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“He who kills the body, kills the soul that inhabits it”: Feminist Filmmaking, Religion, and Spiritual Identification in *Vision*

Abstract

In this article, I argue that the 2009 film, *Vision: From the Life of Hildegard of Bingen*, presents an example of feminist filmmaking that seeks to draw viewers into spiritual identification with the protagonist, 12th-century mystic Hildegard, through its narrative and formal techniques, encouraging the audience to share in Hildegard’s visionary experiences. The film does so in an explicitly feminist way, drawing upon unconventional visual and sonic aesthetics to highlight the power and authority of Hildegard’s spiritual experiences. In particular, *Vision*’s use of music and sound points toward a conception of feminine spirituality that values the subjective, experiential, and holistic. Ultimately, *Vision* offers an example of a feminist film that interacts positively with religion and demonstrates how the cinema can open up a space for the religious and spiritual experiences of women to not just be seen or heard, but experienced.

Keywords

feminism, mysticism, Hildegard of Bingen, Christianity, Identification

Author Notes

Carl Laamanen is a Ph.D. student in the English Department at The Ohio State University. His current research centers around film, religion/spirituality, the senses, and audience identification. He would like to thank Linda Mizejewski and his colleagues in FST 7001 for their helpful feedback during the composition of this article, as well as the JRF reviewers for their kind comments.

In his memoir on spirituality and belief, *My Bright Abyss*, poet Christian Wiman (who some might call a mystic in his own right) makes an intriguing point about Western theology and its suppression of women voices: “In neglecting the voices of women, who are more attuned to the immanent nature of divinity, who feel that eruption in their very bodies, theology has silenced a powerful—perhaps the most powerful—side of God.”¹ Of course, not all women feel that “eruption” of divinity, but Wiman’s larger point still resonates—the material, immanent side of God and spirituality has routinely been silenced by patriarchal suppression and devaluation of women’s spiritual experiences. Wiman’s insight, although not new or novel, leads me to a couple of questions that animate the remainder of this paper. How can the power of women’s spiritual experiences be expressed in today’s patriarchal society? Can a space be carved out that allows for the woman’s voice to be heard in matters of religion and spirituality? The 2009 German film, *Vision: From the Life of Hildegard of Bingen*, directed by Margarethe von Trotta, directly addresses these questions, interrogating a patriarchal stance on religion and spirituality through the cinematic medium. Given von Trotta’s long career as a feminist filmmaker, *Vision* opens itself up to one more question, perhaps the most intriguing of them all: what happens when feminist filmmaking takes spirituality seriously?

Feminism and religion have had a relationship fraught with difficulties, to say the least; thus, a filmmaker like von Trotta making a film about a twelfth-century woman mystic may come as a surprise.² Yet, von Trotta has resisted being labeled a “feminist filmmaker” in the past, preferring to cast herself as “an existential filmmaker,” so perhaps her decision to take on a film about a religious figure fits in with her general disregard for labels.³ In her work, von Trotta has been drawn to stories about intriguing women and their interactions with other women and men, and, in that regard, Hildegard (played in the film by Barbara Sukowa) seems like an ideal candidate. Furthermore, by turning to a religious subject, von Trotta continues a major theme of her work: an exploration and a breakdown of the public and private spheres.⁴ Hildegard’s life brings religious experience, especially that of a woman, often thought of belonging to the private sphere, into the public sphere, both during her life in the twelfth century and in today’s contemporary society through her filmic representation. According to Renate Hehr, von Trotta “represents” a “female sphere of experience” in her films, and *Vision* marks a step into a sphere of experience that tends to be avoided by feminist filmmakers.⁵ I believe that feminism and religion are not mutually exclusive, and the power of a film like *Vision* resides in its ability to allow feminism the opportunity to speak positively into the realm of religion.

Before approaching the film, I want to set forth some of the tensions that marked Hildegard’s life as a woman in a certain historical, political, and religious

context. Throughout the course of this paper, I will explore her history more in-depth, especially when relevant to individual moments in the film. For the moment, however, I want to briefly situate Hildegard in reference to contemporary feminism. For Grace M. Jantzen, Hildegard appears as “a prototype token woman” rather than a “twelfth-century feminist,” due in large part to her close identification with the male-dominated Church and its oppression of women.⁶ Furthermore, Hildegard and other women mystics believed in and supported the mission of the Church; thus, they had no desire to remove themselves from its structure.⁷ As both Jantzen and Rosemary Radford Ruether point out, Hildegard and other female medieval mystics existed within a patriarchal religious system, meaning any rebellion against male leaders could lead to severe repercussions.⁸ These mystics had to navigate a complex set of circumstances that did not allow them the freedoms that women have today. Clearly, these women, particularly Hildegard, do not map directly onto contemporary conceptions of feminism, presenting both challenges and benefits to the scholar. While I will be making an explicitly feminist argument in this article, I am not asserting that Hildegard was a “feminist,” only that her depiction in *Vision* illuminates and speaks to contemporary feminist concerns.

