] Through the use of "mists and lights", visual effects would "modify the architectural contours" of the performance space, creating the illusion of movement.[208]

To achieve such a visual effect, Scriabin incorporated another, more unprecedented, element into his design:

> I thought a long time about how to achieve fluidity and creativeness in the very structure of the temple…And it suddenly came to me it was possible to have columns of incense…They will be illuminated by the lights of the light-orchestra and they will disperse and come back together again! They will be enormous fiery pillars. And the entire temple will consist of them. And the building will be fluid and changing, fluid like the music. And its forms will express the mood of the music and words.[209]

By introducing "columns of incense," Scriabin aimed to heighten the use of dynamic visual movement and to stimulate olfaction. As observed by Mary Fleischer, the Symbolist theatres of both *fin de siècle* France and Russia were particularly interested in the use of scent.[210] Unbounded and diffuse, scent could be deployed in "suggestive, mysterious and expansive ways to dissolve barriers between subject and object, individual and environment," creating the conditions for the emergence of a communal consciousness[211] Scriabin's planned use of scent reflects this impetus: the pillars of incense would produce "odors of both pleasant perfumes and acrid smokes, frankincense and myrrh" in an olfactory echo of the traditional use of incense in the rituals of the Russian Orthodox Church.[212] As with sound, he also wanted the environment

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[207] Brown, "Skriabin and Russian 'Mystic' Symbolism," 50.

[208] Morrison, "Scriabin and the Impossible," 292.

[209] Brown, "Skriabin and Russian 'Mystic' Symbolism," 50.

[210] See Mary Fleischer, "Incense and Decadents: Symbolist theatre's use of scent" in *The Senses in Performance*, ed. Sally Banes and Andre Lepecki (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 105-114.

[211] Fleischer, "Incense and Decadents," 105.

[212] Faubion Bowers, *Scriabin: A Biography*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1996), 253.

outside of the temple to permeate the performance space, with exterior scents of nature and the Himalayas infusing the performance space.[213] These elements of scent would function as pervasively and inescapably as the music itself, permeating the bodies of spectators and performers alike to evoke sobornost' by captivating all of the senses.[214] As with sound, the materiality of scent physically infiltrates the senses, yielding demonstrable affects as testified by recent studies on olfaction and emotion.[215]

Though Scriabin also intended to engage touch and taste, plans for these aspects of the performance do not survive. Yet the details of the aesthetic design for *Mysterium*'s auditory, visual, and olfactory elements attest to Scriabin's vision of producing an affective atmosphere through the use of all the factors delineated by Böhme. By subsuming the senses in *Mysterium*'s material aesthetics, Scriabin's design sought to architect an affective atmosphere that would transform spectators from "individual consciousness to communal consciousness, corporeal life to spiritual life."[216] It was against this affective backdrop of its atmosphere that the transformative drama of *Mysterium* would be played.

As the most complete surviving evidence of *Mysterium*, Scriabin's libretto maps a narrative that explicitly enacts the dissolution of the boundaries between self, other, and

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[213] Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic,* 264-5.

[214] Various accounts testify that Scriabin further planned to incorporate touch and taste into the fabric of *Mysterium* but details of these plans do not survive.

[215] See Robert Holland et al., "Smells Like Clean Spirit: Nonconscious Effects of Scent on Cognition and Behavior," *Psychological Science* 16, no. 9 (2005): 689–93, as well as Aprajita Mohanty and Jay A. Gottfried, "Examining Emotion Perception and Elicitation via Olfaction," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Affective Neuroscience*, ed. Jorge Armony and Patrik Vuillemier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 241-264 and Sylvain Delplanque et al., "How to Map the Affective Semantic Space of Scents," *Cognition and Emotion* 26, no. 5 (2012): 885–98.

[216] Morrison, "Skryabin and the Impossible," 299.

environment.[217] While Scriabin completed only the first half within his lifetime, the entire libretto exists in an earlier, unedited draft, whose dramatic arc traces the "history of the universe…the history of the human races…and the history of the individual spirit."[218] Echoing Ivanov's vision for a Dionysian cultic chorus, the text begins with a chorus announcing the action:

> In the lightning upflight, the dread explosion
> In the loving creative rush
> In its divine breath
> Is the secret countenance of the universe.
> The ardor of a moment engenders eternity
> Illumines the abyss of space;
> Eternity breathes worlds,
> The pealing of bells has embraced silence.[219]

Following the chorus, the dramatis persona of the "Voice of the Masculine" and the "Voice of the Feminine" exchange poetic expressions of desire, with the arc of their union signifying the reunification of Spirit and Matter.[220] Their coupling is anticipated by various elements of nature, personified within the text as Waves of Life, Mountains, Light Beam, Fields, Forest, and Desert. The first half of the libretto closes with these anthropomorphized natural phenomena celebrating the impending union of the Masculine and Feminine, pointing toward an even more metaphysical form of unification through the merging of consciousness:

> O, sacred moment of creation
> Blessed, fiery moment
> You have revealed to me the reflection
> Of white, fateful death.

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[217] Here I am drawing on the finished half of the libretto of *Prefatory Action* as published in Scriabin's personal notebooks. See Scriabin, 125-158.

[218] Scriabin, *The Notebooks of Alexander Skryabin,* 43.

[219] Scriabin, *The Notebooks of Alexander Skryabin,* 158.

[220] While beyond the scope of this discussion, there is a wealth of scholarship detailing the unique role of gender within Russian Symbolist thought; for an introduction to the topic, see Olga Matich, "Androgyny and the Russian Silver Age," *Pacific Coast Philology* 14 (1979): 42–50.

Have awakened in me the consciousness
Of dual-single being.
I am henceforth the conjunction
Of the 'I' and the alien 'not I'.[221]

With this union, the division between Masculine and Feminine, Spirit and Matter, "I" and "not I" dissolves, giving way to an affective ecstasy shared by humanity and nature.[222] The recurrence of the language of "melting" and "merging" throughout the text signals the desire for totalizing union between all forms of life and matter. Rhetoric of ecstasy, anticipation, union, and dissolution depicts a totalizing momentum, with the chorus declaring, "We shall mingle feelings in a unified wave!...We shall vanish, we shall melt."[223] The chorus goes on to directly invoke the role of the senses in achieving the unity of "dual-single being": "Only through the foam of sensuality is it possible to penetrate into that secret realm where the treasures of the soul are."[224] In a recurring refrain, the "bliss of dissolution" signals the ultimate goal of an all-encompassing, unifying state of consciousness—of a metaphysical sobornost'. Played against the multisensory backdrop of *Mysterium*'s aesthetic design, the libretto declares the aims of *Mysterium* in dialogue; it articulates the means behind its own efficacy through the sensuality and affective feelings evoked by the text.

In order to facilitate a transformation from "individual consciousness to communal consciousness, corporeal life to spiritual life,"[225] Scriabin channeled the ethos shared by Ivanov, Sologub, and Evreinov for a performance encounter that would dissolve the distinction between

[221] Scriabin, *The Notebooks of Alexander Skryabin,* 168.

[222] For further explication on the sexual metaphor within Scriabin's metaphysical world view, see Mitchell, 77.

[223] Scriabin, *The Notebooks of Alexander Skryabin,* 158.

[224] Scriabin, *The Notebooks of Alexander Skryabin,* 145.

[225] Morrison, "Scriabin and the Impossible," 299.

spectator and performer wherein "the spectator must become an actor, a co-participant in the rite" through the performance encounter.[226] According to Schloezer, Scriabin believed that humans possessed an innate yearning for "the abolition of all boundaries confining him to relativistic, individual existence."[227] In seeking to dissolve the dichotomy between actor and spectator in *Mysterium*, Scriabin envisioned creating the conditions for universal cosmic ecstasy:

> The very concept of an individual and subjective ecstasy not involving the universe in its entirety implies this separation between an acting individual and a great, passively receptive mass of people, that is actor and spectator. But the idea of a cosmic ecstasy must by necessity exclude the roles of actor and spectator; for it can be only realized as a collective act drawing everyone into its circle without opposing anyone to anyone else. Such a collective act ceases to be a representation or reproduction of an event, but becomes its actual fulfillment.[228]

For cosmic ecstasy to dismantle the separate roles of actor and spectator, Scriabin defined theatrical performance of *Mysterium* as a form of fulfillment rather than an act of representation. Eschewing mere representation, *Mysterium* as a theatrical experience would dissolve of the distinctions between spectator and performer, yielding a state of sobornost' that would end the "cosmic process."

In its superlative sensory design, *Mysterium* aimed to exceed the sum of its parts. Through the confluence of sight, sound, and scent as well as movement and language, Scriabin designed *Mysterium* as a sensory encounter that would enact the "astral and mental" effects that constitute spiritual transformation, leading to the end of the "cosmic process." With its material and sensory design, *Mysterium* was intended to yield an affective state, characterized by sobornost' in which the relationship between not only performers and spectators, but the material

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[226] Ivanov, *Selected Essays,* 104.

[227] Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic,* 219.

[228] Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic,* 184.

and the non-material itself, would be transformed. While such aims may seem to be merely the product of the Symbolist ideology on the spiritual purpose of art and its transformatively efficacious potential, Scriabin's aesthetic vision asserts a distinct phenomenology of the performance encounter in which the very materiality of aesthetics and its perception by the embodied subject constitute the means for *Mysterium's* transformative efficacy.

Emergent from its context of historical rupture, Symbolism, and the medieval imaginary, *Mysterium* sought to engineer a phenomenological encounter within theatre that functions on what I have termed *affective atmosphere*. Scriabin's own multifaceted worldview invites such a phenomenological reading as the means to reframe *Mysterium* as more than mere "cosmic hocus-pocus" but rather as a performance aimed at the production and transmission of affect, one that would interpellate spectators into a transformative atmosphere.[229] As Rebecca Mitchell's probing analysis of Scriabin's personal philosophy demonstrates, his understanding of metaphysics, aesthetics, and consciousness was built on the understanding that "humans could only know their own subjective experience of the world; they had no knowledge of the world itself."[230] Such a formulation coincides with Husserlian phenomenology, the initial investigations of which were published contemporaneously with Scriabin's work on *Mysterium.*[231] Husserlian thought would later by expanded by Maurice Merleau-Ponty with particular regard to embodied perception and materiality. Though there is no evidence that Scriabin read Husserl, his metaphysical worldview aligns with, and in some ways presages, the work of key philosophers of phenomenology in the

[229] Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically,* 313.

[230] Mitchell, *Nietzsche's Orphans,* 69.

[231] Husserl's two volumes of *Logical Investigations* were published between 1900 and 1901. His *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* was published in 1913. Scriabin began composing *Mysterium* in 1904 and worked on it until his death in 1915.

twentieth century. This confluence situates Scriabin's vision for the *Mysterium* as co-emergent with the foundational principles of phenomenology, forming the basis for my argument for affective atmosphere as the methodology behind *Mysterium's* apocalyptic aims.

Affective Atmospheres

By pairing affect and atmosphere, I draw upon their preexisting formulations to redefine theatrical efficacy in terms of materiality.[232] While affect is often broadly defined as preconscious emotion or feeling, it has been articulated in distinctly material terms by Theresa Brennan. In her work *The Transmission of Affect* (2014), Brennan argues that affect is materially perceived by the senses. As previously cited, Scriabin asserted the intrinsic materiality of aesthetics and their impact as "physical" as well as "astral and mental."[233] Scriabin acknowledged at the time that "Although the nature of this impact has not been thoroughly evaluated and its manifestations may not be immediately evident." Nearly a century later, Brennan echoes Scriabin, stating, "Sights and sounds are physical matters in themselves, carriers of social matters, social in origin but physical in their effects. Every word, every sound, has its valence; so, at a more subtle level, may every image."[234] It is the "valence" of such sensory stimuli, according to Brennan, that produces their affective impact, such that "the transmission [of affect] is also responsible for bodily changes…in other words, the transmission of affect…alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject."[235] Citing intangible but

[232] My formulation of affective atmosphere converges with Ben Anderson's helpful literature review of the concept, which situates it within discourses of political revolution but draws on many of the same sources. See Ben Anderson, "Affective Atmospheres," *Emotion, Space and Society*, no. 2 (2009): 77–81.

[233] Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic,* 240.

[234] Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 71.

[235] Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect,* 1.

fundamentally material exchanges that occur on a chemical, neurological, and pheromonal level, Brennan's argument frames affect as a material phenomenon that is perceived by the senses to alter the subject in relationship to others and their environment. In this way, affect itself destabilizes traditional, Western notions of the discrete, self-enclosed individual, instead approaching the subject as permeable: "The transmission of affect means that we are not self-contained in terms of our energies. There is no secure distinction between the 'individual' and the 'environment.'"[236] In light of this, Brennan asserts that "the mystery really is how a person maintains a distinct identity" at all.[237] In this way, Brennan's argument for affect's material impact as a challenge to the notion of the individual "self-contained" suggests the possibility of a communally conscious affective state—of sobornost'.

However, Brennan's focus on affect's transmission over its generation elides how affective states are produced. Here the concept of atmosphere offers a framework by which to articulate affect's generation and production. Dufrenne introduces the notion of *atmosphere* in *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (1967), defining it as the cumulative effect of all the aesthetic elements that comprise an "aesthetic object."[238] Within the aesthetic encounter, it is atmosphere that "orients our comprehension by organizing the sense of all that we will see or

[236] Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect,* 6.

[237] Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect,* 11.

[238] Dufrenne makes a key phenomenological distinction between an aesthetic object and a work of art in which the former is emergent from the latter through aesthetic perception. In his foreword to the text, Edward S. Casey summarizes Dufrenne's definition of a work of art as "the perduring structural foundation for the aesthetic object. It has a constant being which is not dependent on being experienced" (Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans. Edward S. Casey [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989], xxiii). The aesthetic object, on the other hand, is "simply the work of art as perceived" (Dufrenne, xxiv). Thus, Dufrenne argues that the "aesthetic object and work of art are distinct in that aesthetic perception must be joined to the work of art in order for the aesthetic object to appear" (Dufrenne, lxv). I defer to this concept of aesthetic object throughout the remainder of this chapter.

hear."[239] By positing atmosphere as an organizing principle that governs the perceptual interface between the senses and meaning-making, Dufrenne posits that it is atmosphere that transmits the "affective qualities" of an aesthetic object. In this sense, the encounter with an aesthetic object is ultimately an encounter between the spectator-perceiver and the affect-transmitting atmosphere generated by the object:

> By allowing us to perceive an exemplary object whose whole reality consists in being sensuous [*le sensible*], art invites us and trains us to read expression and to discover the atmosphere which is revealed only to feeling. Art makes us undergo the absolute experience of the affect.[240]

In contrast to Brennan's argument that affect is perceived directly by the senses, Dufrenne argues that the senses perceive an aesthetic object's atmosphere, which serves as the medium for affective transmission.

Building on Dufrenne, Böhme has more recently expounded upon atmosphere and its intervening role in the dynamic between subject and object. In *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres* (2017), Böhme defines atmospheres as:

> Something between subject and object: they can be characterized as quasi-objective feelings which flow out indeterminately into space. Equally, however, they must be characterized as subjective, in that they are nothing without an experiencing subject…atmospheres are experienced in terms of the affects they arouse and one can only tell which type of character they have by exposing oneself to them in bodily presence, in order to feel them in one's own disposition.[241]

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[239] Dufrenne, *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience,* 450.

[240] Dufrenne, *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 542. For background on Dufrenne's use of *le sensible* in translation, see Hugh Silverman's review of Dufrenne's work in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33, no. 4 (1975): 462–64.

[241] Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 183.

By posing atmospheres as "quasi-subjective," Böhme demonstrates their capacity to bridge the dichotomy between subject and object, thus uniting an "aesthetics of production…and an aesthetics of reception."[242] Additionally, his focus on "bodily presence" foregrounds his turn to theatre and stage design to demonstrate the production of atmosphere as the means of transmitting affect:

> Atmospheres can be created and there are elaborate arts that deal specifically with the creation of atmospheres. They revolve around the deployment of eminently material, technical devices, however, not as causal agents, but rather as generators of atmospheres. The art of set design is paradigmatic for this approach to atmospheres…atmospheres are experienced in a state of affective resonance and we can only tell what their nature is by exposing ourselves to them by being there physically, in order to perceive them in our particular frame of mind.[243]

Böhme returns repeatedly to stage design to illustrate atmosphere's capacity to arouse "affective resonances," emphasizing the materiality of producing stage design:

> The general aim of stage design is to create an atmosphere with the help of lights, music, sound, spatial constellations, and the use of characteristic objects…the paradigm of stage design offers the advantage of providing a wide range of categories and instruments according to which atmospheres can be determined from the side of their creation.[244]

For Böhme, this turn to theatre serves as a microcosm for city planning and eco-aesthetics, modeling broader social and spatial atmospheres that mediate between individuals and the environment. However, his articulation of atmosphere's impact on each of the senses aligns with Scriabin's aesthetic design across each sensory element. Color and light constitute a central aspect of Böhme's conception of atmospheres; like Scriabin, he argues for the intrinsically synesthetic properties to color itself. Color, in Böhme's words, conveys "haptic qualities" that

[242] Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, 168.

[243] Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres,* 168.

[244] Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres,* 129.

are "atmospherically perceptible even without the concrete sense of touch…the optical features of surface formation, to absorption, diffusion, refraction."[245] This gives color what he terms "its synesthetic character," imbuing materials with the sense of "being warm, gentle, repellant, smooth, damp, obtrusive, or reserved" and affecting "several senses."[246] Despite the uncertain status of Scriabin's neurological perception of "color-tone correspondence," his experience of color and its central role in the affective atmosphere of *Mysterium* are substantiated not only by Böhme but across a wide range of disciplines, including psychology, architecture, and color studies.[247]

Böhme also dedicates special attention to the role of architecture in producing atmospheres, stating that "architecture in particular produces atmospheres in everything."[248] He goes on to parallel music and architecture in their common capacity to modify both feelings and "the space of bodily presence."[249] Scriabin's temple design embodies this logic as central to *Mysterium's* envisioned atmosphere. Finally, Böhme also identifies scent as "perhaps even the most essential" aspect of atmospheres, describing it as inherently atmospheric in comparison to other sensory phenomena; odors are "'expelled indeterminately into the distance,' they envelop, cannot be avoided."[250] The spatiality of scent also depends on bodily co-presence in which "the

[245] Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres,* 145.

[246] Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres,* 145.

[247] Such studies fall broadly under the category of "color meaning"; see Benjamin Wright and Lee Rainwater, "The Meanings of Color," *Journal of General Psychology* 67, no. 1 (1962): 89–99 and the journal *Color Research and Application*.

[248] Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, 181.

[249] Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, 181.

[250] Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, 125.

lack of distance within the experience of smelling can lead to totally getting lost in it, so that the atmosphere of smelling may become the world in which we are."[251] *Mysterium's* use of scent reflects this sense of immersion and world-making. As with sound, the materiality of scent physically infiltrates the senses, yielding demonstrable affects as testified by recent studies on olfaction and emotion.[252]

In light of these articulations of affect and atmosphere, *Mysterium* demonstrates its prescience in its vision for a transformative performance encounter in which affective atmosphere serves as the medium for creating sobornost'. Although Brennan's theory of affect is not directed at theatrical performance, she argues for the capacity of affect to materially instigate the experience of a loss of "distinct identity"—a goal which formed the basis of *Mysterium's* aim for sobornost'. Building on Dufrenne, Böhme delineates the sensory elements of atmosphere that map onto each aspect of *Mysterium's* aesthetic design. Scriabin's vision traces a distinct phenomenological encounter through performance, beginning with the very materiality of aesthetics to its perception by the senses, ultimately producing a conjoined physical and spiritual impact through its singular affective atmosphere thereby enacting the transformational efficacy the unrealized *Mysterium* sought to achieve. With its apocalyptic dreams of the merging of Spirit and Matter, the individual and the collective through the transformational efficacy of performance, *Mysterium* was unprecedented in the scale of its ambition and is often dismissed as a Symbolist fantasy. Yet the lens of affective atmosphere suggests a different reading—rather than grandiose artistic delusion, *Mysterium* reveals itself to be a highly intentional production of

[251] Böhme, "Smell and Atmosphere," in *Atmosphere and Aesthetics*, ed. Tonino Griffero and Marco Tedeschini (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019): 264.

[252] See Robert Holland, et al., Mohanty and Gottfried, and Sylvain Delplanque et al.

affective atmosphere through material and sensory aesthetics, aimed at producing at transforming spectators into a state of sobornost' that would signal a new spiritual reality for humanity.

Conclusion

By excavating the Russian Symbolist turn towards medieval performance, I have sought to situate Scriabin's *Mysterium* within a particular reimagining of the medieval "mystery" that characterized the vision for spiritual transformation through performance during Russia's fraught Silver Age. In a period of escalating political instability, the *Mysterium* was conceptualized in response to a cultural climate characterized by eschatological expectancy in a period of profound rupture, deploying medievalist performance towards a utopic vision of sobornost'. Through the Symbolist reimagining of the medieval "mystery", rooted in the ideal initiated by Solovyov for re-infusing art with spiritual purpose, the Symbolists constructed their own medieval imaginary of performance, one characterized less by the historical mystery tradition but rather by a vision for a performance encounter that would enact a totalizing state of social solidarity.

Though in the wake of his death Scriabin's *Mysterium* receded to the status of an unrealized nonevent, its medievalist legacy for transformative performance was taken up by theatre artists in the new Soviet republic. Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Mystery-Bouffe* (1918) and Nikolai Evreinov's *Storming of the Winter Palace* (1920) signaled the secularization of the "mystery" in service of the new Soviet state. A retelling of the book of Genesis, Mayakovsky's *Mystery-Bouffe* transmuted the Israelite exodus to the Promised Land towards a vision of Soviet utopia.[253] Evreinov's *Storming of the Winter Palace* recapitulated his earlier vision for recapturing an imagined medieval solidarity by staging a mass pageant with thousands of

[253] Sharon Aronson-Lehavi, "The End: Mythical Futures in Avant-Garde Mystery Plays," *Theatre Research International* 34, no. 2 (July 2009): 119.

performers that ritualistically reenacted the nativity of the Bolshevik Revolution.[254] The ideal of sobornost' itself was appropriated and secularized within the Soviet regime as a mode of modeling a vision of communist collectivity.[255] Subsuming the sacred, medievalist impulse into secular, political propaganda, the new Soviet state surrogated the Symbolist drive towards transformative performance; the medieval mystery continued to serve as performance paradigm that functioned to interpellate spectators and performers alike into a totalizing cosmology, replacing the Christian orthodoxy with Communist ideology.

Though *Mysterium* never accomplished its goal of creating a "new man" and completing the "cosmic process", its legacy was transmuted into the next generation of Russian theatre. Emergent within the ruptures of early twentieth century Russia, *Mysterium* functions not merely as a Symbolist delusion of grandeur but as a specifically spiritual model for efficacy within performance. Its vision for an affective atmosphere enacted its transformative vision by dissolving the barriers between self and other within a spiritual state of sobornost'. In this way, *Mysterium's* appropriation of the mystery transposes its religious didacticism as devotional practice to reckon with rupture by achieving a spiritually unified state that would transform not only its spectators but material reality itself.

[254] Roberts, *The Total Work of Art in European Modernism,* 215.

[255] See Biryukov and Sergeyev, "Parliamentarianism and sobornost'."

Ch. 3 - Enacting Freedom:

Liberatory Efficacy, Medievalist Unity, and the Carceral Gaze in Sartre's *Bariona*

As Jean-Paul Sartre's first play, my second case study lacks the declarative spiritual aims of Scriabin's apocalyptic vision for *Mysterium*. Composed under duress during the early months of the Nazi occupation of France, *Bariona: The Son of Thunder's* transformative effects emerged emergent during its sole performance under the carceral conditions of Stalag 12D, a Nazi prisoner of war camp. By disrupting the carceral gaze, *Bariona's* performance functioned to transform its incarcerated spectators into liberated subjects whose solidarity drew on a medieval ideal of French unity invoked by the longstanding national tradition of the mystery cycle. Concomitantly, spectators reported being so moved by the play that several of them converted to Catholicism on the spot, yielding dual transformations that were efficacious in terms of liberation and spirituality.

In December 1940, Sartre penned the following letter to Simone de Beauvoir, announcing his first attempt at writing a play:

> I wrote a Christmas mystery play which is apparently very moving, so much so that the actors are moved to tears as they play their parts. As for me, I play the role of the Magus king. I write in the play in the morning and we rehearse in the afternoon…I'm discovering a totally new form of theatrical art in which a lot can be done…I have never felt so free. [256]

In writing a medievalist "mystery play", Sartre frames his discovery of "a totally new form of theatrical art" as having an inherent, if unarticulated, efficacy—one in which "a lot can be done." The passage seems to suggest that the play's affective power in moving its own actors "to tears" serves as the root of its undefined efficacy. However, the broader context in which Sartre wrote

[256] Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone. Beauvoir, Lee Fahnestock, and Norman MacAfee. *Quiet Moments in a War: The Letters of Jean-Paul Sartre to Simone De Beauvoir*. (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994), 246.

these words adds critical import to his final declaration "I have never felt so free": at the time of this letter, Sartre was interned as a prisoner of war following the fall of France to the Nazis. Interned with thousands of other military servicemen at Stalag 12D in Trier, Germany, Sartre made his first foray into dramatic writing with *Bariona: Son of Thunder*, a Nativity play modelled after the medieval mystery cycle tradition. In the weeks leading up to Christmas 1940, he wrote and directed the play, ultimately acting alongside a cast of fellow prisoners for a total of three performances.[257] The experience of *Bariona* led him to declare to de Beauvoir, "After this, I shall write plays."[258] Following his release from captivity in 1941, he turned to playwriting, penning five plays by the end of the decade including *The Flies* (1943) and *No Exit* (1944). *Bariona*, however, remained unpublished by Sartre until 1962, when he reluctantly allowed it to be printed it under pressure from former Stalag 12D prisoners from; however, he prohibited any future performances, a stricture his estate enforces to this day. Only at the end of his life did Sartre return to the medievalist theatre, envisioning a performance based on the Passion Play tradition titled *Le Pari [The Wager]*.[259] With his death in 1980, it remained unwritten.

