



MOVIE REVIEWED BY ELIZABETH PILGRIM

## VISION FROM THE LIFE OF HILDEGARD VON BINGEN

DIRECTED BY Margarethe von Trotta

PRODUCED BY Zeitgeist Films, 2009

ASIN: B004KCAYXC, LANGUAGE: German, Latin, RUNTIME: 110MIN PRICE: \$29.99CDN

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God's ways are not the ways of the world. He uses someone weak for His purposes. This he did with the life of Hildegard von Bingen. German Director Margarethe Von Trotta's film on the life of this saint shows Hildegard's early life in the Benedictine abbey, her election to abbess, the mystical visions for which she will become famous, her relationship with the novice, Richardis, and depicts the ways in which she was a challenge to the Church hierarchy in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

Hildegard came from a wealthy family that promised her to God. In the film, she is still a child, and a sickly one, when her parents take her to Jutta, the abbess, who will become her surrogate mother, friend and mentor in the religious life. Due to her ill health, Hildegard spent much time alone, enabling her to develop an interior life, where she made use of all experiences for her own sanctification. Her visions from God started at an early age.

When Jutta dies, and her body must be prepared for burial, Hildegard, now older, witnesses the evidence of a life time of self-flagellation, and rejects it. Despite having been sickly, and having an intense interior life, Hildegard is depicted as having a certain earthy quality, because she is shocked and repulsed by the condition of Jutta's battered body from the mortification of the flesh rituals. This results in her rejecting the ascetic tradition of her surrogate mother for a practice of devotion that is more joyful. From this point on in the film, we see Hildegard start to flourish in her work in the natural world. She was a practitioner of holistic medicine with advanced knowledge of herbal healing. She was also gifted in theatre and music. We see a relationship between religion and science that co-exists peacefully within Hildegard's environment.

*Vision's* greatest value to us is the way in which it shows how, despite her vulnerability and weaknesses, and living in an era where women did not have much of an opportunity for self-expression, Hildegard found the inner strength to accept the challenges God was giving her. She understood that she had a responsibility to realize the challenges from God with the particular gifts He had endowed her with to meet those challenges. This was not an easy thing for women in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and yet, like Hildegard, we too, must see her gifts as coming from God, for surely Hildegard was what we typically refer to as a genius, someone beyond human explanation and comprehension, and thus, obviously, the handiwork of God.

Despite its positive aspects, the film does exhibit a few stylistic particularities. Although Hildegard lived in the medieval period, the look of the film is Baroque, in the style of a Vermeer painting. Although the frontal filming of the characters reflects medieval

frescoes with people always standing and looking straight at the viewer, Von Trotta needed for the audience to be able to see the characters' faces to know who was speaking, due to the similarity of the religious habit worn by all. To film them any other way would have rendered them unrecognizable as individual characters.

A main and recurring theme in Von Trotta's films is the need for freedom that women experience. In *Vision*, Von Trotta seems to accent qualities in Hildegard that characterize her as someone who will reform and modernize her faith. My sense is that, even though art is interpretive, Von Trotta has taken a certain liberty in showing Hildegard in this way. She has chosen to speculate on what Hildegard's human qualities might have been, but this may be misleading as Hildegard was obviously receptive and submissive to the will of God to be His instrument, and to eventually be recognized by the Church as a saint.

The intensity of the frenzy Von Trotta shows Hildegard experiencing at the loss of Richardis might be suggestive of an inappropriate relationship with Richardis; yet it is important to note that this was not the case in reality. Von Trotta may have taken a stylistic liberty in presenting the life of this saint in this way. Is she playing to the expectations of a secular audience to garner the film a wider audience? Could this manner of visual suggestiveness have been a condition or way of securing funding for the making of the film? The greeting kiss on the mouth might also be somewhat suggestive of inappropriateness; however, apparently, this was the convention of the period. As mentioned previously, because the film's style is heavily Baroque, this convention of the period seems extraneous, and does not add anything to the narrative. Nonetheless, Catholics rarely get to see a new film about a Catholic saint, and it is hard not to like Hildegard von Bingen; however, I feel that this interpretation of her life is more suited to a mature audience.

*Elizabeth Pilgrim has an Honours BA in English and Film Studies and lives in Brampton, Ontario. Ω*

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