

**Stefanie Knauss**

## **Lovers, Leaders, Fighters: Issues of Gender in Films about Female Mystics**

### **Introduction**

Female mystics have often inspired the creative imagination through their lives, works, and the traces they have left in both Christian and secular culture. Through numerous films, cinema has contributed its share of recreations of the lives of female mystics. In this article, I will take a closer look at three of them: *Thérèse* by Alain Cavalier, 1986; *The Messenger – The Story of Joan of Arc* by Luc Besson, 1999; *Vision – Aus dem Leben der Hildegard von Bingen* by Margarethe von Trotta, 2009. I am particularly interested in how these films refer to issues of gender in their representations of female mystics, and how their treatment of these issues relates to recent research on gender and mysticism.

With S. Brent Plate, I suggest that film, religion and culture are closely connected through the fact that both religion and film attempt to re-create the world: they don't just mimic the world, but actively reshape its elements as they create a new vision of it.<sup>1</sup> In their efforts at re-creation, films and religions exhibit a complex relationship with the cultural context in which they are situated: in creating alternative visions of the world, they are set apart from culture, yet they cannot completely separate from it, and draw on it in their stories and images. With regard to historical films, such as the films I have chosen for this paper, this means that any attempt at finding historical "reality" in films will fail: the Joan of Arc we encounter in film is not the Joan who lived nearly 600 years ago, but rather the vision that a filmmaker may have of her. The deviations from historical material we might find in films should therefore not be dismissed as unhistorical, but rather taken seriously as an opportunity to learn more about the vision of the world that this film wants to present to its viewers and about the world in which it was created. To look at how these films treat issues of gender will therefore likely teach us less about how these issues impacted the mystics

---

<sup>1</sup> S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World* (Wallflower: London 2008), 1.

historically, and more about how our society (still) struggles with gender, particularly within the context of religion.

### **Mysticism and Gender**

Although mystical experience is *per se* gender-indifferent, as Alison Weber indicates, “gender has had a profound impact on the perception of individual mystics and has played a fundamental role in determining how those individuals are remembered. Furthermore, gender roles have shaped the performance of mysticism”.<sup>2</sup> Gender studies in mysticism have especially contributed to the critique of gendered binaries and essentialisms, such as the “easy correlation of affective or corporeal mysticism with women or a putatively speculative mysticism with men”.<sup>3</sup>

I will briefly outline three issues in studies of gender and mysticism that are important for the films I discuss below, namely theories of female nature, the role of body in mysticism, and the issue of sexuality. According to medieval anthropology, female nature was inherently passive, and women’s bodies more porous than men’s. While generally this view of femininity had negative consequences, in the context of mysticism it had a positive effect, because the nature of women made them ideal receptacles for God’s message and therefore prone to mystical experiences.<sup>4</sup> It was through their mystical visions and close relationship with God, not through ordination and office as for men,<sup>5</sup> that women could achieve authority within their community, and from their position as God’s mouthpiece were able to criticize political and ecclesial authorities.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it was important for women to form alliances with

---

<sup>2</sup> Alison Weber, “Gender,” in: Amy Hollywood / Patricia Z. Beckman (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2012), 315-327, here 315. See also Janet K. Ruffing RSM, “Introduction,” in: Janet K. Ruffing RSM (ed.), *Mysticism and Social Transformation* (Syracuse University Press: Syracuse 2001), 1-25, here 6.

<sup>3</sup> Amy Hollywood, “Introduction,” in: Amy Hollywood / Patricia Z. Beckman (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2012), 1-34, here 29; Weber, “Gender,” 316.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hollywood, “Introduction,” 17-18; Veerle Fraeters, “*Visio/Vision*,” in: Amy Hollywood / Patricia Z. Beckman (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2012), 178-188, here 183.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Fraeters, “*Visio/Vision*,” 183-184. See also Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1987), 34-35.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*. Translated by Joseph L. Baird / Radd K. Ehrman (Oxford University Press: New York 1994), 1: 68-69 (Letter 17, Hildegard to Philip, Archbishop of Cologne, 1170-1173).

men, especially clergy, who would support them and vouch for their orthodoxy.<sup>7</sup> As Weber shows, these female-male networks worked not only as support or control systems for women, but could also provide spaces for men to construct their spiritual identity in the relationship with a woman whom they considered their spiritual superior.<sup>8</sup>