While Hildegard may not have held to contemporary feminist ideals, she did challenge the religious status-quo and male authorities by forcefully pursuing the permission to write down and disseminate her visions. In this regard, Hildegard took part in a wider discourse of mysticism, in which female spirituality represented

a substantial departure from male spirituality. Jantzen claims that “the source of [the women mystics’] spirituality was experiential more than intellectual,” which allowed for a different emphasis than that of male spirituality, but also gave male spiritual leaders the opportunity to discredit female visions as too subjective.⁹ Astonishingly, Hildegard, outside of some initial resistance, found her visions validated by some of the most powerful religious figures of her day—Bernard of Clairvaux and Pope Eugene III—and leveraged this power in a number of ways over the course of her life.¹⁰ As Ruether explains, Hildegard was able to achieve this status through a carefully controlled rhetoric, wherein she positioned herself as a “poor little female figure,” delivering the revelation of God.¹¹ By downplaying herself as a woman, she was able to confront the Church leaders as the “voice of God.”¹² Yet, Hildegard’s rhetoric was not simply to avoid censure—she sincerely believed that she was a vessel of God.¹³ Hildegard remains a complex figure, deeply immersed in the contexts and beliefs of her time, but these complexities do not prevent her life from speaking to current issues concerning women’s spiritual experiences. In fact, I would suggest that *Vision* serves as an example of what Carolyn Dinshaw calls “getting medieval,” that is, “using ideas of the past, creating relations with the past, touching in this way the past in our efforts to build selves and communities now and into the future.”¹⁴ By returning to a past figure, who does not fit into contemporary feminist categories, *Vision* uses the medium of film to

touch the past and help create new discussions and communities surrounding feminism and religion.

Vision does not downplay the tensions of Hildegard's life, instead it foregrounds them by encouraging the audience to empathize and identify with Hildegard, visually and sonically. On a general level, given that the film tells Hildegard's story, it is to be expected that the film would attempt to situate its audience within Hildegard's perspective. However, the frequency with which *Vision* employs point-of-view shots and non-diegetic elements (sound, music, etc.) to insert the viewer into Hildegard's experience suggests a deeper level of identification than that typically found in other films of a similar spiritual nature like *The Way* (2010) or *Babette's Feast* (1987). As such, I will contend that *Vision* seeks to create *spiritual identification* with Hildegard's visionary experiences for its audience. Due to the nature of Hildegard's life and spiritual experiences, *Vision* must use subjective camera angles and point-of-audition/non-diegetic sound to bring the viewer into her subjective spiritual experience. Importantly, the film does not treat these subjective moments as unrealistic or false, but rather incorporates them into the diegesis of the film seamlessly, rejecting a dichotomy between the material and the spiritual. This approach foregrounds a formal connection between spiritual experience and the female gaze.

Vision, in its narrative subject matter and its formal construction, actively works against the male gaze. As I mentioned, *Vision* often employs first-person

POV shots from Hildegard's perspective, matching the audience's view with her visual perspective. Of course, many films use this technique, but *Vision* does not restrict Hildegard's POV shots to representing "objective" reality. They often include visual elements that belong to the spiritual realm of her visions; thus, these shots align the viewer with a more intensely subjective position than a traditional POV shot, potentially enabling a higher level of identification. Hildegard's first vision serves as a perfect example for how the film constructs audience identification with Hildegard's spiritual experience. By this point in *Vision*, Hildegard has become the abbess of the nuns at Disibodenberg, a post she was elected to in 1136, following the death of her mentor, Jutta of Sponheim.¹⁵ According to her own accounts, Hildegard had been experiencing visions throughout her life, but never spoke of them until she became abbess. As the audience's first interaction with her visions, this brief moment signals an important shift in the film's tone and establishes the central conflict that animates the rest of Hildegard's life and the film's narrative arc.

Implied by the "vision" of the film's title, sight plays an important role in *Vision*. Thus, I first want to consider Hildegard's initial vision solely from a visual perspective to examine how it contests the male gaze and conventional cinematic technique. I will return to the scene's sonic subjectivity later, hoping to add a layer of complexity to the relationship between sight and vision in this film. Up until this point, *Vision* has formally represented Hildegard's life in a largely conventional

narrative fashion. Then, suddenly, her visionary experience shatters this objectivity. Hildegard is out in the garden with her nuns, teaching them about plants and medicine, explaining how to heal the sick. In the shot directly before the vision begins, Hildegard is seated with her nuns around her, as the camera slowly moves backward. The shakiness of the frame points to the use of a handheld camera here, a device typically associated with documentary or realist filmmaking. The movement of the camera stops and Hildegard looks up; the camera lingers here for a moment before quickly zooming into a close-up of Hildegard. This close-up crossfades into her vision of the clouds opening up, and the light of the sun (or God) forming a giant eye in the sky. The light fills the frame, before a cut to an extreme close-up of Hildegard's mouth and then her eyes. From there, the next shot shows Hildegard praying inside, very clearly shifting her in space and time from the moments before the vision.

