

Mongrel Media

Presents

VISION



A Film by Margarethe von Trotta
(111 min., Germany/France, 2009)

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High res stills may be downloaded from <http://www.mongrelmedia.com/press.html>



A visionary woman who triumphed at combining arts, sciences, and metaphysics... bringing enlightenment to the darkness of the middle ages.

SYNOPSIS

A child of a wealthy German family, Hildegard is handed over to a Benedictine Monastery from the age of 8. Taught in the arts of herbal medicine, reading and writing by her mentor Jutta, she quickly excels in all. When Jutta dies, Hildegard is horrified by evidence of self-flagellation on her body and vows to change the ways of the order.

Hildegard becomes the abbess of the convent and by subtly using her intelligence and diplomacy begins to change the laws from the highest level. Since childhood she has had powerful visions that she records. Certain these mystic perceptions are messages from God, she mentions them to her superior, without fear of the obvious scepticism and suspicion of heresy from the Christian order. The Pope grants her his support and allows her to publish the written accounts of her revelations. With this, Hildegard's life takes a new turn. Allowed to build her own convent, she invents a revolutionary and humanist approach to devotion.

Composer, scientist, doctor, writer, poet, mystic, philosopher, politician, ecological activist... A woman ahead of her time. Hildegard's musical, literary and philosophical works are still loved today and her influence in holistic medicine is growing. The first composer whose life we know about, she was also the first woman to write about female sexuality. Centuries later, masters such as Dante and Leonardo di Vinci were inspired by her works. Hildegard of Bingen was one the most important inspirational and visionary female leaders of the Medieval age, responsible for bringing Europe out of the darkness and into the modern era of science and enlightenment.



Hildegard of Bingen

A short introduction to one of the world's most remarkable women...

“Bow down, archangels, in your dim abode:
Before you were, or any hearts to beat,
Weary and kind one lingered by His seat;
He made the world to be a grassy road
Before her wandering feet.”

Thus wrote William Butler Yeats in *The Rose of the World*.

These words could be used to describe Hildegard of Bingen, a forerunner if there ever was one, and in so many ways. The foremost medieval historian Régine Pernoud called her the inspired conscience of the 12th century. She embodies the unique dignity of women who trace their origins not to illusory freedoms, but to the mystery that has filled them since the dawn of humanity.

Sometimes called the “Prophetissa Teutonica” or the “Jewel of Bingen,” Hildegard was born in 1098. Since childhood she possessed a gift that allowed her to comprehend the inexpressible and the invisible. As a small child her nanny bore witness to this, as do the documents surrounding the inquiry for her canonization. She experienced particularly strong visions concerning future events, which only she understood and which always turned out to be accurate. She experienced these visions constantly, and it took her a long time to admit how much they terrified her.

A servant of God since her youth, she joined a convent and became an oblate in 1106. At the age of 14, on November 1, 1112, she was solemnly cloistered. She spent more than 40 years of her life as a cloistered nun.

Hildegard would transcend all the rules and mores of the clergy to which she was subject. First of all she had to battle against the hierarchy and the laws of the church when she wanted to found her own convent; she struggled to assert the truth of her visions so that she wouldn't end up at the stake like Joan of Arc. A contemporary of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who would help her in her fight, she would never waiver from what these visions told her to do.

Even though the respect of monastic rules confined her within walls, she went past them to take priests to task, and to provide support to the unhappy amidst the chaos of the Middle Ages.

A figure in the image of the great saints, such as Peter, Paul, John, and others, she was, however, not canonized; nevertheless, the cult worship of Hildegard has never ceased.

It began during her lifetime thanks to her miracles, and it has endured because of her works, which can be qualified as divine. On the occasion of the 800th anniversary of her death, Pope John Paul II rendered the following homage to her: “a light to her people and for her time, she continues to shine even more brightly today... we participate with a joyous heart in the remembrance of this anniversary along with all those who admire and venerate this woman who offered us such a rare example.”

