



Barbara Sukowa as Hildegard von Bingen

LIVING IN COMMUNITY, THEN AND NOW

A Film Review of Vision: From the Life of Hildegard von Bingen

Vision, a film by German writer/director Margarethe Von Trotta (Zeitgeist Films) is a biography of the twelfth-century Catholic nun Hildegard von Bingen, a woman who lived in Germany from 1098-1179 A.D. The tale of Hildegard's life has been passed down through history because in an age when women weren't permitted to read, write or compose, she authored books and composed music that is still recorded today.

Vision is the most recent collaboration between Von Trotta and the actress Barbara Sukowa who portrays Hildegard. The film follows Hildegard from the age of ten when she is sent to a monastery to her development as a mystic and a master diplomat and politician as she turns forty.

This bio-pic's plot centers on Hildegard's attempts to navigate the dangers of church politics and money matters, and the wily ways in which her monastery's endless need for fundraising conflicts with the ascetic life the nuns and monks inside are expected to live. Contemporary Buddhist monastics face a similar balancing act of trying to focus on their practice while addressing the demands of the world. The film also chronicles how this innovative woman charted a new spiritual direction for the women under her care.

For example, the film portrays Hildegard as disgusted by her community's—and her era's—commonplace ritual of self-flagellation that left its practitioners' bodies bloody and raw. The Buddha also abandoned the harsh—and he believed pointless—ascetic practices of his day when he developed the Middle Way. In a scene where Hildegard undresses the body of her mentor after the older woman dies, she discovers a bloody barbed-wire corset wrapped around the body's waist. While this was meant to subject the wearer to the sufferings of Christ in accord with Catholic tradition, right there Hildegard stands apart, with a horrified reaction.

She won't be having any of that.

The Buddha developed council discussion and voting to decide on issues impacting the Sangha. Hildegard saw the value of this as well. In one of the film's early scenes, the abbot (played with villainy by Alexander Held) decides Hildegard should become the "magistra" or leader of the cloistered nuns, her fellow sisters at the time. Hildegard insists that the nuns should elect their own leader, and that the magistra should not be chosen by the abbot, as was the hidebound rule within the monastery.

With this rebellious act she took her life in her hands, as she had to have known full well.

Circled by the grim monks living in the cloister, she stands up to the abbot who insists he is the commander-in-chief and that he will therefore appoint the magistra. This is only one of the film's many scenes where he could have had her expelled for disobedience, perhaps even executed her. However, the abbot is constrained by the power Hildegard's alleged "visions" have earned for her. The Church hierarchy, the abbot's superiors, believed Hildegard's visions meant she was in direct contact with God.

Each scene tightens the tension between Hildegard and the abbot. She masters this shifting balance of power, dripping as it is with fear and superstition. Like a surfer, she is ever-moving and bending with the waves of dogma. Her struggles with twelfth-century Catholicism reveal how religion and spirituality part ways, reminiscent of the Buddha's own journey into that divide.

Another instance of Hildegard adopting a consensus model to settle disputes within her community arose after the nuns set off to build their own monastery. Most of the cloistered women, coming from privilege as they did, were unaccustomed to physical labor and deprivation. Camping outdoors in tents while they did the dirty and strenuous work of building a new monastery was not what they had signed up for. An insurrection threatened. Many nuns longed to return to the comforts of their former cloister. As magistra, Hildegard had the authority to quell the revolt and order the dissenting nuns to obey. Instead, she convened the community and gave every sister an opportunity to voice her opinion on the matter, from the youngest to the most senior. After a frank discussion, it was agreed to allow the nuns who wished to leave permission to go without any reprisal.



Harmony within the community was restored and the monastery completed.

Von Trotta avoids the tendency of some current Hildegard fans to portray her one-dimensionally as an "early feminist." Instead, remaining authentic to the twelfth century is Von Trotta's theme. Appropriately enough, much of the story is told by shadows and lighting. Despite being labeled as a feminist director, Von Trotta herself publicly rejects the phenomenon of "woman's filmmaking," arguing that it confines one to a ghetto of sorts.