While this sequence only takes place over five shots, it begins the film's move away from classical, conventional aesthetics into something different and far more subjective. The visual particulars of this sequence recalibrate audience expectations, pointing towards a primary reading of the film through Hildegard's spiritual perspective. For instance, *Vision* gives viewers access to Hildegard's interiority, as seen through her eyes, despite the fact that the shot preceding the vision has all the markings of a realist film. The quick zoom in could be construed as a realistic reaction shot, as if the camera operator suddenly realized Hildegard

was experiencing something unusual. However, the cut to her actual vision renders this realist move void, replacing the objective world with Hildegard's perception of a seemingly different world than the one that the audience has been exposed to thus far. Furthermore, the two shots that follow her vision reinforce a subversion of conventional film form. The two extreme close-ups highlight Hildegard's mouth and her eyes, reminding viewers that her voice speaks with authority (more on that in a later section) and that her eyes focalize the story for them. Further breaking from the classical paradigm, the extreme close-ups appear before the close-up, a reversal of convention that disrupts the flow of outside/inside editing. For the audience, identified with Hildegard and her gaze, the shock of the sudden rupture from classical conventions mirrors Hildegard's own surprise at receiving a divine vision and a call to proclaim this vision. Visually, then, this sequence suggests identification with the woman's perspective, but these images only tell half of the story.

Unlike the visual presentation of the vision sequence, its sonic presentation does not break with classical sound editing techniques. Although the sequence's sound does not subvert classical conventions, it does place viewers in Hildegard's sonic position in a similar manner to how the sequence's images aligns them with her visual perspective. The sequence begins with Hildegard conversing with the nuns, her voice clear and normal. As Hildegard begins to have the vision and the camera zooms in, music begins to play, soft instruments and ethereal vocals. The

music and vocals continue throughout the remaining shots in this sequence and function as a sound bridge into the next scene as well. In this sequence, the music can fulfill two different roles, depending on how one interprets the scene. The music could be read as non-diegetic, speaking from outside the storyworld to imbue the scene with an affect of reverence or awe. Interpreting the music as non-diegetic makes sense, especially since it carries over into the next scene after this sequence. With that being said, I would like to propose an alternate reading of this music as, at least initially, diegetic, issuing from a place within the storyworld and perceived as such by Hildegard.¹⁶ When Hildegard speaks of her visions, she does not consider them “the result of daydream or trance or hallucination,” but speaks of seeing them with “an inner eye.”¹⁷ If the soul can see, it can also hear, as for Hildegard and many other mystics of the period, “the soul is seen...to possess its own sensuous body inextricable from the body proper and transformed by it.”¹⁸ At this moment in the film, Hildegard hears with her inner ears, marking this music as diegetic, breaking into the audience’s consciousness just as Hildegard describes happening to her. For Hildegard, spiritual experience is necessarily physical, revealed through the body and the senses, not apart from them. *Vision* understands this holism and makes no effort to draw clear lines between diegetic and non-diegetic elements of the narrative, resisting a dualistic split between body and soul.

As the final three shots of this sequence show, the film also resists an easy division between image and sound, refusing to subscribe to a dichotomous

understanding of the cinema. Visually, these shots have a fracturing effect, as the extreme close-ups of Hildegard's mouth and eyes appear to cordon off sound from image, each giving them their own visual representation. However, Hildegard's voice can be heard during each of these two extreme close-ups, and her voice sonically unites the disparate images before they are visually unified with the final close-up of the sequence where the audience sees her entire face. As viewers hear her voice during every shot, *Vision* reminds them that Hildegard's voice speaks with power, an idea reinforced by Hildegard's sporadic voice-overs throughout the film. At the same time, the extreme close-up of her eyes, connected with her voice, crucially identifies Hildegard as the possessor of a gaze, but a gaze that does not stand in opposition to the voice. *Vision* does not give Hildegard vocal power just to deny her visual power; instead, the film makes them both the woman's domain, an absolute necessity for subversion. As Mary Ann Doane suggests, giving women power over one aspect of the cinematic experience could relegate them to that facet and further oppress them, but *Vision* avoids that problem by grounding both registers of the film in Hildegard's perspective.¹⁹ This level of identification with a character, particularly a female one, radically re-orient the audience, destabilizing traditional identification with male characters and interests.