She was a rebel to baseness and mediocrity; after having been nurtured on scholasticism, the first Western philosophy to introduce logic to philosophical argument, Hildegard preferred the practice of the mysteries of the revelation and the union with God to the development of the intelligence of faith. Under such inspiration she was a writer, musician, therapist and ecologist. She created an alphabet, composed poems, and authored numerous texts.

Her writings would become so famous that they would inspire Leonardo da Vinci and Dante Alighieri. Scivias (Know the Ways) inspired Dante's vision of the Trinity, and her vision of the haloed existence of the seven planets approximated the Vitruvian Man drawn by Leonardo da Vinci three centuries later.

Her musical and poetic compositions came forth from her hearing of celestial harmonies, and form a musical corpus designed for religious services. When contemporary audiences hear these angelic chants (more than 77 compositions), they enter into the symphony of the skies.

Her *Ordo virtutum* (Play of Virtues), an oratorio composed between 1141 and 1151, is a marvelous example of this genre. It shows that evil is absent in the presence of the expression of beauty and creation. Her songs can be compared to Gregorian chant, but they use a more varied and elaborate harmony and melodies whose structures are not repeated note by note. Here too, in her musical mastery, she showed innovation. The diversity in the registers of the arrangements shows a freedom of composition whose sense of mystery fills her entire musical oeuvre. She allows us to come close to the sound of the divine. Hildegard was the first Western woman to compose musical works for whom we have a historical record.

Even though she never had any scientific training, she also authored works dedicated to the natural sciences and medicine. In these works she connected health to spirituality, in contrast to a medicine more concerned with the illness than the patient. Her entire approach can be summed up in a medicine that is preventative and also curative, one that seeks to reconcile us to ourselves. There, too, Hildegard was ahead of her time.

Her relationship to nature, and the various observations she made of its degradation by mankind, have made her a pioneer of ecology through her alchemy, which she carried out in her medicine for curing people with plants, seeds, infusions, and the like. In particular she was the first person to value the nutritional properties of grains, the need to eat few animal proteins and to replace them with cereal grains, oils and herbs. Her cooking recipes, which may still be consulted today, are models of the genre.

In her love of wisdom and metaphysical knowledge of mankind, she was also a philosopher in the fullest sense of the word.

