

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Margarethe von Trotta, dir. *Vision: From the Life of Hildegard von Bingen*. Zeitgeist Films (US) and Concorde Filmverleih (International), 2009. Film. Unrated: Contains graphic imagery of self-inflicted wounds. Running time: 111 minutes.

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To Complicate a Vision

A biopic with a message about women in politics, *Vision: From the Life of Hildegard von Bingen* tells the tale of the Middle Ages' extraordinary polymath nun with restraint and maturity, perhaps at the expense of saying something extraordinary itself. The film enacts a mixture of emotionally and politically charged moments in Saint Hildegard's eighty-year lifespan over the twelfth century: her being tithed to the church under the tutelage of Jutta von Sponheim at age eight, grappling with her own mystic visions, her election as magistra at Disibodenberg, the founding of a new monastery at Rupertsberg, and her venture on the first of several preaching tours against church corruption. The film was shot on location in the cloisters at Eberbach (Hessen) and Maulbronn (Baden-Württemberg), featuring striking Gothic architecture that is otherwise anachronistic for the period portrayed. State subsidies (*Filmförderungen*) from the south German states, Bavaria chief among them, played a large role in financing the film. Concorde Filmverleih released it in fall 2009 before Constantin Film's own monastic production *Pope Joan* (dir. Sönke Wortmann, 2009) came out, but is only now making its way through United States' independent film circuit.

As one of the eminent New Wave *auteurs*, Margarethe von Trotta has inscribed *Vision* with her directorial signature, in no small part aided by the casting of Barbara Sukowa as Hildegard von Bingen. Sukowa's steadfast intensity as the magistra is without a doubt the primary appeal of the film. Her soft eyes exhibit both

divine curiosity and delusion, her facial expressions are doubly emphasized due to the habit that frames them, and her scenes are carefully orchestrated for a range of emotional tenors to emerge. There is simply not a moment when she does not inhabit the part. As with *Rosa Luxemburg* (1986), another Trotta/Sukowa collaboration about a historically influential German woman, the director plots out the titular character's path through various degrees of sociopolitical strife, and Sukowa demonstrates how this strife can be overcome without sacrificing one's emotional tenderness. A potent formula, to be sure.

The twin forces of violence and female guilt play key roles in *Vision* as they did in the Luxemburg film or Trotta/Sukowa's *Marianne and Julianne* (1981). The opening of the film depicts an almost primeval Christian ceremony complete with self-flagellation and the vivid promise of an apocalypse nigh. The next day, the worshippers awake and are struck with awe by the sun, thankful to be alive. Self-inflicted violence and superstition appear to keep the twelfth-century populace in check. Nowhere is this combination more evident than in the mortified flesh of Jutta von Sponheim (Mareile Blendl) that Hildegard and her sister nun Jutta (Lena Stolze) discover underneath Sponheim's habit after her death. The corpse quite literally embodies Hildegard's antithesis: a clever woman from a good family who nevertheless submits to fatal self-negation and fear of the patriarchy.

Instead, Hildegard turns from her mentor's path to-