As a medievalist Nativity play, *Bariona* presents an anomaly within the Sartrean corpus, its Christian messianism seemingly at odds with its author's lifelong atheism.[260] Its plot traces the travails of its titular character, Bariona, the head of a Jewish village that is suffering under harsh Roman rule. Bariona decides to stage resistance to Roman oppression by ordering the

[257] In 1960, the French newspaper *Le Figaro littéraire* interviewed a former prisoner who attributed his faith to witnessing Sartre's play in Stalag 12D. See Rémy Roure, "Jean-Paul Sartre a sauvé une âme," *Le Figaro littéraire*, March 26, 1960.

[258] Sartre, *Quiet Moments in a War,* 246.

[259] John Ireland, "Freedom as Passion: Sartre's Mystery Plays," *Theatre Journal* 50, no. 3 (Oct. 1998): 338.

[260] In his letters, Sartre states that he became an atheist at the age of 12. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Carnets de la drôle guerre: Septembre 1939-Mars 1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 265-7.

villagers to execute their own extinction by refusing to produce children. This mandate is immediately challenged by Bariona's wife, Sarah, who publicly reveals that she is pregnant. Her husband demands that she abort the child, citing the inhumanity of bringing a child into a world filled with oppression and despair. As Sarah refuses, the Three Magi enter the village seeking the Christ child. While the rest of the village departs with the Magi to worship the newly born Messiah, Bariona is confronted by King Balthazar who philosophically challenges Bariona's capitulation to despair. After a lengthy philosophical debate, Bariona himself encounters the Christ child (off stage) and is transformed: in converting to faith, he renounces despair and vows to fight the emissaries of Herod who seek to murder the Messiah, in a reference to the scriptural Slaughter of the Innocents. As the play closes, Bariona issues a heartfelt goodbye to Sarah, asking her to bear their unborn child and raise it in the knowledge of human freedom, and ultimately joy. Bariona exits to his presumed death joyful and proclaiming the liberating, salvific power of Christ.

Though relatively unknown outside of Sartrean studies, *Bariona* has been on object of perplexity for scholars of Sartre's philosophy and literature. Its overt religiosity and salvific Christian narrative contradict Sartre's reputation and legacy as the preeminent atheist philosopher of the twentieth century. As a result, much of the scholarship on *Bariona* elides any analysis that would trouble the secular atheism of its author, such as Bernard J. Quinn's argument against a religious reading of the play (1972) or studies that approach it as a prototype for Sartre's later work (Mohanty, 1974 and Stenström, 1967). Such arguments posit strictly secular impetuses behind *Bariona*, reading the play's medievalist religiosity as masking a deeper philosophical or political subtext. Within his own lifetime, Sartre substantiated such approaches,

characterizing *Bariona* as "biblical in appearance only."[261] Betraying his own anxiety about its implications for his own atheism, Sartre repeatedly stated, "Finding out that I had written a mystery play, some people have gone so far as to suppose I was going through a spiritual crisis. Not at all!"[262] Rather, he provided his own hermeneutic for the play, stating:

> The script was full of allusions to the circumstances of the moment, which were perfectly clear to each of us. The envoy from Rome to Jerusalem was in our minds the German. Our guards saw him as the Englishman in his colonies!... But I was expressing existentialist ideas in refusing *Bariona* the right to commit suicide and making him decide to fight.[263]

Following his lead, scholars such as Alfred R. Desautels have argued for *Bariona* as a political call to escape or resistance.[264] However, such readings privilege Sartre's authorial "intent" over the play's spiritual reception for its carceral audience. Additionally, many studies of *Bariona* reinforce a hermetic approach to reading Sartre's work ahistorically, seeking continuity only within the Sartrean corpus rather than contextualizing it within the larger context of Vichy France and contemporary medievalist theatre.

This chapter approaches *Bariona's* liberatory and spiritual efficacy by recentering its historical emergence within the ruptures of World War II France. By tracing the genealogy of the French medieval imaginary and its role in France's national narrative, I reframe Bariona within the larger context of French medievalist performance during the first half of the twentieth century. Situated within the political rupture of the German occupation and Vichy's "National Revolution", *Bariona's* efficacy emerges from the medieval imaginary as a touchstone for

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[261] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre,* ed. Michel Contat, and Michel Rybalka (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 39.

[262] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 185.

[263] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 185.

[264] See Alfred J. Desautels, "The Sartre of Stalag 12D", *The French Review* 55, no. 2 (Dec. 1981): 201-206.

French national identity whilst under threat. Turning to Sartre himself, I analyze Sartre's philosophical commitment to freedom as his foundational existential value to query how *Bariona* functioned efficaciously in terms of both its liberatory and spiritual effects. As a restaging of the medieval mystery tradition within a carceral context, *Bariona* reinforms both Sartrean and Foucauldian notions of power enacted by the gaze, reformulating the theatrical encounter in terms of the phenomenology of self and Other. By exploring its dual efficacy as a vehicle for spiritual conversion for some of its spectators and staging freedom within its carceral context, I argue that *Bariona* enacted a form of spiritual liberation by disrupting the objectifying carceral gaze of Stalag 12D, phenomenologically enacting a multi-valenced transformation for both its audience and its author.

The French Medieval Imaginary

Manifesting out of a vastly different genealogy than Scriabin's *Mysterium, Bariona* features clear ties to the medieval French mystery tradition. In addition to directly invoking medieval theatre by referring to it as a "Christmas mystery play", Sartre's script features canonical tropes from the medieval theatre tradition, including the use of an Expositor/narrator, direct address, tableaux, masks, and frequent anachronistic allusion. At the same time, *Bariona* does deviate substantially from traditional Nativity plays in its form and content. Never depicting the Holy Family itself, the play centers on a framing narrative that ultimately intersects with the birth of Christ, while still employing the canonical figures of the Magi and shepherds. By tracing the larger medieval imaginary and the prevalence of medievalist performance that characterized early twentieth France, I reframe *Bariona* as emergent—and incumbent upon—the function of the medieval within the larger French national imaginary.

Unlike Russia, medieval France featured a robust dramatic tradition that included biblical plays, miracle plays, saints' lives, plays based on "profane" history, morality plays and farces.[265] Hundreds of extant dramatic texts survive from medieval France, an amount that greatly surpasses those from the medieval English tradition; ironically, as Alan E. Knight has noted, medieval French drama bas been comparatively understudied relative to its English counterparts.[266] Even during the nineteenth-century medievalist revival, scholars of medieval French literature tended to focus their energies on the study of romance and epics rather than theatre. The first study of medieval French drama, produced in 1880 by Louis Petit de Julleville, deemed the religious theatre of the Middle Ages a "failure."[267] Only with the 1954 publication of Grace Frank's *The Medieval French Drama* did serious scholarly engagement with French theatre of the Middle Ages begin in earnest. Knight categorizes medieval French theatre into two periods: the late 11th to late 13th century, featuring early medieval vernacular drama drawn from biblical and hagiographic sources, including *Jeu d'Adam*, *Jeu de St. Nicholas*, and *Sponsus.* The second period ranges from roughly 1300 to 1550 and is characterized by the preponderance of mystery and passion plays. Noting the prevalence of Passion Plays in extant texts, Knight estimates that over 220 extant religious plays survive from this period.[268] The medieval French tradition of Christian biblical performance, particularly mystery plays, thrived until their prohibition throughout Europe in the mid-sixteenth century by the Council of Trent.

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[265] Alan E. Knight, "France", "France," in *The Theatre of Medieval Europe: New Research in Early Drama*, ed. Eckehard Simon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 155.

[266] Knight attributes this relative neglect of French medieval theatre to the prevalence of genealogies that trace modern French theatre to classical roots rather than medieval/religious origins. (Knight, 151, 159.)

[267] Louis Petit de Julleville, *Les Mystères*, 2 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1880), 6 (quoted by Knight, 152).

[268] Knight, "France," 159.

While the study of medieval theatre may have languished until the mid-twentieth century, the medieval imaginary writ large has transacted with particular salience throughout French cultural and political history. From the Middle Ages themselves through the 1789 Revolution to the Napoleonic Empire, French sovereignty was repeatedly at odds with the ecclesiastical authority of the Catholic Church. Against this backdrop, the notion of the "medieval" achieved specific political saliency within French politics in the 1870s with the rise of the Third Republic and the transition to state-sponsored secularism, with different political factions each claiming "the Middle Ages" as a touchstone and vision for contemporary French political unity. The legacy of the anticlericalism of 1789 revolution[269] reinforced an early-nineteenth century view of the Middle Ages as a highpoint of French-Catholic unity, yielding a conservative medieval imaginary often used to justify "the rights of the monarchy or to bolster theological stances."[270] As with other forms of European medievalism, the French Middle Ages were also retrospectively viewed as period of simplicity, piety, and undisturbed pastoral prior to capitalism and industrialization. By the 1830s, the association between the medieval and conservative political values began to be challenged, with liberal factions redefining medieval France as a period of "communal order and individual liberty, French superiority and bourgeois emancipation."[271] Leftists sought to "de-Christianize" the medieval past by downplaying the religiosity of the

[269] The Revolution spawned a virulent anti-clerical movement in which not only were church lands reclaimed by the new Republic, but diplomatic relations with the Vatican were officially broken and French priests were expelled from the country *en masse*. In what could be described as the first of France's widespread secularization movements, the populace of the new state embarked on a violent period of "de-Christianization", characterized by "murdering priests, violently interrupting celebrations, attacking churches, mocking sacraments, vandalizing sacred objects and defacing temples", one that reach its pinnacle with a prostitute being placed on the altar of Notre Dame in an act of protest. See Herman T. Salton, "Unholy Union: History, Politics, and the Relationship between Church and State in Modern France," *Review of European Studies* 4, no. 5 (2012): 140-141.

[270] Elizabeth Emery and Laura Morowitz, *Consuming the Past: The Medieval Revival in Fin-De-Siècle France* (London: Routledge, 2018), 15.

[271] Emery and Morowitz, *Consuming the Past,* 27.

Middle Ages in favor of arguing for it as a model of a pre-bourgeois and pre-industrial society, even framing the medieval period as a model for democracy.[272]

Such competing partisan reclamations of the Middle Ages positioned the French medieval imaginary as a critical question of national and political importance; writing for the *Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1872, medieval historian Fustel de Coulanges aptly described this socio-political tension:

> Each person makes his own imaginary Middle Ages…and each person forms his faith and his political credo according to the error he has chosen or the error to which his education has bound him. There are as many ways of considering the Middle Ages as there are political parties in France. It is our historical theories that divide us the most.[273]

The political contestation over the medieval imaginary met a reprieve, however, following the Franco-Prussian War; with France's defeat by Germany in 1871, the Middle Ages were turned to as a unifying symbol of national identity and pride in the wake of a humiliating defeat. In this way, "medieval France, which survived the Germanic invasions…served as a positive example for rebuilding the wounded French nation", one that was deployed toward reifying a sense of national unity.[274] French Gothic cathedrals were reappraised through a secularist lens as the epitome of French "national architecture" and "a symbol of French nationality."[275] The thirteenth century saint and warrior, Joan of Arc, was valorized as the "ultimate symbol of France",

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[272] Victor Hugo's medievalist novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831) popularized the idea of the Middle Ages as proto-democratic; he specifically saw the transition from "Romanesque architecture of the early Middle Ages to the Gothic architecture of the thirteenth century as reflecting the progress of society from its theocratic, Church-dominated feudal state to a more democratic state. Gothic architecture is thus seen by Hugo as the symbol of the people's newly-acquired status and power." (Odile Boucher-Rivalain, "Attitudes to Gothic in French Architectural Writings of the 1840s," *Architectural History* 41, [1998]: 145.)

[273] Emery and Morowitz, *Consuming the Past,* 15.

[274] Emery and Morowitz, *Consuming the Past,* 21.

[275] Emery, Elizabeth, *Romancing the Cathedral: Gothic Architecture in Fin-De-Siecle French Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 21.

elevated to an icon messianism in the face of foreign military threat.[276] Claimed by both the left and the right, Joan of Arc was represented as saint, patriot, and daughter of the people; in the words of Robert Frank, "the leftist republican and radical preferred and second and third [characterizations]…[while] the rightist favored the first while honoring the second."[277] Medievalism, in this sense, became associated with a unifying French patriotism that superseded political partisanship; nationalistic, medievalist events, such as a 1894 proposal for a "festival of patriotism"[278] in honor of Joan of Arc and the 1904 *Exposition des Primitifs français* featuring a reconstruction of an imagined medieval France, served to reframe the medieval beyond the contestations of disparate and political factions and position it as a signifier for French nationalism.[279] It was against this backdrop of national medievalist unity that medievalist performance emerged as a performative mode of staging an imaginary of a unified and communal France.

The Rise of Medievalist Theatre

Though the medievalism of *Bariona* may have been anomalous within Sartre's dramatic corpus, it was pervasive in French theatre leading up to and during the Vichy regime. By tracing the rise of medievalist French theatre in the nineteenth century through World War II, I resituate *Bariona* as emergent from and reflective of the longstanding politicization and appropriation of the medieval French imaginary. As in Great Britain, the second half of the nineteenth century

[276] David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 203.

[277] Robert Frank, *Collaboration and Resistance, Images of Life in Vichy France 1940-1944*, tr. Lory Frankel (NY: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 213. See also Jennifer Kilgore's article, "Joan of Arc as Propaganda Motif from the Dreyfus Affair to the Second World War," *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal* 6, no. 1 (2008): 279-296.

[278] Emery and Morowitz, *Consuming the Past,* 25.

[279] See Laura Morowitz, "Medievalism, Classicism, and Nationalism: The Appropriation of the French Primitifs in Turn-of-the-Century France," *Studies in the History of Art* 68 (2005): 224-241.

produced several new translations and printings of medieval French texts. Contemporaneously, the longstanding German tradition of Oberammergau Passion Play grew in popularity, drawing tourists from across Europe to its annual performances.[280] Praised by both Protestants and Catholics, the play had a marked impact on an unnamed French priest from Nancy who upon seeing the play in 1900 mounted a similar version in 1904 as a means of raising funds for his parish.[281] The Nancy Passion Play's success in 1904 led to its regular performance every four to five years since. The more formal presentation of the Nancy Passion Play, as modeled after Oberammergau, was not the only French staging of a passion play. In April 1904, Princess Daisy of Pless wrote of seeing a different passion play performance in Bayonne, in the humble context of a village fair.[282] The late nineteenth-century translation of Arnoul Gréban's original fifteenth-century medieval passion play furnished more opportunities for the staging of such works, with records showing that it was performed regularly at Paris' famous Odéon theatre between 1906 and 1910.[283] Medievalist performances further increased in number and frequency in the period between the two world wars, when the plays were regularly performed by a range of amateur theatre troupes, such as the *Comediens des Routiers*, a Protestant group modeled after the American Boy Scout that instructed youth in historical French theatre.[284] Simultaneously, performances of religious plays by Catholic communities and church groups grew in prevalence.

[280] Lynette Muir, "Medievalism, Classicism, and Nationalism: The Appropriation of the French Primitifs in Turn-of-the-Century France" in *Nationalism and French Visual Culture, 1870–1914* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2005): 236.

[281] Muir, "Medievalism, Classicism, and Nationalism," 237.

[282] Muir, "Medievalism, Classicism, and Nationalism," 237.

[283] Muir, "Medievalism, Classicism, and Nationalism," 238.

[284] Helen Solterer, *Medieval Roles for Modern Times: Theater and the Battle for the French Republic* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 66-7.

Henri Ghéon, a World War I veteran who experienced a dramatic conversion to Catholicism following his experience of trench warfare, became renowned for his adaptations of medievalist plays and themes in the form of various saints plays, moralities, and passion plays that were produced frequently within amateur Catholic contexts.[285]

The medieval imaginary, however, transacted beyond such devotional settings; in his 1927 "Manifesto for an Abortive Theatre", Antonin Artaud reveals his own valorization of the medieval imaginary:

> We ought to return to the state of mind, or simply even the practices of the Middle Ages, but genuinely, by a form of essential metamorphosis. Then I would consider we would have brought about the only revolution worth discussing….had I succeeded in creating a theatre, what I would have done would have had as little relationship to what is commonly called theatre, as an obscene performance resembles an ancient religious mystery. (25)

Artaud's formulation of the "Middle Ages" as the inspiration for a revolutionary theatre directly invokes the mystery cycle tradition through his imagining of "an ancient religious mystery." Contemporaneous with the devotional theatre of Ghéon, Artaud's transgressive theatre of cruelty also appropriated the "medieval" toward transformative—if sacrilegious—ends. Jody Enders aptly argues this point in *The Medieval Theatre of Cruelty: Rhetoric, Memory, Violence* where she posits that "the medieval theatre cruelty may then be construed as a capable forerunner of Artaud's theater of cruelty."[286]

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[285] See Jerome Keeler, "Henri Ghéon and His Religious Plays," *An Irish Quarterly Review* 26, no. 104 (December 1937): 631-640.

[286] Jody Enders, *The Medieval Theatre of Cruelty: Rhetoric, Memory, Violence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 95.

Often considered the father of modern French theatre, director Jacques Copeau also turned to the medieval as a model for a "renewed" French theatre.[287] Establishing the Vieux-Colombier theatre in 1913, Copeau eschewed both the "commercial theatre" and the "naturalism of the more serious theatre", instead seeking to establish "'a new theatre on absolutely solid foundations" by turning to the past.[288] Drawing on repertoire from ancient Greece, medieval France, and Renaissance England, his first season included Adam de la Halle's thirteenth century *Jeu de Robin et de Marion*, the fifteenth century *Farce du savetier enrage*, as well as work by his friend and collaborator, Ghéon.[289] From these beginnings, Copeau drew direct inspiration from the Middle Ages, developing what he termed his "popular theatre" aimed at creating social change and the transformation of the common man.[290] In a 1920 journal entry, he describes medieval mystery plays as "the indispensable preface to all development of popular theatre…which originate in the moral life of the people and which also influence it."[291] In his words, medieval theatre:

> Produced images and expressed ideas based on popular forms and sources from which an entire people could learn and receive spiritual nourishment…they were shown the life, suffering and death of a God become man in order to save humanity…they opened their hearts to the spectacle from which they expected enlightenment…they were shown common folk responding to the preaching of love and , like them, in communion with them, they were uplifted.[292]

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[287] Jane Baldwin, "The Accidental Rebirth of Collective Creation: Jacques Copeau, Michel Saint-Denis, Léon Chancerel, and Improvised Theatre," in *A History of Collective Creation*, ed. Kathryn M. Syssoyeva and Scott Proudfit (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 71.

[288] Baldwin, "The Accidental Rebirth of Collective Creation," 72.

[289] Baldwin, 74. Baldwin notes that the medieval plays opened but failed and were subsequently dropped from the season's repertoire (see note 22).

[290] Jacques Copeau, John Rudlin, and Norman H. Paul, *Copeau: Texts on Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1990), 182.

[291] Copeau, *Copeau: Texts on Theatre,* 187.

[292] Copeau, *Copeau: Texts on Theatre,* 188.

Over the course of his thirty-year career, Copeau repeatedly staged medieval French dramas, ranging from biblical plays to saints' lives to farces, including *Noah* (1931), *Santa Uliva* (1934), *Savanarola* (1935), and *Le Miracle du pain doré* (1943).[293] He also collaborated with Nikolai Evreinov, whose Ancient Theatre was discussed in Chapter 2;[294] Copeau produced Evreinov's one-act *La Mort Joyeuse* in the 1921-22 season.[295] Copeau's final work *Le Petit Pauvre*, based on the life of St. Francis Assisi was staged posthumously in 1950. Like the Russian Symbolists, Copeau's vision for a renewed theatre was ultimately expressed in spiritual terms: "What do we want? In a word, we want to return the theatre to its religious character, its sacred rites, its original purity."[296]

Thus, the ubiquity of the medieval imaginary permeated French theatre of the early twentieth century across religious and political orientations. Its prevalence meant that by 1930, as Helen Solterer has observed, most communities in France would have encountered medieval drama in some form.[297] The formation of the theatrical troupe the Theophiliens under the direction of Gustave Cohen, a medieval literature professor at the Sorbonne, epitomizes how medieval drama was leveraged for political and nationalist causes all the way through the outbreak of World War II. Taking their name from Rutebeuf's thirteenth century play *Le Miracle*

[293] Baldwin, "The Accidental Rebirth of Collective Creation," 72-96.

[294] By the early 1920s, Evreinov had left Russia and settled in Paris, working with directors Jacques Copeau and Charles Dullin. Sartre was, upon his release from Stalag 12D in 1941, hired by Dullin to teach classical theatre at Dullin's theatre school, revealing a genealogy that connects Sartre with Evreinov, and by extension, Scriabin. See John Ireland, "Orality, Censorship and Sartre's Theatrical Audience," *Sartre Studies International* 18, no. 2 (2012): 97.

[295] Thomas William Mason, "Jacques Copeau: Dramatic Critic and Reformer of the Theatre," (PhD diss., McMaster University, 1973), 75.

[296] Copeau, *Copeau: Texts on Theatre,* 198.

[297] Solterer, *Medieval Roles for Modern Times*, 7.

de Theophilien—the troupe's inaugural production staged in 1933—the Theophiliens and Cohen also collaborated with Evreinov, producing the Theophiliens' 1934 performance of Adam de la Halle's *Jeu de Robin et de Marion*. In 1938, Cohen's troupe was commissioned by the state to perform at the reopening of Reims Cathedral, the coronation site for the French monarchy, in celebration of its reconstruction following its devasting bombing in World War I. There, to thousands of spectators, the Theophiliens performed *Adam and Eve*, adapted by Cohen from early twelfth century Anglo-Norman poetry. This performance exemplifies how the medieval imaginary was leveraged through performance towards the reification of a unified French national identity; as Helen Solterer observes in her monograph *Medieval Roles for Modern Times: Theater and the Battle for the French Republic*, the Chartres performance:

> Embodied the paradoxes of a French Republican Middle Ages…their playing in front of cathedrals was drafted to represent the citizenry: the democratic workers…their performances intended to give a boost to the egalitarian, fraternal cult of France on the Left. At much the same moment, they inspired thousands who continued to flock to Chartres in defense of a religious ideal of France on the Right…[the Theophiliens had become] spokespeople of national ideals in all their paradoxical, conflicted force.[298]

However, the ideological ambivalence of the medieval imaginary at this moment—just a year before Germany's invasion of Poland and France's declaration of war—did not produce equivalent ambivalence in the Theophiliens themselves. As if a precursor to the conversion to faith for *Bariona's* spectators in 1940, Cohen and several other members of the Theophiliens converted to Catholicism, with some entering holy orders or becoming missionaries.[299] Cohen directly attributed his transformation of faith to his experience staging medieval religious drama:

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[298] Solterer, *Medieval Roles for Modern Times*, 102-3.

[299] Solterer, *Medieval Roles for Modern Times*, 117.

"My attitude is a direct consequence of the *Miracle de Theophile*. These are things that are beyond us."[300]

By tracing the medieval imaginary through medievalist drama in early twentieth-century France, I suggest that Sartre's turn to the medieval in *Bariona* manifests out of the ubiquity of the "Middle Ages" as a touchstone for French national identity and as a contested political imaginary, one leveraged both by partisan factions and appropriated towards idealized visions of national unity. Rather than merely an anomalous deviation from Sartre's prevailing philosophical interests and atheism, *Bariona*'s medievalism is imbricated within the rupture of German occupation and the Vichy regime. Within this larger frame, the play's ambivalent status and contested meaning within Sartre's corpus reflects more than its author personal philosophical and religious orientations; rather, it illuminates the confluence of secular and religious reclamations of the "medieval" that characterized key aspects of French political and social discourse in the decades leading up to *Bariona's* creation. Evoking a vision for French national unity both past and present, the medieval imaginary of early twentieth-century France transacted between the dichotomies of the religious and the secular, the political and the spiritual. With the crisis of the France's defeat to the Germans and the establishment of the Vichy regime in 1940, *Bariona's* emergence within the carceral context of Stalag 12D engages the medieval imaginary at a distinct point of national and social rupture**.**

Vichy's "National Revolution" & Prisoners of War

After devastating loss of life in World War I and financial turbulence in the early 1930s, the French government and its people were reluctant to enter another war, despite Germany's remilitarization in 1936. Internally, the interwar years were fraught with political instability, with

[300] Helen Solterer, "The Waking of Medieval Theatricality Paris 1935-1995," *New Literary History* 27, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 376.

control of the government jockeying between the leftist Popular Front and right-wing, anti-parliamentarian factions. As Eric Nordlinger summarizes, "the republic tottered…in the interwar period" with the "lifespan of its governments" lasting only "months rather than years."[301] Partisanship fell between the poles of the left's socialist "*mouvement*" and the right's call to return to "*l'ordre établi*,"[302] with each drawing on their respective imaginaries of the medieval to bolster their vision for the nation. Neither, however, managed to respond sufficiently to the growing fascist threat of Hitler's Germany. Upon Germany's invasion of Poland, France finally declared war but was quickly defeated after only six months of the so-called "phony war."[303] During this period, Sartre was enlisted to serve as a military meteorologist; with the French surrender, he—along with approximately 1.8 million French servicemen—was taken captive as a prisoner of war by the Germans.[304]

With the collapse of the Third Republic and establishment of the Vichy government, Marshal Philippe Pétain rose to the Prime Ministership, unfurling his vision for a "National Revolution" that would restore a "true France *[la France profonde]*" based on medievalist ideals.[305] Blaming the humiliating French defeat on the "decadence" and "spirit of pleasure" of the interwar years, Pétain's National Revolution sought to restore "traditional morality in order to realize national salvation."[306] While Pétain's government was firmly situated on the right—

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[301] Eric A. Nordlinger, "Democratic Stability and Instability: The French Case", *World Politics* 18, no. 1 (Oct. 1965): 127.