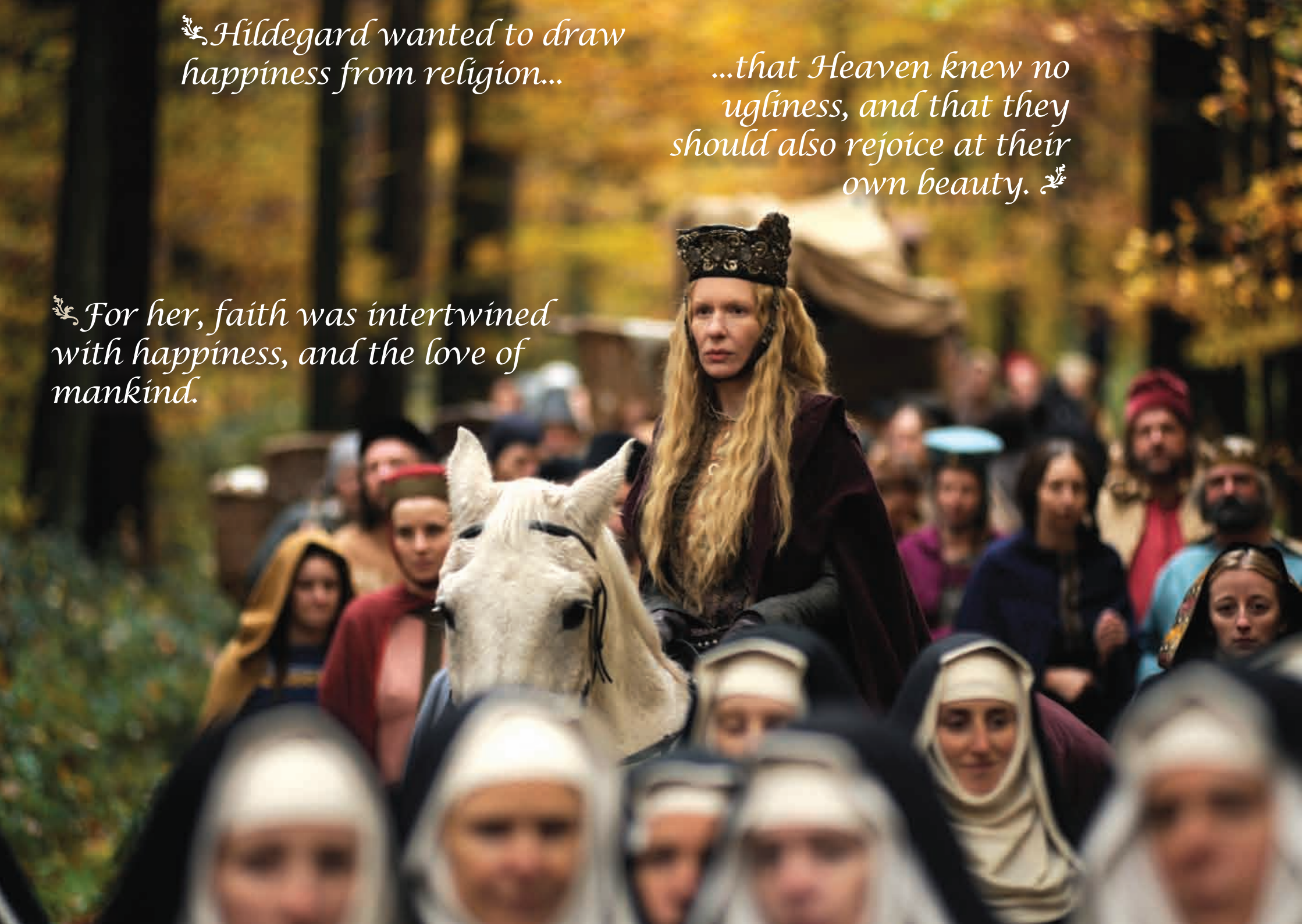
In conclusion, as her edited and translated works testify today, she participated in the birthing of the modern world by being its first woman rebel, doctor, ecologist, writer, and musician. She possessed this capacity without any other teaching than the one she received in her visions, and she re-transmitted it to mankind for the greater glory of God and mankind. She was a woman and mother by divine birth, a nomad of freedom.



*✿ Hildegard wanted to draw
happiness from religion...*

*...that Heaven knew no
ugliness, and that they
should also rejoice at their
own beauty. ✿*

*✿ For her, faith was intertwined
with happiness, and the love of
mankind.*



Interview with Director Margarethe Von Trotta

When and where did you first come across the name of Hildegard of Bingen?

In the 1970's, women involved in the Women's Movement were looking for role models in History. At that time there were few female role models. History was written by men and made by men. The history of women was not told, and women were marginalized, as if they had never played any role. We came across Hildegard of Bingen in this search for forgotten women. Some time thereafter, a lot of people were becoming involved with alternative medicine, and were looking into the effectiveness of medicinal plants. It was then that Hildegard's name resurfaced anew. So, I had already become interested in her before writing the screenplay for "Rosa Luxemburg." That was in 1983, and soon thereafter I asked myself whether her life wouldn't be good material for a movie. I even wrote a few scenes, but I thought that there wouldn't be a producer who was ready to make this movie. So, I shelved it for a while.

What was the draw for you personally to make a movie about Hildegard of Bingen, a medieval nun?

Well, first of all she belongs to our early history, and she was, as one would say nowadays, multitalented. She was a visionary, but at the same time fully grounded. She was a highly intelligent woman who, however, had to hide her light under her nun's habit, because, as a woman and a nun, she was not allowed to express herself publicly. The only chance for her to do so was as a visionary acknowledged by the Pope, but even there she is an exception. There were at the time many eccentric women who drove themselves to religious ecstasy, and experienced their communion with Christ in this delirious state. Hildegard of Bingen experienced her visions consciously, and with a clear presence of mind. She must have had a very strong subconscious that showed her how to assert herself. Of course she believed in God, and that God sent these visions to her. Everyone believed in God, the Devil, Heaven and Hell. What is interesting to me is how Hildegard of Bingen used her visions. As a woman and a nun, she was actually unknown and subordinated – one had to remain unseen – and, furthermore, she was locked up in a convent, which she was not permitted to leave after taking her vows. She "used" the visions in order to become known as a seer. This step also entailed a huge risk for her; she could just as well have been excommunicated if she hadn't been believed, and had instead been judged as possessed by the Devil.