The close association of women and body often led to a greater emphasis on the somatic miracles experienced by women, such as food miracles, levitations or mystical pregnancies. Caroline Walker Bynum has offered a functional explanation for this fact, namely that the sphere of body and provisions for the body in the shape of food and care were specifically women's domains in the Middle Ages and thus a field where it was easiest for them to exercise control.<sup>9</sup> However, as the same author has also shown, women were able to give symbolic meaning to their bodies, interpreting them as a path towards the imitation of Christ precisely through an identification of their own bodiliness with Christ's humanity.<sup>10</sup> Pointing out that male mystics can show a similar insistence on the body, Patricia Dailey suggests that references to corporeality should not be read only as a consequence of the mystic's gender, but rather as an expression of the signifying capacity of body as a symbol for a variety of issues, from Christ's humanity to human power relations to forms of knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

Such a development from an essentializing reading to one that questions the gender binary is also noticeable in the discussion of sexuality and mysticism. The sexual language of numerous texts by female mystics, often inspired by the Song of Songs, has led to interpretations that either attempt to eliminate the sexual element by understanding it as a metaphor for spiritual experiences, or to ignore the religious element by taking the sexual references as signs of "profane" experiences devoid of any spiritual significance.<sup>12</sup> Constance Furey has

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Fraeters, "Visio/Vision," 183.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Weber, "Gender," 325.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (University of California Press: Berkeley 1987).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (Zone: New York 1991), 129-134.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Patricia Dailey, "The Body and Its Senses," in: Amy Hollywood / Patricia Z. Beckman (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2012), 264-276, here 273-276.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Constance M. Furey, "Sexuality," in: Amy Hollywood / Patricia Z. Beckman (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2012), 328-340, here 330.

pointed out that the modern understanding of sex as “plotted along a grid with the dichotomy of heterosexuality or homosexuality on one axis, and abstinence or intercourse on the other”<sup>13</sup> does not do justice to the medieval view of sex as being both bodily and spiritual, an occasion when the unity between the two can be experienced. While the insight that sexual experiences of union can have spiritual meaning is important, Amy Hollywood cautions that it was often the male secretaries or confessors of female mystics who underlined the sexual dimension of their experiences, thus further reinforcing the sexualization and fetishization of their bodies.<sup>14</sup> In such a critical perspective, sexual language can be seen to point towards the capacity of the body to realize intersubjectivity by both delimiting and transcending boundaries – those between bodies, genders, and even those between immanence and transcendence.<sup>15</sup>

As Alison Weber concludes, “mysticism has been remarkably protean in its capacity to challenge and confirm traditional gender roles, to open and foreclose opportunities for women, and to uplift and denigrate them.”<sup>16</sup> In the next section, I will analyze the representation of female mystics in film in order to see what role they attribute to gender in the performance of mysticism.

## Female Mystics in Film

### *Thérèse*

Alain Cavalier’s film tells the story of the Carmelite Thérèse of Lisieux, drawing mainly on her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*.<sup>17</sup> The film is highly unusual in its minimalist aesthetics: all scenes are set indoors in front of uniform, mostly black, grey or brown backgrounds and only minimal props are used in order to establish the various settings of Thérèse’s home, the Carmel and other stations of her life.<sup>18</sup> Instead of attempting to capture Thérèse’s personality as a mystic through a realistic representation of external events, the film attempts to evoke the internal, spiritual dimension of her life through

---

<sup>13</sup> Furey, “Sexuality,” 331; see also footnote 11.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechtild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Furey, “Sexuality,” 332.

<sup>16</sup> Weber, “Gender,” 327.

<sup>17</sup> Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*. Translated and edited by Robert J. Edmonson (Paraclete Press: Brewster 2006).

<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the film see Mary Bryden, “Saints and Stereotypes: The Case of Thérèse of Lisieux,” in: *Literature & Theology* 13.1 (1999), 1-16.

symbolic objects, quotations from the Song of Songs, and representative biographical vignettes, relying heavily on the acting abilities of the cast.