[302] Nordlinger, "Democratic Stability and Instability," 127.

[303] Nordlinger, "Democratic Stability and Instability," 128 note 6.

[304] Thure Stenström, "Jean-Paul Sartre's First Play", *Orbis Litterarum* 22, issue 1 (March 1967): 185.

[305] Thomas R. Christofferson, and Michael S. Christofferson, *France During World War II: From Defeat to Liberation* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2006), 42.

[306] Christofferson, *France During World War II,* 1.

espousing anti-parliamentarian views and implementing proto-fascist tactics—the Middle Ages encapsulated the bipartisan imaginary of the medieval as a reaction against the modern that was resonant even with some on the Left. Calling for a return to "peasant values" and "spiritual renewal", the National Revolution aimed to:

> Eliminate class struggle, alienation, even modernity in order to return to a primitive peasant and artisan community in which class cooperation prevailed. …Vichy was above all a reactionary enterprise: an attempt to reestablish the essence of French identity, a community in which the family was strong, hierarchy prevailed, the paterfamilias dominated and everyone knew his or her place. It sought *la France profonde*, the True France that had been lost to uprootedness, urbanization, alien forces, and the like.[307]

With a vision for "the return to the soil, to peasant and artisan cultural values and the village", the Vichy government mobilized cultural producers to create "idealized pictures of daily life among peasants and artisans", drawing imagery and inspiration from "a lost medieval world."[308] Ultimately, the National Revolution was deemed a failure; support from the wider population was short lived once it became apparent that the government's collaboration with Germany was failing to end German occupation and Pétain turned to increasingly fascist tactics. However, the vision for a "true national community" after decades of political contestation signals how the national ruptures of military defeat and foreign occupation yielded the desire for solidarity and a restoration of national identity through a medieval imaginary.[309]

Before turning to the text of *Bariona* itself, I want to situate my analysis within the context of Sartre's imprisonment as a prisoner of war. With France's surrender in June 1940, Germany immediately took nearly two million French prisoners of war, the vast majority of

[307] Christofferson, *France During World War II,* 42.

[308] Christofferson, *France During World War II,* 50, 48.

[309] Christofferson, *France During World War II,* 41.

whom would remain incarcerated in POW camps until the Allied victory in 1945.[310] Vichy was ineffectual in negotiating for the return of prisoners and ultimately set up a system by which prisoners of war would become civilian guest workers in Germany, providing essential labor unregulated by the Geneva Convention; initially employed as agricultural laborers, many French prisoners eventually became workers in the German war effort until the Allied victory.[311] Sartre, however, was able to avoid manual labor and ultimately obtained a medical release from Stalag 12D after only nine months of imprisonment.[312] Captured on June 21st, 1940, Sartre moved was moved between prisoner of war camps until his October arrival at Stalag 12D in Trier, Germany.[313] First serving as an interpreter in the camp infirmary, he was exempt from hard labor which provided time for him to work on his current writing project, *Being and Nothingness*.[314] Later expelled from working in the infirmary due to unspecified "intrigues", Sartre ingratiated himself with the camp "*artistes*" as a means to continue to avoid fieldwork; "They have a regular little theater where they put on shows for the fifteen hundred prisoners [sic][315] in the camp, twice a month on Sundays. And for this service they get paid, can sleep late in the morning, and needn't do a bloody thing the rest of the day…I write plays for them, which are never presented,

[310] S. P. MacKenzie, "The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II," *The Journal of Modern History* 66, No. 3 (Sept. 1994): 497.

[311] MacKenzie, "The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II," 499-500.

[312] Sebastian Gardner, *Reader's Guides: Sartre's "Being and Nothingness"* (London: Continuum, 2009), 4.

[313] Sartre, *Quiet Moments in a War*, 233.

[314] Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, trans. Patrick O'Brian, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 156-7.

[315] This number is likely erroneous; the account of fellow prisoner Marius Perrin states that the camp held 15,000 prisoners, which is in line with the typical size of German POW camps. See Marius Perrin, *Avec Sartre Au Stalag 12D,* (Paris: J.P. Delarge, 1981), 9.

and I'm paid too."[316] In the same letter, Sartre announces to de Beauvoir that he has begun work on *Bariona:*

> I want you to know that I'm writing my first serious play, and putting all of me into it (writing, directing, and acting), and it's about *the* Nativity. Have no fear, my sweet, I won't end up like Ghéon…But take it from me, I really do have a talent as a playwright. I wrote a scene of the angel announcing Christ's birth to the shepherds that absolutely took everyone's breath away. Tell that to Dullin, and that some had tears in their eyes…It will be given on December 24th, with masks, there'll be sixty characters, and it's called *Bariona*, or the Son of Thunder…after this, I will write plays.[317]

In referencing Ghéon, Sartre demonstrates his self-awareness of the connotations that could be attached to his turn to the medieval; in writing "my first serious play" about "*the* Nativity" and "putting all of me into it", he anticipates de Beauvoir's response and assures her that his atheism remains intact. Shortly thereafter, Sartre wrote de Beauvoir on December 10, as quoted at the beginning of this chapter, stating "I have never felt so free."[318] Recent scholarship on prison theatre echoes this association between performance and freedom, with Anne Dutlinger suggesting that "performance [in the context of WWII] transformed fear into freedom."[319] Michael Balfour's *Theatre in Prison* describes theatre in carceral contexts as a means to "find a temporary escape, a moment of resistance, against formalized and pervasive systems of power."[320] Ashley Lucas has also recently delineated prison theatre as a method for community building, professionalization, social change, and hope under the broader aegis of "strategies for a

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[316] Sartre, *Quiet Moments in a War*, 244.

[317] Sartre, *Quiet Moments in a War,* 244-245. Italics in the original.

[318] Sartre, *Quiet Moments in a War,* 246.

[319] Dutlinger, Anne D. *Art, Music, and Education As Strategies for Survival: Theresienstadt, 1941-45* (New York: Herodias, 2001), 5.

[320] Michael Balfour, *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice* (Portland, OR: Intellect Press, 2004), 2.

better life."[321] Building on such work, this chapter asks how the theatrical encounter disrupts the conditions of carcerality and enacts a form of freedom; *Bariona* provides the opportunity to analyze how the theatrical encounter enacts liberation both textually and phenomenologically.

Sartre on Freedom

Before turning to the text of *Bariona*, it is essential to approach the notion of freedom through Sartre's own work as a theorist for whom freedom was the foundational philosophical tenet. As Christina Howells has argued in her book *Sartre: The Necessity of Freedom*, Sartre's "major preoccupation was, throughout his life, always the same--freedom, its implications and its obstacles."[322] His lifelong investigation of freedom through both his philosophical and literary works traces his journey from "a conception of absolute freedom towards a mature position which takes into account the constraints and conditioning of the external world."[323] It was, in fact, Sartre's commitment to human freedom that first necessitated his atheism; as John Gillespie points out, Sartre's lifelong existentialist project was underpinned by his motivation to assert absolute human freedom and the necessity of God's absence. As Gillespie states, "his [Sartre's] atheism was a choice of liberty", in which Man's freedom is equated with the desire to be God, which in turn requires God's absence. [324] However, as Howells observes, the Sartrean formulation of freedom exists dialectically within the constraints of existence and external reality; "Freedom, then, is not envisaged as the quasi-miraculous ability to do anything one wishes: on the contrary, it is always seen as a response to concrete and constraining

[321] See Ashley E. Lucas, *Prison Theatre and the Global Crisis of Incarceration* (London: Methuen Drama, 2020).

[322] Christina Howells, *Sartre: The Necessity of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.

[323] Howells, *Sartre: The Necessity of Freedom,* 1.

[324] John H. Gillespie, "Sartre and God: A Spiritual Odyssey? Part 2," *Sartre Studies International* 20, no.1 (2014), 49.

circumstances."[325] Indeed, in this sense, human freedom is and can only be enacted within constraint; for Sartre, freedom itself is only rendered meaningful through its enactment within and despite constraint. It was this enactment of freedom that formed the nexus of Sartre's dramatic theory and his "theatre of situations."

Sartre's valorization of freedom was troubled, however, by the existence and essential freedom of the Other. His famous quotation from *No Exit*—"Hell is other people"—pithily summarizes his larger philosophical quandary of mutually conflicting freedom between individuals. In what he terms the existential "original sin", Sartre asserts that it is impossible to acknowledge the freedom of the Other and maintain one's own essential freedom.[326] In *Being and Nothingness* he posits:

> I am guilty when in turn I look at the Other, because by the very fact of my own self-assertion I constitute him as an object and as an instrument…whatever I may do for the Other's freedom, as we have seen, my efforts are reduced to treating the Other as an instrument…I shall never be able to accomplish anything except to furnish his freedom with occasions to manifest itself without my ever succeeding increasing it or diminishing it, in directing it or in getting hold of it.[327]

Here Sartre introduces the gaze as the objectifying force between self and Other, formulating subjectivity in phenomenological terms; for Sartre, not only do other people and their respective freedom contribute to the external constraints on my own freedom, but also my attempts to recognize the Other's freedom are only able to reduce them to an object, rather than a subject. This philosophical quandary has been more deeply explored by other scholars; for the purposes

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[325] Howells, *Sartre: The Necessity of Freedom,* 23.

[326] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: NY, Washington Square Press, 1975), 289.

[327] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 531.

of this chapter, I highlight it to illuminate the longstanding conceptual tension for Sartre between the individual and the communal which would later manifest in his theorization of "the look [*le regard*]." Sartre's commitment to individualistic existential freedom reached its limits when confronted with the constraints incumbent upon the free individual in society, living communally alongside other free individuals.[328]

Sartre's dramatic theory would come to hinge on this tension between freedom and unity. Reflecting on his beginnings in theatre in a 1979 interview with Bernard Dort, Sartre defines theatre as unique within the literary arts due to the "sharing" between author and audience that defines performance.[329] As Ireland has pointed out, Sartre's approach to theatre was always fraught with regard to authorial control and freedom of the audience's reception. Sartre recognized this question of reception in literature at large, in a presage to what Stanley Fish and others would later term reader-response or reception theory. In his 1947 book, *What is Literature?,* Sartre articulates aesthetic reception in his hallmark terms of freedom itself:

> Since the [literary] creation can find its fulfillment only in reading, since the artist must entrust to another the job of carrying out what he has begun…all literary work is an appeal. To write is to make an appeal to the reader that he lead into objective existence the revelation which I have undertaken…the sufficient reason for the appearance of the aesthetic object is never found either in the book (where we find merely solicitations to produce the object) or in the author's mind…the appearance of the work of art is a new event…And since this directed creation is an absolute beginning, it is therefore brought about by the freedom of the reader, and by what is purest in that freedom. Thus, the writer appeals to the reader's freedom to collaborate in the production of his work.[330]

While this passage, and *What is Literature?* as a whole, does not explicitly address drama, it

[328] Incidentally, this conundrum is perhaps the reason why was Sartre was famously unable to finish his work on an existential ethics.

[329] Bernard Dort, "Sartre on Theatre: Politics and Imagination," *Canadian Theatre Review* 32 (1981): 33.

[330] Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Methuen 1967), 46.

formulates Sartre's theory of aesthetic reception in terms of human freedom: aesthetic reception on the part of the reader/spectator is an act of freedom that is guided by the "directed creation" of the aesthetic work as produced by the author. This intrinsic freedom within aesthetic reception is one that Sartre argued was even more prevalent in performance than in literature.

From his earliest public lecture on theatre in 1944, Sartre defined theatre as a mode of staging freedom itself, characterizing theatre as "a sort of ring in which people battle for their rights" in which "the conflicts of rights that interest and move an audience should be conflicts of modern rights and relevant to life as it really is today."[331] For the audience to comprehend the "battle of rights" that are played out on stage, there must a free protagonist, who is characterized by what Sartre called the "hero's freedom" to choose and act, whom the audience observes exercising his freedom.[332] Sartre subsequently formulated this "battle of rights" into what he termed "a theatre of situations"; asserting an ontology of theatre in which "the chief source of great tragedy…is human freedom", Sartre formulated the "theatre of situations in which a free human agent is placed in a theatrical situation in which he exercises his freedom."[333] In this sense, theatre for Sartre was the depiction and enactment of human freedom staged the audience's free act of reception:

> If it's true that man is free in a given situation and that in and through that situation he chooses what he will be, then what he will have to show in the theater are simple and human situations and free individuals in these situations choosing what they will be…The most moving thing the theater can show is a character creating himself, the moment of choice, of the free decision…Immerse men in these universal and extreme situations which leave them only a couple of ways out, arrange things so that in choosing the way out they choose themselves, and you've won--the play is good. It is through particular situations that each age grasps the human situation and the enigmas human freedom must

[331] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 14.

[332] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 10.

[333] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 3.

confront.[334]

Here Sartre asserts his formulation for "good" theatre: one that enacts the existentialist foundational concept of human freedom by staging situations both "universal and extreme." To construct these situations, Sartre turned to myth; as summarized by Gillespie, myth for Sartre was "not necessarily historical myth" but rather "universal situations of the human condition with which everyone can identify and show values in the process of unfolding in action rather than philosophical abstraction."[335] Sartre frequently employed myth in this broader sense in his early plays: in *Bariona*, through the biblical myth of the Nativity; in *The Flies*, the Greek myth of Orestes; in *No Exit*, the mythic space of Hell. In employing such mythic situations, Sartre, in his own words, strove to "stage certain situations which throw light on the main aspects of the condition of man and to have the spectator participate in the free choice which man makes in these situations."[336] It was within Sartre's notion of mythic and universal situations that the drama of human freedom could be enacted.

By staging human freedom within the performance encounter, Sartre explicitly sought to "transform"[337] his audience, producing "a veritable tidal wave in each spectator's soul."[338] He stated on multiple occasions that "above all we must change the audience"[339] and that the

[334] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 4.

[335] Gillespie, "Sartre and Theatrical Ambiguity," 52.

[336] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 35.

[337] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 67.

[338] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 144-5.

[339] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 50.

theatre's highest aim was to "cause a definite change in the spectator's mentality."[340] However, Sartre's vision for change and transformation was challenged repeatedly by the reality of the freedom of spectatorial reception. In his 1959 lecture "The Author, the Play, and the Audience", he returned to his earlier reckoning in *What is Literature?* with the audience's freedom of reception; stating "the audience writes the play quite as much as the author does," Sartre reframed his hopes for transformative theatre as dependent on the audience itself: "It's the audience that works with the author to bring about the transformation."[341] Upon stating this in his lecture, Sartre was asked by a listener, "Do you always agree with the transformation?" to which he replied, "No, but what can I do about it?"[342] The desire to change or transform his audience stands in tension with the simultaneous fact that the audience will often author its own type of transformation through the performance. Even more than *Bariona*, Sartre's play *Dirty Hands* (1948) demonstrated his inability to control the audience's freedom of reception. Despite his intention*, Dirty Hands* was received in Paris as a damning portrayal of Marxism's shortcomings.[343] Despite its critical and financial success, Sartre subsequently banned performance of the play for over a decade. In an interview in 1964, Sartre testified to the unpredictability of audience reception in regard to *Dirty Hands*:

> A play is far less its author's property than a novel…it can often have unexpected results. Indeed, what happens between audience and author at the dress rehearsal and on the following nights gives a play a certain objective reality which the author very often had

[340] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 141.

[341] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 67-8.

[342] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 67.

[343] *Dirty Hands* depicts the trials of its protagonist, Hugo, a member of the communist People's Party in the fictional country of Illyria, as he strives to maintain his ideological integrity when tasked with assassinating a fascist dictator. In the words of Gillespie, the play "poses the dilemma of the free individual… 'in the context of a controlling collectivity'." See John Gillespie, "Sartre and Theatrical Ambiguity," *Sartre Studies International* 18, no. 2 (2012): 50.

> neither foreseen nor intended…a play assumes an objective meaning which is assigned to it by the audience. There is nothing to be done about it; if the whole of the French bourgeoisie makes *Dirty Hands* a hit and if the Communists attack it, that means something has really happened. It means that the play has become anticommunist of its own accord, objectively, and that the author's intentions no longer count…I still think, subjectively, that is to say as far as what I wrote is concerned, that it is not an anticommunist work but just the opposite.[344]

Over the course of his dramatic career, Sartre became increasingly frustrated with audiences' propensity to interpret his work in ways that he "had neither foreseen nor intended" and by the mid 1960's he ceased writing plays altogether.

As Sartre's first foray into playwriting, *Bariona* demonstrates this tension between the individual author and the collective audience in terms of its Sartre's intellectual commitment to freedom. John Ireland has read *Bariona* broadly within these terms, framing the play as an example of the tension between the individual and the communal as manifested in Sartre's ideological conflict between his fundamental existentialism and his later Marxism:

> His [Sartre's] nativity and passion plays [*Le Pari*], with their insistence on human action and even human existence as acts of faith…enact more than any other genre the resistance of Sartrean existentialism to Marxism.[345]

Within the larger turn in French philosophy from existentialism to Marxism in the mid-century, Ireland's reading of Sartre's existentialism as "resisting" his Marxism hinges on a tension between individual freedom (the existentialist ideal) and collective unity (the Marxist ideal). In *Bariona*, the heroic individual sacrifices his life for benefit of the collective (humanity itself) by saving the life of Christ. However, as Ireland argues, a pure Marxist ideology would not assign a special role or privilege to an individual, even in the act of self-sacrificial martyrdom;

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[344] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 212.

[345] Ireland, "Freedom as Passion," 348.

> As part of a collective body that determines not only his function but his whole identity…the communist has no personal attributes. And just as his life is the Party's to determine, he will renounce any possibility of a personal death. Since his life is his work within the Party, his disappearance through death is negated by the presence of comrades who replace him and continue his task. In that sense, says Sartre, the communist does not, cannot die.[346]

Yet in contrast to his idea of communist ideology subsuming individuality, Ireland argues that *Bariona* betrays Sartre's deep investment in the existence of "an individual protagonist conceived as a messianic hero."[347] In *Bariona*, we see Sartre's insistence on "a vision of freedom based on the exemplary life and heroic self-sacrifice of an exceptional individual."[348] While Ireland's reading aptly highlights the ideological tension between existentialism and Marxism, I would suggest that reading *Bariona*—and Sartre's medieval impetus at large—as merely the result of this specific incompatibility between ideologies is too narrow, one that doesn't take into account Sartre's deeper existentialist quandary about the Other's inherent freedom. While Sartre's commitment to Marxism wavered over the course of his life, his commitment to the existential notion of fundamental human freedom remained the consistent touchstone and impetus behind his work. I would suggest that *Bariona* stages what Sartre struggled to articulate philosophically—a balance between individual freedom and collective unity—underpinned by his early valorization of spectator's inherent freedom of reception.

Freedom in *Bariona*

As described in brief earlier, *Bariona's* narrative focuses on the struggle of a Jewish village to resist Roman occupation, one that ultimately intersects with the story of the Nativity. With its

[346] Ireland, "Freedom as Passion," 344.

[347] Ireland, "Freedom as Passion," 341.

[348] Ireland, "Freedom as Passion," 341.

titular character mandating the self-annihilation of the village by ordering the villagers to cease "beget[ting] new life", *Bariona* stages the question of Jewish extinction in the face of oppressive persecution—a theme with overt resonances with its context in Germany during World War II.[349] In staging a final act of resistance by depriving Rome of future generations to oppress, Bariona enacts Sartre's overarching belief in human freedom within and despite external constraint. Like Roquentin, Sartre's protagonist in *Nausea* (1938), Bariona valorizes existential despair as a means of maintain and enacting human freedom:

> Life is one long defeat, nobody wins and the whole world is beaten…Everything that has happened has been for the worst and the greatest folly in the world is hope…But, my companions, we should not resign ourselves to the fall, for resignation is unworthy of man. That is why I say to you: our souls must accept despair…be strong and firm for the dignity of man lies in his despair: Here is my decision…You'll have no more children…Why would you bring new men into the interminable agony of the world? What destiny, then, for your future children…to become slaves of the Romans, work for crumbs and end perhaps dying on the cross. You will obey [to have no more children]And I hope that our example gets known throughout Judea and is the beginning of a new religion, the religion of nothingness and that the Romans remain the masters of our deserted towns and that our blood falls again on their heads.[350]

Bariona upturns the assumed relationship between despair and resignation, instead prescribing resistance through despair itself; he reframes despair, hopelessness, and nothingness as means that can be reclaimed towards human dignity, by resisting tyranny through death.

The exchange that follows between Sarah and Bariona, in which they debate the fate of their own unborn child, Bariona repeatedly describes a life under oppression as slavery—"Do you want to give him [their child] enslaved Judea as his country?"[351] Despair and death are thus framed as the

[349] Jean-Paul Sartre, "*Bariona* or *The Son of Thunder,*" *ADAM International Review* 35, no. 343-345 (1970): 47.

[350] Sartre, *Bariona*, 47-48.

[351] Sartre, *Bariona*, 49.

liberatory means to escape slavery, privileging freedom as a value higher than life itself. Bariona extends his argument to include an anti-theistic stance: "To have a child is to approve of the creation from the bottom of your heart, it is saying to God who torments us, 'Lord, all is well and I give thanks to you for having made the universe.'"[352] Thus both God and life are framed in his logic as antagonistic to human freedom.

Despite the villagers' and Sarah's protests, Bariona remains unmoved, stating that God would have to confront him through an angel that very night in order to dissuade him. The play then transitions to a canonical scene of shepherds tending their flocks when an angel appears, announcing the birth of Christ. The shepherds rush to the village to share the good news with Bariona and the villagers; reneging on his declaration that an angel's appearance would overturn his resolution, Bariona reiterates his declaration to let the village die out, expanding his critique to address the folly of hope in a world defined by suffering and asserting his essential, existential freedom in the face of God: "God will show his face between the clouds and I would still refuse to understand it, for I am a free man; and against a free man, even God can do nothing."[353] Despite this, the villagers and Sarah depart for Bethlehem to worship the Christ-child while Bariona remains. The entrance of the Three Magi serves to confront Bariona's resolute despair; Balthazar (played by Sartre himself in 1940) challenges Bariona in a lengthy monologue on the nature of hope and suffering:

> Are you sure that it [man's dignity] is not rather in his hope? I don't know you but I see from your face that you have suffered, and I see also that you have taken pleasure in your sorrow…You suffer and yet it is your duty to hope. Your duty as a man. For you more than anyone else Christ has come down to the earth…when God fashioned the nature of man, he melted together hope and anxiety. For man, you see, is always more than he is…despair [is] ruminating on the fleeting present, looking down at your feet with

[352] Sartre, *Bariona*, 51.

[353] Sartre, *Bariona*, 61.

> spiteful, stupid eyes, tearing away time from the future and enclosing it in a circle round the present. Then you cease to be a man, Bariona.[354]

In reformulating the relationship between man and his suffering, Balthazar argues for the function of hope, rather than despair, as the essence of man's agency and ultimately, his freedom. In challenging Bariona, he argues against the logic of freedom necessitating anti-theism and death, presenting an alternative formulation of freedom as choosing hope and by extension, belief in Christ's salvation.

By this point in the plot, Sartre is arguing for different formulations of freedom in relation to the question of hope and despair. Not only did such questions define Sartre's fundamental philosophical worldview, but it also presents immediate, concrete relevance to the context of *Bariona's* carceral performance and audience of prisoners. The character of Balthazar invokes this clear parallel multiple times throughout the text, breaking the fourth wall to directly refer to the play's prisoner-spectators:

> Look at the prisoners in front of you, who live in the mud and the cold. Do you know what you would see if you were able to follow their spirit? Hills and the gentle meanderings of a river and the vines and the sun of the South…that is where they are. Hope is the golden September vines for a prisoner perishing with cold and covered in lice. Hope that they may fulfill themselves, and you would deprive them of their vines and of their fields and of the vividness of faraway hills; you want to leave them only the filth and the pox and the turnips, you want to give them the frightened present of a beast. For this is your despair…but the man who has hope takes pleasure in everything, and the world is given to him like a gift.[355]

[354] Sartre, *Bariona*, 64-5.

[355] Sartre, *Bariona*, 64-5.

Here Balthazar/Sartre directly applies his formulation of hope to the carceral conditions of Stalag 12D. Balthazar later reappears and collapses the drama's temporality by referencing the prisoners:

> In two thousand years' time there will still be suffering as there is today…But he is God…he is beyond that suffering. And we, the men made in God's image, we are beyond all our suffering to the extent that we resemble God…Now, Christ has come to redeem us; he has come to suffer and to show us how suffering should be treated. For we do not have to dwell on it, nor make it a matter of honor to suffer more than others, nor resign ourselves to suffer…Christ has come to teach you that you are responsible only to yourself for your suffering…You are beyond your suffering for you fashion it to your need…If you accept your portion of suffering as you accept your daily bread, then you are beyond it…Throw yourself heavenwards and then you will be free…He [Christ] has come to say to you: let your child be born. He will suffer, it is true. But that is not your concern. Do not pity his suffering, you have no right to. That is his business alone and he will deal with it as he wishes, for he will be free...he is free; free to rejoice forever in his existence…He [Christ] has come to say to the blind, to the unemployed, to the maimed and to the prisoners of war: you should not hold back from having children. For even for [them]…there is joy.[356]

In this monologue, Balthazar formulates a nexus between freedom, hope, and faith in Christ, ultimately applying it to a list of abject subjects that ends by referring directly to "prisoners of war." By extending the "suffering" of Bariona under Roman rule into the future ("in thousand years' time"), his argument extends the logic of freedom through hope in Christ to the contemporary moment in 1940 Trier.