How did she get men to pay attention to her beliefs?

Using her diplomatic skills, because she understood men and their vanities, she turned to Bernard of Clairvaux as a "lowly woman and servant." So, first she was allowed to publicize her visions, and then – this is the greater, more revolutionary step – she managed, through these visions, to be able to found her own convent. She left Disibodenberg – the province, as one might say today – and moved to Bingen on the Rhine, which at the time was a "traffic intersection" near the important Archbishopric of Mainz. Pilgrims and traders came through, and visited the convent. She was closer to the world; she received news of the latest developments in medicine, and encountered the knowledge of her time.

How is she significant or relevant to the present day?

The film addresses two issues that are important to us today. One is the holistic approach to medicine. She once said, "First the soul must heal; then the body will follow." The other was the warning that the elements could turn against us. At the time people spoke of elements; today we speak of nature turning against us, or destroying us, if we don't protect it. Both of these points make her relevant. Then of course we have her incredible opus as a composer; she wrote over 90 songs.

Can you explain the scene of the lyrical drama that stands out against the usually dark, monastic context of the rest of the film.

This scene, which is an excerpt from her lyrical drama "Ordo Virtutum" is genuine; I found it in the historical accounts. On certain holidays, Hildegard's nuns were allowed to wrap themselves in white silk gowns, wear jewelry, let down their hair, and decorate themselves with garlands. It must have been a very happy and innocent sisterhood. Hildegard of Bingen said that Heaven knew no ugliness, and that, because as virgins they belonged to Heaven, they should also rejoice at their own beauty. There were two directions within the Benedictine Order: one, which was very severe and ascetic, to the point of self-castigation, which Hildegard refused, and the one that embraced life, that also wanted to draw happiness from religion. I tried to show this through her "Ordo Virtutum."

Your movie refuses to take up of the notion that one comes closer to God through suffering in a scene with Jutta von Sponheim, who wore a belt of thorns, which Hildegard of Bingen discovers after her death.

Exactly. In a short scene beforehand, I show Hildegard, already as a child, discovering that Jutta von Sponheim flagellates herself in the hope of coming closer to God through her pain. The discovery of this self-castigation shook Hildegard of Bingen tremendously. She never flagellated herself, and never asked anyone else to. She was also opposed to severe fasting. For her, faith was intertwined with happiness, and the love of mankind.

What is the continued appeal for you in putting strong female figures to the forefront?