Visually, *Vision* works against the male gaze, but makes its feminist critique even more explicit with its treatment of music. As I mentioned previously, the music often blurs diegetic boundaries, which lines up with the film's larger project

to create a spiritual identification with the audience which moves between different levels of reality. The film constantly associates music with women's spiritual experiences and, outside of a few moments, refuses men entry into the musical domain. Hildegard composed many songs, music and lyrics, throughout her life, most of which were used for worship among her nuns.²⁰ All of Hildegard's compositions, especially her allegorical *The Play of the Virtues*, deal explicitly with theological and moral concerns, and I will endeavor to situate my analysis within that context. To place the film's music within its context, the most common form of music at the time was "plainchant" (more colloquially known as "Gregorian chant"), which is "a single line of music sung in unison or octaves."²¹ Hildegard's music originates within this tradition, but has a different style, which "comes close to sounding like improvisation, developing organically rather than systematically."²² For the most part, the film's music, both diegetic and non-diegetic, connects to these traditions. The manner in which the film formally deploys this music adds to its ability to communicate a sense of spiritual experience.

Out of all the cinematic techniques that help to provide identification for the audience, music might be the one most suited to enabling spiritual identification. In his recent book, *Scoring Transcendence*, Kutter Callaway argues that film music can be read as a type of religious experience. Callaway's claims are deeply rooted in traditional Christian concepts, which makes them useful for an analysis of *Vision*, but his larger argument can also be applied to a number of different religious and

spiritual experiences. Discussing the “presence” of film music, Callaway makes several arguments about the music in Paul Thomas Anderson’s films, and I think these arguments provide a helpful starting point for considering the power of music to address spiritual experience in *Vision*.²³ Callaway suggests that music, if allowed to do more than “enhance the visual elements,” can “indicate a pervasive presence that stands outside the film’s primary representation,” yet a presence that the audience experiences nonetheless through the music.²⁴ Second, Callaway claims that the music in Anderson’s films “[signifies] the presence of an immanent transcendence,” that is, a “transcendence...glimpsed in and through the immanent structures of the composition.”²⁵ Finally, Callaway addresses Anderson’s film music as “revelatory,” a point in which he discusses the audience’s reception of the music “as the primary element...that shifts the cinematic experience into this spiritual or transcendent register.”²⁶ I find all three of these points fascinating, and I think that Callaway’s insights about the presence of film music open up a new way to hear the music during Hildegard’s first vision.

Regarding Callaway’s first point, the music that plays during Hildegard’s first vision returns during other visionary experiences in the film, giving those moments the same emotional tenor. As Callaway suggests, however, the music in these moments seems to do more than just provide emotional backdrop; when paired with Hildegard’s subjective visions, the music hints at an experience that evades visual representation. Yet, as interesting as that insight may be, Callaway’s

notion of music's potential to be immanently transcendent points the way forward from the diegetic conundrum that I discussed earlier. Is the music during this sequence diegetic or non-diegetic? To put it simply, I think it is both. At this intense spiritual moment in the film, the music certainly can provide both immanent and transcendent functions to the audience, and likewise, it appears to be doing the same for Hildegard within the diegesis. Outside of the diegetic world of the film, viewers experience the potential for transcendence (or a revelatory experience, in Callaway's words) through the immanent nature of the music and film being within the world they occupy; at the same time, within the diegesis, Hildegard experiences the transcendent through the materiality of her body and soul.²⁷ Elsewhere in the film, Hildegard speaks plainly of music's ability to act in both the spiritual and material spheres of the world, eliding the boundary between these two spheres in the world, just as film music moves between diegetic and non-diegetic boundaries. Similarly to her vision sequences, the film plays with diegetic boundaries elsewhere, reinforcing Hildegard's unwillingness to draw strict lines between spiritual and material experience.

Early on in the film, in a sequence directly before the one that leads to her first vision, Hildegard attends to several patients, giving them medicine and spiritual advice. The first patient she talks to is a man who has flagellated himself in an attempt to get closer to God through bodily suffering. Hildegard reprimands the man with a telling phrase: "He who kills the flesh, kills the soul that inhabits

it.” For Hildegard, body and soul are intimately connected, and any abuse done to one will be reflected in the other. Thus, she tells the nuns, who are learning how to care for the sick, that both the soul and the body must be healed, because complete healing cannot be achieved otherwise. Before she leaves the man to attend to another patient, she offers an intriguing phrase: “Music can also heal your wounds and your soul.” Music, for Hildegard, is capable of spiritual and physical healing; in other words, music operates holistically upon the whole person in a way that purely spiritual or strictly physical methods do not. Hildegard then instructs a nun to begin playing music, and this music continues to play for the remainder of the sequence. *Vision* draws attention to the diegetic nature of the music, slowly moving in on the nun singing and playing a violin and keeping her in the frame for an extended shot before cutting again to Hildegard. This music is rooted in the diegesis, yet when the scene shifts from the sick ward to the garden, the music still plays, clearly non-diegetic at this point. Coming from such a concretely physical source as one of the nuns, for this music to evaporate into the non-diegetic field points to music’s ability bring together the physical and the spiritual.

