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## Hadewijch

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## Hadewijch

### Abstract

This is a film review of *Hadewijch* (2009).

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In her *Book of Visions*, the thirteenth-century Beguine mystic Hadewijch of Antwerp, a virtuoso of mystico-erotic poetry, wrote of her yearning for union with Christ, “My heart and my veins and all my limbs trembled and shuddered with desire.... so passionate... that I thought I should not satisfy my Lover and my Lover not fully gratify me.” Such ungratified longing would mean “to desire while dying and die while desiring.” Anxious desire—no less corporeal than spiritual, and so severe as to verge on lethal—is embodied in Céline, the twenty-year-old Parisian theology student and postulant nun whose Christian namesake provides the title for this 2009 French movie, directed by Bruno Dumont.

In an early scene, Céline’s Mother Superior criticizes the aspirant’s “excessive behavior” (Céline refuses food and subjects herself to the elements unprotected), calling her a “caricature” of a nun driven by “self-love.” Accused of indulging in fleshly mortifications, Céline is expelled from the convent with instructions to seek humility beyond the cloister walls. Over the course of the movie, Céline, like many of her mystical forbears, attempts to negotiate, though not to temper, the intensity of her longing for Christ, whose absence is the palpable source of her agony. In doing so, she seeks escape from the luxurious surroundings of her parents’ Parisian abode; Céline’s disdain for her technocrat father and snobbish mother raises questions about the authenticity of the motivations of her

religious pursuits. could her love of Christ simply be a form of rebellion against her parents' earthly wealth and authority?

Céline also eschews the affections of other mortals. When a trio of young Muslim men beckons her to join them at a coffee shop, she obliges so willingly as to seem naively incautious, but later rebuffs the advances of Yassine, who becomes her friend. When Céline explains to Yassine that she is saving her love for Christ, he is injured and petulant, replying, "You're nuts."

Céline's exceptional psychological state—being in love with an absent, invisible Christ—is one crux of investigation in this movie that is made poignantly clear when she attends a Qur'an study group led by Yassine's brother, Nassir. Ogled by one of the men in the group, Céline weeps, explaining to Nassir that she cannot stand to be looked at by anyone but Christ. Nassir takes on the role of spiritual guide, directing Céline's passion for her invisible beloved, explaining that her desire is best expressed not only in prayerful contemplation, but in action dedicated to justice on earth; Céline's piety thus becomes politicized. After accompanying Nassir to a site of oppressive violence in the Middle East, Céline kneels alongside Nassir and Yassine in prayers directed to different Gods, but united in passion for earthly justice. Presaging a brief but shocking scene of violence, Céline, echoing Hadejwich, murmurs, "The sweetest thing about love is its violence."

*Hadewijch* raises numerous worthwhile questions concerning socioeconomic disparity, religious pluralism, justice and the role of violence in achieving it, love for the invisible, authenticity, guilt, and redemption. However, it contains elements of ambiguity that, though germane to the ethical quandaries it explores, may frustrate some viewers and detract from its overall force. These extend to the rather baffling coda, in which a convict helping with construction work at the convent comes to Céline's rescue, raising her from waters in which she had sought to drown herself. The convict's face is at once vacant and Christlike, and when he raises Céline from the waters, it is clear that it is not (only) his but Céline's baptismal redemption that we are witnessing.

The film's most serious problem is the stereotypical connection of Islam with violence. The point here, however, seems to be to raise questions about how the intensity of religious love—whether Muslim or Christian—can tip into an egregious act of terrorism. How Céline is implicated in this act is left uncertain, evoking a complex conflation of sympathy and complicity that questions the relations between violence, religious love, and justice.

Though at times frustrating and even ponderous, *Hadewijch's* excesses and ambiguities may be apt, for this movie suggests that religion is not only a source of potentially lethal emotions, but also provides structures for constraining excessive passions. After all, when Céline is expelled from the convent, it is for exceeding

the rules that are meant not only to stimulate and maintain faith, but to temper and guide love, so that in desiring the invisible—Allah, Christ, or earthly justice—one need not die, or kill.