It is true historians have found accounts of Hildegard being described as an irrepressible spirit, and it is true as a result modern analysts compare her to feminists, or label her a feminist, because her actions can be

interpreted as a lance in the boil of gender barriers, as well as in the superstitions that ruled the medieval world 24/7. Yet such analyses come soaked in the benefit of hindsight and Monday-morning quarterbacking.

To conceive of notions like women's rights or feminism in 1150 is like suggesting they had rocket launches or call-waiting.

Given everything known about treatment of women in twelfth-century Europe, it's doubtful Hildegard was agitat-

ing for equality and more likely she was just trying to survive. Authenticity, rather than some modern point of view, percolates throughout the film. As Von Trotta told an interviewer in 2010, "Hildegard always said 'I'm so weak,' but she had to say that in order to be accepted."

The film illustrates how and why Hildegard is labeled a "first" in many arenas. During her lifetime, nuns were largely the only women who could read and write. While girls from noble families might have a shot at learning to read, in general the only way for a poor girl to have hope for getting an education was to become a nun. Hildegard not only read but wrote and performed plays and composed music so haunting it survives to this day and has been recorded by multiple contemporary musicians. Some of it comprises the film's soundtrack.

The film shows how she investigated the healing and curative chemicals in plants, and instructed her sisters in botany and medicine, such as it was in 1150. She seems to see God's work in plants and trees, and it was obvious to her the flow from plant to medicine to healing and health was God's plan. She suspected that plants and animals were put on the earth for man's use, and that

man was God's ultimate creation. Local people brought their sick relatives to her. Curing them embellished her reputation as a saint on earth, thereby keeping her in the good graces of the Church's upper management. Her healing abilities trumped her uppity reputation. Lucky for her.

Von Trotta uses subtle techniques—camera angles, lighting, and sudden turns of Sukowa's head that show a slightly comical twist on her face—to reveal to the audience that although her male rulers believed she had godly powers, Hildegard herself suspected she was merely learning science. Slowly we see that she gets that and they don't. A scary thing to stumble upon in 1150.

She authored books about theology and about what she perceived in her visions. The film traces the way in which the pope and bishops backed her in this recording of visions, once rumors about her work reached them.

She wrote about natural history as well as animals and zoology. Her musical plays were performed in her convent. She had a convent built—that alone causes her to stand out from the pages of history. In a crater of superstition, Hildegard found workarounds.

She has one friend among the monks—Brother Volmar, played with both subtle and overt romantic feelings by Heino Ferch. The film does not confirm whether their love was ever physical. Brother Volmar chances to come into possession of a pile of books, some written by Aristotle and other philosophers, some about botany and chemistry, and other scientific pursuits. He brings this trove to his friend Hildegard who is enchanted by them.

This scene defines her life: She opens the books with awe and wonder, as if a great light was floating up from the pages. Books! Knowledge! Now here is something to be worshipped!

Talk about an information highway. The books opened for her a world of scholarship and thoughtfulness, critical thinking, experimental tactics and research, philosophical frontiers, things about which she'd had no chance to see in her stilted, confined cloister. It is the reading of these books that will sculpt her into a "Renaissance woman" before the renaissance, whose belief in her visions will now become tempered with knowledge and political shrewdness.

As each scene peers through the veil of Dark Ages superstition, we see her ever-more-elaborate dance of

survival strengthen proportionate to her improved debating skills.

The monks and nuns live in the same monastery, theoretically so the monks could protect the nuns, but when one of her sisters becomes pregnant by a monk, Hildegard again challenges the abbot directly, pointing out the nuns need protection from the monks. They need to build their own separate convent residence, and that the notion of living on the same grounds is incompatible with celibacy.

This scene is yet another unpalatable challenge to the abbot's authority, another moment when he would like to use his power to ban her from the cloister, if not excommunicate her from the Church, but he gulps hard and knows he can't do that, once again, because the

Church's hierarchy is entranced, or at least curious enough for the jury to still be out, by her writing about her visions, and convinced her visions came from God.