Thérèse is represented as living an intimate love relationship with Christ in the small aspects of her everyday life, not in contrast to it or beyond it, following what in her autobiography she describes as her “little way”.<sup>19</sup> Her love of Christ is not exalted, but a real possibility, which she explains in everyday terms, such as when she turns toward the cross fastened to her pillow and fans it, saying that “he” was feeling a little lonely there. Such a scene also shows that it is entirely possible to be a saint and have a good sense of humor – something that only those who have not yet seen photos of Thérèse with a slightly mischievous smile on her lips or read the “wedding invitation” she wrote for her profession, in which “Almighty God, Creator of Heaven and earth [...] and the Very glorious Virgin Mary” invite the guests to participate in the wedding of their son with Sister Thérèse, would find surprising.<sup>20</sup>

The most obvious gender-related aspect of the film refers to the patriarchal structures within which women have to try to find the space to live their spirituality. Although the Carmel is a women’s convent, and interactions with all persons from the outside, especially men, are conducted through a grille or from behind a curtain, it is men who have the power to decide over the admission of young Thérèse to the Carmel, forcing her to fight her way through the whole ecclesial hierarchy from the priest in charge of the Carmel to the highest power in the church, the pope. The film makes a point of depicting each interview with the next higher decision-making power in a sequence, underlining the hierarchical relationships among these men, and the fact that in relation to each of them Thérèse is subordinate to their power, not only according to ecclesial structures, but also physically when her grip of the pope’s robe is loosened forcibly and the sound of her being dragged away is heard in the off. But the film also shows that Thérèse has a male ally in her father who supports her vocation, although it means that he will lose his daughter, thus undercutting the all too simplistic binary between powerful men and powerless women.

When Thérèse enters the Carmel, she seems to be freed from the conventional expectations of women’s role in society: as her bridal dress is taken off and replaced by her habit, her bridal bouquet (which she negligently swings around

---

<sup>19</sup> Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, 230-231.

<sup>20</sup> Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, 188-189.

as she moves through a dark transitory space from where she said farewell to her family to the interior of the Carmel) taken away, and her hair cut off, Thérèse moves to a space where she will live her love for Christ according to another set of rules entirely. Expressions of humility – in her lifestyle, relationships with her Mother Superior, etc. – are now no longer the result of her being “naturally” inferior as a woman, but rather because when faced with God’s grace, nothing but humility is the appropriate reaction for all human beings. Nevertheless, the film points toward ways in which gender relationships are still a part of convent life, most notably in the prohibition of any contact between men and the sisters, for example when Thérèse is examined by a doctor through the grille. Even the world of the convent is not free from gender conventions.

In a move that is reminiscent of how earlier mystics described their loving union with God, the film draws heavily on the Song of Songs with numerous direct quotations from the text, which are not found to this extent in Thérèse’s autobiography. Is the erotic language of the Song here used by a male director to represent a fetishized, sexualized image of a mystic, as mentioned earlier? I would argue that this is not the case, because the quotations are delivered by different characters, thus inhibiting the viewer’s exclusive attention on Thérèse. By placing the characters in front of a uniform, subdued background, the film achieves a visual contrast between these settings and the passionate sexuality described in the texts, avoiding the sexualization of specific bodies. The quotations of the Song then succeed in underlining the unity of spiritual and embodied experiences of God’s love that characterize Thérèse’s mysticism without making her a sexualized spectacle.

While ascetic practices, including bodily self-mortification, play an important role for many female mystics, the film emphasizes that they are not important for Thérèse; in fact, she is contrasted with other sisters who use practices of mortification to work through personal and spiritual weaknesses. Only in a scene set during her final illness is she shown to struggle with the suffering her illness causes, until she is able to overcome it. The point that the film makes here is not that suffering is an end in itself, but rather that Thérèse can overcome suffering by embracing it: significantly, the scene concludes with Thérèse saying “I don’t suffer anymore”.

The film refers most obviously to the power issues and presumptions about gender roles which are present even in the convent. In drawing on the language of the Song of Songs, and referring to issues of asceticism, the film introduces the theme of embodied mystical experiences without essentializing tendencies, because it avoids the fetishization of suffering or desiring female bodies.

