

SCREEN INTERNATIONAL

‘The Book Of Vision’: Venice Review

BY NIKKI BAUGHAN 4 SEPTEMBER 2020

Venice Critics Week opens with a ‘wilfully enigmatic film’ clearly influenced by EP Terrence Malick’s work



SOURCE: VENICE CRITICS’ WEEK

‘THE BOOK OF VISION’

Dir: Carlo Hintermann. Italy-UK-Belgium. 2020. 95mins

Straddling the past and the present, and weaving ideas of physiology, psychology and spiritualism, *The Book Of Vision* is a bold and uncompromising feature debut from Italian documentarian Carlo Hintermann. Following the fractured experiences of a young female doctor as her research into 18th century medicine chimes with her own biological challenges, the film is a beautifully shot, if narratively knotty, exploration of our evolving relationship with our bodies and souls.

Bogged down by its own heavy-handed existentialism
Wilfully enigmatic, this Critics Week opener could easily divide audiences. Those who succumb to its dreamlike feeling will find a great deal of pleasure, while others

are likely to be frustrated by its time-jump structure and convoluted story strands. The presence of Charles Dance top-lining the cast, as well as of executive producer Terrence Malick, may help pique the interest of streaming audiences interested in its themes of medicine, the occult and animism.

Malick also serves as an obvious source of inspiration for Hintermann, whose first documentary, 2002's *Rosy-Fingered Dawn*, was a devoted profile of the filmmaker. Hintermann was also a line producer on Malick's *Tree Of Life*, and their shared sensibility is clear from the off; dreamy voice-overs, lingering shots, experiential musings. Similarly, much like Malick's recent works, *The Book Of Vision* can get bogged down by its own heavy-handed existentialism.

The story is nonetheless intriguing. Young Dutch surgeon Eva (*Outlander's* Lotte Verbeek) — a pointed name that recalls Eve, the ultimate Earth mother — leaves behind her promising career to study medical history. She has become obsessed by 18th century Prussian physician Johan Anmuth (played in flashback by Dance), who paid as much attention to the beliefs and dreams of his patients as their physical symptoms. The discovery of his manuscript of cases provides Eva with a link to the past, and she begins having visions of Anmuth, his wealthy patient Elizabeth (also played by Verbeek), and his young maid, Maria (compelling Russian actress Isolda Dychauk), who miscarried her violently-conceived child.

In the present, Eva, too, is pregnant, a condition which is putting a strain on her already ailing heart. Modern medicine may save her, but it may also harm her unborn child. Unsure of what to do with her own body, and under pressure from her doctor (also played by Dance), Eva looks for answers in the experiences of Elizabeth and Maria; the former a well-to-do mother of three who suffers with a military brute of a husband, the latter a witch-like girl who believes that the souls of the departed are absorbed into a living tree.

That's certainly a lot to take in, and *The Book Of Vision* isn't afraid to pile on the symbolism. Tree roots writhe with human bodies, malformed fetuses are consumed by the bark, a grief-stricken Maria scrubs blood from the floor, wanders barefoot through the mud, while Eva is hooked up in sterile white rooms to gleaming machines. In a surprising karaoke sequence, Eva purrs the opening lines to Velvet Underground's 'Candy Says', about transgender Andy Warhol cohort Candy Darling — "Candy says, I've come to hate my body and all that it requires in this world" — before fainting beatifically in the arms of her tutor Stellan (*Bjorn McEnroe's* Sverrir Gudnason), who is falling in love with her. Subtle, this film is not.

It is, however, stunning to look at. Cinematographer Jorg Widmer, who also shot Malick's *A Hidden Life*, treats each scene as a portrait to be savoured, filling the frame with exquisite detail drawn from Mariano Tufano's gorgeous costumes and David Crank's evocative production design. Yet audiences may be left wishing there was some more substance behind all that style.