

Performance Research

A Journal of the Performing Arts

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprs20>

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To cite this article: Cormac Power (2023) 'Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood', *Performance Research*, 28:1, 55-61, DOI: [10.1080/13528165.2023.2222356](https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2023.2222356)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2023.2222356>



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Published online: 26 Oct 2023.



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Real presence and personhood in *Midnight Mass* and *Lips of Thomas*

C O R M A C P O W E R

In this essay, I will reflect upon the representation of the Christian Eucharistic rite in two highly contrasting works, the Netflix miniseries *Midnight Mass* (2021) and Marina Abramović's iconic work *Lips of Thomas* (1975/2005). Within these works, blood plays a central role both iconically as a potent visual presence, as well as indexically in order to point subversively towards the ritual of the mass. There is a degree of ambivalence evident in these works, in that neither appears to offer us a straightforward critique of doctrine or of religious belief, but instead they appear to engage in a kind of distanced fascination with the Eucharist, and especially the doctrine of real presence. For many Christian denominations, the real presence of Christ in Eucharist constitutes the most important element of communal practice. In part, the Eucharist memorializes the Last Supper, in which Jesus Christ shared bread and wine with his disciples on the night before his arrest and subsequent crucifixion. Taking bread, he gave pieces to his disciples, telling them that the bread was his body. He then took the cup of wine and passed it around, saying, according to Luke's Gospel, 'This chalice which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood' (Luke 22: 20). He then enjoined the disciples to continue this practice in his memory. Based upon this and other scriptural foundations, the Catholic Church defines the Eucharist as a sacrament, holding that during the mass the bread and wine is transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ, and that Christ becomes fully present in the bread and wine offered to the congregation.¹ In taking the sacrament, the congregation thereby ingest the body and blood of Christ.

This essay explores how the representation of blood in these works reflects both a subversive and an engaged reflection on the notion of real presence. Real presence is perhaps a

somewhat disconcerting term. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains the term in the following way:

This presence is called 'real' – by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as if they could not be 'real' too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a substantial presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present. (CCC 1374)

All Christians would accept the idea that Christ is in some sense 'available' to a given individual at all times. Indeed, Saint Paul went so far as to proclaim that, for the believer, 'it is not I who live, but Christ lives in me' (Galatians 2: 20). The Eucharist, however, is seen as a privileged moment in that Christ becomes present, not in a merely 'spiritual' sense but 'really' present, as the Catechism states, 'wholly and entirely'. The Eucharistic rite, as a kind of theatre, is re-enacted in both *Midnight Mass* and, in a more indirect way, *Lips of Thomas*. Both point to the paradoxical way in which blood features in the Eucharist, signifying both death (of Jesus of Nazareth on the cross) and eternal life (as promised to those who believe). In developing an analysis of the ways in which blood features in these works, I will propose that the paradoxical status of blood in *Midnight Mass* and *Lips of Thomas* is resolved by the concept of 'personhood', as defined by feminist theologian Catherine LaCugna (1991). While discourse around concepts such as subject, body, self, identity, character and persona are well established within the wider field performance and performance studies, this essay will highlight the distinct concept of 'personhood'. In doing so, I argue for the more general notion that theological and liturgical concepts can overlap with and productively inform our understanding of secular performance practices.

Created by American horror film maker Mike

¹ At the Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century, the real presence was defined in clear opposition to the notion of symbol, with statements such as: 'If any one shall say, that, in the sacred and holy sacrament of the Eucharist, the substance of the bread and wine remains conjointly with the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and shall deny that wonderful and singular conversion of the whole substance of the bread into the Body, and of the whole substance of the wine into the Blood, the species only of the bread and wine remaining, which conversion indeed the Catholic Church most aptly calls Transubstantiation; let him be anathema' (Session 13, Canon ii).