### *The Messenger*

Luc Besson's costume/action drama, with its attempt at a realistic recreation of Joan of Arc's life, can be seen as the polar opposite of Cavalier's minimalist style. The film emphasizes the battle scenes, which are filmed and cut in a way to induce an adrenaline rush in viewers, and supernatural occurrences like Joan's visions. Overall, it follows the sequence of events as it is laid out in the documents of Joan's trial, with some creative freedom in the details. The most obvious departure from these documents is a sequence set during Joan's childhood in which her village is raided by the English and her sister killed and raped by a soldier while Joan is forced to watch this traumatic event from her hiding place. Also, the director introduces a mysterious figure, the "Conscience", that appears during Joan's imprisonment and trial. This figure questions her visions and actions again and again, more insistently even than her judges, until in the end she confesses that the Voices she heard told her what she wanted to hear, that she fought the war against the English not in God's name, but in her own in order to avenge her sister's death.

The film's departures from what is known about Joan's life and motivations serve to put into doubt the authenticity of her mystical visions, raising the question that was often asked of women: is this a mystic or is she mad? The latter view is further underlined by the representation of Joan as extremely high-strung, frantic, and obsessive. In one scene she is shown as a child, sneaking into the village church at night during a thunderstorm in order to grab the eucharistic chalice and gulp down the wine until it drips over her chin and leaves her looking rather like a madwoman or vampire. Joan's visions are depicted explicitly, using fast-forwards, unusual camera-angles, sound-effects and other elements to render them supernatural; yet there are also suggestions that they might have their origin in Joan when the film shows her lips move along with the Voice that speaks to her. Therese Sanders suggests that the film attempts to maintain the tension between Joan, the messenger of God, and Joan, the psychotic.<sup>21</sup> Although I would agree with Sander's basic conviction that a person's psychiatric troubles do not exclude her from having intense religious experiences – indeed, the diagnosis "hysteria" was often an easy way to disqualify women from having a voice in religious or social matters –,<sup>22</sup> I am less sure that the film succeeds in representing the "both/and" because of its sustained vision of Joan as a troubled woman

---

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Therese Sanders, *Celluloid Saints: Images of Sanctity in Film* (Mercer University Press: Macon 2002), 207-209.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Sanders, *Celluloid Saints*, 194-195.

and, most importantly, because of Joan's final confession of having seen and heard what she wanted to, rather than what God told her.

Another issue relating to gender in this film is the disturbing fact of Joan's female body. When she arrives at the dauphin's court to deliver her message for him, she has to undergo several tests to affirm her credibility, one of them an examination of her virginity. The film takes its time to show in detail how a cubicle is set up for the exam in the middle of a large room, how the observers take their seats, how the elderly woman performing the exam washes her hands, and how finally Joan is led in, examined, and proclaimed "intact". Although the film does not go into detail about how a woman's body was perceived in those times, it becomes clear that the mere fact that Joan is a woman, and yet claims religious authority, something acknowledged only in men, is troubling. Exerting control over her body by examining her virginity is thus a way for the men at court to reclaim authority. It is also an expression of anxiety about women's sexuality: a woman no longer sexually "pure" would have been considered an unworthy recipient of God's message.<sup>23</sup>

Joan herself also uses her body in order to negotiate issues of power and gender: when she feels disregarded by the officers of her army because she is just a girl, she cuts off her hair so that by molding her body into a more masculine shape she might make it easier for her officers to listen to her. Authority is shown to be incorporated in bodies, especially male bodies; it is not simply a matter of military expertise or spiritual superiority. The discrepancies of gender inscribed into Joan's body – her femininity, especially her virginity, and yet her short hair, male clothing, military and spiritual authority – are an essential part of what she is accused of: this gender blurring means that she lives against nature and thus against God's law; her "queer" body is a sign of her errors and heretical convictions.<sup>24</sup> In the film, the English finally ensure Joan's execution by making her wear men's clothes again after her relapse, thus creating a reason to condemn her and underlining that patriarchal control is exerted specifically as control over a woman's body. Yet scenes at the dauphin's court also show that it is not only men who support and profit from

---

<sup>23</sup> In fact, Joan of Arc herself denied a married woman participation in her campaign and rejected her claims to have received visions; see Anne Llewyn Barstow, "Joan of Arc and Female Mysticism," in: *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1.1 (1985), 29-42, here 38.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. T. Douglas Murray (ed.), *Jeanne d'Arc, Maid of Orleans, Deliverer of France: Being the Story of Her Life, Her Achievements, and Her Death, as Attested on Oath and Set Forth in the Original Documents* (McClure: New York 1902), 135, 139.



patriarchal power and its gendered hierarchies: the dauphin's mother-in-law ably uses these power structures to exert political influence, even if that means sacrificing Joan when she is politically no longer profitable.