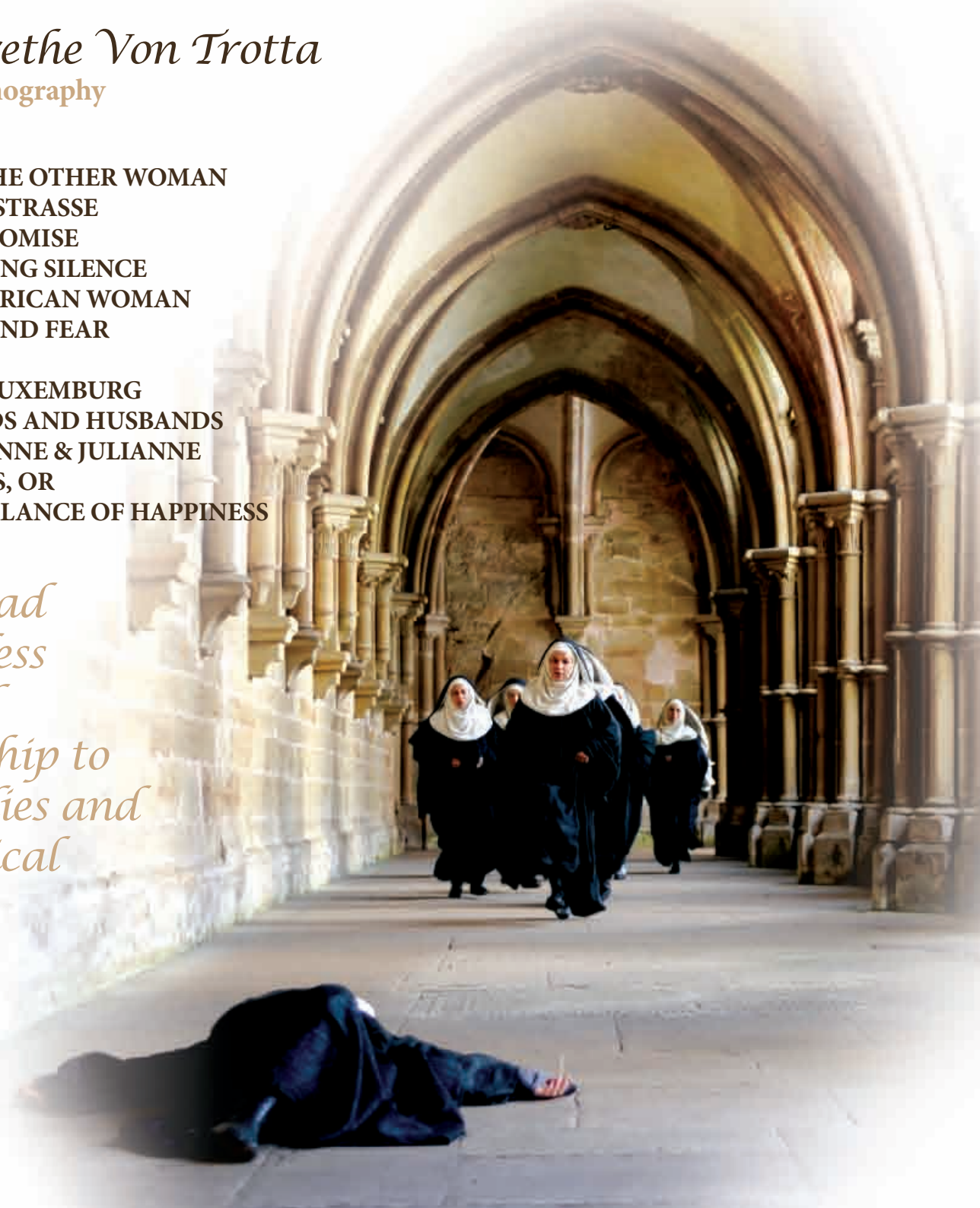
The figures that appeal to me are always women who also have moments of weakness; therefore, I never try to make heroines out of them. Instead I show how they fought to find their own way, how they put themselves out there, and how much they had to swallow in order to find themselves. I am fascinated by how they overcame these obstacles in order to achieve their goals. Hildegard of Bingen had a dream of founding her own abbey, and she suffered a lot of setbacks in the process. The moments of her greatest weakness are when the nun Richardis is to be taken away from her. In this situation, she behaves either like a small, abandoned child, or with fury. This conduct is all recorded in her letters. And it is precisely these moments of extreme self-abandonment that I find so beautiful, surprising, and contradictory. Hildegard of Bingen demands for herself what she usually gives to others. I absolutely did not want to portray her as a saint.

Margarethe Von Trotta

Selected Filmography

- 2009 VISION
- 2006 I AM THE OTHER WOMAN
- 2003 ROSENSTRASSE
- 1994 THE PROMISE
- 1993 THE LONG SILENCE
- 1990 THE AFRICAN WOMAN
- 1988 LOVE AND FEAR
- 1987 FELIX
- 1986 ROSA LUXEBURG
- 1983 FRIENDS AND HUSBANDS
- 1981 MARIANNE & JULIANNE
- 1979 SISTERS, OR
THE BALANCE OF HAPPINESS

*They had
a much less
inhibited
relationship to
their bodies and
the physical
world.*



*W*hat writings or records did you use?