Flanagan, whose credits include the popular horror miniseries *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018), *Midnight Mass* is located amidst the isolated Catholic community of fictional Crocket Island. The islanders eagerly await the return of Monsignor John Pruitt, an ageing priest who has served the island for many years, from his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Rather than Monsignor Pruitt, however, it is a certain Father Paul Hill (Hamish Linklater) who arrives by ferry from the mainland in his place, carrying with him a mysterious wooden chest. The islanders do not realize that Father Hill is not who he claims to be. During his pilgrimage, Monsignor Pruitt visited a cave in which he encountered a demonic creature who attacked and killed him. In the cave, however, Pruitt 'resurrected' into a decades' younger version of himself. Rejuvenated, Pruitt returns to the island under the guise of Father Paul Hill, with the 'angel' from the cave secreted inside the wooden chest. With the aid of the angel, his mission is now to bring 'eternal life' to the faithful of the island by ministering communion wine infected by the blood from the angel; this contagion will reduce almost all on the island to the status of zombie-vampires.

In the unfolding of the story, it is the Catholic mass, and especially the Eucharistic rite, portrayed in remarkable detail, which becomes pivotal. In the culminating mass at midnight on Easter morning, a packed congregation is presented with the 'angel', a monstrous winged figure, who walks to the altar. All are forced, some against their will, to drink the angel's death-inducing poisoned blood, only to be resurrected as vampires who turn on one another and those on the island who have stayed away from the church. As morning breaks, the island's vampire population burn and disintegrate in the dawning sun as the island's people, its church and its town go up in flames. As the island burns, the scene is watched by two teenagers, Leeza and Warren, who have managed to escape to safety by boat.

The series has elicited generally favourable reviews from both professed believers and religious sceptics, with the former finding an often sensitive and theologically astute analysis of evil as a corruption of fundamental goodness,

while sceptics and the anti-religious are given grist to their mill in the depiction of faith as corruptible, and the faithful as fundamentally misguided. Creator and director Mike Flanagan received a Catholic upbringing, serving as an altar boy for twelve years from his childhood into adolescence, but subsequently he became a convinced atheist. Flanagan's highly personal creation is far from evangelistic, but is rather made from a position of distanced fascination, revolving especially around the notion that Christ's body and blood are consumed within the mass. As Flanagan explains:

The thing about Catholicism isn't that the bread and wine represent the body and blood of Christ or are a stand-in for the body and blood of Jesus, it's that they physically transform into flesh and blood supernaturally on the altar. And that is how you achieve eternal life. The fact that this hasn't been explicitly linked to vampirism surprises me. You're dealing with a mythology that is steeped in blood ritual and resurrection. (Mike Flanagan cited in Romano 2021)

There are two things to note in the above statement. First, it is apt to recognize that, in fact, gothic literature generally, and the vampire figure in particular, has long been associated with subversions of the Eucharist, and to Protestant anxieties about Catholicism more generally (see, for example, Mulvey-Roberts 2016). The most famous vampire, Dracula, created by Irish Protestant Bram Stoker in his eponymous novel, seeks a kind of anti-Eucharistic mode of life by drinking the blood of innocent victims in order to perpetuate an eternal demonic existence. What Flanagan is clear on is that the Eucharist is not intended to be understood as symbol ('a stand-in for the body and blood of Christ') but as real presence through, in Flanagan's terms, supernatural transformation. This is not an easy idea to accept, even for Catholics themselves. A major survey undertaken in 2019 revealed that only one third of Catholics in America accord with the Church's teaching on real presence, with some 69 per cent preferring to see the Eucharist as a symbol, with the majority of that 69 per cent being non-regular attenders of the mass (see Smith 2019). Real presence, if taken seriously, would surely fill the pews of many an empty church.

In Episode Two of *Midnight Mass* (Book II:

Psalms) the question of belief in real presence is explored in ways both direct and indirect. This episode features no less than four enactments of the mass, culminating with what appears to be a divine miracle. Leeza sits near the front of the congregation in her wheelchair, waiting to take the host from Father Hill. The priest, however, as he picks up the host, appears to reach a decision. Quietly but firmly, Father Hill, remaining standing where he is at the foot of the altar, intones to Leeza 'Body of Christ'. Leeza appears confused while her parents exchange a glance. Leeza moves her wheelchair towards Father Hill. The priest steps back up onto the altar and turns once again to Leeza. There are objections from her parents ('Father, what are you doing?') and looks of consternation from the congregation; but Father Hill demands of Leeza, 'C'mon! Body of Christ.' At this point the character Erin steps up and says, 'No, stop it. That's cruel.' Leeza's parents are on their feet. 'What is wrong with you?' (Mrs Scarborough); 'If this is a joke Father, it's not funny' (Mr Scarborough). We hear gasps as Leeza slowly but determinedly gets up from her chair. No-one seems more shocked than Leeza herself. Father Hill repeats, 'Body of Christ', and we see a close-up of Leeza responding 'Amen' and receiving the Eucharist. The screen blanks to signify the end of the episode.

This moment is the culmination of an episode that offers a reflection on real presence, its power and mystery, its radicality and its dangers. The unfathomable event of Leeza taking to her feet is wrapped up within the moment of transubstantiation; the 'visible' miracle of Leeza's walk coincides with the invisible miracle of the bread and wine becoming the body and blood of Christ. The exclamations of incredulity and the sense that this must be 'a joke' serve also to direct our attention to the great mysteries at play at the centre of the mass, which are premised on the notion of the real presence. Were the bread and wine merely 'symbolic' there would be very little objectionable illogicality that might provoke amazement, disbelief and scepticism. In like terms, had the priest merely expected Leeza to move her wheelchair towards where he stood, which she initially seemed to understand his intention to be, then this might

have been understood as a 'symbolic' act of moving towards the host to meet Christ. The central claim made within the enactment of each and every mass is that a miracle is performed before and with the assent of a gathering. Here, this miracle is given a kind of visible expression, and the moment of Leeza's walking is received as joyful, but moreover as perplexing and disturbing, and Flanagan leaves the viewer with a deep sense of unease as the credits roll.

In the context of the series this deep sense of unease is well justified. Leeza walks, sight is returning to the blind, the elderly are finding a renewed physical vigour, yet all the while the religious community are swallowing communion wine that has been contaminated with demonic blood. The islanders do not know it, but as they drink from the communal cup, they are slowly surrendering themselves to the lordship of the demonic vampiric angel. By the end of the series, all on the island, apart from Leeza and her friend Warren, have become reduced from recognizable characters to a mob of blood-seeking vampires, stalking the island in the manner of a zombie horde, attacking and assimilating those who have stayed away from the church and the contaminated communion wine. The transubstantiation of wine into blood becomes subverted from the promise of eternal life in freedom and fellowship with God to the medium by which the islanders endure a kind of living death. The Pauline notion that the self dies so that Christ can live becomes hideously transfigured into an apocalyptic scene in which a community loses its basic humanity, and its people all trace of their identity. As the island and its inhabitants burn at the end of the series, real presence and the ritual of communing with the person of Christ has given way to a chasmic absence and the annihilation of personhood as such.

If *Midnight Mass* as a drama explores and subverts the logic of real presence through the means of fictive presentation within a popular cultural framework, then let us now turn our attention to a very different form of performance in which the Eucharistic rite is subversively referenced in a more directly experiential way. Marina Abramović's much discussed work *Lips of Thomas* (1975) is an extreme example of body

art while also overtly referencing aspects of Christianity through its iconography. In form, context and spectatorial demand, this work is possibly about as far removed from a popular contemporary Netflix series as it is possible to get. Yet, while *Midnight Mass* trades on historical Gothic blood/vampire motifs for its subversions of Catholicism in particular, Abramović's work addresses Eucharistic sacrifice within a more contemporary artistic framework in which the body, and especially the body's capacity to bleed, is foregrounded. However, I will suggest that Abramović's work offers us not an apocalyptic inversion of the Eucharist, but rather invites us to think deeply about the interconnection between real presence and personhood.