*The Messenger* is an interesting example of the perennial doubts, voiced especially *vis-à-vis* women, regarding the origins of mystical experiences, and thus questions the authority women derive from these experiences. Furthermore, it is interesting in its critique of how patriarchal control is acted out through the control of women's (and men's) bodies. The attention that male authors of works about female mystics paid to their bodily states, as mentioned above, could be seen as a facet of this exercise of power over bodies.

### *Vision – Aus dem Leben der Hildegard von Bingen*

Margarethe von Trotta's film is a "realistic" costume drama of Hildegard's life and her role as *magistra* (head of her sisters without the official title of an abbess), with all its accompanying administrative, political and personal conflicts. Her theological insights, apocalyptic visions and scientific achievements, which have probably been more important in establishing her authority than her administrative skills,<sup>25</sup> are treated more briefly in a few representative scenes. Her mystical experiences are visualized only once: in a cloudy sky, a burning light appears that shapes into an eye and then into a strong ray of light, which flows through her brain, breast and heart, warming rather than burning her. At other points throughout the film, visions are quoted in order to legitimate her decisions or claims, for example her demand to move with her sisters to a monastery of her own.

Throughout the film, a number of issues are treated that are relevant to gender, especially Hildegard's continued struggle against men and their authority, such as her abbot who poses resistance to her initiatives wherever he can (not least by keeping control over the properties endowed to her community). Other scenes that serve to underline the forces that Hildegard is up against as a woman in a men's world show her when she is questioned about the origins of her visions in a shot-counter-shot sequence which clearly opposes the men to the woman (although she has two male supporters of her own, her secretary Volmar and her abbot), and when she writes to Bernard of Clairvaux (a known misogynist, as Volmar helpfully remarks, in case viewers

---

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Michael Embach, "Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179): A History of Reception," in: Beverly Maine Kienzle / Debra L. Stoudt / George Ferzoco (eds.), *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen* (Brill: Leiden 2014), 273-304, here 276.

might not be familiar with this figure) to ask for his approval of her visions. She is shown to cleverly use conventions of her time, like that of the weak woman, to assert her position as recipient of God's visions, and not to shrink from carving out new roles for her as a woman, for example when she decides at the end of the film to go on a preaching tour, something highly unusual for a woman at the time. The film seems to employ the theme of male resistance as a dramaturgical device that allows Hildegard to show her strength of character, spiritual superiority and political acumen: negotiating patriarchal power, gathering allies in the highest places and not least, using charismatic events like mysterious illnesses (and miraculous recoveries) to make her point, she is portrayed as "a proto-feminist force to be reckoned with", as film critic Stephen Holden writes.<sup>26</sup> Yet the film also puts a question mark behind the spiritual authority she is claiming through such charismatic events: her recovery, occurring promptly after her wish to move her sisters away to another convent is granted, or the visions she is able to cite to legitimate unusual behavior, are represented as a little too convenient to be convincing.

As often in relation to female mystics, the film discusses the role of body in spirituality, and in particular, Hildegard's positions regarding bodily mortification and ascetic practices, as well as her holistic view of the human being. She is shown as being firmly opposed to extreme self-mortification, underlining that good works are more pleasing to God. Yet she does not hold that the body be excluded from spiritual matters, because body and soul closely interact, as she explains in the context of a lecture on the healing powers of herbs and how to treat the sick: only when the soul is healed, can the body follow, and thus music to cure the soul is just as important as herbs for the body. In a society in which women are associated with their (inferior) bodies, and men with their (superior) minds, this view of the closely connected, if not unified, body and mind has important implications regarding the social position of women. Thus the film clearly establishes Hildegard as one of the inspirations of contemporary (feminist) efforts to develop a more holistic view of the human being and, consequently, a more equal society.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Holden, "Vision (2009): A Multitasking Nun in Medieval Germany," in: *The New York Times*, 12 October 2010 ([http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/13/movies/13vision.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/13/movies/13vision.html?_r=0), 04 September 2014).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body: A Theology of Embodiment* (Continuum: New York 1995).

