



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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Commissioned by Benita Blessing (Oregon State University)

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 Julienne* (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, thank-

ful 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 toward a life of the mind holistically tied to the body and a matter-of-fact resistance against male domination. Her visions, signified (perhaps awkwardly) with an eye in the sky that resembles that of Sauron or the CBS symbol, give her direct access not only to the Divine, but also to political capital within a church establishment in need of inspiration. Similar to *Pope Joan*, Hildegard finds a male ally--the monk Volmar (Heino Ferch)--who supports and aids Hildegard in her quest for political and scholarly independence. Volmar is often shot in filtered sunlight or other forms of soft light, whereas most of the church authorities are treated with harsh key lighting to emphasize their cold and calculating visages. But soft masculinity paired with constructively hardened femininity appears to be the combination necessary to effect real social change in this male-dominated, corrupt, and violent world.

Thankfully, twelfth-century Rhineland society is portrayed in the film to a degree of complexity that may put aside some of the usual critiques leveled against a medieval film's historicity. Networks and agents are laid open for all to see. For example, Abbot Kuno (Gerald Alexander Held) clearly articulates how the Sponheim lands are the material basis of Disibodenberg's survival, and that a family's wealth outside the cloister directly determines one's status within it. Stolze's Jutta resents favoritism shown toward Hildegard by the other sisters, but suppresses her envy out

of political pragmatism. The introduction of the brilliant young Richardis von Stade (Hannah Herzsprung) into the abbey provides the necessary skill set and enthusiasm to circulate Hildegard's words in the proper Latin, and her family proves instrumental in securing the new women-only abbey at Rupertsberg. But then Richardis accepts a position as an abbess in Bremen out of a combination of familial loyalty and personal ambition, devastating all involved.

Unlike in *The Name of the Rose* (dir. Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1986), *Vision* depicts monastic life not as a dark and mysterious endeavor, but as a mixed bag of gradual personal growth and petty political conflicts that last a lifetime. Presentism rears its head only in a heavy-handed conversation between Hildegard and her architect about Islam's intellectual achievements, and in the obvious comparisons one could draw between Hildegard and Angela Merkel as female leaders. Yet judging by Hildegard's struggles, the perpetual funding crises and struggles over institutional legitimacy of our time are suggested to be to some degree timeless.

Vision affirms the idea of an exalted (saintly?) lifepath driven by an empathic mixture of personal and divine courage--much like, say, that of T. E. Lawrence of *Lawrence of Arabia* (dir. David Lean, 1962). Indeed, Trotta tests this courage in Hildegard by weighing the mediocrity of societal politics against the grandeur of her visions. Yet she is not punished (i.e., martyred) for high ambitions; the film ends with her alive and fit, awakening from a near-death trance that she probably induced herself. In addition to fashioning her as a visionary leader, the film would have her enshrined as a bibliophile, autodidact, critical activist, shrewd politician, wise healer, vulnerable woman, warm friend, and principled administrator. In brief: Trotta has created a slightly over-determined paean about a proto-feminist activist before our time whom we should all emulate today.

But this optimism about Hildegard's determination comes at the expense of a more experimental view of her own "fiery life of divine wisdom" that would "ignite the beauty of the plains, ... sparkle the waters, ... burn in the sun, and the moon, and the stars," as she once put it.[1] There is beauty in the textual Hildegard that struggles to find representation in Trotta's tale. Beyond Sukowa's activist-scholar persona, where then is Hildegard with whom we are familiar in this film: the poet, dramaturge, musical genius, and avant-garde scientist? The film's soundtrack is underwhelming at best, despite Hildegard's own influence on music from Pérotin to David Lynch. Though her accomplishments such as her morality play *Ordo Virtutum* and several of her musical pieces are cited, her intellectual labors remain a largely underexplored metatext. The film may indeed be better suited to classes about medieval monastic politics or women in history than literary and musical seminars, where her works are most often taught. But perhaps Hildegard's infectious curiosity and inspirational politicking in the film may drive viewers to seek out her admirable books for themselves in any case.

Note

[1]. Hildegard von Bingen, "Liber Scivias," in *Meditations with Hildegard von Bingen*, ed. and trans. Gabrielle Uhllein (Santa Fe, NM: Bear and Company, 1983), 30.

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