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## Thelma

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# Thelma

## **Abstract**

This is a film review of *Thelma* (2017) directed by Joachim Trier.

There are two ways to interpret the Norwegian movie *Thelma*, directed by Joachim Trier. The first is this: a young freshman, Thelma (Eili Harboe), in university at Oslo, has psychogenic non-epileptic seizures brought on by the stress of being a conservative Christian and finding herself in love with another female student, Anja (Kaya Wilkins). Through a number of seizure visions and dreamscapes, reality and fantasy mix until, at the end, she seems healed with a unique blend of Christian faith and lesbian love. There are even recurring images like as in a nightmare to bolster this approach to the film; for example a fish swimming under ice, an infant also under ice, Thelma unable to surface in a swimming pool because it is walled over.

This is interesting in and of itself, but the actual storyline fully eclipses this reading and is far more captivating. The movie has rightly been compared to *Carrie*—but *Carrie* remade by Ingmar Bergman or *Carrie* meeting Freud and Hitchcock. *Mutatis mutandis* it could also be compared to *Breaking the Waves*. It is interesting that when Trier talks of it, it is about alienation and dealing with difficult parents; it is a coming-of-age film and a love story. Religion does not seem to be his focus except for the observation that it is being used to control young people and homosexuals. That the film may be updating Christianity, adapting its symbols to present issues, appears to be unappreciated.

A haunting moment occurs in the opening scene when Thelma's father (Henrik Rafaelsen) takes her, at eight years old (Grethe Eltervåg), hunting with him. A deer comes into view, but he turns the gun away from it and aims at Thelma's head, who stands in front of him watching the creature. He slowly decides not to shoot and the deer escapes unharmed. Why would he want to murder his daughter? Are there traces of the *Akedah* (Abraham's binding and near sacrifice of his son Isaac) here? Fast forward ten or twelve years and she is away from her conservative Christian home for the first time at university. Her parents check in with her every night, gently interrogating

her about the day. They memorize her school schedule and watch her Facebook page for how many “friends” she has. When she does not answer they worry. It will turn out that they are much more concerned about her than the maintenance of her faith in a secular world. And this will make them sympathetic.

She soon begins having seizures, accompanied by ravens gathering and even hitting windows, by flickering lights, by a swinging chandelier, by a shattering window. Doctors, meanwhile, are able to rule out a tumor or epilepsy and pinpoint psychogenetic non-epileptic types of seizures instead. These were previously associated, we are told, with saints possessed by God and sinners possessed by demons. Is she one of them? At the same time she meets Anja and they are drawn to each other.

Anja opens up a new world for Thelma. She is initiated into Anja’s circle of friends where she reveals her Christian background by querying a cocky, atheistic student how his mobile works if he is so sure he knows religion is obsolete; he is reduced to stammering he is certain it is not God but that is all. She shares a darker side of her upbringing with Anja as when her father held her hand over a candle and said that was what hell was like. Anja provides opportunities for exploration. Thelma drinks, she smokes, she dances, she blasphemes, she falls desperately in love. Because her love interest is Anja herself, it evokes the seizures. She simultaneously lunges toward Anja to kiss her passionately and runs frightened away to church and prayer. She is sorely tempted, as scenes with a snake emphasize, and is urgently trying to fight the temptation off as well as to embrace it.

The seizures themselves also expand her horizons. On her first visit to see a doctor she has an MRI and learns she had a seizure when she was eight years old, but has no recollection of it. Her father later tells her there were no recurrences since she let God into her heart shortly

thereafter, thus insinuating she has now strayed from the fold. On her second visit, Thelma has an EEG while the doctors try to induce a seizure. They ask some questions of her to provoke anxiety and when they hit on friends she reacts, thinking of Anja. The accompanying phenomena to her seizures have been simply signs to this point, but presently they shift to accomplishments—she makes Anja disappear; she is nowhere to be found. And she has another revelation—her grandmother, who she was told went mad and died, is still alive and hospitalized. She visits her as she is trying to come to grips with Anja’s vanishing and finds her catatonic. She learns from a nurse that she was admitted because of delusions that she had made her husband disappear.

Thelma breaks down and asks to come home. There she is told the circumstances of her first seizure. She twice caused her infant brother to disappear when she was eight years old; the last time while sleeping she placed him under the frozen lake outside the house, killing him. Presently, she is kept sedated and locked in her room. In her moments of lucidity she is forced to confess her sins and ask forgiveness. She asks if she is going to be committed like her grandmother but receives no answer.

Her parents actually have a final solution for her. Her mother, Unni (Ellen Dorrit Petersen) who is wheelchair bound, is the one who pushes for it. “God is testing us,” she says. If Thelma does it again they’ll never forgive themselves. Her father, a general practitioner, prepares a lethal syringe and the day he is going to kill her he first goes out in a boat and meditates. Thelma, again in her sleep, causes him to burst into flames, avoiding her own “crucifixion.” She wakes up and sees the abandoned boat and realizing what had happened walks into the lake, in a white gown like one being baptized, to drown herself. Instead she faints underwater and sees herself reunited with Anja.

Everything changes now. She providentially surfaces, crawls ashore, and lies down beside a dead raven. It revives and flies away. She goes inside and finds that Anja has texted her, as she foresaw. She silently touches her mother and she rises from the wheelchair. Thelma walks out of her home with an emerging smile. On a sunny day on campus, Thelma foresees Anja coming to join her with a kiss. It happens exactly as she had foreseen and they walk off holding hands.

So what has happened? Jesus was a miracle worker and healer for his time; Thelma is for now. Thelma carries her powers forward as her foreseeing demonstrates. It is unclear how she will use her powers but her major is biology and her father was a physician. She could heal without calling attention to herself. The deaths of her brother and father were brought on while she was asleep and, apparently, having a seizure; they were not maliciously done like some of the tales of Jesus in the second century *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. Also with her father, it was an act of self-defense, not petty irritations as with Jesus. God is no longer a judge who is intolerant of alternative lifestyles nor is God a sexist. Perhaps God is female now and had a sex transformation. It is a liberative vision of God, on personal not political grounds, and offers an intriguing revision of Christianity.