Finally, the film pays particular attention to Hildegard's personal relationships with her nuns, especially Jutta and Richardis, raising the issue of feminine companionship and love. Jutta, who joined the convent together with Hildegard at a very young age, is shown to be envious of Hildegard because she feels that their *magistra*, Jutta of Sponheim, preferred Hildegard to herself – something not confirmed in Jutta's biography –,<sup>28</sup> a feeling that seems to accompany her throughout her life. Although Jutta does support Hildegard in her endeavours, the envy that Hildegard knows Jutta harbors colors their relationship and prevents a perfectly open exchange between them. It is maybe not surprising then that Hildegard attaches herself to a young nun, Richardis: clearly younger than Hildegard, the issue of competition does not arise between the two as with Jutta, and the younger woman is obviously a kindred spirit with whom Hildegard can exchange her thoughts. Their relationship is represented as intense and exclusive; and equally intense is the rupture when Richardis is elected abbess elsewhere and has to leave the convent (and Hildegard). In the film, Richardis is shown as being quite eager to accept her election, and Hildegard perceives this selfishly as a betrayal of their friendship, rather than as a chance for Richardis to grow. Although the film suggests that the intensity of their relationship borders on love,<sup>29</sup> it does not hint at a sexual dimension of this love, and thus wisely abstains from making the intimate relationship between the two women a sexualized spectacle.

Like the other two films, *Vision* underlines male resistance against the authority of female mystics, using this resistance as an occasion for Hildegard to emerge as a highly unusual, admirable woman with original theological and scientific ideas which may have the potential to change gendered relationships.

## Conclusion

The films represent a broad range of approaches to the representation of female mystics, from minimalist arthouse cinema to action film to costume drama, and from the symbolic evocation of the mystic's interior life to the focus on exterior events. The films' analysis shows that in all three, the struggle of women against patriarchal powers that attempt to silence their voices is

---

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Barbara Newman, "'Sybil of the Rhine': Hildegard's Life and Times," in: Barbara Newman (ed.), *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1998), 1-29, here 6.

<sup>29</sup> See Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 143-144 (Letter 64, Hildegard to Abbess Richardis, 1151-152).

represented as one of the most important issues related to gender. Also, the issue of body, society and religion appears to be important: they discuss for example the role of self-mortification (*Thérèse*), a unified vision of body and mind (*Vision*), the need for masculine control over the female body (*The Messenger*), and the attempt to integrate bodily with spiritual experiences (*Thérèse*). Interestingly, *The Messenger* and *Vision* question – although with different intensity – the divine origin of the visions and miracles that legitimate the authority of Joan and Hildegard, preferring to represent these women as strong women who stand up against social conventions rather than as women whose authority is grounded in a divine source. The integration of spirituality and gender that is evoked in *Thérèse*, especially through its references to the Song of Songs, seems unacceptable to the other two films that focus on gender as a “problem” to be resolved on the social plane, and see religion as an obstacle to this resolution rather than as a potential resource.

Este artículo aborda tres películas sobre místicas, *Thérèse* de Alain Cavalier (1986); *El Mensajero – La historia de Juana de Arco* de Luc Besson (1999); *Vision – Aus dem Leben der Hildegard von Bingen* de Margarethe von Trotta (2009), con un interés particular en la forma en que estas películas se refieren a las cuestiones de género en sus representaciones de místicas, y cómo su tratamiento de estos temas se relaciona con la investigación reciente sobre el género y el misticismo. El análisis de las películas muestra que en las tres la lucha de las mujeres contra los poderes patriarcales que intentan acallar sus voces se representa como una de las cuestiones más importantes relacionadas con el género. Además, el problema del cuerpo, la sociedad y la religión parece ser importante: ellos discuten por ejemplo, el papel de la auto-mortificación (*Thérèse*), una visión unificada del cuerpo y la mente (*Vision*), la necesidad de control masculino sobre el cuerpo femenino (*El Mensajero*), y el intento de integrar lo corporal con las experiencias espirituales (*Thérèse*). Curiosamente, *El Mensajero* y *Vision* cuestionan el origen divino de las visiones y milagros que legitiman la autoridad de Joan y Hildegard, prefiriendo representar a estas mujeres como mujeres fuertes que se defienden contra las convenciones sociales en vez de querer ganar su autoridad a través de una fuente divina. La integración de la espiritualidad y de género evocado en *Thérèse* parece inaceptable para las otras dos películas que se centran en el género como un “problema” que resolver en el plano social, y ven la religión como un obstáculo para su resolución, y no como un recurso potencial.