Immediately following this exchange, Bariona approaches the Nativity scene (which remains out of view offstage), wrestling on the brink of conversion; "Free…O heart stick firmly to your denial…You must accept, you must enter into this stable and kneel down...You will be free—free."[357] Exiting toward the stable, Bariona's conversion is ultimately framed as a turn

[356] Sartre, *Bariona*, 79-81.

[357] Sartre, *Bariona*, 81.

toward a newer, truer freedom; Balthazar's argument wins out and in accepting Christ, Bariona's rhetoric shows that he is following Sartre's value of freedom toward hope, away from despair. In this way, Bariona's character arc maps a spiritual journey from despair to hope, but one resolutely guided by a commitment to "freedom" that ultimately architects his conversion to faith. As the play reaches its denouement, Bariona once again embraces death, this time out of sacrificial hope rather than despair; as the Holy Family learns that Herod has sent soldiers to perpetrate the slaughter of the innocents, Bariona rallies the men of the village to stave off the soldiers in order to let the Holy Family escape. Before exiting to his certain death, Bariona reunites with Sarah and charges her to bear and raise their child, proclaiming in his joy, freedom, and faith: "I am overcome with joy like an overflowing cup. I am free, I hold my destiny in my hands. I march against the soldiers of Herod and God marches at my side…Farewell my sweet Sarah…You have to be joyful: I love you and Christ is born."[358] As Bariona and his band of followers exit, Bariona breaks the fourth walls and addresses the audience in the closing lines of the play:

> And you, prisoners, this is the end of this Christmas play which was written for you. You are not happy and perhaps there is more than one of you who has felt that taste of gall in his mouth, the acrid taste I spoke about. But I believe that for you too, on this Christmas Day—and all other days—there will be more joy to come.[359]

Following Balthazar's earlier references to the prisoners, Bariona's final lines hail the prisoner-spectators, interpellating them as the subjects of the performance's message of hope, faith, and freedom. Beyond the play's narrative and overt message of liberatory hope, this closing moment enacts a mutual recognition between the performers and the spectators as incarcerated yet

[358] Sartre, *Bariona*, 85.

[359] Sartre, *Bariona*, 85.

existentially free. *Bariona's* narrative asserts as an apologetic for Christian salvation through the hermeneutic of existential freedom. But it also effects an experience of freedom through phenomenology of the gaze within its final moments of direct address, enacting its liberatory efficacy through the embodied, intersubjective recognition of its spectators within the co-present and carceral performance encounter.

Sartre's "The Look" and Disrupting the Carceral Gaze

I posit that *Bariona* as a performance phenomenologically disrupted the objectifying gaze of the carceral context of Stalag 12D beyond its textual narrative. In turning to Sartre's phenomenology of "the look [le regard]" as articulated in *Being and Nothingness* in conjunction with Foucault's formulation of carceral visibility, I am arguing for a phenomenological framing of theatre as disruptive to carceral power structures, concretizing the broader notion in theatre and prison studies of performance as liberatory. However, this disruption also functions with Foucauldian and Sartrean thought through a distinct medieval imaginary of pre-modern unity, one that *Bariona* particularly invokes through its medievalism and, as I will assert, explicates not only Sartre's account of having "never felt so free" but also *Bariona's* spiritual efficacy for its spectators.

Contemporaneous with *Bariona*, Sartre began writing *Being and Nothingness* in response to Heidegger's *Being and Time* while interned at Stalag 12D. Published in 1943, the text would form the cornerstone for his existentialist philosophy, with Sartre subtitling it an "essay in phenomenological ontology." In it, Sartre draws a foundational distinction between "being-in-itself" [*être en-soi*] and "being-for-itself" [*être pour-soi*].[360] The former refers to "pure immanence", or, matter *prior* to consciousness as "monolithic and undifferentiated"; in other

[360] Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2008), 357.

words, being "just is"—absurd and superfluous [*de trop*] in its meaninglessness.[361] The latter, "being-for-itself", is predicated on "being-in-itself" and refers to consciousness; Sartre describes consciousness as an eruptive fissure from "being-in-itself" through self-consciousness, constituting the subject.[362] "Being-in-itself" is defined by freedom, wherein the fundamental freedom of human existence precedes any essence (or any inherent meaning, hence the existentialist aphorism "Existence precedes essence"). Thus the subject's foundational freedom lies in her ability to choose her own essence, or meaning, based on her inherently free existence; in Sartre's words, "I am condemned to exist forever beyond my essence…I am condemned to be free."[363]

As discussed previously, the Other poses a threat to the subject's freedom within Sartre's phenomenological ontology. It is when the free subject encounters the Other that Sartre introduces "the look" as constituting what he terms "being-for-others." It is through the experience of being seen—being apprehended by "the look"—that the subject becomes aware of the Other as a subject:

> My fundamental connection with the other-as-subject must be able to be referred back to my permanent possibility of *being seen* by the Other. It is in and through the revelation of being-as-object for the Other that I must be able to apprehend the presence of his being-as-subject.[364]

In this way, Sartre describes the recognition of the Other's subjecthood through one's own objectification by the Other's gaze. This, for Sartre, constitutes the ontological conflict of

[361] Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology,* 356.

[362] Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology,* 357.

[363] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 567.

[364] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 344-5.

intersubjectivity; as summarized by Julie van der Wielen: "Because this reversal between subject-me and object-other is the necessary condition for the apprehension of another subject, and because it is impossible…for one to be a subject and an object at the same time, I can never relate to a subject while being one too." [365] Thus, for Sartre, the encounter with the look of the Other transmutes a subject from "being-for-itself" to an object—a "being-for-others." He equates this with a loss of freedom:

> Being-seen constitutes me as a defenseless being for a freedom which is not my freedom. It is in this sense that we can consider ourselves as 'slaves' in so far as we appear to the Other…I am a slave to the degree that my being is dependent at the center of a freedom which is not mine and which is the very condition of my being. In so far as I am the object of values which come to qualify me without my being able to act on this qualification or even to know it, I am enslaved. By the same token in so far as I am the instrument of possibilities which are not my possibilities, whose pure presence beyond my being I cannot even glimpse…I am in danger. This danger is not an accident but the permanent structure of my being-for-others.[366]

Sartre's formulation of "the look" as the apprehension of the Other as subject shows overt parallels to Foucault's articulation of visibility in *Discipline and Punish*. As Angelina Vaz observes in her comparative study of Sartre and Foucault's conceptions of the gaze, "the operation of the Panopticon mirrors the events which Sartre says occur in relations with the Other—the decentering of an objectified individual who find him/herself inscribed and entrapped in a new structure or space which is defined by the power of the gazing subject at the center of that space."[367] Such parallels reflect Foucault's early writings and training in phenomenology through the prevailing influence of both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty in contemporary French

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[365] Julie van der Wielen, "The Magic of the Other: Sartre on Our Relation with Others in Ontology and Experience", *Sartre Studies International* 20, no. 2 (2014): 58.

[366] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 267-8.

[367] Angelina Vaz, "Who's Got the Look? Sartre's Gaze and Foucault's Panopticism", *Dalhousie French Studies* 32, (Fall 1995): 35.

philosophy.[368] As Nick Crossley has argued, Foucault's theory of visibility within *Discipline and Punish* logically assumes (though, Crossley acknowledges, fails to clearly articulate) the objectifying function of the gaze as argued by Sartre. In this way, Crossley suggests, "Sartre's account fills something of the gap in Foucault's work. It at least gives a name and a more detailed description to that 'anxious awareness of being observed', which Foucault refers to but never elaborates upon."[369] I would go further to posit that Foucault's panoptic theory of surveillance extends Sartre's ontological framing of the phenomenal power of "the look", scaling it to the level of institutional and societal power relations.

Tracing forms of discipline and subject formation from the medieval practice of public torture/execution to the development of the modern prison, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* famously employs Jeremy Bentham's design of the Panopticon to illustrate how power is enacted upon subjects through visibility and the social-historical shift towards surveillance. Power is enacted within the modern prison specifically through the "uninterrupted play of calculated gazes."[370] Through the forced visibility of being subjected to the gaze, the imprisoned subject loses agency: "The major effect of the Panopticon [is to] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power."[371] It is this

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[368] Todd May details Foucault's philosophical origins in phenomenology, tracing his eventually rejection of the phenomenological method for his modes of genealogy and archeology. However, as May argues, "although Foucault rejects phenomenology in both his method and his content, he retains what might be called the spirit or motivation behind the phenomenological project" through his interest in the subject as historically constructed rather than ontologically emergent. See Todd May, "Foucault's Relation to Phenomenology", in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 287.

[369] Nick Crossley, "The Politics of the Gaze: Between Foucault and Merleau-Ponty," *Human Studies* 16, issue 4 (October 1993): 408.

[370] When citing from the French, I use the Gallimard edition featuring original pagination (Michel Foucault, *Surveiller Et Punir: Naissance De La Prison* (Paris, Gallimard, 1975). For the English translation, I use Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Vintage Books, New York, 1995). See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 177.

[371] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 201.

state of "permanent visibility" that strips the individual of his subjectivity and agency, enacting the loss of freedom not only by the deprivation of personal liberty but also through the knowledge that he is being observed. Sartre similarly suggests that the knowledge that one is being watched—or even the mere suspicion of it—is sufficient to transmute "being-for-itself" to a state of "being-for-others" in which one's essential freedom is threatened.[372]

By approaching visibility in *Discipline and Punish* through the phenomenological lens of Sartre's theorization of the look, I am pursuing two ends: to investigate how Sartre's account of the look operates within a carceral context, and to argue that theatre, as an intersubjective encounter between the gaze of performer and spectator, disrupts the objectification of the incarcerated subject. It is through this phenomenological disruption of the carceral gaze that *Bariona's* transformative effects, both liberatory and spiritual, manifest. While neither Sartre nor Foucault directly address theatre as a means of challenging the objectifying power of the gaze, *Discipline and Punish* features repeated reference to theatre as a central metaphor. This recurrence of the theatre metaphor rhetorically suggests the possibility for intersubjectivity through the theatrical encounter that disrupts the politics of "the look" within the carceral context.

Foucault deploys the theatre metaphor most frequently in his discussion of "the spectacle of the scaffold." Recounting the pre-modern use of torture and public execution, Foucault argues that the spectacle of punishment was crucial to the enactment of power. He aligns spectacle with the idea of theatre, citing the "ceremony of public execution [*la cérémonie des supplices*]" as a "theatre of horror [*le théâtre de l'atroce*],"[373] a "theatre of punishments [*le théâtre des*

[372] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* 258.

[373] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 63, [Foucault, *Surveiller Et Punir,* 66-7].

châtiemnts],"[374] a "theatre of terror [*le théâtre de terreur*],"[375] and ultimately a "theatre of hell [*le théâtre de l'enfer*]."[376] Here, Foucault deploys theatre as a metaphor for both the visibility and communal nature of spectacle within the public torture paradigm of punishment. In tracing the shift from pre-modern punishment to modern imprisonment, Foucault leaves the notion of spectacle (and its accompanying metaphor of theatre) behind. He makes this shift clear when citing Julius, invoking the image of the theatre once again in order to reinforce its relationship to spectacle:

> Antiquity had been a civilization of spectacle. 'To render accessible to a multitude of men the inspection of a small number of objects': this was the problem to which the architecture of temples, theatres and circuses [*des théâtres et des cirques]* responded…The modern age poses the opposite problem: 'To procure for a small number, or even for a single individual, the instantaneous view of a great multitude.' In a society in which the principal elements are no longer the community and public life, but, on the one hand, private individuals and, on the other, the state, relations can be regulated only in a form that is the exact reverse of the spectacle.[377]

Here Foucault argues that theatre itself existed in antiquity as a form of spectacle designed to solve a particular problem—that of giving "a multitude of men" visual access to "a small number of objects". Foucault characterized the modern age by inverting this problem ("to procure for a small number…the instantaneous view of a great multitude"), thereby making the inverse of spectacle the solution to this professed problem of modern society. This inversion of spectacle, Foucault argues, is surveillance, which replaces spectacle as the visual enactment of power within modern punishment: "Our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance."[378] He

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[374] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 106,[Foucault, *Surveiller Et Punir,* 108].

[375] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 49, [Foucault, *Surveiller Et Punir,* 53].

[376] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 46, [Foucault, *Surveiller Et Punir,* 49].

[377] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 216, [Foucault, *Surveiller Et Punir,* 218].

[378] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 217.

reinforces this distancing from the theatrical in particular as accompanying the rise of surveillance over spectacle: "The great spectacle of physical punishment disappeared…the theatrical representation of pain was excluded from punishment."[379] For Foucault, the visual dynamics of spectacle and surveillance are intrinsically different, suggesting that the visibility inherent in "the theatrical" is distinct from the visibility that characterizes surveillance.

However, the theatre metaphor appears once more in *Discipline & Punish,* complicating the relationship between visibility, spectacle, and surveillance. In arguing that visibility equates with power within the panoptic system, Foucault's use of the theatre metaphor returns:

> They [cells] are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately…Visibility is a trap.[380]

By comparing prison cells to theatres and prisoners to actors, Foucault implicitly aligns the experience of being imprisoned with performance and theatricality. The imprisoned subject effectively performs his own discipline through the knowledge that he is "constantly visible". Foucault furthers this rhetorical alignment between theatricality and a loss of power, stating:

> He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power…he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles: he becomes the principle of his own subjection.[381]

In this statement, Foucault sets up an equation for the "constraints of power": the "subjected" must know that he is within a "field of visibility", causing him to "play both roles" of subject and the author of "his own subjection". For Foucault, these extended theatrical metaphors of "roles", "actors", and "small theatres" serve to reinforce his broader argument that visibility leads to

[379] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 14.

[380] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200.

[381] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 203.

disempowerment and subjection. In this instance, Foucault's use of the theatre metaphor deviates from its earlier rhetorical alignment with spectacle and enters the realm of surveillance.

Sartre's experience as both author and actor in *Bariona's* carceral performance resolves this seeming contradiction in Foucault's figurative language. Sartre repeatedly emphasized the collective, communal participation of *Bariona's* generation and performance—one that not only helped him realized "what theatre ought to be" but provided him with his sense of "having never felt so free". His particular focus on the fact that he was addressing fellow prisoners as "comrades" reveals the importance to Sartre that the theatrical spectacle of *Bariona* was played to a communal audience of peers. To recast this in Foucauldian language, the audience of this spectacle was not an invisible detached dominant seat of power as represented in surveillance but rather the incarcerated community of prisoners. In other words, the carceral context of *Bariona's* performance functions inversely with the politics of visuality described by Foucault in the "cages" and "small theatres" of the Panopticon; rather than in a Panoptic context "in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible", the imprisoned "actors" in Stalag 12D experienced collectivity and community through an intersubjective gaze shared between incarcerated actors and their prisoner-audience. In staging a play for their comrades, Sartre as visible not to his captors through surveillance but visible to his peers through spectacle. This echoes Foucault's earlier comparison of pre-modern spectacle and modern surveillance;

> In a society in which the principal elements are no longer the community and public life, but, on the one hand, private individuals and, on the other, the state, relations can be regulated only in a form that is the exact reverse of the spectacle.

By reappropriating the gaze/look within "community and public life" (that characterized both pre-modern spectacle and Stalag 12D), *Bariona's* performance successfully transformed the carceral context into a theatrical space that allowed for communal visibility. If for Foucault,

the gaze of the punished from the scaffold was not uni-directional, as it is in the Panopticon, the mutual gaze of incarcerated subjects in Stalag 12D yields intersubjectivity rather than objectification. In deploying theatre as a metaphor for as premodern spectacle with a visibility that is countermanded by modern surveillance, Foucault implicitly argues for theatre as a mode of undoing the unidirectional objectifying gaze of Sartre's "look", suggesting that theatre itself disrupts the visual politics of the carceral context.

In addition his implicit argument that theatrical spectacle neutralizes the objectifying gaze of surveillance, Foucault invokes a medieval imaginary through his repeated assertion of the temporal binary between the pre-modern and the modern. As argued by Bruce Holsinger, Foucault's pervasive medievalism draws on the influence of Georges Bataille and manifests most clearly in *The History of Sexuality*.[382] Anne Clark Bartlett observes the same tendency in her article "Foucault's Medievalism", where she demonstrates how Foucault's corpus presents the "Middle Ages as a sort of utopian realm, which offers a cultural space free of the routine and disabling surveillance that, for Foucault, characterizes modern society. In Foucault's work, all of Western history before the seventeenth century functions nostalgically—though ambivalently—as a lost and golden age."[383]

Within *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault directly attributes the invention of "judicial investigation" to the Middle Ages as characterized by public torture and the "spectacle of the scaffold", which is supplanted in the eighteenth century by "techniques of discipline and the examination" and extended into the modern carceral institutions through surveillance.[384] The

[382] Bruce Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 52-56.

[383] Anne Clark Bartlett, "Foucault's Medievalism," *Mystics Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (March 1994): 15.

[384] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 225.

medieval is repeatedly juxtaposed against the modern throughout his argument as period of communal public life that has been excised by modernity's individualization:

> In a society in which the principal elements are no longer the community and public life, but, on the one hand, private individuals and, on the other, the state, relations can be regulated only in a form that is the exact reverse of the spectacle.[385]

What emerges from this is a multi-faceted temporal binary wherein the medieval is characterized by "community and public life" and the gaze functions within spectacle to preserve the subjectivity of the criminal; in contrast, the modern is framed as "private" and "individual", enacting the gaze as disciplinary and objectifying through the technologies of surveillance. Within this formulation, theatre is decisively aligned with both spectacle and communal, public life, suggesting not only its liberatory potential from modernity's individualism but its disruption of the objectifying power of the gaze. This enables us to reapproach Sartre's "look"—previously confined to a contestation of subjectivity between the self and Other—as complicated, or indeed rendered intersubjective, within the phenomenal encounter of theatre. In his critique of Sartre's conceptualization of "the look", Merleau-Ponty argues along similar lines, asserting that the look is not inherently objectifying but rather is intersubjectively situated as a mode of communication that can at will be disrupt by the refusal to communicate:

> the other's gaze transforms me into an object, and mine him, only if both of us withdraw…if we both make ourselves into an inhuman gaze, if each of us feels his actions to be not taken up and understood…but even then, the objectification of each by the other's gaze is felt as unbearable only because it takes the place of possible communication…The refusal to communicate, however, is still a form of communication.[386]

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[385] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 216.

[386] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002), 420.

In line with Merleau-Ponty's reasoning, I am suggesting that the gaze within the theatre encounter is fundamentally communicative, opening the possibility of intersubjectivity that—in the case of *Bariona*—functioned to disrupt the conditions of carceral surveillance and objectification of Stalag 12D. The play's medievalism colludes with these effects; as Foucault argues through his repeated valorization of the "pre-modern" as characterized by "communal and public life", Sartre formulated *Bariona's* efficacy in terms of its communal unity that he associates throughout his dramatic theory with a "pre-bourgeois" temporality.

Medievalist Unity and Transformative Efficacy

In 1946, approaching the height of his dramatic career, Sartre delivered a lecture titled "Forgers of Myth" in which he laid out his dramatic theory, grounding it in the experience of producing *Bariona*:

> My first experience in the theater was especially fortunate. When I was a prisoner in Germany in 1940, I wrote, staged, and acted in a Christmas play…This drama, biblical in appearance only was written and put on by a prisoner, was acted by prisoners in scenery painted by prisoners; it was aimed exclusively at prisoners (so much so that I have never since then permitted it to be stage or even printed) and it addressed them on the subject of their concerns as prisoners…as I addressed my comrades across the footlights, speaking to them of their state as prisoners, when I suddenly saw them so remarkably silent and attentive, I realized what theater ought to be—a great collective, religious phenomenon.[387]

In recounting the context of *Bariona's* emergence, Sartre repeatedly emphasizes the carceral context and identity shared between himself and his fellow prisoners. The play was "aimed exclusively at prisoners" from which emerged his revelation of "what theater ought to be—a great collective, religious phenomenon." Sartre's use of the word "religious" to describe the ideal of the theatrical encounter is curious, particularly in the context of having just disavowed *Bariona's* biblical theme. The term's etymological roots, however, reveal the prevailing meaning

[387] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 39.

of unity that Sartre invokes with his emphasis on theatre as a collective; derived from the Latin *religare* meaning "to bind", Sartre's language of the "religious" refers to a collective unity afforded by the carceral context.[388] Only a few lines later in the lecture, Sartre expands on this:

> I was, in this case, favored by special circumstances; it does not happen every day that your public is drawn together by one great common interest, a great loss or a great hope. As a rule, an audience is made up of the most diverse elements: a big businessman sits beside a traveling salesman or a professor, a man next to a woman, and each is subject to his own particular preoccupations…this situation is a challenge to the playwright: he must create his public, he must fuse all the disparate elements in the auditorium into a *single unity* by awakening in the recesses of their spirits the things which all men of a given epoch and community care about.[389]

Having just emphasized *Bariona's* extraordinary context and collectivity, Sartre prescribes the role of the playwright as striving to replicate the "single unity" that he describes as religious. It is this unity for Sartre that generates theatre's transformative efficacy in which "all the spectators and agents [performers] become welded in a single group."[390] Throughout his writings on theatre, Sartre repeatedly framed the purpose of theatre: to "move" and "unify"[391], "change"[392] or "transform" the audience. [393] Such transformation was inimitably tied to the unity of the audience, calling for a theatre that would "recover its lost resonance…[and] succeed in *unifying* diversified audiences who are going to it in our time."[394] To describe this relationship between transformation and unity, Sartre repeatedly turned to the language of religious ritual as

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[388] "religious, adj. and n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2020.

[389] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 39. Italics are my own.

[390] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 144-5.

[391] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 5.

[392] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 50.

[393] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 67.

[394] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 5.

characteristic of a previous, if unspecified, time period. Theatre must, in his words, effect its transformative unity by "recover[ing] its lost resonance;

> At the great moments in the history of the theater there was a real homogeneity of author and audience. For the audience was more or less consciously experiencing in its own life the contradictions that the author was putting on the stage…The theater, therefore, had a united public…Nowadays, the audience is drawn from too many different social groups and sometimes has too many conflicting interests for anyone to be able to foretell how such a diversified public is likely to react.[395]

Here, Sartre betrays a frustration with the lack of "homogeneity between author and audience", decrying a lost unity that he ubiquitously assigns to the past "history of the theater." This presumed unity between audience and author that characterized theatre in the past became a recurring theme for Sartre; he frequently referenced the need for theatre to restore unity in line with theatres from the past, repeatedly invoking the idea of "returning to a tradition"[396] and reinstilling a "religious" aspect to theatre.[397] In calling for a theatre that "remains a rite", Sartre invokes a temporal imaginary of theatre that is "austere, moral, mythic, and ceremonial in aspect."[398] While Sartre at times characterized this period as "prebourgeois", his formulation points to the idealization of the medieval. Stating that "the entire tradition of the theater was a people's theater before the advent of the bourgeoisie",[399] Sartre imagines the Middle Ages as the period that preceded the rise of class conflict that disrupted the unity between author and audience to which he attributed theatre's capacity to transform spectators. Foucault's imaginary

[395] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 69.

[396] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 34.

[397] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 41.

[398] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 42.

[399] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 55.

of the "premodern" functions similarly as defined by a lost period of "communal and public life." In attributing both unity and the capacity for transformation to his first "fortunate experience" of *Bariona*, Sartre roots his dramatic theory in the medievalism not only of the play's content but in its communal, carceral circumstance in which his audience was unified by "a great common interest."[400] Though separated by nearly three decades, Sartre and Foucault's conceptualization of the "prebourgeois" and the "premodern" point to the pervasive medieval French imaginary as a touchstone for an ideal of unity. In this way, both the narrative of *Bariona* and its carceral context can be traced to idealizations of the medieval as a lost temporal imaginary in which collective unity enabled transformation.

Conclusion

Bariona's efficacious legacy came to define Sartre's dramatic theory as a whole, one that coalesced into a formulation of theatrical efficacy that operated through a medievalist ideal of unity of audience with author. By 1959, however, Sartre had written what would be his final play, *The Condemned of Altona*; in an interview of the same year, he expressed resignation at his inability to architect his desired "transformation [*cette transformation*]" on audiences.[401] Shortly thereafter, he withdrew from theatre altogether, citing his frustration the chronic separation between author and audience that characterized modernity.[402] Haunted by the medieval, Sartre continued to nurture a vision of a return to medievalist theatre through *Le Pari*, a passion play, until the end of his life. In his surviving sketches of the play, he once again pens a narrative of a heroic individual enacting his essential freedom to save humanity, this time through his death on

[400] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 39.

[401] Françoise Giroud, Kanters Robert, Lanzmann Claude, and Erval François, "Deux heures avec Sartre," *L'Express,* Sept. 17, 1959, https://www.lexpress.fr/informations/deux-heures-avec-sartre_590829.html.

[402] Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, 67.

a cross. Like *Bariona*, *Le Pari* was to be staged "in the style of medieval theatre", this time with "different mansions, as in the Middle Ages."[403] For Sartre the dramatist, no other model of theatre or transformative efficacy ever supplanted the medievalism of his first play, the experience of which prompted him to state, "I have never felt so free."