By describing her visions in her writing, she continually risks excommunication from the Church. That may not sound like a big deal now, but in 1150 it was tantamount to being banished to live alone on an island with no clothes or iPhone.

The film's suspense flows from the harsh patriarchal culture shimmering with fear. The world was black and white, with no gray: A person is either on God's side or on the side of the Devil. No middle ground. For all the eloquence of Hildegard's speeches, men around her pretty much thought she was on the side of the Devil. One false move and they could be done with her.

The film shows the way girls from noble families were traded to monasteries and convents in exchange for prestige, favors, power, and even a fast track to heaven. In return for all of these perks, wealthy families financed monasteries. Dependent as they were on their benefactors, the monks and nuns were ever bowing down to the nobility. Modern nuns choose to join a convent, but women during the Middle Ages had no choice. Like Hildegard, most were brought to the convent and left there by age ten.

Despite this, Hildegard's accomplishments mount, and stand in contrast to her life, given that she was shut up in a cramped stone building with little outside-world contact for the first forty years of her life. She penned a play, "Ordo Virtutum," (Play of Virtues) that her sisters performed. She becomes a playwright as



well as a scholar who dared to build a library when books were difficult to find.

When crises hit her, Hildegard experiences near-death illness or fainting. She would lie down in great pain, unable to rise, and then experience visions or white lights. She would remain prone and in pain for hours. In the film, this habit seemed to prove to her enemies that she had a special connection to God who protected her with a vision whenever she was verbally attacked or threatened.

Hildegard thus learns how to use people in high places.

Church rulers believed in visions and she had them. After the unwanted pregnancy and subsequent suicide of one of her sisters, through careful manipulation, Hildegard convinces the abbot to let her build her own convent for her sisters. For a woman, she had astounding command of language, moving from point to point like a criminal defense attorney might do in front of a jury. Hildegard's family, by locking her up in a monastery, condemned her to an ascetic life, shut off from the world, a virtual slave to the abbot. Nonetheless, she claimed God ordered her, in her visions, to write down everything she observed. Quite handy in an environment where most women couldn't read, but where she wanted to write about everything.

She described brilliant white light and a sense of heat in her brain, and was also known for being chronically sick. She tells the abbot one of the reasons the sisters should elect her, rather than him appointing her, is that they know how sickly she often is, and therefore they should decide if she is capable of becoming magistra.

Not mentioned in the film is the fact that some modern scholars argue Hildegard must have suffered migraine headaches, and that this explains both her having to lie down in pain during her visions, her reputation for frequent sick feelings, and the bright light and heat she described. What she took for God's message could have been a migraine.

Her description of the aftereffects of her visions matches classic migraine symptoms. Migraines are often followed by feelings of blindness or paralysis, both of which she wrote about. As the contemporary neuroscientist Oliver Sacks wrote about Hildegard, "It is a tribute to the remarkable spirit and the intellectual powers of this woman she was able to turn a debilitating illness into the word of God, and create so much with it." Other women

of her time undoubtedly suffered migraines, but they likely remained bedridden (or in that time—straw pallet-ridden) and in paralyzing pain for the duration and were simply relieved when it ended. Most women would not have been able to use the affliction to advance their careers. Only Hildegard figured that out. Or divined it.

Von Trotta noted in a 2010 interview that, in addition to Sacks' theory, "Others have said it was a form of epilepsy. And it's true, with epileptic seizures you are in the middle of the world and then all of a sudden

you are outside it. But you are not in a coma, you are really present. And in the medieval ages, faith was undoubtable. The Bible was her material, so Hildegard worked with this (to explain her visions.) If she'd been a Buddhist, she'd have worked with different material."

By the film's end, the Catholic Church has been painted as something of a public relations business. The abbot at one point muses that if Hildegard's claim of visions from God is accepted by the Church's powerbrokers, "people everywhere will know of us." Sounds like a quest for fame. He was obsessed with power, as well as obsessed with the hierarchy, and obsessed with what the top of the hierarchy—the pope—would think.

The abbot's wish came true. Because of the film *Vision*, people everywhere can know of him.



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