This article discusses three films about female mystics, *Thérèse* by Alain Cavalier (1986); *The Messenger – The Story of Joan of Arc* by Luc Besson (1999); *Vision – Aus dem Leben der Hildegard von Bingen* by Margarethe von Trotta (2009), with a particular interest in how these films refer to issues of gender in their representations of female mystics, and how their treatment of these issues relates to recent research on

gender and mysticism. The films' analysis shows that in all three, the struggle of women against patriarchal powers that attempt to silence their voices is represented as one of the most important issues related to gender. Also, the issue of body, society and religion appears to be important: they discuss for example the role of self-mortification (*Thérèse*), a unified vision of body and mind (*Vision*), the need for masculine control over the female body (*The Messenger*), and the attempt to integrate bodily with spiritual experiences (*Thérèse*). Interestingly, *The Messenger* and *Vision* question the divine origin of the visions and miracles that legitimate the authority of Joan and Hildegard, preferring to represent these women as strong women who stand up against social conventions rather than as gaining their authority from a divine source. The integration of spirituality and gender evoked in *Thérèse* seems unacceptable to the other two films that focus on gender as a "problem" to be resolved on the social plane, and see religion as an obstacle to this resolution, rather than as a potential resource.

In diesem Beitrag werden drei Filme über Mystikerinnen diskutiert, *Thérèse* von Alain Cavalier (1986); *The Messenger – The Story of Joan of Arc* von Luc Besson (1999); *Vision – Aus dem Leben der Hildegard von Bingen* von Margarethe von Trotta (2009). Dabei steht die Frage im Vordergrund, wie die drei Filme in ihrer Darstellung der Mystikerinnen Gender-Problematiken thematisieren und wie sie dabei auf aktuelle Forschung zu Mystik und Gender Bezug nehmen. Die Filmanalyse zeigt, dass in allen drei Filmen die Auseinandersetzung der Frauen mit patriarchaler Macht, die ihre Stimmen zum Verstummen bringen will, als zentrales Thema in Bezug auf Gender dargestellt wird. Auch die Verbindung von Körper, Gesellschaft und Religion erscheint wichtig: Sie diskutieren zum Beispiel die Rolle von Selbstgeißelung (*Thérèse*), die Vision von Geist und Körper als Einheit (*Vision*), die männliche Kontrolle weiblicher Körper (*The Messenger*), und den Versuch, körperliche und geistliche Erfahrungen ineinander zu integrieren (*Thérèse*). Interessanterweise stellen sowohl *The Messenger* als auch *Vision* den göttlichen Ursprung der Visionen und Wunder, die Johannes und Hildegards Autorität legitimieren, in Frage und stellen sie lieber als starke Frauen dar, die gegen gesellschaftliche Konventionen ankämpfen, statt als Frauen, deren Autorität einer göttlichen Quelle entspringt. Die Integration von Spiritualität und Gender, die in *Thérèse* versucht wird, scheint für die anderen beiden Filme inakzeptabel; sie fokussieren auf Gender als "Problem", das auf einer sozialen Ebene gelöst werden muss, und sehen Religion eher als Hindernis für diese Lösung und nicht als mögliche Resource.

**Stefanie Knauss** is assistant professor of theology at Villanova University (USA). Her research focuses on culture and theology, gender issues in religion, and body in religion. Recent publications: *More than a Provocation: Sexuality, Media and Theology* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), and (edited with A.D. Ornella and A.-K. Höpflinger): *Commun(ica)ting Bodies: Body as a Medium in Religious Symbol Systems* (Pano/Nomos 2014).