As an oft-neglected case study of medievalist theatre in World War II France, *Bariona* models spectatorial transformation that is both liberatory and spiritual. During his own incarceration, a philosopher whose deepest value was that of individual freedom turned to the medieval, with its attendant connotations of unity with the French national imaginary, to produce a theatrical treatise on liberatory hope through the narrative of the Christian nativity. As the means by which the surveillance and the carceral gaze within Stalag 12D were subverted, *Bariona* transformed its imprisoned spectators by enacting liberation through the theatrical gaze that also yielded spiritual conversion. In its dual efficacy, *Bariona* led not only to the conversion of spectators but also to Sartre's own conversion to an ideal of collective unity defined by the medieval. Inverting its author's phenomenology of "the look" and the threat of the Other to the subject's freedom, *Bariona* staged a theatrical encounter that disrupted the surveillance of the carceral gaze to create a space for intersubjective unity. Its efficacy amidst rupture returns once again to a vision for a solidarity that functioned spiritually, despite its author's professed unbelief. For even this avowed atheist, medieval religious theatre returns efficacy to its sacred roots, staging the mystery as the means by which spectators could be transformed into truly free subjects.

[403] *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault* 13 (1955): 54-56, quoted in Ireland, 339. As Ireland notes, the first sketch of *Le Pari* was published in the Cahiers Renaud-Barrault in 1955; Sartre reiterates his vision for the unwritten play to Bernard Dort in 1979, a year before his death.

Ch. 4 - Performing the Unmodern: *Yiimimangaliso* and South African Medievalist Performance

My final case study is an adaptation of the Middle English Chester mystery cycle by the South African theatre company Isango Ensemble. In restaging medieval religious drama drawn from the colonizer's canon, Isango's production of *Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries* reclaimed the biblical narrative for black performers, though not necessarily black audiences. Through its post-colonial, syncretic aesthetics, *Yiimimangaliso* evoked the racialized gaze of both South African and British audiences with the effect of staging an imaginary of "authentic", black spirituality for its Western spectators while performatively enacting the spiritual-political ideal of *ubuntu* for its domestic audiences. In its bifurcated reception, *Yiimimangaliso* presents a surrogation of the mystery towards disparate modes of transformation in which the medieval operates as an "unmodern" imaginary of spiritual unity.

In summer 2001, *Yiimimangaliso* opened at the Wilton Music Hall in London. Unlike most British productions of Middle English mystery cycles, it featured no medieval costumes, no set, and was delivered in five different languages. In its unique coupling of a medieval dramatic text with a contemporary South African aesthetic, the show was an unprecedented success, acclaimed by Charles Spencer of *The Telegraph* as "one of the most moving, beautiful, human and courageous shows you will ever see."[404] Reviewers lauded it as "full of riches" and "brilliantly inventive" as the *Times* reported the nightly standing ovations wherein "hundreds of jaded journalists forgot their cynicism and sprang to their feet."[405] Beyond the production's

[404] Charles Spencer, "Divine, Defiant, and Dazzling," *The Telegraph*, February 28, 2002, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3573853/Divine-defiant-and-dazzling.html .

[405] Michael Billington, "The Mysteries," *The Guardian*, June 8, 2001, 22.

multicultural aesthetics, critics especially praised the production's spiritual effect, describing it in turn as a show that "will fill a hole in your soul"[406] and having "done what the Church of England has been striving to do for decades and given Christianity an audience."[407] The 2001 run quickly sold out and transferred to the West End for another sell-out run in 2002 before touring internationally to further acclaim; since then the production has been reprised in London in 2009 and in 2014.[408] Only a few months earlier, however, *Yiimimangaliso* received a less laudatory response from its South African audience; during its December 2000 premier at the Spier Arts Festival in Stellenbosch, many members of the predominantly white audience walked out when a black performer spoke the opening lines "I am God", affronted by the divine figure's portrayal by a person of color.[409] Spectators openly complained at the "Africanization" of the biblical narrative, with reviewers offering tepid praise for a production they deemed "too long."[410]

As medieval scholars Katie Normington and Sarah Beckwith have observed, contemporary productions of medieval mystery cycles are often revivalist productions aimed at invoking a nostalgia for a pastoral medieval Britain while recapitulating secularist values such as "community" and "altruism."[411] *Yiimimangaliso* elides such characterization through its distinctly South African aesthetics and its post-colonial reclamation of a canonical medieval

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[406] Jane Mulkerrins, "It features 40 amateur actors, four different languages, and rubbish binds, so why has The Mysteries taken the West End by storm," *The Sunday Times,* June 3, 2002, 18.

[407] "No Mystery: The success of the West End's new miracle cycle is clear," *The Times,* Feb. 28, 2002, 25.

[408] The production had a third reprisal scheduled in the UK for May 2020 but the performance was indefinitely postponed due to the outbreak of COVID-19.

[409] Alan Riding, "A Racial Event That Became a Hit," *The New York Times*, May 12, 2002, A7.

[410] Fletcher, "Mysteries Make Moving Theatre," A4.

[411] Katie Normington, *Modern Mysteries: Contemporary productions of Medieval English Cycle Dramas,* (D.S. Brewer, 2007), 80; and Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 18.

English text yet the production has yet to receive scholarly attention within global theatre studies.[412] In the recent edited collection *Forays into Contemporary South African Theatre: Devising New Stage Idioms* (2020), editors Marc and Jessica Maufort argue for contemporary South African performance reflecting the "process of identity renegotiation South African society has undergone since the end of apartheid" and the creolization of "post-apartheid stage aesthetics."[413] Drawing on Sarah Nuttall's privileging of creolization over alternative frameworks such as "hybridity" and "syncretism", the Mauforts identify South African theatre's process of creolization as rooted in histories of violence and oppression; in Nuttall's words, "given a properly historical reading, both in South Africa and elsewhere, creolisation carries with it a particularly vivid sense of the cruelty that processes of mixing have involved."[414] Through this lens, collections such as Maufort's seek to redress idealized narratives of South Africa's "Rainbow Nationhood", privileging theatre and performance that exposes, in the words of Glissant, "the interference, the shock…and the disharmonies among cultures."[415] Greg Homann has observed that South African playwrights increasingly are turning to address specific challenges within the post-apartheid years, offering critiques of central elements of the ANC government, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the "Rainbow nation" trope; in

[412] Neither *Yiimimangaliso* nor any of Isango Ensemble's subsequent stage productions are included in a wide range of scholarly books published since 2000 on contemporary South African theatre, including Loren Kruger's *The Drama of South Africa* (1999), Anton Krueger's *Experiments in Freedom: Explorations of Identity in New South African Drama* (2010), Yvette Hutchinson's *South African Performance and Archives of Memory* (2013), Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer, and Greg Homann's *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary South African Theatre* (2015), and Patrick J. Ebewo's *Explorations in Southern African Drama, Theatre, and Performance* (2017). However, Isango's films, *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* (2005) and *Son of Man* (2006), have received critical attention within musicology and film studies.

[413] Marc Maufort and Jessica Maufort, *Forays into Contemporary South African Theatre: Devising New Stage Idioms* (Leiden; Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2020), 9.

[414] Sarah Nuttall, "City forms and writing the 'now' in South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30, issue 4 (2004), 735.

[415] Édouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-Monde. Poétique IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 194; cited in Maufort, 6.

Homann's words, "there are in fact far more examples of plays being critical for Rainbow Nation-ism" than affirming it.[416] In its celebration of "Rainbow Nation-ism", *Yiimimangaliso* disrupts the framework identified by Nuttall, Maufort, and Homann. Furthermore, the production's embrace of a sixteenth-century, religious, dramatic tradition also challenges dominant modes of approaching religion—and Christianity in particular—within post-colonial theatre studies. Gilbert and Thompkin's *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, and Politics* addresses the "reworking" of Christian myth within post-colonial theatre as enacting "strategic reform" through the intentional "(mis)use of the master narratives of Christianity to illustrate imperialism's effect on native cultures."[417] Describing the "tyranny of the Bible" over "not only minority groups in settler colonies but also majority populations in areas where Christianity continues to dilute the influence of local religions", Gilbert and Thompkins valorize plays such as Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema, and Barney Simon's *Woza Albert!*, which they describe allegorizing Christ's second coming as an "apocalyptic overthrow of imperial systems."[418] In celebrating rather than critiquing the biblical Christian narrative, *Yiimimangaliso* challenges perspectives like Gilbert and Thompkins', which represent a secularist hermeneutic for reading post-colonial Christianity as a problematic indicator of settler colonialism, European proselytization, and the suppression of indigenous religions. However, such a hermeneutic flattens the multi-faceted role Christianity plays in contemporary South Africa, where the percentage of South Africans identifying as Christians has risen to a record high of 79.8% since

[416] Greg Homann, "On Black and White: Staging South African Identities After Apartheid" in *Forays into Contemporary South African Theatre: Devising New Stage Idioms,* ed. Marc, and Jessica Maufort, (Leiden: Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2020), 33.

[417] Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2002), 33-44.

[418] Gilbert and Thompkins, *Post-colonial Drama,* 46.

the end of apartheid, most notably through growth in African Independent Church membership (accompanied by steep decline adherence to Dutch Reformed Christian traditions).[419] With the shift of Christian belief and practice away from the global North to the global South over the last century (60% of the world Christian population is now located in the global South), studies of the intersection between post-colonial theatre and religion must be nuanced beyond Eurocentric assumptions of secularist modernity.[420]

This chapter recenters *Yiimimangaliso* within South African theatre studies by tracing the interplay between its syncretic aesthetics, its medievalism, and its emergence during the national rupture of the fall of apartheid. As a syncretic form of medieval and South African theatre, *Yiimimangaliso* engages in post-colonial discourses on the decolonization of performance through aesthetics; through the hybridization of indigenous and imported aesthetic forms, syncretic theatre enacts new modes of identity in post-colonial contexts, with particular relevance within the post-apartheid period and the heralding of South Africa as the newly deemed "Rainbow Nation." *Yiimimangaliso's* medievalism draws on the contested role of the medieval imaginary within South African colonization, as a signifier of the "unmodern" as well as its reclamation by Africanists and anti-apartheid activists as an idealized period prior to colonization. By tracing the multi-valenced genealogy of South African medievalism, I argue that *Yiimimangaliso's* turn to the medieval imaginary manifests out of the rupture of apartheid's dismantling and the political need for a new formulation of South African national identity. Produced during the early presidency of Thabo Mbeki, *Yiimimangaliso* reflects the national

[419] Johannes Erasmus, "Religious Demographics in Post-Apartheid South Africa", in *Welfare, Religion, and Gender in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, ed. Ignatius Swart et. al, (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2012,) 46.

[420]"Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population", Pew Research Center, Washington D.C., (2011), https://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/.

project of Mbeki's "African Renaissance" and the valorization of the indigenous spiritual-political value *ubuntu* as a conjoined means of building a sense of positive national identity and social solidarity after decades of state-sponsored racial oppression. By situating its medievalism as reflective the politics of South Africa's emerging national identity in 2001, I reapproach critiques of the production's exoticism to interrogate its spiritualized reception in the West. What constituted *Yiimimangaliso's* political controversy in its South African reception but its spiritual efficacy for British spectators? As a post-colonial syncretic performance, how does *Yiimimangaliso* re-present the Chester Mystery Cycle and leverage its medievalism, and to what ends? In answering these questions, I read *Yiimimangaliso's* disparate South African and British reception through a phenomenology of racialized spectatorship that links South African performance and the medieval through their shared othering as "unmodern."

Theatrical Syncretism as Decolonizing Strategy in *Yiimimangaliso*

In approaching *Yiimimangaliso* through the lens of syncretism, I intentionally invoke the term's etymology in describing religious hybridism as it is reflected in both *Yiimimangaliso's* approach to medieval religious drama and in the broader post-apartheid efforts towards reconciliation instigated by the South African government. The notion of syncretic theatre draws on the terminology surrounding hybridized forms of religion that emerged within colonial and post-colonial contexts in which "elements of two or more religions are merged and absorbed into each other."[421] Originating from religious studies in the context of the Caribbean, syncretism was first deployed as a framework to describe such hybridized religious practices such as Haitian voodoo, Brazilian *candomblé*, and Trinidadian *shango*.[422] In his 1956 work on cultural anthropology in

[421] Christopher Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and the Post-Colonial* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 2.

[422] Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage,* 9.

Haiti, Melville Herskovits defines syncretism as "the process by which old meanings are ascribed to new elements or by which new values change the cultural significance of old forms."[423] This definition served to broaden the application of the term to other forms of cultural practice including performance. In his 1999 work on post-colonial theatre, *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and the Post-Colonial*, Balme argues:

> Theatrical syncretism is in most cases a conscious, programmatic strategy to fashion a new form of theater in light of colonial or post-colonial experience…syncretic theatre is one of the most effective means of decolonizing the stage, because it utilizes the performance forms of both European and indigenous cultures in a creative recombination of their respective elements, without slavish adherence to one tradition or the other.[424]

In arguing for syncretism as a decolonializing strategy, Balme explicitly contrasts it with "theatrical exoticism", which can easily be mistaken for syncretic theatre but rather serves to reinforce Orientalizing and othering representations of post-colonial subjects. For Balme, theatrical exoticism is characterized by its appropriative use of "indigenous cultural texts" devoid of their "original cultural semantics": "They mean little else than their alterity; they are no longer texts in the semiotic sense but merely signs, floating signifiers of otherness."[425] Syncretic theatre, in contrast, "respect[s] the semantics of the cultural texts they use" in which they "undergo a process of recoding."[426] This process is characterized by a "consciously sought-after creative tension between the meanings engendered by these texts in the performative context and the new function within a Western dramaturgical framework", allowing them to "retain their integrity as

[423] Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage,* 9.

[424] Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage,* 2.

[425] Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage,* 5.

[426] Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage,* 5.

bearer of precisely defined cultural meaning."[427] Despite the opacity of such terms as "respect" and "integrity", Balme locates the difference between exoticism and syncretism within a semiotic framework in which the disassociation between cultural signs and their signifiers denotes the appropriative impulse of exoticism. He particularly attributes the maintained "integrity" of cultural texts and their "defined cultural meaning" to the positionalities and identities of the producing artists: "Because the dramatists and directors [of syncretic theatre]…come from indigenous cultures, their processes of adaptation respect the semantics of the cultural texts they use."[428] In this way, Balme's argument against theatrical exoticism focuses exclusively on the conditions of production and artistic creation, essentializing the positionalities of "colonizer" and "indigenous." For Balme, exoticism is elided in performance based on the essentialized identities of the artistic creators and performers as "indigenous" and their assumed loyalty to the "original cultural semantics" of indigenous cultural texts. However, I would trouble Balme's assumption of a strict dichotomy between "indigenous" and "colonial" artists, particularly within the post-colonial context. Such an approach risks flattening artistic producers at the expense of different forms of intersectional, post-colonial identity. Furthermore, as a method of analysis, Balme's formulation privileges production over reception. It overlooks questions of cultural commodification and self-orientalism that can be read into the consumption of post-colonial syncretic theatre, as argued by medievalist Stephen Kelly in his analysis of *Yiimimangaliso.*

Kelly describes *Yiimimangaliso* in terms of intercultural translation, in which "an original theatrical tradition belonging to the source (British) culture is mediated and re-translated by the

[427] Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage,* 5.

[428] Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage,* 5.

target (South African) culture. In turn, the target (South African) culture is forced to translate itself according to a series of assumptions on the part of the source (British) culture to which it returns, now as a source."[429] Citing Paul Ricoeur's notion of translation as "a form of hospitality", Kelly argues that any act of translation is concordantly an act of interpretation in which something inevitably is lost between two languages, or in this case, performance traditions. He proceeds to read *Yiimimangaliso* as symptomatic of a colonized culture having to render itself legible and visible to the colonizer within performance. Kelly's specific critiques of the production are wide-ranging; he argues that the production fetishizes the Bible, reducing it to "typological myth" that functions to erase the conflicted role scripture has played in South African cultural memory as both a tool of colonial oppression and of political resistance.[430] He also critiques Isango's multiethnic, cross-racial ensemble as eschewing "political complexity in favour of festive cliché" through color-blind casting; "Ironically, in such a self-consciously multiracial theatre company, race is all but erased in the fictional world of the play; black and white characters play brothers and sisters, fathers, mothers, songs and daughters, all the while explicitly negating race as a key characteristic of identity."[431] Ultimately, Kelly recasts *Yiimimangaliso* as a problematic example of cultural commodification; he reads the costumes and dance in *Yiimimangaliso* as performing for British audiences a notion of "authentic African cultural experience" that betrays how "theatrical translation has come to *stand for* cultural encounter."[432] He concludes that the "commodification" and "easy consumption" of

[429] Stephen Kelly, "An Absence of Ghosts: cultural and theatrical translation in the British reception of *The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso*," *Quaderns: revista de traducció* 19 (2012): 70.

[430] Kelly, "An Absence of Ghosts," 74.

[431] Kelly, "An Absence of Ghosts," 73.

[432] Kelly, "An Absence of Ghosts," 70.

Yiimimangaliso's performance of South African-ness yields a "cosy exoticisation" that "panders to a clichéd conception of globalized multiculturalism", revealing "complex ethical questions about its capacity to represent and re-present the Other."[433] Implicit in Kelly's argument is the positionality of a white, British spectator who consumes *Yiimimangaliso* as an exotified "African cultural experience" at the expense of "political complexity." In this way, his argument privileges the legibility of the "political" to a presumed Western viewer, operating on an underlying Eurocentrism; indeed, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, *Yiimimangaliso's* South African audience—with its protestation of the "Africanization" of the narrative—demonstrably viewed the production as highly political within the context of South Africa in the recent wake of apartheid. In focusing exclusively on the British reception of the play, Kelly neglects situating the production within its historiographic context. As I will later address, *Yiimimangaliso* reflects policies and political values (the African Renaissance and *ubuntu*) that the South African government actively promoted during the production's creation in 2000.

Medieval drama scholar Theresa Coletti has usefully offered an historiographical reading of the production, focusing on the multifaceted role of the Bible within South Africa's political history. In contrast to Kelly, Coletti argues that *Yiimimangaliso* "enacted confluences of theater, politics, and religion for its young South African company at a particular moment in the history of a young country coming to terms with the long legacy of colonial oppression and racial segregation."[434] She aptly rereads the medievalism of *Yiimimangaliso's* approach to the biblical

[433] Kelly, "An Absence of Ghosts," 75-6.

[434] Theresa Coletti, "Medieval Biblical Drama in Post-Apartheid South Africa," ed. David L. Jeffrey, *Transformations in Biblical Literary Traditions: Incarnation, Narrative, and Ethic* (University of Notre Dame, 2014. 268-288), 269-270.

narrative of the Chester Mystery Cycle through the lens of "the role that Christianity and the Bible, its sacred book, have played in South Africa's colonialist history and continue to play in the new country's ongoing project of liberation and reconciliation."[435] Drawing on the work of Jean and John Comaroff on the dual history of the Bible as a tool of oppression as well as a means of resistance to colonial domination within South Africa[436], Coletti illuminates how *Yiimimangaliso* uniquely reflects the dialectical relationship between South Africa and the Bible itself, one that "involves not only the influence of the Bible on the formation of African Christianity but also the impact that Africa has made on the Bible."[437] In tracing the evolution of black South African biblical hermeneutics from its beginnings with the first Zulu translation of the Bible by nineteenth century missionary John William Colenso, Coletti argues *Yiimimangaliso* embodies uniquely "South African approaches to the Bible;" she persuasively demonstrates the "methods of biblical reading and interpretation on display in *The Mysteries* [*Yiimimangaliso*]—that is, understanding the text and story in relation to the readers' present world—possess cultural sanction and authority" yielding a performance that "deeply resonate[s] with a conflicted, hybrid legacy of South African reception of the Bible."[438] Rather than reinforcing a Western, Eurocentric perspective on *Yiimimangaliso's* politicization, Coletti illuminates the deeply political and post-colonial resonances of the production as a syncretic adaptation of medieval biblical drama. In focusing on the biblical narrative, however, Coletti's purposes do not engage directly with the question of medievalist performance and its role within post-apartheid South African national identity, a point this chapter will address.

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[435] Coletti, "Medieval Biblical Drama in Post-Apartheid South Africa," 272.

[436] See Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[437] Coletti, "Medieval Biblical Drama in Post-Apartheid South Africa," 273.

[438] Coletti, "Medieval Biblical Drama in Post-Apartheid South Africa," 274.

Together, Balme, Kelly, and Coletti's arguments reveal the multiple factors present when analyzing a post-colonial syncretic performance like *Yiimimangaliso*. While *Yiimimangaliso* functions as a form of post-colonial syncretic theatre, it elides the reductive binary argued by Balme between "colonial" and "indigenous" artists, with its multi-racial and multi-national cast and production team. While racialized spectatorship is at play in the production's British reception, Kelly's reading of the production leaves key aspects of its historical and political context unaddressed, instead assuming the Eurocentricity of its audience. Drawing on Coletti's historiographic research, I will elucidate how *Yiimimangaliso's* emergence in the post-apartheid era leverages the medieval imaginary to invoke a new sense of South African national identity in the wake of political rupture. Ultimately, I return to the question of *Yiimimangaliso's* spiritual efficacy in its British reception, reformulating the critique of its exoticism in favor of a phenomenological argument for racial animatedness, as formulated by Sianne Ngai. I argue that it is the confluence between notions of the medieval unmodern and the racialized Other across its transnational audiences that activates *Yiimimangaliso's* spiritual efficacy.

South African Medievalism

Unlike Scriabin's *Mysterium* and Sartre's *Bariona*, *Yiimimangaliso's* medievalism manifests overtly as a theatrical adaptation of the Middle English Chester Mystery Cycle. The Chester Cycle survives across eight extant manuscripts, most often described as antiquarian in that they generally date between the years 1591 and 1607, several decades after the cycle's final performance in 1575.[439] As with the other Middle English cycles in York and Wakefield, the Chester Cycle was initially staged annually on the feast of Corpus Christi before its performance

[439] David Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle: A New Edition with Modernised Spelling* (East Lansing, Mich: Colleagues Press, 1992), xvi.

was moved to Whitsun, the celebration of Pentecost within the liturgical calendar. Surviving evidence attests to the cycle's annual performance through the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by the local guilds within Chester. The cycle is exceptional within the Middle English mystery cycle tradition due to two main factors; the first is Chester's performance late into the sixteenth century in defiance of royal edicts banning it due to its Catholic connotations. The second has been described as Chester's exemplary didacticism in comparison to the other extant cycles, most often ascribed to its inclusion of an Expositor and its liturgical episodes such as the Plays of Pentecost and the Antichrist.

Director Mark Dornford-May's choice of the Chester Cycle as the inaugural production under his new leadership of the Spier Arts Festival in 2001 resulted from his own upbringing in Chester, UK. Beginning in 1951, the cycle was revived after centuries of being unperformed; the cycle has been performed every five years since then, with Dornford-May acting in the productions during his childhood and adolescence. Drawing on his familiarity with the cycle's text and performance tradition, Dornford-May chose the Chester plays because of their accessibility; in his words, "We chose the mystery plays for several reasons. The stories are accessible to most South Africans; we are not trying to push the Christian message, but rather to establish a common link across South Africa's cultures."[440] In asserting the biblical stories of the cycle as a "common link" across the divisions within South African culture, Dornford-May's turn to the medieval derives draws on the aforementioned prevalence of Christianity within South Africa, practiced by nearly 80% of the population.

However, *Yiimimangaliso's* medievalism is more anomalous within South African performance than its biblical themes. As with Scriabin's Russia, South Africa's theatrical

[440] Guy Willoughby, "South Africa: Unravelling the Mystery," *Mail & Guardian (Johannesburg)*, Dec. 15-21, 2000, 2.

historiography offers infrequent evidence of medievalist performance. Biblical drama was first deployed within the colonial encounter as part of missionary efforts. In its dual project of conquering and Christianizing indigenous South Africans, settler colonialists turned to medievalist performative modes in service of the "civilizing" project of imperial colonialism in South Africa. The rise in missionary efforts in South Africa in the late nineteenth century led to the use of religious drama as a means not only to convert indigenous peoples to Christian faith but to instill "Christian" values of behavior, social, and economic practice. Representative of these efforts was the work of German Catholic priest Father Bernardus Huss and Scottish Protestant missionary Mary Waters, both of whom staged biblical and religious drama in their missional work in South Africa. The case of Father Huss provides the majority of the surviving evidence for proselytization through drama in South Africa; convinced of drama's "transformative" capabilities, Huss produced twenty-four religious plays in Zulu that were performed by indigenous students at his mission school for the edification of the larger Zulu community.[441] His productions of *Joseph in Egypt* (1904) as well as *Job* (c. 1906) and *The Prodigal Son* (date unknown) were employed as scriptural models for enduring hardship and maintaining faith as well as prescribing "Christian values" of behavior.[442] Huss also produced a variety of saints' plays, including *St. Agnes, St. Elizabeth*, and *St. Augustine*, in the same mode of modeling Christian faith, morals, and devotion.[443] Huss' productions were met with such approval that they were regularly performed for both indigenous communities and for white

[441] Bhekiziwe Peterson, "All Work and No Play Makes Civilization Unattractive to the Masses," *African Studies* 54, issue 2 (1995): 35.

[442] Bhekizizwe Peterson, "'I Will Open My Mouth in Parables': Theatre and Evangelism in South Africa between 1900-1925," *Theatre Journal* 46, no. 3 (Oct. 1994): 350.