Like Flanagan, Abramović experienced religious formation as a child, her early years being spent with her devoutly Christian grandmother. Her grandmother's brother-in-law had even become the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church in Yugoslavia. Indeed, there is, in Abramović's memoirs, a fondness in her recollection of these years:

My grandmother was very religious, and her entire life revolved around the church. At six o'clock every morning, when the sun would rise, she'd light a candle to pray. And at six in the evening she'd light another candle to pray again. I went to church with her every day until I was six and I learned about all the different saints. Her house was always filled with the smell of frankincense and freshly roasted coffee ... I felt a deep sense of peace in her house. (Abramović 2016: 11)

Both Flanagan and Abramović also came to reject that religious formation as adults and yet retain an intense interest in Christian ritual motifs as well as wider questions raised by religion.² As many commentators have noted, the title of the work itself carries a clear allusion to the Christian tradition. As expounded in the Gospel of John (20: 24–9), to allay Thomas's scepticism as to the reality of the resurrection, Jesus appears to him in the presence of the other apostles, displays his wounds from the crucifixion and invites Thomas to put his hands into the wound on his side. On doing so, Thomas utters the affirmation, 'My Lord and my God!' (John 20: 28). In a kind of precursor to the Eucharist, Thomas the apostle wrestles with comprehending the mysterious 'real presence'

of Christ in the aftermath of the death of Jesus of Nazareth. The allusion to Thomas resonates strikingly with the invitation Abramović offers the audience in asking them to consider her own wounding and bodily harm within the performance. Mary Richards offers a succinct overview of this work:

In Abramović's performance, the audience witness the reality of her wounds. The performance moves through a number of stages. In the first, Abramović sits and eats a kilo of honey, before going on to drink a litre of red wine [that] can also be interpreted in terms of Christian Communion as the body and blood of Christ. The crystal glass from which Abramović drank is broken by her hand before she takes a razor blade to her stomach to cut a five pointed star ... However, Abramović did not stop there; she took a whip and whipped herself until she could no longer feel. At this point, a cruciform ice bed, already laid out on stage, became Abramović's resting place. The heat from the radiator on her now supine form caused the blood from her wounds to flow. It was only when audience members, worried by extended period of time she remained on the ice, came and removed the ice from her that the performance ended. (Richards 2009: 12)

For Erika Fischer-Lichte, Abramović's *Lips of Thomas* amounts to a pivotal moment in the history of performance that, by challenging established ideas about spectatorship and representation, serves to 'plunge the audience into a crisis' of interpretation, due to the radical reworking of existing 'norms and rules of art and everyday life' (2008: 12). Fischer-Lichte turns to religious ritual to locate a cultural context in which such practices (especially bloodletting) can be rendered comprehensible, noting, 'Voluntary self-flagellation – physical abuse that aims at spiritual transformation – is recognised as a penance practice by the Catholic Church even today' (14). For Fischer-Lichte, what Abramović achieved was not so much her own spiritual transformation, but a transformation among spectators who experienced 'sensations ... ranging from awe, shock, horror, disgust, nausea, or vertigo, to fascination, curiosity, sympathy or agony which stirred them to actions' (17).

While offering a convincing context for the reception and seismic nature of this work, Fischer-Lichte's reading of Abramović's *Lips of Thomas* tends to emphasize the foregrounding of negation, absence and lack, which differs

² Abramović professes to believe in an 'undestroyable energy' as the ground of being (cited in Carey 2016: 410), while Flanagan has talked about his interest in resurrection, blood sacrifice and how Christianity connects to vampire culture (cited in Wixson 2021).

from the logic of real presence. For example, Fischer-Lichte notes: 'The material status does not merge with the signifier status; rather, the former severs itself from the latter ... objects and actions are no longer dependent on the meanings attributed to them' (22–3). By staying within the logic of representation and signification, Fischer-Lichte's account emphasizes how Abramović challenges conventional ideas of representation and how a materially constituted artwork or performance might signify meaning to a spectator. Indeed, the word 'not' appears thirty-three times within the eight-page analysis, with phrases such as,

The artist was *not* producing an artefact through her actions ... she was *not* creating a fixed and transferable work of art that could exist independently of her ... her actions were also *not* representational ... she was *not* performing as an actress. (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 11, my emphases)

