

Vision – Aus dem Leben der Hildegard von Bingen

Director: Margarethe von Trotta
Producer: Hengameh Panahi
Cinematography: Axel Block
Screenplay: Margarethe von Trotta
Original Music: Christian Heyne, Hildegard von Bingen
Running Time: 110 minutes
Cast: Barbara Sukowa (Hildegard), Heino Ferch (Volmar), Hannah Herzsprung (Richardis von Stade), Gerald Alexander Held (Abbot Kuno), Lena Stolze (Jutta)

Notes and Commentary by Sharan Knoell

“Ich bin eine schwache Frau”...

is perhaps the biggest misnomer Hildegard von Bingen could have ever attributed to herself. She did not label herself as such for self-placating or manipulatory purposes. Instead, she embraced her deference to Christ and the Benedictine order without pontificating on any other means of vocation.

Born in 1098, Hildegard was a perpetually ill child who was offered to the church by her parents as a tithe (their tenth child). She lived adjacent to the friary in Disibodenberg and entered under the tutelage of Jutta von Sponheim, who prepared Hildegard to take her monastic vows at age 15.

As a mystical woman, Hildegard was blessed (or cursed, depending on how you look at it) with visions from God. She describes a vision at age 24 thusly:

“I saw an extremely strong, sparkling, fiery light coming from the open heavens. It pierced my brain, my heart and my breast through and through like a flame which did not burn; however it warmed me. It heated me up very much like the sun warms an object on which it is pouring out rays. And suddenly I had an insight into the meaning and interpretation of the psalter, the Gospel and the other Catholic writings of the Old and New Testaments, but not into the meaning of the sentence structure and the hyphenation; also I had no understanding of the events of the times.”

In 1141, she was instructed by God in one of these visions to begin recording them. She enlisted the help of Volmar, a monk, and Richardis, a fellow nun to act as secretary and transcriber, respectively.

When discussing her visions, it is important to note that she was not a learned woman. Coupled with the fact that women were not permitted to preach, teach, or interpret scripture at the time, Hildegard was met with disbelief and eyebrow-raised skepticism when the credibility of these visions was questioned. She shrewdly used her educational handicap to legitimize her visions – stating that it was God who allowed her to interpret scripture and criticize the present beyond normal comprehension. She wrote, *“I have learned to fear more the judgment of God should I, God’s small creature, keep silent”*.

Hildegard also took ill before her visions. Oftentimes, she was bedridden, immobile, and in a cataleptic state. She spoke of her womb convulsing and was no longer able to see or move. Upon receiving a vision, she often sprang from her bed and paced, not being able to speak. Without the benefit of modern medicine, the physical ailment also added to the credibility of her illuminations from God.

In the struggle between religion and science, in which one is constantly trying to decry the other, modern-day British neurologist Oliver Sacks has put forth a case that Hildegard’s visions were merely migraine attacks. The symptoms she describes – nausea, abdominal pain, muscular weakness, visual disturbances – are identified by Sacks as those commonly associated with migraines. However, Hildegard never specifically mentions headaches, but Sacks indicates identifying migraines as simply headaches is too narrow a definition.

In any case, in 1148, Hildegard was visited by the Pope and was recognized as a seer, thus cementing her status as a visionary in 12th century (what is now) Germany.

Hildegard – The Legacy

While probably the most dramatic and film-ready part of her life, her visions and their validity are rarely in the forefront of Hildegard biographies and literature.

She was such an accomplished woman (who, remarkably, died at age 81), that one cannot discuss her without mentioning achievements that defied gender and societal conventions. Her visions instructed her to found two all-female convents – Bingen and Rupertsberg. Written communication survives between Hildegard and popes, statesmen, emperors and other notable figures of her time. Again, based on her visions, she conducted four teaching and missionary tours in her golden years that identified clerical corruption within the church and demanded reform.

Additionally, perhaps one of the most noteworthy things about Hildegard is the sheer volume of works that are extant. She has left behind 100 letters, 72 songs, 70 poems, nine books, and approx. 80 compositions.

She was never canonized by the Catholic Church for formal reasons, despite four separate attempts, but she remains beatified.

von Trotta's Hildegard

Aside from their joint identity as strong women forging ahead in a traditionally masculine field, von Trotta says she was drawn to make a movie about Hildegard because the latter was "multi-talented", "highly intelligent", and "a visionary". However, von Trotta refused to turn her into a saintly heroine; instead, she included Hildegard's moments of weakness. The most effective examples are the two scenes in which Hildegard learns of Richardis' departure – one a bit more permanent than the other.

Barbara Sukowa – the actress who plays the medieval nun in the film – chose to work with von Trotta on the movie for similar reasons. She sums up the personality of Hildegard very concisely and benignly makes a very poignant statement about the nun's manner. Sukowa identifies Hildegard as a strong woman who "was able to insinuate herself very delicately, and...knew how to manipulate very well".

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http://www.germansociety.org/Film_Programs.html.

We wish you all a safe and happy summer,
und wir sehen uns im Herbst!

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"Vision Aus dem Leben der Hildegard von Bingen"

June 10, 2011 • 6:30 PM • Film, Food & Discussion

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