[443] Peterson, "All Work and No Play," 49.

colonists between 1915 and 1927.[444] Around the same time, Mary Waters similarly employed religious drama towards proselytizing ends and overtly cited medieval drama as her inspiration. Waters and other missionaries in her circle became "attracted to the idea of teaching religious history and Christian ethics by means of stage plays, which as they remembered, was a method of the early Church in Europe."[445] Waters' allegorical play *The Light* (1925), which traces character of "Civilization" in her encounters with various indigenous peoples, "follows the influence of early medieval moralities and liturgical drama as it had been used in Christian proselytizing in medieval Europe."[446] South African medievalist performance has at times reemerged later in the twentieth-century, albeit in different forms. For example, Barney Simon, Percy Mtwa and Mbongeni Ngema's famous staging of the second coming of Christ (Morena) in *Woza Albert!* echoes of The Last Judgement plays that concluded medieval mystery cycles. More recently, however, medievalist performance in South Africa has turned away from the religious and biblical towards popular representations of Arthurian legend, with hit productions of *Camelot* in Durban and family-friendly pantomimes like *The Legend of King Arthur* in Johannesburg.

Despite the relative dearth of South African medievalist performance both past and present, the medieval has circulated as a critical imaginary within twentieth century South Africa, one that is inextricably bound up with questions of colonialism, apartheid, and the pursuit of a post-apartheid national identity. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Kathleen Davis has argued for the construction of the medieval imaginary as contemporaneous with the rise of colonialism,

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[444] Peterson, "All Work and No Play," 32.

[445] Martin Orkin, *Drama and the South African State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 7.

[446] Mziwoxolo Sirayi & Owen Seda, "Intrusive hegemonies and localized identities in early South African Drama and Theatre: 1880 to 1930," *South African Journal of African Languages*, 35:1 (2015): 133.

focusing especially on the formulation of the concepts of secularization and feudalism as key to sixteenth and seventeenth century discourses on sovereignty and slavery. Through this ideological turn, she argues, the modern free subject was presaged on the past medieval feudal subject, reifying a political notion of the medieval that modernity defines itself against.[447] This construction of the medieval and modern as a binary emerged concomitantly and in service of European colonialism:

> The genealogies of "the Middle Ages" and of colonialism are intimately entwined…there was no such "superstitious, feudal Middle Ages" before colonialism, and doubtless there never would have been such without colonialism…colonizers could not have mapped and administered foreign lands and bodies as they did without the simultaneous process of imagining such a [irrational, superstitious, and feudal] "Middle Ages."[448]

This formulation of the medieval was utilized to justify colonial expansion and the subjugation of non-Western peoples and territories by through what Barrington terms "temporal global medievalism":

> This form of global medievalism uses medievalism to imagine two coeval cultures as occupying two different time zones or historical chronologies. The Western European is considered to occupy the modern "now", while others are perceived as occupying a medieval "then," a dark age from which Western Europe emerged in the sixteenth century but where others will always be stuck without Western European intervention…when Europeans use medievalism as a prism for looking at others beyond their national frontiers, they associate Westerners with positive qualities of the medieval past, such a chivalry, honour, whiteness, and Christianity, while associating indigenous cultures with its negative qualities, such as barbarism, treachery, darkness, and heathenism.[449]

In this way, the medieval imaginary was weaponized as a tool of colonial oppression, deployed to subjugate the racialized, indigenous Other. Through the narrative of temporal latency in which

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[447] Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty,* 8.

[448] Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty,* 20.

[449] Barrington, "Global medievalism and translation," 184-5.

indigenous people and cultures signified the "medieval", European colonizers reified their own "modern" superiority to justify colonial dispossession and oppression. As Barrington states, this form of "temporal global medievalism forces the contemporaneous into the past to make it manageable", architecting its subjugation in temporal terms.[450] This formulation not only served as a justification for European colonialism but was inculcated into colonialist education; for example, the British famously "divided Indian history into the Hindu, Muslim and British periods, later termed the ancient, medieval and modern eras" which "early Indian nationalist historiography accepted" as a predominant mode of reading Indian history.[451]

Africa, as a site of colonial conquest, was not excepted from this formulation of the medieval as the unmodern. As Simon Gikandi argues in his essay "Africa and the Signs of Medievalism", the "African unmodern came to operate under the sign of medievalism" during the colonial period.[452] Turning to contemporary colonial travel accounts in West Africa, Gikandi traces the convergence of negative medieval associations like "Gothic", superstitious, childish, and despotic within the European description of African culture. This association between the "medieval vices" and African culture led to the erasure of the Middle Ages from "the narrative of European history as it was circulated in African schools."[453] In what Gikandi describes as European embarrassment by a period of history that "seemed to associate them [colonizers] with

[450] Barrington, "Global medievalism and translation," 185-6.

[451] Kathleen Davis and Nadia Altschul, *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: The Idea of "the Middle Ages" Outside Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 12.

[452] Simon Gikandi, "Africa and the Signs of Medievalism" in *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: the Idea of "Middle Ages" Outside of Europe,* ed. Kathleen Davis and Nadia Altschul (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009): 370.

[453] Gikandi, 372. Gikandi does note that white South African schools were excepted from this blanket policy, but the lacuna of the Middle Ages in school curriculum was enforced in colored and black schools.

a set of cultural values that were too close to the lived experiences of the colonized", the medieval period was uniquely framed within African colonialism as historical liability that would undermine the legitimacy of the "modern" as the exclusive hallmark of European identity and the justification for the colonization of the African continent.[454] It was precisely due to this "evacuation of the Middle Ages" from the African colonial discourse and its accompanying "dissociation from imperial civilizational projects" that the medieval was poised for reclamation in the early post-colonial era.[455]

Invoking the medieval as the period where not only Africa was still untouched by the colonial encounter but when Europe and Africa were on the "same temporal and social plane", Africanists like D.T. Niane sought to reclaim a "narrative of Africanness untainted by colonialism."[456] Through these attempts to derive a "foundational narrative of Africanness" from the medieval period, Africanists appealed for political legitimacy through a reclamation of medieval, pre-colonial Africa as part of the decolonization process.[457] This turn to the medieval within post-colonial, African nationalist movements functioned in service of the larger decolonization of notions of temporality and Africa's place within global history. As summarized by Davis and Altschul:

> Writing a Middle Ages of one's own has been a principal means for post-independence nations to negotiate colonial schemes of representation…For West Africans nationalists in the 1960s…writing a Middle Ages defied the nineteenth-century appropriation of the African Other as 'medieval', both by asserting African contemporaneity with Europe, and by challenging European dominion over the Middle Ages and modernity.[458]

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[454] Gikandi, "Africa and the Signs of Medievalism," 372.

[455] Gikandi, "Africa and the Signs of Medievalism," 372-3.

[456] Gikandi, "Africa and the Signs of Medievalism," 374.

[457] Gikandi, "Africa and the Signs of Medievalism," 376-77.

[458] Davis and Altschul, *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World,* 13.

Victor Houliston has demonstrated additionally the confluence between the rise of medieval studies in South Africa and anti-apartheid efforts by white historians; once again, the abjection of the medieval within colonial education left room for the medieval to be reclaimed as a temporal other that shared affinity with the racial other in South Africa; in Houliston's words, "to find inspiration in medieval civilization is potentially to open up the way for an appreciation of other cultures that do not conform to the ideals and practices of modern industrialized society."[459] In other words, reclaiming the medieval from the pejorative stereotypes of the primitive, superstitious, or backwards provides a model for reapproaching indigenous African cultures that were dogged by the same othering tactics deployed by colonial and apartheid powers. Thus, the medieval, its attendant histories, and its political reclamations within twentieth-century South Africa functions as progressive potentiality, one that allows for a recuperation of the idea of the "un-modern" as an alternative to Western and Eurocentric temporal notions of linear progress.[460]

The African Renaissance

This progressive potential of the medieval manifested in post-apartheid South Africa contemporaneously with the conception and production of *Yiimimangaliso.* Following the 1994 election of Nelson Mandela and the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from 1995 to 2000, Thabo Mbeki's election to the presidency in 1999 introduced a political turn away from the focus on redress of the atrocities under apartheid to what Mbeki termed an

[459] Victor Houliston "Medieval Studies and the Voice of Conscience in Twentieth-Century South Africa," in *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: The Idea of "the Middle Ages" Outside Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009): 359.

[460] As summarized by Stephen Kelly, Johannes Fabian's 2002 work *Time and the Other* attests to how Western thought has "objectified non-Western cultures by locating them in a temporal scheme which figures theme as a "stage" or "phase" of cultural development in which Western societies stand as fulfillment or apotheosis…non-Western cultures are thereby figured as primitively *of-the-past*." (Kelly, "An Absence of Ghosts," 73).

"African Renaissance" as a means of orienting South African national identity towards a new, unified future. Such invocation of a "Renaissance" functions as a bifurcated temporal turn; as a "re-birth", the concept of a renaissance simultaneously points towards repetition and novelty, a return to the past as a means of approaching the future. Mbeki's deployment of the term operated temporally to align the centuries of colonialism, imperialism, and apartheid with the "Dark Ages" as associated with the medieval from which the new South African nation, and Africa as a whole, was reemerging into a "Renaissance." However, in seeking to reclaim the glory of Africa's pre-colonial past leveraged towards the future, Mbeki also turned to the medieval as a touchstone of "authentic" African identity prior to the ravages of European conquest. This dual political deployment of the medieval ultimately provides the context from which *Yiimimangaliso* emerged.

The notion of an "African Renaissance" was first articulated by Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop in 1946 as a call for a Pan-African renewal of culture and development in the aftermath of colonialism.[461] In a 1998 conference in celebration of Diop's work and legacy, Mbeki—then the Deputy President of South Africa—gave a keynote address titled "Giving the Renaissance Content: Objectives and Definitions."[462] In that speech, and subsequent others, Mbeki formulated the African Renaissance as a call for "self-discovery and the restoration of own self-esteem."[463] From 1999 to 2008, Mbeki oriented his presidency around redefining South Africa "in terms that countered negative colonial and apartheid formulation of black South

[461] Phemelo Olifile Marumo and Mompati Chakale, "Mbeki on African Renaissance: A Vehicle for African Development," *African Renaissance* 15, no. 4, (Dec. 2018): 174-5.

[462] André Mbata B. Mangu, "Democracy, African Intellectuals and African Renaissance," *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies*, 1:1, (2006): 147.

[463] Mangu, "Democracy, African Intellectuals and African Renaissance," 150.

Africans, while offering South Africa a sense of a 'past glory' and reconnecting the country with the African continent."[464] In what Yvette Hutchinson terms "restorative nostalgia", Mbeki drew on narratives and legacies from Africa's medieval past as the temporal period before colonialism, particularly the "glorious past" of medieval Timbuktu in modern day Mali. Following in the footsteps of D.T. Niane's *Epic of Sundiata* (1960), Mbeki utilized Timbuktu's medieval preeminence as a "unifying myth to create a renewed pride in Africa's pre-colonial past in order to build a more positive sense of African identity."[465] Founded in 1100 AD, Timbuktu's legendary status as the commercial, cultural, and intellectual center of the Malian empire was famously described in 1546 by Leo Africanus, beginning its centuries of mystique within the West.[466] Reaching its height in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Timbuktu was specifically employed by Mbeki as the exemplar of Africa's pre-colonial ascendency in commerce, arts, and culture; in addition to his frequent invocation of Timbuktu and the Malian empire, Mbeki initiated the *Timbuktu Script and Scholarship* exhibition, which toured forty medieval Malian manuscripts throughout South Africa and the rest of the continent. The exhibition's press release explicitly stated that "By celebrating these manuscripts as African cultural treasures, the exhibition strives to promote the values and objectives of the African Renaissance." [467] Mbeki's approach to the African Renaissance was characterized by "moving the focus from the problems

[464] Yvette Hutchinson, *South African Performance and the Archives of Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 137.

[465] Hutchinson, *South African Performance and the Archives of Memory,* 140, 141.

[466] Hutchinson, *South African Performance and the Archives of Memory,* 143.

[467] Hutchinson, *South African Performance and the Archives of Memory,* 150.

and conflicts of the immediate past to conceptualizing a more positive sense of history and identity for South Africans" in order to create "a glorious future."[468]

Ultimately, Mbeki's efforts toward African Renaissance within South Africa amounted to a holistic impetus towards what W.A.J. Okumu has termed "social transformation"[469], one that "must begin with a fresh sense of the purpose and meaning of life as the basis of cultural identity." [470] Okumu outlined such a transformation as generating "a sense of well-being, renewed motivation" that would manifest "first, in the arts and culture; then in science, technology, commerce, and in politics."[471] Okumu's privileging of the arts as the first object of renewal in a trickle-down model of establishing a new, inclusive South African national identity was reinforced by the Mbeki presidency's support of the arts as essential in architecting his envisioned African Renaissance due to their particular value in conveying "humanistic values."[472]

It was in this context of a national call led by Mbeki for an arts-led African Renaissance that *Yiimimangaliso* was conceived and produced. South African billionaire and philanthropist, Dick Enthoven, sought to transform his wine estate in Spier, Stellenbosch, into a world-class arts festival, one that would ultimately produce *Yiimimangaliso*. Enthoven, described by Dornford-May as a sort of philanthropic "prophet of the new South Africa",[473] was a former South African

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[468] Hutchinson, *South African Performance and the Archives of Memory,* 139.

[469] Washington A. J. Okumu, *The African Renaissance: History, Significance, and Strategy* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2002), 12.

[470] Okumu, *The African Renaissance,* 20.

[471] Okumu, *The African Renaissance,* 20.

[472] Elias K. Bongmba, "Reflections on Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30, no. 2, (June 2004): 308.

[473] Mark Dornford-May, Personal interview with the author, April 22, 2020.

MP who went into a "voluntary exile" in the UK during the apartheid era.[474] Having nurtured a longstanding dream to make the arts more accessible to all South Africans, Enthoven returned to South Africa after apartheid, establishing the Spier Arts Festival at his historic wine estate in 1996. First encountering Dornford-May in 1997 at the director's production of Beethoven's *Fidelo* in Durban, South Africa,[475] Enthoven approached Dornford-May in 2000 to ask him to helm the Spier Festival with the aim of helping to "build a shared nationhood in this new democracy."[476] Dornford-May and his music director Charles Hazlewood were already established in the London theatre scene as the founding directors of the Broomhill Opera in East London, where their artistic aims were coupled with an ethos of increasing access to theatre in underprivileged communities. The London company was founded in 1993 on the border between London's poorest borough and the city's richest square mile. At that time, Dornford-May said, "both communities were deeply suspicious of each other; we intended to create a company whose work would be both of excellent quality and completely accessible to all. We saw ourselves as social entrepreneurs as well as an arts company."[477] Impressed by their experience bridging entrenched social divides through the arts, Enthoven offered the team leadership of the Spier Arts Festival in hopes of realizing his aims of fostering a unified South African national identity through the "world-class" arts productions.[478]

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[474] Winnie Graham, "New Academy to develop SA's raw talent," *The Star*, Sept. 25, 2001, 13.

[475] Jasper Rees, "An Evening with God and the Devil," *The Times*, Feb. 16, 2002, 30.

[476] Mark Dornford-May, "Working on the white face of theatre", *Cape Times*, November 18, 2010, 9.

[477] Willoughby, "South Africa: Unravelling the Mystery," 2.

[478] This decision, however, received considerable blowback from urban South African arts institutions, describing the choice as "unnecessary and patronising" with accusations of "cultural imperialism" lobbied at Enthoven for importing British directors rather than using South African talent. (Jean Le May, "Spier hits a false note with artists", *Weekend Saturday Argus*, July 29-30, 2000, 8).

Enthoven's aspirational vision for his arts festival to "build shared nationhood" not only reflects the political rhetoric of Mbeki's African Renaissance but refutes Kelly's assertion that *Yiimimangaliso* elides "political complexity." Rather, the production—as the first show premiered under Dornford-May's new creative leadership—exemplifies the political climate of the time, directly responding to Mbeki's call for the arts as a key method of modeling a sense of national unity within post-apartheid South Africa. Contextualized within this moment, *Yiimimangaliso's* medievalism also reflects the larger reclamation of the medieval within post-colonial African discourse and the South African turn towards "Renaissance." While Kelly reads the production's multi-racial cast as "negating race as a key characteristic of identity", the "erasure" he critiques of race follows echoes Mbeki's own speeches that championed "Rainbow nationhood" across racial and ethnic categories. In his oft-cited speech 1996 speech "I am an African", Mbeki rhetorically interpellates his audience into a range of racial and ethnic identities, employing the first person to identify himself with the Khoi and San tribes, European colonial migrants, Malay slaves, Boer farmers, and Xhosa and Zulu warriors, combining them into a singular, transcendent South African identity that would aspirationally form the foundation of the new nation. Rather than political naivete, *Yiimimangaliso's* color-blind casting attests to the comprehensive political messaging of the Mbeki presidency through its invocation of the African Renaissance as reclaiming one version of a kind of inclusive, positive identity for post-apartheid South Africans. Rather than eliding "political complexity in favour of festive cliché", the production's medievalism attests to how the medieval itself was being politically leveraged within South Africa's social and cultural discourse at the beginning of the twenty-first century.[479]

[479] Kelly, "An Absence of Ghosts," 73.

Yiimimangaliso's Syncretism

Seeking to build an ensemble that was "genuinely South African" in its diversity, Dornford-May and Hazlewood initially held auditions at universities, conservatories, and urban arts organizations; however, they quickly realized that black performers struggled to access these spaces of historically white privilege, especially due to distance and transportation to and from townships that lay on the periphery of the major cities. [480] Shifting their approach, they instead began to travel directly to townships to hold auditions, eschewing what Dornford-May has termed the "white fortresses of European culture in the middle of black Africa" and ultimately heard auditions from nearly two thousand black South Africans.[481] According to Dornford-May, "we decided to contact choirs in townships and hold auditions right there…we made it clear that there were no entry qualifications. Everyone would be heard. I felt that anyone who walked in by themselves to sing to a couple of white guys had the confidence to perform onstage."[482] From the thousands of hopefuls, a company of thirty-four black and six white performers was formed, initially named Dimpho Di Kopane before settling on their permanent name, Isango Ensemble.[483]

In addition to his previous experience with the cycle, Dornford-May chose the Chester text as the source material for the ensemble's first performance due to its use of Middle English: "The fact that no one culture starts with an advantage in this production is underscored in language."[484] During the early weeks of workshopping with the newly formed ensemble,

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[480] Riding, "A Racial Event That Became a Hit," A7.

[481] Riding, "A Racial Event That Became a Hit," A7.

[482] Riding, "A Racial Event That Became a Hit," A7.

[483] Dimpho di Kopane translates to "combined talents" in Sotho while Isango means "gateway" in Zulu and Xhosa.

[483] Riding, "A Racial Event That Became a Hit," A7.

[484] Willoughby, "South Africa: Unravelling the Mystery," 2.

Dornford-May had the performers only recite the text in the original Middle English in order to establish a common ground of mutual alienation from the language; in this way, no performer initially approached the text in their native tongue. Only after a period of establishing this "even plane and [getting] clarity on the story", the ensemble collectively chose the languages that would be used in the production, with performers delivering their own lines in their respective first language. As a result, the performance ultimately featuring a mix of English, Middle English, Xhosa, Afrikaans, Zulu, Sotho, and Latin.[485]

This heteroglossia constitutes one of the central components of *Yiimimangaliso's* syncretism and would end up forming one of the central tenets of Isango's approach to language. In a 2010 editorial for the *Cape Times* titled "Working on the White Face of Theatre", Dornford-May explicitly emphasized the importance of using multiple South African languages in the company's productions; "I do think it is vital that we continue to use various languages, otherwise a sense of alienation for people is increased. If you never hear your language [on stage] then surely the work is not for you?"[486] He went on to observe that tensions surrounding the heteroglossic use of language only manifest within the South African theatre context; "The most complicated debate around our work grows out of our use of different languages within the same production. Funnily enough this is never a question when we are touring [abroad]…The comment about too much Xhosa…I have never heard reversed into too much English."[487] In observing a South African "debate" around the prevalence of indigenous languages in Isango's productions that is notably absent from the company's reception abroad, Dornford-May

[485] Willoughby, "South Africa: Unravelling the Mystery," 2.

[486] Dornford-May, "Working on the White Face of Theatre," 9.

[487] Dornford-May, "Working on the White Face of Theatre," 9.

highlights how the multiplicity of languages deployed by Isango is aimed at creating a "bridge across the artificial divisions of the past" in reference to the legacies of colonialism and apartheid.[488] This post-colonial heteroglossic approach to language posits a syncretism that, as Theresa Coletti notes, links medievalist performance with post-colonial performance;

> The acknowledgment of linguistic difference that we encounter in the Chester plays, which strategically employ Latin and French alongside [Middle] English, both provides precedent for the sliding between languages that is on display in the South African *Mysteries* and signals the important cultural inflections that accompany uses of the vernacular in both historical contexts.[489]

In this way, Coletti sheds light on how the vernacular in both medieval Chester and contemporary South Africa function syncretically by forming a linguistically hybridized performance. Marvin Carlson even more explicitly links the medieval with the post-colonial through language in his formulation of "macaronic theatre."[490] For Carlson, "every macaronic performance can be seen as a cross-cultural activity, a staging of difference."[491] In his later work, *Speaking in Tongues: Languages at Play in the Theatre*, Carlson argues for a specific connection between medieval and modern African theatre through their negotiation of languages; "The complex play of language and dialect choices in the drama of this period [the medieval] can be best understood by the kind of analysis developed in postcolonial studies."[492] He goes on to posit that post-colonial societies exist in a heteroglossically in relation to local indigenous languages

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[488] Dornford-May, "Working on the White Face of Theatre," 9.

[489] Coletti, "Medieval Biblical Drama in Post-Apartheid South Africa," 278.

[490] First coined to characterize Renaissance texts that incorporated Latin and vernacular languages, "macaronic" refers to any text that employs more than one language.

[491] Marvin Carlson, "The Macaronic Stage" in *East of West: Cross-cultural Performance and the Staging of Difference*, ed. Claire Sponsler and Xiaomei Chen (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 16.

[492] Marvin Carlson, *Speaking in Tongues: Languages at Play in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 28.

and the colonizing language, yielding a state that he explicitly terms syncretic: "this quality of dialogue or difference within syncretic theatre means that languages within the syncretic tradition can be considered as heteroglossic within themselves, even before they interact in the theatre with other languages."[493] Indeed Carlson's direct comparison of medieval and postcolonial syncretic theatre suggests that the latter echoes the former within the larger context of the multiplicity of languages as attached to notions of power and authority in both medieval and post-colonial societies. In other words, the authoritative hegemony of Latin and English are respectively challenged by the popular vernacular in medieval England and South Africa. In this way, *Yiimimangaliso's* post-colonial heteroglossia more aptly reflects the linguistic syncretism of the original Chester Mystery Cycle than more historically faithful productions that approach the text solely in English.

The multi-lingualism of the production additionally functioned to expand the modes by which the biblical narrative was conveyed, utilizing dance, song, and movement to communicate beyond language. As Dornford-May stated in a 2001 review of the Australian tour of the production, "Because everyone knows the story of Noah and the Flood or Abraham and Isaac, we could allow the freedom of expressing these stories in all these languages."[494] The linguistic syncretism served both cognitively to engage the audience internally to supply the particularities of the dialogue based on the audience's (presumed) familiarity with the biblical text while also supplementing the dialogue with a dynamic interplay of non-linguistic performance elements. In this way, the production functioned affectively rather than discursively, particularly with regards

[493] Carlson, *Speaking in Tongues,* 111.

[494] "The Mysteries", *The Sunday Times (Perth),* Nov., 25, 2001, http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=72654f41-6f4b-4595-9fe4-acbc93fd1555%40sdc-v-sessmgr03&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=200111251S14060711&db=nfh .

to music. The role of song features heavily throughout the production, prompting more than one reviewer to deem it "musical theater," though it more aptly follows the long tradition of township musical performance.[495] Central scenes in the performance—including God's creation of the world and Adam and Eve, Noah and the Flood, the annunciation of Mary, the Slaughter of the Innocents, Lucifer's temptation of Christ, Christ's raising of Lazarus, and Christ's resurrection—are all enacted through song, typically sung in languages other than English. [496] Musical director Charles Hazelwood described in an interview gathering a "library" of songs across distinct South African traditions, including Dutch folk songs, Zulu lullabies, Xhosa war chants, and Latin hymns which were interwoven throughout the show.[497] Widely praised within reviews, the company performs a syncretic version of "You Are My Sunshine" when the flood abates and Noah's ark arrives safely on land; featuring the four-part harmonies that are characteristic of township gospel choir singing, God then appears and joins the song, playing a township-styled instrument made of a glass soda bottle. *Yiimimangaliso's* final scene closes with the entire ensemble gathered onstage in a collective song and dance: the song is the traditional Xhosa melody "Intonga", which *The Times* described as "the sort of song that could make anyone think they have died and gone to heaven."[498] The song is a canonical Xhosa retreat song but Coletti notes that its lyrics resonate with the theme of resurrection that signals the end of the play: "Elan

[495] For an overview of township theatre and musical performance, see David B. Coplan, *In Township Tonight!: South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

[496] Unless otherwise cited, all references to elements of the production are sourced from the DVD of the 2001 Wilton Music Hall performance (Mark Dornford-May, *Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries*, Heritage Theatre/BBC co-production, 2005. DVD.

[497] "Township Opera" dir. Anthony Fabian, (London: Elysian Films, 2002), *YouTube*, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hlIiGKSVNc.