As an alternative to the logic of 'materiality and semioticity' (2008: 17) proposed by Fischer-Lichte, I would like to offer the logic of personhood as a key to understanding the subversion and engagement with real presence that we see in *Lips of Thomas*. While it seems reasonable to suggest that Abramovic generates a crisis for interpretation in that her work opens a series of negations that contradict recognized codes of art and spectatorship, there remains the inescapable reality of her personal presence within the gallery space revealed in the modes of exposure and physical duress. When we look at this performance work from the perspective of real presence, we can see more than a pulling apart of materiality and signification, but an opening up of the question of personhood. That which is made available in the mode of 'real presence' within the mass is not merely the substance of Christ's body and blood, but the very person of Christ.³ More than this, we might say that it is personhood itself that is made present for the congregation.

The suggestion that the Catholic mass proposes the absolute reality of personhood (as opposed to, for example, the absolute reality and presence of God) might seem like an un-theological claim. But this is not so. While threads that combine to form the contemporary notion of 'person' are complex and subject

to debate, what is clear is that theological enterprises that sought to delve into the nature and being of God form an important historical context to our contemporary understanding of this term. Drawing upon Greek and Roman terminologies (*prosopon* and *persona*, respectively) that connected the theatrical idea of mask worn to denote a character, early theologians developed this concept in an attempt to account for the idea that there is one God existing in the form of a trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit – distinct 'persons' sharing a single nature. As feminist Catholic theologian Catherine LaCugna writes in her classic work *God for Us*, 'Defining personhood has been at the centre of trinitarian theology since its inception' (1991: 243). Following a careful reading of central theological figures such as Irenaeus, Origen and Augustine, LaCugna presents the idea that personhood is fully understood only with respect to the trinity, for it is the trinity that establishes the ground of existence as free, loving, co-equal relationality. Each member of the trinity receives their existence in their relation to the other members of the trinity. There is no Father without the Son, no Spirit without the Father and the Son. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are said to be the 'persons of the trinity', and they exist only in terms of their inner relations to one another, and their outward relations to the created order. In this way, the theological notion of personhood differs from the Cartesian notion of 'subject'; whereas the Cartesian subject is cut off from genuine relationality with others, the world or even the body, the theological understanding of person is relational in its essence.⁴ LaCugna offers a neat encapsulating definition of the person in the following terms: 'A person is an ineffable, concrete, unique and unrepeatable ecstasis of nature' (1991: 289, emphasis in original). Unlike the term 'human', which essentially denotes repetition, the repetition of human traits or human nature by virtue of belonging to a certain species, the term 'person' denotes a particular and unique presence. While being a unique and concrete presence, a person is nothing in and of itself. A person is made in the image of God to the extent that human personhood can be said to be an icon of an essentially relational,

³ Article 1377 of the catechism of the Catholic Church states: 'Christ is present whole and entire in each of the species and whole and entire in each of their parts, in such a way that the breaking of the bread does not divide Christ.'

⁴ For more on the development of the concept of 'person' and its distinction from that of 'subject', see Gadamer (2000).

trinitarian God. As LaCugna explains:

From the standpoint of a relational ontology, the being of Jesus (what he is) cannot be known in and of itself. Indeed, by itself, apart from his person, the nature of Jesus does not exist. And, by himself, apart from others, Jesus does not exist as a person. The reality of Jesus is given in his being-from, being-with, and being-for others. To answer the question of who Jesus Christ is, we look to how he acts, to the shape of his relationships with others, with God, with the goods and creatures of the earth. (LaCugna 1991: 293)

Jesus, in LaCugna's account, exemplifies personhood as such, in that his entire being is given over to 'his being-from, being-with, and being-for others'. He does not possess, as it were, a private subjectivity with private interests, ideas and aspirations and desires sequestered from these exemplary modalities of personhood ('I and my Father are one': John 10: 30). In the miracle of transubstantiation, the central claim of the enactment of the mass, it is not just the person of Christ who is made really present, but personhood as the foundation of reality. God is not a substance, a thing or a being, but personhood itself – an other-oriented unique and mysterious relationality.