Among other things, there is a biography written during her lifetime, not by her, but in part dictated by her, which documents her life's journey from birth until old age. I also used her writings as documentation: for example, the "Scivias," her first book of visions, and two others on naturopathy and healing. I also made use of her correspondence with Emperor Barbarossa, various Popes, and abbots and abbesses of other convents. There is also the "Rule of St. Benedict," which contains a lot of information about monastic life at the time. A friend of mine, who is a medievalist, told me that people kissed each other on the mouth when they concluded a contract, and to celebrate other meetings as well, so I included this. They weren't as puritanical as we think; instead they had a much less inhibited relationship to their bodies and the physical world.

*W*hat role does the music have, and what criteria did you use for choosing it?

I chose the songs that I liked the most, that touched my heart and gave me goose bumps the first time I heard them. Salome Kammer, the actress and singer, who also acted and sang in Edgar Reitz's "Heimat," sings two songs dressed as a nun. I didn't want to take music from a recorded CD, which always makes the music sound so flat. Of course the songs also had to fit the respective scenes in terms of their content. Barbara Sukowa, who in the last twenty years has performed more as a singer than as an actress, also had the opportunity to sing her own part in the "Ordo Virtutum."

*H*ow did you recreate the atmosphere of the convent so vividly?

Axel Block, the cinematographer, and I discussed the look of the film for a long time. We were in agreement that we did not want to film it glamorously. The film was not meant as some saint's portrait to stick in your bible or hymnal. In fact, the time is very far away from ours, but the people should nevertheless feel close to us, and alive.

Interview With Barbara Sukowa (Hildegard Of Bingen)

*H*ildegard of Bingen was a great visionary for her time; does she still have something to teach us?

These days there is a tendency to publish things that are not scientifically supported, a tendency that is increasing. We are slowly becoming more critical of our scientific age, as well as our materialistic worldview, which was so important to us after the Second World War as a way to bring a sense of clarity to the chaos. There are efforts and endeavors everywhere to approach religion and spirituality from a scientific perspective. It is in the context of this movement that interest in Hildegard of Bingen has sprung forth and grown.

*H*ow did you get a sense of Hildegard of Bingen on a truly personal level?

Hildegard of Bingen was a woman who took something for herself that society at the time denied her. Her social power as a nun and abbess in a convent was actually very limited. She transcended these limits through her visions, and managed to have the institution of the Church acknowledge them. She carved out an independent space for herself. This has a lot to do with the fact that she was always sickly as a child. Here I sense a point of contact with Rosa Luxemburg, which I also worked on with Margarethe von Trotta. Rosa Luxemburg was also sick as a child. Many people who spend a lot of time in bed as kids, and are unable to experience the outside world, develop a very strong inner life and sense of fantasy. This was the case with Hildegard of Bingen, a woman who was very intellectually vital, determined, persistent, and powerful despite her physical weakness. She was a fighter who knew how to achieve her goals, and who often made herself appear small in the male-dominated world of the Church in order to be heard. She was able to insinuate herself very delicately, and in my opinion she also knew how to manipulate very well.

*W*hat was the greatest challenge for you in performing this role?

To embody a woman who stood very firmly within a 12th century framework of beliefs, in which people believed in Heaven and Hell, in condemnation and in resurrection. The difficulty is that this woman lived 1000 years ago, and obviously it's not possible to enter the mind of someone who thinks like that. So, you look for material that is resonant today, and pull something out of this persona that relates to you personally. I cannot claim to represent this woman, or anyone else, from this age.

 She was a fighter who knew how to achieve her goals.

What was your involvement with the music in the film? You have been a successful singer yourself for many years.

I love this music. It's beautiful, and a little unusual for the time; there is something very serene and spiritual about it. In her compositions, Hildegard of Bingen did not follow the rules of the time; whether she did so consciously, or simply didn't know the rules, we can't exactly tell. Anyhow, it was a pleasure for me to sing these parts.