[498] Jasper Rees, "An Evening with God and the Devil," *The Times*, Feb. 16, 2002, 30.

e twasa lhobo; la ku phumele da bene yo! Ku ba ku bet w'intonga; Yo! [The sun is rising. It is a new day. Go forth in peace]."[499] Throughout the performance, the encounters and ongoing interactions between God and humanity are marked by song, to the extent that God's relationship with mankind emerges as a continuous song featuring different characters, participants, and episodes. Additionally, the musical backdrop of the production is constant and atmospherically pervasive; in the words of one South African reviewer, "unconventional instruments, normally associated with anything but music, are used to generate what can be described as heavenly noise."[500] The instruments employed drew on staples of black township musical performance—upturned rubbish bins, penny whistles, oil drums, tires, bottles, and always voices. In combination with the performers' singing and ululation, *Yiimimangaliso* produced a perpetual sonic atmosphere, one that both was linguistically heteroglossic in its deployment of Latin, Dutch, and African songs as well as non-verbally affective in its "heavenly" resonances.

In addition to music, *Yiimimangaliso* used dance as another non-discursive means of supplementing its heteroglossic syncretism, drawing on traditional indigenous dance modalities. While song was alternatingly performed by individuals and the ensemble as a whole, dance functioned almost exclusively as a means of indicating key moments of relational transformation or unity within the narrative. God communally dances with his angels during the creation of the world, utilizing gestures that evoke a sense of calling forth order out of chaos. Later, Christ's incarnation as man is signified by a dance between Mary and Christ, distinctly reminiscent of South African gumboot dancing featuring an intricate clapping rhythm.[501] Mary demonstrates to

[499] Coletti, "Medieval Biblical Drama in Post-Apartheid South Africa," 281.

[500] Patrick Phosa, "Holy Cow!" *The Star*, Dec. 20, 2000, 20.

[501] The dance would be aptly characterized as gumboot dancing save for the fact that Christ and Mary are not wearing gumboots but are barefoot. For background on gumboot dancing, see Jane Osborne, "The Gumboot Dance: An Historical, Socioeconomic, and Cultural Perspective," *South African Theatre Journal* 4, no. 2 (1990), 50-79.

God, who is dressed in ornate tribal garb, a complicated rhythm of clapping and stomping; God attempts to repeat the dance but fails in a moment of comedic humility. Mary demonstrates again, with God failing again— finally in order to perform the dance, God must remove his ornate garments, revealing tattered jeans and sandals underneath. Only then can God-now-Christ perform the dance of his earthly mother. The simplicity of this moment—and its insertion as extraneous material from the biblical text—functions to enact and embody the incarnation of God as Man, visually signifying God's assumption of humanity as Christ the "Son of Man."

Later, Jesus chooses his followers, calling them into discipleship by teaching them each the same gumboot dance individually. In a rare moment of acknowledgement of the multi-raciality of the cast, the only disciple played by a white actor struggles to replicate the complicated rhythm, shaking his head at his own (and implied, white) rhythmic ineptitude.[502] The dance and its increasing elaborations throughout the production forms an embodied, kinesthetic motif, tracing the incarnational encounter between humanity and the divine. Ultimately, the dance is recapitulated in the penultimate scene of the play, which stages the Chester Cycle's Pentecost episode. Following the death of Christ, the disciples enter the bare stage in silence. Gradually, they begin to speak inaudibly to each other until one of the disciples attempts to show Peter the complex rhythmic, clapping dance that God has performed throughout the play. After multiple attempts, and without dialogue, Peter and all the disciples master the dance and perform it in unison. They break into song and dance as the back of the stage is lit with flames to signify the

[502] The racialization of rhythm as "black" has been excavated within musicology scholarship, though most often in the American context. See Ronald M. Radano, "Hot Fantasies: American Modernism and the Idea of Black Rhythm," *in Music and the Racial Imagination*, ed. Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000): 459-480 and Jeff Pressing, "Black Atlantic Rhythm: Its Computational and Transcultural Foundations," *Music Perception* 19, issue 3 (March 2002): 285–310.

coming of the Holy Spirit.[503] At this moment, Christ—now recostumed as God to signify his resurrection—enter the stage from a central thrust platform and joins in leading the dance. Increasing in its pace and elaboration, the dance encompasses the entire playing space, with the entire ensemble ultimately joining to show the spread of the gospel throughout all the nations (as specified in the Chester text). With the entirety of the company onstage, the clapping dance transmutes into a victorious dance whose movements echo the *toyi-toyi*, the canonical dance of anti-apartheid protests. Coupled with the victorious Xhosa song "Intonga", the dance represents humanity's encounter with God as a complex and embodied mode of unification through movement. In the 2001 return of the production to South Africa (now celebrated as an international hit), then-President Thabo Mbeki famously joined the cast on stage to dance in the final moments of the play.[504]

Across these elements, an aesthetic of South African indigeneity is prominently featured. The costume design draws extensively on a mix of traditional clothing across South Africa's many indigenous tribes as well as contemporary dress associated with township life. In general, the divine characters—God and his angels—are clothed in vibrant and intricate tribal costumes while the human characters wear a mix of traditional and contemporary African clothing. At key moments, the contemporaneity of the dress has special significance; the prostitute whom Jesus saves from an angry mob is dressed as a contemporary sex worker while Pontius Pilate (played by a white actor) is dressed as a colonial military leader. On the other hand, characters associated with rurality (such as the shepherds in the Nativity) or with tribal authority (the Magi) are

[503] Pentecost, scripturally and during the medieval era, is associated with "tongues of flame" descending to represent the Holy Spirit empowering the disciples to speak in tongues. (Acts 2:3-4).
[504] Jane Mulkerrins, "It features 40 amateur actors, four different languages, and rubbish binds, so why has The Mysteries taken the West End by storm," *The Sunday Times,* June 3, 2002, 18.

dressed in traditional African garments, while the threatening King Herod is garbed as a military junta leader associated with figures of African dictatorship.

Such visual references extend beyond costume design, providing other forms of allusion to black South African culture. In place of the biblical account of stoning prostitutes, *Yiimimangaliso's* female sex worker is threatened with necklacing, a form of "people's justice" justice infamously enacted in black townships upon collaborators with the apartheid government.[505] The gifts given by the shepherds to the infant Jesus are also distinctly South African: a gourd and a penny whistle, both associated with the popular *kwela* music of the 1950's. Rather than a crown of thorns, Jesus is crowned with a ring of barbed wire in a clear reference to the barbed wire gates and walls that populate affluent districts in South Africa's urban centers.

Together, these interwoven elements of song, dance, and visual design formed *Yiimimangaliso's* syncretic approach to the Chester Mystery Cycle. However, the role of Dornford-May and Hazlewood—as white, British, theatre practitioners—in forming the ensemble and creating the production troubles Balme's definition of theatrical syncretism based on the essentialized positionalities of its creators. Rather than coming "from indigenous cultures" which, Balme suggests, would establish an inherent "respect [for] the semantics of the cultural texts they use,"[506] Dornford-May and Hazlewood's directorial roles seem to suggest that the production falls into the "cosy exoticization" decried by Kelly and critiqued by Balme as "theatrical exoticism." However, such essentialization of identity also reinforces binaries that the syncretic itself challenges as a post-colonial aesthetic modality. As South African

[505] Lars Buur and Steffen Jensen, "Introduction: vigilantism and the policing of everyday life in South Africa," *African Studies*, 63:2 (December 2004): 139-152. See footnote 12.

[506] Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage,* 5.

performance scholar, Loren Kruger, has argued, "Insisting on authenticity or an absolute difference between European and African, imported and indigenous, literary and oral, threatens to repeat the neocolonial essentialism that it purports to critique."[507] Instead, Kruger redefines the syncretic in interstitial terms in which it "marks an ongoing negotiation with forms and practices, variously and not always consistently identified as modern or traditional, imported or indigenous, European or African."[508] Kruger articulates her preference for the verb "syncretizing" over the noun "syncretism" to denote the movement inherent in such "ongoing negotiation", displacing notions of fixity in defining South Africa cultural productions. *Yiimimangaliso's* syncretism reflects Kruger's formulation of the term rather than Balme's; it was the production's syncretic approach to the medieval Chester Cycle that ultimately garnered such acclaim in its international tour.

Heralded across the U.K. and U.S. as "visionary,"[509] and "dazzling"[510], *Yiimimangaliso's* syncretism was lauded as a "celebration of the linguistic and cultural plurality of modern South Africa."[511] It was also acclaimed as proof of South Africa's newfound "intelligent racial cooperation"[512] in the aftermath of apartheid. Deeming it (somewhat bizarrely) "as improbable a cultural event as a coupling between a young lynx and an antique tortoise would be a biological one", theatre critics praised the production's unprecedented pairing of a medieval mystery cycle

[507] Loren Kruger, *The Drama of South Africa: Plays, Pageants, and Publics since 1910* (London: Routledge, 2006), 18.

[508] Kruger, *The Drama of South Africa,* 20.

[509] Hitchings, "An Exhilarating Sensory Feast," "An Exhilarating Sensory Feast," *Evening Standard*, September 16, 2009, 37.

[510] Spencer, "Divine, Defiant, and Dazzling."

[511] Robert Hewison, "Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries," *The Sunday Times*, June 3, 2001, E1.

[512] Billington, "The Mysteries," 2001, 22.

with South African music, dance, and aesthetics as a refreshing approach to post-colonial theatrical adaptations of Western texts. The *New York Times'* Margo Jefferson, in an echo of Balme's distinction between syncretism and exoticism, stated:

> [The production has] taken a huge leap past the usual conventions about how Western and non-Western styles should meet, especially when the styles are Anglo- and African-based. We are all too familiar with the old pattern by which some classic work is injected with the style serum of a culture assumed to be earthier, more sensual and less intellectual and therefore able to reach the audience with its primal force, or at the very least its openhearted warmth and vibrant energy. How dreary those contrasts are!...Nothing could be farther from the path taken by the D.D.K [Dimpho di Kopane] directors, actors, and choreographer. Two sets of performance traditions meet. They alter and enhance each other.

Jefferson's reference to the melding of distinct performance traditions—medieval and South African—is apt, implying further resonances than she excavates in her review; in addition to the heteroglossic convergence between medieval drama and *Yiimimangaliso* described earlier, the production's noted "rough theatre" aesthetics and the use of amateur actors also align with medieval theatre tradition, bridging these otherwise temporally and geographically distinct performances.

The production's international reception was also framed by critics as emblematic of the emerging "new South Africa" in the wake of apartheid. Describing the cast as "cultural ambassadors", *The Sunday Times* quoted producer Enthoven who stated that the ensemble represents "new role models, the first heroes for black South Africans…In a country so distorted by apartheid, they have the whole of South Africa behind them; all ages, colours and income levels."[513] Despite the glaring inaccuracy of framing "heroes for black South Africans" as previously absent, this sense of racial representation and reconciliation populated the vast majority of reviews; *The New York Times* characterized the production as an "experiment in

[513] Mulkerrins, "It features 40 amateur actors," 18.

crossing the racial barriers still diving South African culture" that served as proof that "black, white and 'colored', or mixed-race South Africans could work together on an equal footing."[514] The *London Evening Standard* cited the plays as an "antidote to bad news", particularly countering "all the gruesome stories about South Africa that circulate in the media" and ultimately serving an "affirmative purpose." The article continues, "The affirmation is a challenge to the status quo. An affront to the prejudices fermented both within and around 21st-century South Africa, the production is also a riposte to those who have questioned the viability of South African theatre."[515] Such descriptions converge on a perceived political efficacy of the production, not only in showcasing South African culture and talent, but repairing the country's reputation abroad. An international pariah for the final decades of apartheid, South Africa's racial atrocities triggered global censure in the form of UN resolutions, trade embargoes, and widespread anti-apartheid movements across the world. For both its creators and audiences, *Yiimimangaliso's* political efficacy functioned reparatively by performatively signaling a newly unified South African identity to the international community. Benedict Nightingale of London's *The Times* articulates this performative efficacy in definitive terms of reconciliation: "It's a celebration of healing, wholeness, togetherness: South African, human, universal."[516] By reading the production as reconciliatory, such reviews reveal how *Yiimimangaliso* was read as politically reflective of the post-apartheid call for South African reunification, epitomized by the value of *ubuntu*. By addressing the politics of *ubuntu* and its role in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I suggest that *Yiimimangaliso's* consumable performance of "healing, wholeness,

[514] Riding, "A Racial Event That Became a Hit," A7.

[515] "South Africa's Champion of Culture," *Evening Standard*, September 1, 2009, 30.

[516] Benedict Nightingale, "West End erupts with joy at gift from Africa," *The Times*, Feb. 27, 2002, 21.

and togetherness" reflects the strategic rhetoric of contemporary South Africa political and government policies.[517]

Ubuntu as Spiritual-Political Ideal

A traditional African value that pre-existed colonialism and Christianity, *ubuntu* has been described as a form of "African humanism" that functions as a philosophy of "shared humanity."[518] Often translated as humanity or humaneness, the concept is encapsulated by the South African aphorism "people are people through other people."[519] Framed as an interdependent, communal state, *ubuntu* formulates the self through its inherent relationship with others; in this way, as Hannake Stuit has argued, it refutes Cartesian logic and constitutes a non-Western, anti-individualist notion of common humanity based on the recognition that a person is "incomplete unless he or she maintains an active connection to the society or culture of which he or she is a part."[520] Such "active connection" is most often aligned with practices of hospitality, forgiveness, and non-violence. As a philosophical practice and enacted ideal, ubuntu operates at the level of a "social contract" in which those who do not live by its principles can lose their own humanity; one's humanity, in sense, is earned or performed by the practice of ubuntu as an embodied philosophy.

Following the fall of apartheid and the beginning of South African democracy, ubuntu was appropriated from a pre-colonial value to a nation-building tool and ideology. In their post-apartheid call for forgiveness and reconciliation, Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond

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[517] For all his affirming rhetoric, Mbeki's African Renaissance has been critiqued as undergirded by neoliberal policies as well as his denialism of the AIDS/HIV epidemic. See Gillian Hart, "The Provocations of Neoliberalism: Contesting the Nation and Liberation after Apartheid", *Antipode* 40, Issue 4 (Sept. 2008): 678-705.

[518] Leonhard Praeg, *A Report on Ubuntu*, (Pietermaritzburg : University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2014), 11, 15.

[519] Bongmba, "Reflections on Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance," 229.

[520] Hanneke Stuit, *Ubuntu Strategies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016), 7.

Tutu invoked ubuntu as the mode by which South Africa would heal as a nation and form a new unified identity, serving the new democracy as a "model for redefining terms of inclusion in this historically divided country."[521] With the initiation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1995, ubuntu served as its defining philosophy and was featured proffered as the alternative to "victimization" in the seven volumes of the Commission's final reports.[522] As the chairman of the TRC, Archbishop Tutu deployed ubuntu alongside Christian values in a syncretic approach to forgiveness. Rather than drawing on other aspects of ubuntu's communalism, Tutu publicly framed ubuntu as operating in line with Christian religious principles as a call for radical forgiveness. In his 1999 book *No Future without Forgiveness,* Tutu rephrases ubuntu's central aphorism to "what dehumanizes you, inexorably dehumanizes me."[523] Tutu's coupling of ubuntu and the Christian ideal of forgiveness form a distinct syncretism (in the original religious sense of the term) strategically aimed at nation-building within the post-colonial and post-apartheid context. Rather than relying exclusively on Christian rhetoric and ideologies (despite his dual position as an archbishop in the Anglican Church and Chairman of the TRC), Tutu drew on a "traditional African ideal", hybridizing it with popular Christian values to create what Stuit calls a "reinvented tradition."[524] This new syncretic form of ubuntu—framed as "mutual responsibility and human fellowship"[525] as well as a "form of

[521] Hutchinson, *South African Performance and the Archives of Memory,* 137.

[522] *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Vol. 1, (1998), 8, https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/finalreport/Volume%201.pdf .

[523] Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 34-5.

[524] Stuit, *Ubuntu Strategies,* 26.

[525] Stuit, *Ubuntu Strategies,* 25.

relational spirituality that connotes the basic connectedness of all human beings"[526]—functioned as the guiding principle and the performed significance of the TRC. In *Performing South Africa's Truth Commission*, Catherine Cole connects ubuntu to the act of "witnessing" that constituted the TRC:

> Performed witnessing was at the center of the TRC's public enactment, and this aspect of its performance expressed the very essence of ubuntu—the African philosophy that animates the core of South Africa's TRC. The humanity of the victims and perpetrators who appeared before the TRC was affirmed by the presence of other human beings who were in the hall or listening in on radios or watching on their television sets from home.[527]

While Kelly's critique of *Yiimimangaliso* briefly acknowledges how the production reflects the "political and economic policy" of Rainbow Nationhood perpetuated by the post-apartheid South African government, his analysis elides any engagement with ubuntu or its foundational role in the TRC. What Kelly reads in 2012 as a problematically "deracinated" production is rather the direct product of the social, cultural, and political backdrop of the production in 2001.[528] Ubuntu in particular, with its value of common humanity and Mbeki's invocation of a unifying South African identity that supersedes race, forms the central ethos of the production. In this sense, its elision of racial difference is not politically naïve but rather highly politically motivated. A celebration of common humanity through the syncretic aesthetics of post-colonial performance, *Yiimimangaliso's* flattening of racial difference is a strategic, political choice emergent from the particular context of its inception and production six years after end of the apartheid.

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[526] Michael Battle, "A Theology of Community: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 54, issue 2, (April 2000): 178.

[527] Catherine M. Cole, *Performing South Africa's Truth Commission: Stages of Transition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 162.

[528] Kelly, "An Absence of Ghosts," 73.

Following the production's success in the UK, it was remounted in South Africa—this time to an enthusiastic domestic reception. Dornford-May has wryly attributed this turn in South African reception to a lingering need in the country for international recognition and praise following decades as a global parish under the embarrassment of apartheid;

> When we brought it back to South Africa after the London run, it was the exact same show but after the London success, the response was much more positive from the South African press. You know, there's that sense of, "Oh, the British press like it so it must be good." A lot of reviewers then, I think went back and said, "Oh, this has developed tremendously since I first saw it" because they had to cover their tracks. There was a lot of backtracking.[529]

Soon after the incident where President Mbeki joined the cast onstage for the final dance, the South African government granted the company fifteen million rand in funding, a financial windfall for the young ensemble.[530] While Kelly's critiques stem from a growing discourse aimed at troubling multiculturalism (a valuable hermeneutic within Western contexts), it functions to disregard the production's domestic reception in the context of a nation that was rapidly trying to assemble its own multicultural, national identity after nearly half a century of state instituted discrimination. Despite the Eurocentrism of his critique, Kelly's argument necessarily raises the question of how race *did* function within the reception to the production, both abroad and domestically. While Kelly reads the performance as "deracinated" and thus lacking political complexity, I would assert that race played a central role in the production's British reception as spiritually efficacious: its ability to "fill a hole in the soul" is imbricated with the consumption of race through its performance.

Racial Animatedness and Spiritual Efficacy in *Yiimimangaliso*

[529] Mark Dornford-May, Personal interview with the author, April 22, 2020.

[530] Mulkerrins, "It features 40 amateur actors," 18.

Critiques of the racialized reception of South African theatre, like Kelly's, usually center on the exoticism that accompanies the Western consumption of black, non-Western performance. As Veit Erlmann argues in his analysis of the Western reception of South African musical performance, groups like Ladysmith Black Mambazo (first popularized for Western audiences through Paul Simon's 1986 album *Graceland*) are consumed as "unmediated and authentic expression[s] of a mythic African past."[531] As an "African discourse about Africa" drawn from the Zulu *isicathamiya* performance tradition, Ladysmith's songs "represent an attempt to reject and embrace modernity" through a search through performance for "an identity and some kind of rootedness" while emerging from "a deep sense of alienation and from the bitter experience of being part of modernity and being excluded from it."[532] Erlmann goes on to trace the exotified consumption of South African music abroad back to the nineteenth performances of the Zulu Choir in London and America, presenting a longstanding genealogy of racialized performance that continues to the present. Jeanne Colleran also recapitulates the critique of exoticism in terms of the Western reception of black South African theatre (one that she contrasts with the reception to white South African playwrights such as Athol Fugard). In what she terms the "allure of the exotic," Colleran argues that internationally popular South African musicals such as *Sarafina!* flatten the black South African experience by appealing problematically to notions of authenticity: "Black South African theatre is…assumed to communicate the single, unified vantage point of black South Africans as *authoritative* and *authentic*."[533] While such flattening of

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[531] Veit Erlmann, *Music, Modernity, and the Global Imagination: South Africa and the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 200.

[532] Erlmann, *Music, Modernity, and the Global Imagination,* 200.

[533] Jeanne Colleran, "South African Theatre in the United States: the allure of the familiar and the exotic", in *A Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy 1970-1995,* ed. Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 222, 229.

the black South African experience frequently occurs in the Western consumption of black cultural production, I would suggest that *Yiimimangaliso*'s disparate receptions and efficacies (both spiritual and political) manifest in ways beyond the exotification of South African aesthetics. Rather, the racialized reception of *Yiimimangaliso* for both British and South African audiences engages what Sianne Ngai has termed "animatedness" as a phenomenological perceptual practice that performs a distinctly raced notion of "authenticity."

In *Ugly Feelings*, Ngai characterizes "animatedness" as a "minor affect" read onto racialized subjects. She defines animatedness as "the kind of exaggerated emotional expressiveness…[that] seems to function as a marker or racial or ethnic otherness."[534] While Ngai notes that animatedness has been applied to a range of differently racialized subjects, she analyzes its ongoing legacy in particular relation to black subjects. Under the Western gaze, black bodies are attributed with "the affective qualities of liveliness, effusiveness, spontaneity, and zeal [point] to a disturbing racial epistemology, and make these variants of 'animatedness' function as bodily (hence self-evident) signs of the raced subject's naturalness or authenticity."[535] In defining animatedness as an affect rather than an emotion, Ngai explicitly frames her analysis in phenomenological (rather than semiotic) terms. Differentiating affect and emotion in terms of subjectivity and perception, she defines affect as "designating feeling described from an observer's (analyst's) perspective" while emotion refers to "feeling that 'belongs' to the speaker or analysand's 'I'."[536] Affect, in this regard, is a perceptual

[534] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2005), 94.

[535] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings,* 95.

[536] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings,* 25.

phenomenon, one that Brian Massumi has characterized as "unformed and unstructured", thus eliding reduction to the "discursive significations" that define semiotic analysis.[537]

As a racialized affect manifesting as perceptual practice, animatedness invites a phenomenological reading as modeled by scholars of the phenomenology of race. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's canonical account of being hailed as a "Negro", scholars such as Helen Ngo, Sarah Ahmed, and Linda Martín Alcoff have demonstrated how racialization manifests as a preconscious perceptual practice within the visual sphere. Applying Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological formulation of perception, Alcoff argues for his "concept of the habitual body—a default position the body assumes in various commonly experienced circumstances that integrates and unifies our movement" as a useful mode for understanding "how individuals fall into race-conscious habitual postures in cross-racial encounters."[538] For Alcoff, race manifests as a "structure of contemporary perception" that results from "sedimented contextual knowledges" that are "congealed into habit" and activated by the gaze.[539] In this way, visual perception unconsciously accesses learned, racial knowledges:

> This is why race must work through the visible markers on the body, even if those markers are made visible through learned processes. Visible difference, which is materially present even if its meanings are not, can be used to signify or provide purported access to a subjectivity through observable, 'natural' attributes, to provide a window on the interiority of the self.[540]

Aligning with Ngai's articulation of animatedness as signaling expressive "authenticity", Alcoff's phenomenological argument frames race as a visible bodily marker that is perceived as

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[537] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings,* 25.

[538] Linda Martín Alcoff, "Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment," *Radical Philosophy* 95 (May/June 1999): 15-26, 18.

[539] Alcoff, "Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment," 18-21.

[540] Alcoff, "Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment," 24.

providing access to "the interiority of the self", reifying racialized attributes and stereotypes as "natural" or "authentic."

Through the rhetoric of "animatedness", both South African and British reviews of *Yiimimangaliso* testify to the spectatorial perception of such racialized "authenticity." For South African critics, the authentic animation of the performers was disparaged as "amateurish", while for the British press it was lauded as religiously convicting.[541] As previously mentioned, the production drew ample criticism at 2000 South African reception premiere; as Mark Dornford-May recalls, "The reviews in South Africa were appalling…absolutely appalling…one [critic] said it was like a school play…People walked out. People left in droves."[542] While South African critics did not address the cast's race directly in reviews, their feedback converged on a racialized critique of what they saw as the black cast's tendency to "overdramatize the story,"[543] with one particular critic disparaging the acting as "histrionic."[544] This critique was echoed in great detail by reviewer Robert Grieg, who attributed it to the "amateurish performances" of the black performers;

> By "amateurish" I mean they do the obvious things with obvious intonations…The craft that digs beneath the obvious…isn't there. And this is, I suspect, for economic reasons… The characters emote at a level that shows little respect for the story…they are being very dramatic…in the crucifixion scene, all the women wail and yell, when a chilly silence would be more eloquent.[545]

[541] Grieg, "Focus blurred and detail lost in premature debut," 19.

[542] Mark Dornford-May, Personal interview with the author, April 22, 2020.

[543] Phosa, "Holy Cow!" 20.

[544] Shirley Apthorp, "Plans for Spier's Festival have a utopian touch", *Business Day*, Dec. 22, 2000, 4.

[545] Grieg, "Focus blurred and detail lost in premature debut," 19.