Vision connects its use of music to feminism by granting women control over the majority of the music in the film. On a more general scale, the film gives women’s music more screen-time than that of the men, often showing the nuns chanting during their times of prayer, weaving their plainchant throughout several sequences, and, as I mention above, using the chanting as a sound-bridge to

transition from scene to scene. On a smaller scale, the film often references the voice, particularly in relation to singing, and these moments are solely the domain of the women in the film. When Richardis (Hannah Herzsprung), a young woman of noble birth who will become one of Hildegard's closest associates, enters the monastery to pledge her life to God, Hildegard asks her to read a passage from the Bible. Once she finishes reading, Hildegard remarks, "You have a lovely voice." From that point forward, Richardis' "lovely" voice will become one of the featured voices in *Vision*, most prominently in the film's staging of Hildegard's *The Play of Virtues*, a morality play set to music. This scene comes later in the film, once Hildegard and her nuns have left the monastery at Disibodenberg and established their own cloister at Rupertsberg, a move they undertook around 1150 in response to one of Hildegard's visions.²⁸ At Rupertsberg, Hildegard and her nuns were still under the male leadership of Disibodenberg, but the distance granted them a certain level of autonomy, even though they still needed a priest in order to take mass.²⁹ To this end, Hildegard persuaded Abbot Cuno of Disibodenberg to part with Volmar (Heino French), who she had worked closely with while there, and he joined Hildegard and her nuns a few years later.³⁰ With this historical context in place, let me turn to this sequence, which most clearly demonstrates the film's feminist stance, and does so primarily through music.

Immediately before *Vision* portrays *The Play of Virtues*, it shows Hildegard explaining the premise to her nuns. They will be performing the play for a guest of

honor, a magistra (Annemarie Durringer) from another cloister. She lets them know that the play will be about a soul being tempted by the Devil. One of the nuns asks, “Who will play the Devil?” Hildegard responds, “Our priest, Volmar. He’s the only one who may not sing.” Hildegard and the film exclude the man from the musical space by not allowing him to sing; moreover, all of the nuns will portray virtues, except Richardis, who will play the soul. With this brief introductory scene, *Vision* explicitly sets up *The Play of Virtues* as the spiritual experience of a woman who must resist the wiles of the male devil with the help of female virtues and Humility, the “queen of the virtues.”³¹ Visually and aurally stunning, the film’s staging of *The Play of Virtues* reinforces the women’s control over both registers of the cinematic experience. The sequence contrasts Volmar, dressed in black, with the rest of the nuns, dressed in white robes, surrounding him. Instead of veils, the nuns are wearing crowns of flowers, a striking rejection of their dress code that makes the subversion of this sequence stand out even more. Of course, the white robes represent virtue and purity, clashing with the black of Volmar’s robe, but also the dark blue of the visiting magistra, who will later castigate Hildegard for the immodesty of the play. The camera moves fluidly throughout the sequence, providing several close-ups of Hildegard and Richardis as they sing. The film also shows viewers the shocked reaction of the visiting magistra, an older woman, demonstrating the sheer boldness of the play’s performance. The sequence ends with the Devil being bound with a rope by the virtues and collapsing in the center

of the room, surrounded by women. He has, quite literally, been physically defeated by the power of song, a power he cannot access.

Coming from an unidentifiable source that may or may not be diegetic, the music in this sequence continues in its established pattern of inhabiting a liminal space between the diegetic and non-diegetic. The music starts very softly as Volmar yells angrily at Richardis, and as she starts to sing it begins to pick up in volume. While no diegetic source of this music can be seen in the sequence, its sparse instrumentation and sonic fit to the room's spatial characteristics make it plausible that the music could be coming from within the diegesis. The diegetic ambiguity of this music, much like the music in Hildegard's vision sequences, speaks to Hildegard's conceptions of spiritual experiences. *The Play of Virtues* speaks of souls and virtues, things that are traditionally thought of as existing in an abstract or a spiritual realm, yet Hildegard frequently adds "in the body" after "soul" ("soul in the body") in the character name in the play's text, suggesting that this soul and these virtues exist in relation to the material world.³² In *The Play of Virtues*, the woman's spiritual experience—aided by the virtues, Humility, and, of course, God—draws together her body and soul and questions a clear-cut separation between the two. Similarly, the ambiguous relationship of the music to this scene mixes the diegetic and non-diegetic in a way that mirrors the mingling of the body and soul performed in *The Play of Virtues*. Additionally, the characters in the film are bodily representing spiritual and/or abstract entities, a further commingling of

the “diegetic” levels, if you will. Furthermore, these diegetic instabilities are routinely connected to the woman’s voice, whether speaking or singing, and music, claiming the musical domain as one in which women’s spiritual experiences can be expressed without interference from men.