Do you approach historical material any differently from something contemporary? Which is "easier" or "harder?"

Actually, hard or easy doesn't have so much to do with it being historical or contemporary. Hard or easy has everything to do with how close you feel to the character, or how much you may have to change things in order to understand the character, which is something you may have to break through within yourself. In a historical film, you try to familiarize yourself with the history, as well as peoples' limits. In preparing for this role, I looked at old paintings, and made notes of how people folded their hands, what kind of clothing they wore, and what poses they affected. To that extent, yes, there is a difference between playing a Hildegard of Bingen to a woman of today.

You have often worked with Margarethe von Trotta's what is your connection across the decades?

Certainly a friendship. It is always a special treat for me to work with Margarethe von Trotta, because she used to be an actress herself; she truly understands actors, and so she understands both positions. She is helpful and listens very carefully. I also find her very exciting as a person. On the one hand she is very intelligent and intellectually minded, and on the other, very warm and open to anything, even the irrational. When she began to make films, women still had to fight hard within the male-dominated world of cinema. So, sometimes she came across as harder than she is, because of how much she had to assert herself. Her other, more humorous side has come through even more over the years.

Barbara Sukowa

Selected Filmography

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|------|---|
| 2009 | VISION
Margarethe von Trotta |
| 2008 | THE INVENTION OF CURRYWURST
Ulla Wagner |
| 2005 | ROMANCE & CIGARETTES
John Turturro |
| 2003 | HIERANKL
Hans Steinbichler |
| 1999 | THE THIRD MIRACLE
Agnieszka Holland |
| 1998 | THE CRADLE WILL ROCK
Tim Robbins |
| 1997 | IM THE NAME OF INNOCENCE
Andreas Kleinert |
| 1995 | JOHNNY MNEMONIC
Robert Longo |
| 1991 | HOMO FABER
Volker Schlöndorff |
| 1990 | EUROPA
Lars von Trier |
| | THE AFRICAN WOMAN
Margarethe von Trotta |
| 1987 | DAYS TO REMEMBER
Jeanine Meerapfel |
| | THE SICILIAN
Michael Cimino |
| 1986 | ROSA LUXEMBURG
Margarethe von Trotta |
| 1983 | A COP'S SUNDAY
Michel Vianey |
| 1982 | EQUATEUR
Serge Gainsbourg |
| 1981 | MARIANNE & JULIANNE
Margarethe von Trotta |
| | LOLA
Rainer Werner Fassbinder |
| 1980 | BERLIN ALEXANDERPLATZ
Rainer Werner Fassbinder |



Crew

Directed and Written by

Produced by

Executive Producer

Cinematography

Music

With original compositions by

Sound

Sound Mixing

Art Direction

Editing

Casting

Make-up Artists

Costume Design

Production Manager

Line Producer

Margarethe von Trotta

Markus Zimmer

Hengameh Panahi

Axel Block

Chris Heyne

Hildegard of Bingen

Michael Busch

Hubertus Rath

Heike Bauersfeld

Corina Dietz

Sabine Schroth

Jeanette Latzelsberger

Kerstin Sattmann

Ursula Welter

Richard Bolz

Manfred Thureau

A German and French Co-Production by Clasart Filmproduktion,
Munich with Celluloid Dreams, Paris
as well as ARD/ Degeto Film GmbH.

With the Support of

The German Film Fund (DFFF), The NRW Film Foundation,

The Bavaria Film and Television Fund (FFF), Hessen Invest

and The German Federal Film Board (FFA)



the directors label



FFF Bayern





Cast

Hildegard of Bingen
Brother Volmar
Richardis von Stade
Abbot Kuno
Jutta
Richardis' Mother
Clara
Jutta von Sponheim
Hildegard as a child
Abbess Tengwich
Emperor Frederick Barbarossa

Barbara Sukowa
Heino Ferch
Hannah Herzsprung
Alexander Held
Lena Stolze
Sunnyi Melles
Paula Kalenberg
Mareile Blendl
Stella Holzapfel
Annemarie Düringer
Devid Striesow