Grieg echoes Ngai in his equation of the emotional expressivity of the performers (their "obvious intonations"), reading it as indicative of a lack of artistic craft or training which he attributes to "economic reasons." This phrase—as well as tacit references to "disadvantaged backgrounds"—recurs across many South African reviews to signal the performers' blackness, reinforcing the idea that as black subjects, these artists are in fact not performing but are authentically "overemotional."[546] Grieg's stylistic prescription of a "chilly silence" rather than "dramatic" and "obvious intonations" also belies a staggering ignorance of the Zulu mourning practice of *ukulila*, the tradition of wailing and song in lament after a death.[547] Such critiques derive from a positionality that privileges of the Western hegemony of natural realism as indicative of true "craft." Instead of recognizing the artistic choice for a non-Western, non-naturalist production style, critiques Grieg's reveal a racialized reception of black performance, reading black performers as un-artistically racially animated in their emotional expressivity.

While *Yiimimangaliso's* laudatory reception in the U.K. was tied to its perceived spirituality, the South African response did not read the production as efficacious in terms of rehabilitating the Christian narrative for its domestic audiences. Though racialized through the rhetoric of animatedness, *Yiimimangaliso's* efficacy for its South African spectators operated in political, rather than spiritual, terms. The aforementioned accusations of "Africanization" by audience members reflect the anxiety of the production's elite South African spectators amidst the rupture of apartheid's collapse. While British spectators were disassociated from the specific realities of South African's shifting sense of national identity, South African spectators, already

[546] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings,* 91.

[547] Helaine Selin and Robert M. Rakoff, *Death Across Cultures: Death and Dying in Non-Western Cultures* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 129.

imbricated within the nexus of Mbeki's national policies, betrayed their discomfort with the new political reality of the "African Renaissance." In recounting spectators walking out of the Spier premiere of the production, Mark Dornford-May says:

> Spier is very close to Stellenbosch, which was in many ways the intellectual center of apartheid. At the time, my lighting designer, Mannie Manim[548], said, "You are completely and utterly mad. You are putting forty black actors on a stage in Stellenbosch—you have no idea what you are doing"…I don't think people would walk out now, people would be too ashamed to walk out because of a black actor. But if you want the absolute truth, sadly, I think a lot of people, they just wouldn't have the courage to walk out anymore. I mean, it was 2000. We were five and a half years after the end of apartheid—it was a red rag to a bull.[549]

Here Dornford-May testifies to the politically fraught landscape in which *Yiimimangaliso* was produced; far from being perceived as apolitical, the production functioned as a "red rag to a bull" in the context of the "center of apartheid." The negative reaction of critics and audience alike testifies to the production's politicized reception, one that was either ignored or deemed "politically naïve" for not only Western spectators but also scholars. In the sole scholarly review of the production, Betsey Rudelich Tucker characterized the production as "politically naïve" and "wholly uncritical", presenting an "opportunity passed by" to interrogate "how great religious myths can be appropriated by new adherents for new purposes."[550]Tucker's response encapsulates how Western spectators' perception of the religious themes of the production superseded its politics. In this sense, the negative response by South African critics and

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[548] Renowned producer, director, and lighting designer, Mannie Manim was a founding member of The Company with Barney Simon in 1973. In 1976, he co-founded Johannesburg's Market Theatre, known for its progressive, anti-apartheid productions, and worked closely with Athol Fugard for several decades. See Anne Fuchs, "Mannie Manim, the Performing Arts Councils and the commercial scene in Johannesburg in 1974," in *Playing the Market: The Market Theatre, Johannesburg*, ed. Anne Fuchs (New York: Rodopi, 2002), 3-15.

[549] Carla Neuss, "South Africa the Future of Post-Apartheid Theatre: An Interview with Mark Dornford-May, Artistic Director of Isango Ensemble," Theatre Journal 72, no. 4 (Dec. 2020): E-14.

[550] Betsy Rudelich Tucker, "*Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries* (review)," *Theatre Journal* 54, no. 2 (May 2002), 304-305.

audiences illuminates how politically efficacious *Yiimimangaliso* truly was in reflecting a nation in a state of rupture in relation to its own oppressive history and its burgeoning new multicultural, national identity.

The British reception to *Yiimimangaliso* stands in stark contrast with the South African response. British reviewers acclaimed many of the same animated qualities disparaged by the South African, ultimately lauding the show's spiritual efficacy in similar terms of racial animatedness. In addition to Charles Spencer's effusive praise ("one of the most moving, beautiful, human and courageous shows you will ever see"[551]), critics across the British press repeatedly turned to the rhetoric of animatedness to articulate their praise. Terms like "vital", "raw", and "zest" proliferated alongside numerous references across multiple publications to the cast's "extraordinary raw energy"[552], "infectious energy,"[553]and "fresh energy."[554] Drawing on connotation of "animation" as signaling energetic movement or motion, Ngai notes that "energy" acquires specifically racialized overtones in regards to the "metamorphic potential of the animated body" which is "readable as signs of the body's utter subjection to power, confirming its vulnerability to external manipulation and control."[555] Such energy—reinforced through the term "vital"[556]— highlights the corporeality of the body, exaggerated to the ends of "the body-made-spectacle" and echoing a long lineage of the black body as a site of spectacular

[551] Spencer, "Divine, Defiant, and Dazzling."

[552] Kristy Lang, "The Cape Crusaders," *The Sunday Times*, May 27, 2001, 18.

[553] "South Africa's Champion of Culture," 30.

[554] Henry Hitchings, "Magical Mysteries Tour," *Evening Standard*, September 1, 2009, 30.

[555] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings,* 101.

[556] See reviews by Spencer, Lang, and "South Africa's Champion of Culture."

performance for the white gaze. The repeated adjectives of "raw",[557] "fresh"[558], "pungent"[559] and "zest"[560] (and in one review, "zingily"[561]) invoke the sensory language of taste and gustation, further contributing to a sense of spectatorial consumption of the performance. In his *Evening Standard* review, Henry Hitchings refers to *Yiimimangaliso* as a medieval mystery cycle "with a zestily contemporary South African tang," exemplifying the connotation of the gustatory consumption of South African aesthetics as (in his terms) a "sensory feast" served to British spectators. [562] The overt language of bodily consumption, in addition to the qualities of energy and spectacle, recur throughout the British reviews, with the repeated usage of "spectacular"[563], "intoxicating"[564], "unabashed"[565], "exuberance"[566], and "passion"[567] demonstrating a racialized reception of "animatedness" performed for the palette of predominantly white British audiences.[568]

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[557] See Julie Carpenter, "The Mysteries – Garrick Theatre, London*" London Express,* Sept. 18, 2009 https://www.express.co.uk/entertainment/theatre/128075/The-Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso-Garrick-Theatre-London as well as reviews by Lang and Mulkerrins.

[558] See reviews by Nightingale, Hitchings' "Magical Mysteries Tour", and Sarah Hemming, "The Mysteries, Garrick Theatre, London," *The Financial Times*, Sept. 18, 2009, https://www.ft.com/content/7092ae20-a3e1-11de-9fed-00144feabdc0.

[559] Hitchings, "An Exhilarating Sensory Feast," 37.

[560] Hitchings, "An Exhilarating Sensory Feast," 37.

[561] Hitchings "Magical Mysteries Tour," 30.

[562] Hitchings, "An Exhilarating Sensory Feast," 37.

[563] Hitchings, "Magical Mystery Tour," 30.

[564] Rees, "An Evening with God and the Devil," 30.

[565] Nightingale, "West End erupts with joy at gift from Africa," 21.

[566] Nightingale, "West End erupts with joy at gift from Africa," 21.

[567] Lang, "The Cape Crusaders," 18.

[568] As in the US, there is a robust discourse in contemporary Britain on the racial demographics of theatre institutions and audiences. To date, the majority of British theatregoers are white and upper-middle class. See

It is this racialized consumption of animatedness that underpinned what spectators perceived as the production's spiritual authenticity and, ultimately, its efficacy. As Alcoff suggests and Ngai echoes, reading a racialized subject's "naturalness or authenticity" serves to reinforce "the notion of race as a truth located, quite naturally, in the always obvious, highly visible body."[569] This sense of "authenticity" was especially invoked by critics' use of the rhetoric of "joy." Writing for *The Guardian*, Michael Billington deemed the production to be "not just a well-drilled company but an expression of communal joy."[570] In contrasting the "expression of communal joy" against the mechanized rhetoric of a "well-drilled company", Billington not only implicitly attributes an authenticity to such "joy" but also linguistically distances the production from theatrical representation itself; if a "well-drilled company" *represents* joy on stage, Isango *expresses and embodies* joy. Charles Spencer similarly describes the production not only as "full of joy" but as "heartfelt", suggesting a blurred distinction between representation and authenticity.[571] For Spencer, *Yiimimangaliso* is not "joyful", in a more typical, descriptive use of an adjective; rather the production is "full of joy" in that it holds "joy" within it. In other words, joy is not represented by the production but is *in* the performers themselves. Similarly, the term "heartfelt" revisits the notion of authenticity, implying a sincerity that is more "real" that representational. This notion of performed emotion as sincere and thus

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Dominic Cavendish, "Are Theatre Audiences Too White?" *The Telegraph*, Dec. 9, 2014, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/11283846/theatre-audiences-too-white-janet-suzman.html.

[569] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings,* 95.

[570] Michael Billington, "The Mysteries," *The Guardian*, September 16, 2009, Accessed May 5, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/sep/16/the-mysteries-review.

[571] Spencer, "Divine, Defiant, and Dazzling."

authentic was repeated by Billington in his 2009 review of the production's second UK tour. In attempting to explain the show's powerful ability to "raise the spirits," Billington writes:

> Watching the thirty-three actors in this all-black company, I felt that they were telling the story out of inner conviction…I felt the cast were genuinely rejoicing and believed in the possibility of miracles. However much militant rationalists may deplore this, the sincerity of their faith communicates itself to the audience.[572]

Through his rhetoric of "genuineness" and "sincerity", Billington asserts that *Yiimimangaliso* authentically embodies, rather than represents, the personal religious faith of its performers. Other reviewers echoed this equation of authenticity with the actors' personal faith, with one American critic referring to Isango as "a company of true believers."[573] This recurrent attribution of faith is striking, not only across its Western repetition, but because it is completely assumed. At no point in the show's run did the creative or marketing teams indicate anything about the personal faith of the performers, the company itself has no religious affiliation, nor have any of its members spoken publicly on the subject of their personal faith. Yet despite this, several reviewers all made the same assumptive assertion of the "true conviction" of *Yiimimangaliso's* performers: why?

In line with the aforementioned theorists of phenomenology of race, I posit that *Yiimimangaliso's* performers were read as "natural" or "authentic" by Western audiences through the lens of their "animatedness", which functioned to transmute their racialized "exaggerated expressivity" into proof of their "inner conviction." For these "animated" performers, "joy" cannot by representational: it must be "genuine" and "natural" in its "energy",

[572] Billington, "The Mysteries," 2009.

[573] Marilyn Stasio, "Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries", *Variety*, Nov. 22, 2004, https://variety.com/2004/legit/reviews/yiimimangaliso-the-mysteries-1200529374/.

"zest", and "passion." In this sense, *Yiimimangaliso's* black cast was read racially as non-representational—not performing spiritual belief but enacting it "authentically." Through the white, Western gaze, the performance itself was perceived as and became an enactment of faith, one that fills "a hole in the soul" and gives "Christianity an audience" through its performers' animatedness, whose racialized perception construed sincerity, authenticity, and a presumed spiritual conviction.

The perception of animatedness as connoting "true conviction" in the performers ultimately produced *Yiimimangaliso's* spiritual efficacy for its British spectators through its invocation of the medieval imaginary. Tucker makes this connection explicit, noting the "thoroughly joyful commitment of the multi-colored cast to the text" and their "refreshing faithfulness to the spirit of…Chester."[574] While she stops short of assigning religious belief of the performers, Tucker reads *Yiimimangaliso's* "joyful", "multi-colored" cast somehow aligned with the original devotional and doctrinal purposes of the medieval Chester text itself—what she terms the "spirit of Chester." Tucker's language reveals the racialized perception of *Yiimimangaliso's* performers and their "authentic" performance of faith as reactivating the spiritual efficacy of the text that is truly "medieval."

By returning to the pervasive narrative that associates black African bodies and the Middle Ages as both distinctly unmodern, the racialization of the production's spiritual efficacy is revealed to transact through an underlying yet persistent conception of the Other, both temporally and geographically. It is the racialized Otherness of *Yiimimangaliso's* cast that is read through a modern, secular, Western gaze as recapitulating a "sincere" and "authentic" sense of religiosity, spirituality, and biblical orthodoxy that defines the "spirit of Chester." For British

[574] Tucker, "*Yiimimangaliso: The Mysteries* (review)," 304-5.

audiences, the phenomenological experience of watching *Yiimimangaliso* re-enacted the spiritual efficacy of the Chester Cycle, an efficacy that has otherwise been absent from what Katie Normington and Sarah Beckwith have diagnosed as the secular nostalgia that characterizes contemporary British revivals of medieval mystery plays. Rather than functioning as "mournful reminders of an Edenic 'green and pleasant land'"[575] or recasting the Christian narrative as centered on the secular values of "altruism" and "community"[576], *Yiimimangaliso's* racial alterity perceptually enacts the "unmodern" of Christian devotion, belief, and faith, causing spectators to read the performance as "authentically" religious and spiritually transformative as the original medieval productions themselves. This association between the African Other and the medieval unmodern is explicitly revealed through the commentary of reviewers who juxtaposed *Yiimimangaliso's* "transcendent faith" against modernity and its assumed association with secularism. Critics marveled at the productions ability to "resonate with a secular audience"[577], "communicate powerfully to a secular audience"[578], and create an "excitement that is at once political, dramatic, and spiritual."[579] Billington further stated that "even in a secularized society like ours" the production called out a "residual religious instinct"[580] while Jane Mulkerrins declared the production "the perfect antidote for the cynicism of modern British life."[581] Here the recurring presumed association of secularity and modernity betrays the

[575] Kelly, "An Absence of Ghosts," 74.

[576] Normington, *Modern Mysteries,* 80.

[577] Hitchings, "Magical Mysteries Tour," 30.

[578] Hitchings, "An Exhilarating Sensory Feast," 37.

[579] "South Africa's Champion of Culture," 30.

[580] Billington, "The Mysteries", 2001, 22.

[581] Mulkerrins, "It features 40 amateur actors," 18.

racialized reading of *Yiimimangaliso* and its black cast as "unmodern" in their assumed spirituality.

Through the racialized perception of "authenticity" in terms of faith and belief in the Chester text's Christian message, *Yiimimangaliso's* spiritual efficacy and capacity for affective transformation in its audience demonstrates how the production's medievalism was uniquely rendered through the phenomenology of race as activated by the white Western gaze. In staging *ubuntu* through the medievalist lens of the "mystery", *Yiimimangaliso's* efficacy transcribed racial animatedness to a sacred state of solidarity, one that was at once "African" and "unmodern." In this way, *Yiimimangaliso* as a form of post-colonial, syncretic, medievalist performance was perceived as "authentically" enacting the medieval imaginary for Western audiences, yielding a more spiritually affective transformation in spectators than perhaps any other recent performance of the Chester Mystery Cycle.

Epilogue

Having traversed the twentieth century's beginnings to its close, I conclude by gesturing to the ongoing legacy of the medieval imaginary and the mystery in the present. In fall 2019, rapper and producer Kanye West, in collaboration with Italian performance artist Vanessa Beecroft, premiered his medievalist opera *Nebuchadnezzar* at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles. A few months later, West unveiled a subsequent opera, *Mary*, at Art Basel Miami and later Lincoln Center. Since debuting his first album in 2004, West has had a meteoric rise in the public eye; famous for his producing prowess as a rap and hip-hop artist, his renown only grew with his marriage to Kim Kardashian, his turn towards fashion design, and his repeated runs for the U.S. presidency. West functions within the American, and global, media landscape as a fraught icon. Over his nearly twenty year career, he has jointly inspired and shocked; tabloid publications regularly update his list of most "outrageous moments" with canonical incidents including his declaration during a live broadcast for Hurricane Katrina relief efforts that "George Bush doesn't care about black people",[582] his 2009 interruption of Taylor Swift's acceptance of a music award ("I'mma let you finish…"),[583] and his more recent statement that he may legally change his name to "Christian Genius Billionaire Kanye West."[584] West represents a splintering type of fame, at once lauded for his musical acumen and pilloried for his self-aggrandizement. In early 2019, he was photographed wearing a Trump campaign MAGA hat, an incident that led to his brief "cancellation"; by the end of the year, he had renounced Trump and re-emerged as a self-

[582] "Kanye West's Most Outrageous Moments", *US Weekly*, Feb. 19, 2021, Date accessed: 3/2/21 https://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/pictures/kanye-wests-most-outrageous-moments-201366/.

[583] "Kanye West's Most Outrageous Moments."

[584] Elizabeth Wolfe and Saeed Ahmed, "Kanye says he may change his name to Christian Genius Billionaire Kanye West. Then again, he says a lot of things" *CNN*, Nov. 8, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/08/entertainment/kanye-west-genius-billionaire-trnd/index.html.

described born-again Christian.[585] His medievalist operas, based on the biblical accounts of their titular characters, emerged soon after his highly publicized turn to Christianity.

Featuring his Sunday Service choir, West's *Nebuchadnezzar* and *Mary* showcased the "mystery" to a level of publicity absent in the case studies I have already considered in this project. With casts of predominantly black performers, the pieces were liturgical in their use of music—hymns and gospel songs—and scripture, often featuring a voice over narrative read by West himself from his personal bible. In an echo of the gilded costumes recorded in accounts of the original Middle English mystery cycles, the casts of both productions were clothed in shimmering drapery, and in the case of *Mary*, complete with silver body paint that echoes Afrofuturist aesthetics while suggesting a post-racial divinity.

West's *Nebuchadnezzar* stages the story of the Babylonian king's descent into madness and ultimate recognition of God's sovereignty as told in the book of Daniel. Its narrative reapproaches the same source material as thirteenth century liturgical drama, *Ludus Danielis [The Play of Daniel]* but centers on the adjacent narrative of an earthly ruler brought low and then redeemed by God. Critics generally deemed the production unsuccessful and under rehearsed, though that did not prevent tickets from selling out. Music and opera critiques noted the pervasive use of Latin choral masses and deemed that it was more aptly described as an oratorio rather than an opera.[586] By the time *Mary* premiered one month later, critics were more interested in trying to define the genre of West's turn to Christian performance than analyzing

[585] Carl Lamarre, "How in 2019 Kanye West Found God—And Redeemed Himself," *Billboard*, December 20, 2019, Accessed May 5, 2021. https://www.billboard.com/articles/events/year-in-music-2019/8546432/kanye-west-found-god-2019.

[586] Zachary Woolfe, Woolfe, Zachary, "Kanye West Is Operatic. His Opera Isn't," *The New York Times*, Nov. 25, 2019, Accessed May 5, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/25/arts/music/kanye-west-nebuchadnezzar-opera.html.

the production itself: "Was this a Kanye concert? A traditional opera? Was screaming 'We love you Kanye' in the darkness appropriate?"[587] Ultimately deemed a "pageant" by some,[588] Mary was most lauded by Christian publications that deemed it "not just theatre" but "real deal liturgical ministry."[589] As a liturgical drama, *Mary* draws directly on the Nativity play tradition, tracing the Annunciation to Christ's birth. Like *Nebuchadnezzar*, its performances quickly sold out.

West's turn to the medieval extends the legacy of the mystery cycle tradition into the present. Like *Mysterium*, *Bariona*, and *Yiimimangaliso*, it presents another example of the emergence of the "mystery" in response to rupture. With the unexpected ascendence of Donald Trump to the American presidency in 2016, the United States experienced new levels of social unrest, partisan politics, white supremacy, and violent culture wars. Black subjectivity and oppression once again became a central and divisive discourse within American society, with the 2017 Charlottesville massacre, the 2020 murder of George Floyd, and the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement signaling another turn towards the question of systemic racism and civil rights in America. As a black American artist and a sporadic Trump supporter, West embodies racial and political tensions that at present seem unreconcilable. The efficacious aims of his mysteries are also transparent, with West himself quoting scripture and declaring the divinity of Christ in both performances. West is not the only award-winning contemporary rapper who is integrating Christian faith into his musical output; Kendrick Lamar and Chance the Rapper (the

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[587] Nancy Coleman, "Kanye West Gives Lincoln Center an Opera for Christmas," *The New York Times*, Dec. 23, 2019, Accessed May 5, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/23/arts/music/kanye-west-opera-mary.html.

[588] Ann Binlot, "Inside Kanye West's Miami Christmas Pageant, Mary" *Vanity Fair*, Dec. 9, 2019, Accessed May 5, 2021, https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2019/12/kanye-west-mary-opera.

[589] N.D. Smith, "The New Brown Face of Evangelism: A Review of Kanye West's Opera, Mary", *The Source*, Dec. 23, 2019, Accessed May 4, 2021, https://thesource.com/2019/12/23/review-of-kanye-west-opera-mary/.

latter to whom West attributes his born-again conversion) are also vocal about their Christianity. With Christian affiliation declining amongst white Americans over recent decades, black Americans now present that largest racial demographic that identifies as Christian, signaling the need for a reappraisal of American Christianity as embodied and enacted by minoritarian subjects.[590] In staging a reclamation of medieval religious drama for black subjects during a time of national and cultural rupture, West's operas restage the medievalist impulse towards spiritual transformation that this project has traced across the twentieth century and reclaims the mystery towards devotional practice.

So, what do we turn to when we (re)turn to the mystery? From its etymological roots in sacred ritual, the mystery constitutes a post-medieval performance modality that models a certain type of transformative efficacy. Rather than the secular modes of participatory or social justice theatre delineated by Fischer-Lichte and Dolan, the mystery invokes a form of spiritual transformation presented in the trappings of medieval Christian drama, interpellating spectators into a state of transcendent solidarity. This interpellation functions in an Althusserian sense, seeking to transform subjects by hailing them into a spiritualized, communal identity underpinned by the medieval imaginary. For Scriabin's *Mysterium*, this interpellation sought to reconstitute a pre-secular state of spiritual and communal unity—of *sobornost'*—that not only functioned through a religious medieval imaginary but that strove to reorient the relation between Matter and Spirit itself. In *Bariona*, its carceral audience was interpellated as liberated subjects through its iteration of the Nativity that simultaneously invoked medievalist French nationalism and transmuted the objectifying gaze into the means for intersubjective unity. For

[590] The Pew Research Center reports that currently 79% of Black Americans identify as Christian/Catholic, compared to 70% of White Americans, 77% of Latinx Americans, and 34% of Asian/Pacific Islander-Americans. Accessed May 5, 2021, https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/racial-and-ethnic-composition/asian/.

Yiimimangaliso, the mystery served to hail a new South African national identity through the syncretization of the Christian narrative and the indigenous value of *ubuntu*, reimagining a pre-colonial past for the purposes of a post-colonial future. All three of the case studies emerged in relation to different moments of rupture; while *Mysterium* anticipated the impending 1917 Russian Revolution, *Bariona* emerged almost concurrently with French defeat and German occupation during World War II, while *Yiimimangaliso* manifested during the denouement of apartheid's collapse. These varying temporal relations to rupture illuminate the mystery's elasticity as a flexible theatrical frame that enacts its efficacy at different points during moments of historical change. The mystery in this way can precede, succeed, or even accompany rupture itself, leveraging its spiritually didactic legacy towards enacting solidarity in the face of political, social, and cultural uncertainty.

Across each case study, efficacy emerges in performance through phenomenological methods aimed at interpellating spectators into a transcendent state of collective solidarity. Their respective efficacies can be condensed into the following formulation wherein spectating subjects are transformed through the phenomenologies of the performance encounter into localized and indigenous ideals of solidarity: *Mysterium's* affective atmosphere, enacted through its multi-sensory material aesthetics, aimed to collapse matter and spirit into an apocalyptic conflagration that would yield sobornost'. In disrupting the carceral gaze of surveillance, *Bariona* liberated spectators into a state of intersubjective unity. Through its syncretic aesthetics, *Yiimimangaliso* staged an experience of ubuntu that was activated by perceptual practice of racial animatedness. In all three performances, the ideal for solidarity is imagined as medieval—a temporal "before" that has been lost with modernity and that functions to invoke a collective state of transcendent spirituality informed by the Christian, biblical narrative. From their contexts

of political and social rupture, these theatre events demonstrate that when transformative efficacy is the envisioned aim, the medieval mystery provides the means within performance. The mystery functions to collapse the binaries between the political and spiritual, secular and sacred, reconstituting them as a dialectic. Transformation itself is elevated to a spiritual level within performance, returning these modern, transnational performance to the religious theatre of the past in their vision for efficacy. Even scholars like Jill Dolan recourse to the language of the sacred to describe visions for secular, political efficacy, to the extent that she has defended her utopian performatives as "spiritual" but not "religious."[591] The modern mysteries I have considered trouble that colloquial distinction that seeks to dichotomize public and private spheres, spiritual and religious impetuses. Rather these mysteries show that transformative efficacy—and the longstanding attempts of theatre makers to conjure it through performance—finds recourse in the "sacred rites" of the mystery as medievalist religious drama. As Donnalee Dox states: " 'Performance' might be reimagined as a permeable, vibrating membrane between people's internal sense of spirit and the materiality of culture…in this way, spirituality constructs performance."[592] Ultimately, when we seek efficacies that transform through performance, we seek a change that is both individual and collective, internal and external—one that reconstitutes us both as subjects and as societies. Perhaps such aims can only be deemed, in the last analysis, spiritual.

[591] Dolan, *Utopia in Performance,* 135.

[592] Dox, *Reckoning with Spirit in the Paradigm of Performance,* 16-17.

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