Vision’s insistent focus on the woman’s voice, music, and spiritual experience leads me to a deeper connection between the film’s treatment of the subject and film music more broadly. I will now briefly return to Callaway’s work to flesh out a concept that directly applies to *Vision*. For Callaway, film music operates outside the “representational constraint” of images, and, as a result, it “is far more effective in signifying that which lies beyond the limits of visual representation.”³³ From there, Callaway argues that “music does not ‘represent’ an ineffable presence...it is that presence.”³⁴ Coming from a Christian perspective, Callaway argues that the presence that “indwells,” to use a theological term, film music is the Holy Spirit, and that the audience can experientially “encounter the real presence of God” through film music.³⁵ Regardless of whether or not this idea holds true for or can be applied to all film music, I think this concept illuminates an interesting reading of *Vision*’s insistence on connecting spiritual experiences with the soundtrack. The characters within *Vision* exist in an explicitly Christian context and would see the Holy Spirit as an integral part of any spiritual experience, suggesting that the diegetic ambiguity of the music during those sequences indicates the Spirit’s presence for the characters. For example, the curious

(non)diegetic music that plays during Hildegard's vision could be heard as a diegetic expression of the Spirit's power manifested within her subjective position. While this idea provides a useful way of thinking about how the music functions for the characters, I am far more interested in Callaway's bolder claim that film music can usher its audience into a transcendent experience and how this might foster identification with feminine spirituality in *Vision*.

A mirroring of the audience's experience with the diegetic characters' experience happens throughout *Vision*, as I mentioned above when discussing *The Play of Virtues* and earlier when analyzing Hildegard's first vision. If this holds true here, then the expression of the Spirit's power in the diegetic characters' experience can be transferred to the audience's experience.³⁶ Within the specific context of *Vision*, the film draws on the ineffable presence of film music to suggest the work of the Spirit, a work that can be seen as explicitly feminine.³⁷ Within Christian thought, there is a strain of tradition, most recently taken up by Jurgen Moltmann, which identifies the Holy Spirit with feminine qualities. Moltmann argues that the feminine dimension of the Spirit was "lost in the patriarchal Roman empire," but that the language about the Spirit in the Hebrew and in several early Christian texts is decidedly feminine.³⁸ Taking this conception of the Holy Spirit and applying it to *Vision*, I would argue the film posits the Spirit as feminine and deeply present in the spiritual experiences of those within the film. The music in *Vision*, which contains the ineffable presence of the Spirit, draws the audience into

the experiences of Hildegard, much in the same way Hildegard saw the Spirit drawing her into her visionary experiences. Music is the domain of the women in *Vision*, because it is already the domain of a feminine presence that gives the diegetic characters and the audience the opportunity to have a transcendent experience. By its use of music, *Vision* more clearly brings this feminine aspect of spiritual experience into focus and creates an atmosphere in which women's spiritual experiences are validated precisely because they spring forth from this ineffable presence.

Vision uses both voice and music to grant Hildegard authority over the film and the film's narrative, connecting her experiences in the film with the real, historical authority she had in order to speak those visions. As mentioned earlier, Hildegard received permission to begin publishing her visions and teachings after appealing to Bernard of Clairvaux in a letter from 1146.³⁹ Bernard brought her writings to the attention of Pope Eugene at the Synod of Trier in 1147-48, and the Pope eventually granted Hildegard permission to publish her writings.⁴⁰ Highly unusual for the time, Hildegard was able to secure these endorsements due to the powerful testimonies of her visions. In the recording of her visions, Hildegard routinely refers to being spoken to by God, claiming authority to disseminate her teachings through the authority of God's voice. Invested with the authority of God, Hildegard would write about many different topics—theology, human sexuality, natural science, etc.—over the course of her life, bringing her insights into a number

of disciplines while always claiming the power to speak with the voice of the Lord. To demonstrate Hildegard's remarkable authority, *Vision* portrays Hildegard's knowledge in interesting visual manners and uses voice-overs to situate Hildegard in control of the narrative of the film.

As the film progresses and Hildegard gains authority and autonomy, *Vision* illustrates this authority by positioning her to take visual precedence in the frame, especially when she speaks to matters of religion and issues that appear in her writing. Perhaps the most intriguing example of this comes after the move to Rupertsberg and the completion of Hildegard's first volume of writing. Hildegard sits, centered in the frame, speaking her thoughts to Volmar, who is off-screen, as he listens to them and writes them down. *Vision* lingers on this shot of Hildegard for almost a minute, letting her speak without interruption, either from another voice or from a cut. In this moment, the content of Hildegard's discourse becomes just as important as the way it is framed, because Hildegard is talking about male and female sexuality. Here, the film formally grants Hildegard the authority to speak to this topic, one that, in her age, would certainly have been the purview of a male perspective. As a nun, Hildegard was celibate, yet this did not stop her from writing extensively on the subject of sexuality with full authority, as no topic was outside the scope of God's revelation. In contrast to the obvious nature of this scene, *Vision* tends to mark Hildegard's authority in visually subtle ways, elevating her in the frame or aligning the audience with her perspective through close-ups.