Both *Midnight Mass* and *Lips of Thomas* play upon the logic of real presence by asking questions of belief, interpretation and perception. We see the consternation and amazement caused by Leeza's newfound mobility in *Midnight Mass*, which is layered upon the moment of transubstantiation. The affective shock represented in the drama can be read as a commentary on claims made by the mass itself; when the host and the cup are raised believers are asked to accept something that is, by any reasonable measure, quite literally shocking and amazing. In *Lips of Thomas* we find in Fischer-Lichte's account a similar array of affective responses ('sensations ... ranging from awe, shock, horror, disgust, nausea, or vertigo, to fascination, curiosity, sympathy or agony'). Such responses make sense to the extent that they are attuned to the notion of personhood. It is the person of the artist that is at stake in *Lips of Thomas*, not merely a body as materiality (the medium of the artist) nor the body as a vehicle for signification. Rather it is the unique, fragile and ultimately mysterious

presence of Abramović's person, revealed to us in a specific fragile, and mysterious way within the performance, that carries the weight of the performance's affective power. As Abramović writes: 'In performance art the knife is real, the blood is real' (2016: 268). No 'leap of faith' is required of the spectator in the sense demanded by the acceptance of real presence in the mass. However, potentially a latent belief in the spectator is revealed and played upon by Abramović, a belief in the existence of personhood, which extends to a belief that 'the artist is present' in her person, and that her person is in some way at stake within the work, more than the fact of the artist subjecting her body to extreme duress.

In their different ways, both *Lips of Thomas* and *Midnight Mass* strike a critical relation to the notion of real presence while also leaving open a space for contemplating mystery and ineffability. There is the sense of awe before the ineffable, a sense of an indefinable depth that goes beyond empty ritual or collections of atoms. Both performance works, while being critical of organized, structured faith, appear to invite reflection on the meaning and significance of real presence and personhood. *Midnight Mass* enacts the subversion of the mass and the concomitant destruction of personhood embodied in the figure of the vampire-zombie. It is clear that the figure of the vampire-zombie is the very antithesis of LaCugna's concept of personhood, to the point where the vampire-zombie is essentially an anti-person. Devoid of interiority and of the markers of unique individuality, the vampire-zombie no longer exists in LaCugna's relational modes of 'being-from, being-with and being-for the other'. In the case of the vampire-zombie, blood becomes the currency in an economy of living death. In *Lips of Thomas* on the other hand, Abramović opens up her body and in so doing reveals the depth of personhood. Through self-abnegation Abramović arguably reveals an idea that lies at the depth of the Eucharistic rite: that personhood is at once as ordinary and ubiquitous as the substances of bread and wine and simultaneously mysterious and unreachable. The person is a mysterious presence, being a concrete and embodied entity, while at the same time existing not as a concrete

‘thing’ but, in LaCugna’s account, as a radical relationality. As LaCugna puts it, ‘the ultimate predicate of incomprehensibility is “person”’ (1991: 302). Abramović’s bleeding body at once announces the inevitable death of the body and also the ecstatic nature of personhood, which becomes fully realized in the measure that it is given away, here in the form of the self-giving of blood, ‘poured out’ (Matthew 26: 28) to and for the other.

As a final note, a meditation on these performance works may circulate back in offering valuable space for reflection on the mass itself as a performative enactment. As a result of the very real contagion of COVID-19, the communion chalice by which the transubstantiated wine is imbibed by the congregation remains absent from most Catholic churches at the time of writing, its place having been taken entirely by the wafer.⁵ In such a circumstance, one might say that the communion wafer has become a kind of symbol, at least insofar as it must take the full affective weight carried by the iconicity, taste and sheer potency of wine in channelling the real presence of Christ, body and blood. Whatever the theological and liturgical ramifications may be if this situation endures, what is surely clear is that the role played by communion wine with its iconic relation to the blood of Christ that is offered to the faithful has carried a historically unique affective power that will not easily be replaced. It seems that even as the faithful are fed, vampires may yet be thirsty for some time to come.

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⁵ The current guidance operating for The Catholic Church Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales is: ‘For the time being, Holy Communion must continue to be given under one kind only (the Sacred Host)’ (2022).