I will give two brief examples of these techniques before turning to the film's use of voice-overs. A clear example of Hildegard's elevation in the frame comes directly after *The Play of Virtues*, as the visiting magistra questions the modesty of the play. The sequence starts with both Hildegard and the magistra sitting down, but, given that relationship, Hildegard is shown as being higher in the frame, and the shots of the magistra—which are not quite over-the-shoulder shots, but still align with Hildegard's perspective—are angled as to look down on her slightly. In this scene, Hildegard argues with the magistra about a matter of Biblical interpretation: how women, especially those who are virgins and unmarried, should dress. As Hildegard begins to fully articulate her position, she stands up, elevating her presence in the frame, placing herself in a position of power and authority. Coming immediately after *The Play of the Virtues*, during which the visiting magistra was also sitting, Hildegard's standing defense of her interpretation of the Biblical commandments visually places her in the authoritative position.

Hildegard's confrontation with Abbot Cuno (Alexander Held) which takes place before the nuns' move to Rupertsberg illustrates the film's use of close-ups to encourage identification with Hildegard, thus portraying the story through her perspective. The confrontation, which in the film serves as the inciting incident for Hildegard's decision to move the cloister, comes after one of Hildegard's nuns commits suicide upon finding out that she is pregnant and will have to leave the cloister. Hildegard informs Cuno that "the living light" has appeared to her in a

vision and told her to leave Disibodenberg for the sake of her nuns' purity and the purity of the monks. As their conversation escalates, the shots progressively move closer to each character, intensifying the emotion of the scene. However, the film frames Hildegard in close-up more consistently than Cuno, and also moves in closer to her face at particularly incisive moments, in a shot that places her eyes and mouth at the upper and lower limits of the frame. This shot is not quite an extreme close-up, but is closer than a normal close-up. Speaking of the dead nun, Cuno remarks, "I hope that God sent her to the darkest corner of Hell." Hildegard replies, her face presented in the shot I just described, "And what do you hope for your brother? The Kingdom of Heaven?" Hildegard speaks with authority into this situation, revealing the sexual double standard that applies to men and women even to this day, and the film encourages viewers to identify with Hildegard's outrage by positioning the camera to take full advantage of her emotion. Likewise, the film's voice-overs position viewers to experience *Vision* through Hildegard's perspective, even before they are ever introduced to Hildegard as an adult.

Vision's opening credits roll over a procession of horses and people through the woods, before the camera focuses on a young girl, riding on a horse with a man behind her. A voice-over speaks of a young girl, Hildegard, who "would understand the language of plants, stones, and animals and with her heart recognize the signs that are revealed to a few." The voice tells the audience this is the voice of the adult Hildegard, speaking of herself in the third person, commenting on the scene from

what Michel Chion calls “the acousmatic field,” a shadowy space that seems to exist inside and outside of the diegesis.⁴¹ Before we ever hear Hildegard’s adult voice attached to her body, *Vision* has set her up as the film’s storyteller, so much so that she comments on her own life in the third person. For Chion, the “being” (which he calls the “acousmètre”) that speaks in that field that straddles diegetic boundaries has certain powers—many of which are associated with God—when speaking from that place: “ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence.”⁴² Thus, from the onset of the film, *Vision* posits, with just one voice-over, that Hildegard can speak with the authority of God, drawing on the powers this voice possesses as an acousmètre. Even though Hildegard will eventually become an “already visualized acousmètre” and lose some of these powers, every time her voice speaks in voice-over, it retains some of the acousmètre’s power, especially when connected with her position within the diegesis as a messenger of God.⁴³ One of the film’s most powerful uses of voice-over occurs near the end of the film and will serve as my final illustration from *Vision*, as it brings together the various elements I have discussed in this article for one last example of spiritual identification.

In this scene, the nuns and Volmar surround Hildegard, and she appears to be on her deathbed. Volmar performs his priestly duties, but as he does so, music softly begins to play in the background—suddenly, Hildegard’s voice breaks into the sonic landscape, describing her current state. She speaks in voice-over, perhaps

lending her voice to the closing of the film and her life, just as her voice opened it, but curiously the film then cuts to a few shots that slowly pan the faces of the nuns surrounding her, as the color of the scene shifts, reminiscent of one of Hildegard's earlier vision sequences. Hildegard continues, describing a vision that would appear to be happening to her at this moment, if the shifts in color and the elliptical movement of the camera represent a visionary state. The music fades, the color returns to normal, and Hildegard opens her eyes, as she has still divine work to pursue. In this sequence, the diegetically ambiguous music, shifts in perspective, and voice-over all return to mark one more subjective religious experience, bringing the audience into Hildegard's perspective once again. Fittingly, this scene leads into one where Hildegard informs Volmar she will be going on a preaching tour, regardless of what the religious leaders say, making her "the first woman" to do so. With that, *Vision* ends on an explicitly feminist note, suggesting that even if the historical Hildegard cannot be seen as feminist, her character in the film definitely can be.

I now return to the question I posed at the beginning of this article: what happens when feminist filmmaking takes religion seriously? While I would not want to extrapolate too broadly, given that I only considered one film, I think that *Vision* demonstrates several larger themes I would expect to see in other similar films that positively approach religion from a feminist perspective. First, a feminist take on cinematic religion will be deeply invested in the subjective spiritual

experiences of its protagonist, but the film will not separate those experiences out from more “objective” forms of religious experience. In doing so, a feminist religious film will resist the old stereotypes that label women’s spiritual experiences as purely subjective in order to devalue or discredit them. Second, the film’s formal characteristics will tend toward the unconventional, particularly if the film seeks to bring its audience into the woman’s spiritual experience. In *Vision*, this takes the form of subjective camera work and interesting intersections of music and image, but it may look different in a different film. Third, the film will give spiritual authority to its protagonist, whether explicitly in the diegesis or through formal decisions, and allow her to tell her own story. *Vision* exhibits all of these elements and offers a productive dialogue between feminism and religion that suggests a woman’s spiritual experiences, even within an intensely patriarchal society, can be positive and lead to change. As *Vision* demonstrates, the cinema offers myriad possibilities for women’s spiritual experiences to be valued and expressed, carving out a space where women can freely speak—or sing—with authority.

¹ Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013), 153.

² I want to add the caveat here that I will not be pursuing an auteuristic reading of *Vision*; however, given von Trotta's long career and interactions with feminism and feminist filmmaking, a certain level of attention has to be paid to her role in the filmmaking process and the themes of her previous films.

³ Susan Kress and Robert Boyers, "Trying to Make a Film: A Conversation with Margarethe von Trotta," *Salmagundi* 164/165 (2009): 127.

⁴ Renate Hehr, *Margarethe von Trotta: Filmmaking as Liberation*, trans. Ilze Klavina (Stuttgart and London: Axel Menges, 2000), 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 171.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁸ Jantzen, *Power*, 158; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Visionary Women: Three Medieval Mystics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 10.

⁹ Jantzen, *Power*, 159.

¹⁰ Ruether, *Visionary Women*, 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 11-15.

¹⁴ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 206.

¹⁵ Fiona Maddocks, *Hildegard of Bingen: The Woman of Her Age* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 51-54.

¹⁶ The music could also be inhabiting both diegetic and non-diegetic zones simultaneously, given music's ability to move between these borders quite easily, something various film sound scholars have noted. For example, see Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 80-82.

¹⁷ Maddocks, *Hildegard*, 58.

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- ¹⁸ Rosemary Drage Hale, “‘Taste and see, for God is sweet’: Sensory Perception and Memory in Medieval Christian Experience,” in *Vox Mystica: Essays on Medieval Mysticism in Honor of Professor Valerie M. Lagorio*, eds. Anne Clark Bartlett, et al. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995), 3.
- ¹⁹ Mary Ann Doane, “The Voice in Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space,” in *Film Theory & Criticism*, 7th ed., eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 329-30.
- ²⁰ Maddocks, *Hildegard*, 193-95.
- ²¹ Maddocks, *Hildegard*, 191-92.
- ²² *Ibid*, 198.
- ²³ Kutter Callaway, *Scoring Transcendence: Contemporary Film Music as Religious Experience* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 131-32.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, 137.
- ²⁵ Callaway, *Scoring*, 139.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, 148.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, 148-52.
- ²⁸ Maddocks, *Hildegard*, 92.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*, 96.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*.
- ³¹ Hildegard of Bingen, *Hildegard of Bingen: Selected Writings*, trans. Mark Atherton (New York: Penguin, 2001), 57.
- ³² Hildegard, *Hildegard*, 58-60.
- ³³ Callaway, *Scoring*, 173.
- ³⁴ *Ibid*.
- ³⁵ *Ibid*, 172.
- ³⁶ Here, Vivian Sobchack and her ideas in *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of the Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) become instructive. In Sobchack’s terms, the audience would be gaining access to the film’s perception of these spiritual experiences and entering into an intersubjective relationship with the film’s perceiving/expressing body, a deeper connection than mere identification (see 307-8).
- ³⁷ I am holding to the Christian language that Callaway uses here mainly due to the Christian context of *Vision*. I see no reason, however, why his work cannot be applied to other religious

traditions that have similar concepts or to a larger understanding of transcendence and spirituality in film music.

³⁸ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: An Universal Affirmation*, 3rd ed., trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 157-58.

³⁹ Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Eherman, trans., *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen: Volume 1* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 27.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 32.

⁴¹ Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 21-23.

⁴² Chion, *The Voice*, 24.

⁴³ Ibid, 21.

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