

## **Die Sünderin Causes Moral Outrage (1951)**

### **Abstract**

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The release of the 1951 film *Die Sünderin* [*The Sinner*], a love story between a prostitute and a dying artist starring Hildegard Knef, sparked massive backlash from the Catholic and Protestant Churches in Germany; the film became the subject of church sermons and protests that spread quickly and led to the banning of the film in many small and medium-sized towns. Screenings in Frankfurt and Mannheim were interrupted by the release of tear gas; in Duisburg, protestors released white mice; in Düsseldorf and Regensburg, street fights broke out in front of movie theaters, and stink bombs were thrown into theaters. Church leaders never criticized these protests, even when they became violent, instead blaming *The Sinner* itself for causing domestic unrest and strife. The film also set off a debate about censorship; the FSK [Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle der Filmwirtschaft], the state organization in charge of imposing ratings on films, was criticized by some (mainly religious leaders) for being too permissive, while others cautioned that excessive censorship and church influence on ratings and censorship would be a major blow to the German film industry, especially internationally.

### **Source**

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#### **The Sins of *The Sinner***

It is a crying shame that the issue of whether or not we need film censorship has been raised by *The Sinner*—a film that will remain a humiliation for director Willi Forst for as long as he lives. He is accused of transgressions against morality. But that is not the worst of it; he has transgressed against art. Had he set store by being a moralist, he would never have filmed *The Sinner* in the first place. But because he sets store by being an artist, he should have been honest about his artistic intentions. Now, both the moralists and the art lovers are indignant. And both factions are right when they assert that *The Sinner* is among the most hypocritical things ever seen on the big screen.

And in the cities where the counter-propaganda is at work, you see long lines at the box office. The audiences sit in the dark, ready to be either amused or filled with outrage and, I swear, neither faction will really get its money's worth. No real seduction scenes, no close-ups of tricky situations, not a scintilla of charm, and not even really any eroticism. Why—since everyone is protesting—haven't the owners of by-the-hour hotels complained that it is not really quite so horribly bleak as all that in their establishments? The film portrays the life of a young woman who has "taken to the streets." An immoral story, to be sure. But even young women who—not bothered by the moralists—would like to live an immoral life, would be deluded to imagine that this film might provide practical tips for them. Because it is not true that visiting dive bars opens the way for a willing female to effortlessly earn hundreds of marks. The real truth is that we are talking about measly, paltry amounts of money. But there is another example that makes the hypocrisy of this film far more evident. The father of the wrongheaded female creature is consumed with questions of honor. When he finds out that his daughter is "on the streets," he is dismayed. He opens a package. Is he planning a trip? No, the package contains his officer's uniform. Now what? With the audience on tenterhooks, the tortured father pulls out his old uniform, and removes all the braid and medals. The audience laughed. Some, to whose nationalist feelings Willi Forst may have slyly hoped to appeal, silently left the movie theater. So not only did playing the "erotic" card in Forst's strategy fail, so did playing the "national" card. That was in Hamburg, where there was not much agitation, either for or against *The Sinner*. Hamburg is a liberal town. The issue took care of itself here. So we saw a bad film, that's all! But in Cologne, but in other countries ...

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The Protestant film representative, Pastor Werner Hess, who withdrew from the voluntary film rating board [Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle, FSK] wrote the following in the *Sonntagsblatt* newspaper published by the regional bishop Hanns Lilje: “We knew that the church’s objections to this film would constitute advertising for it.” Admittedly, people are storming the box offices. And the head of the “voluntary rating” board, Fritz Podehl, wrote in a letter to the *Welt* newspaper, “If *The Sinner* had not been blown up into a huge success by parties that had no intention of causing that, it would certainly not have become the hit of all time. There can be no doubt that Cardinal Josef Frings also contributed to publicity for *The Sinner* when, in a recent midnight sermon in Cologne’s cathedral, he called upon the faithful to take steps on their own to do something about bad films—by which he meant, of course, morally bad films. But to get back to Pastor Hess’s statement, after acknowledging his awareness of the publicity effect, he immediately added, “There are decisions where you cannot think tactically, but must act on principle.” Which is not much different from saying, “Although we know that we are helping *The Sinner* achieve—let’s say the financial—success it would never have achieved without our criticism, we accept that because we owe it to our conscience!” Although SPIO, the film industry umbrella organization, recently countered in a memorandum: “Calls for demonstrations with the aim of starting an organized boycott represent a blatant abuse of rights and of free expression.” So we have two fronts. One is the churches, the other the film industry. And voices are already being raised to say this predicament means that we need state-run film censorship.

For one thing—and not without justification—the “voluntary ratings” system has been called a demonstration of healthy common sense. Because, namely, as long as the FSK, which is headquartered in Wiesbaden, fulfills its duties, not only in terms of film industry profits, but also in terms of benefit to the public, then that configuration makes state censorship superfluous. That the status quo represents an advantage should be crystal clear to anyone who has studied state censorship—and not only in Germany, but in every other country. It has always gone so far that art succumbed not necessarily to morals, but most certainly to prudery. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the churches have a right, indeed a divine mission, to work in all spheres of human existence. But in fact, political organizations have also already come forward to claim an entitlement to participate in the monitoring. But monitoring is not, by a long shot, positive. Recommendations are positive. And the film crowd cannot complain about being supported with a surfeit of recommendations; they have far more reason to complain about objections and protests.

It is certainly open to debate whether it is even practical to have representatives of the churches on the board of the FSK. The churches set store by it. OK, then they will have to accept that the representatives will see things that will upset their nature as priests. What if the motifs of *The Sinner* had been mastered with real artistry, and therefore truthfully? Pastor Hess, who stepped down from the FSK, gives us the answer; he condemned *The Sinner* and praised the similarly themed film *Volcano*. That gives us hope that the parties will agree on the principle that, in film, artistic ambitions will take precedence. But there is also hope in a new SPIO resolution: it believes, despite everything, in the value of self-discipline; it believes in a chance of reform in the make-up of the voluntary FSK. In a memorandum composed in less than stellar German, it expresses a very good insight: “In the cultural sector, self-discipline is worth more than a police baton. Might remorse about *The Sinner* produce something good? It is a hope—not only from a Christian viewpoint, but also from an artistic perspective—that would be appropriate for German film, which is endangered in every way, but above all artistically ...”

Source of original German text: Josef Marein, “Sünden um die Sünderin,” *Die Zeit*, no. 11 (1951), March 15, 1951.

Accessible online at: <http://www.zeit.de/1951/11/suenden-um-die-suenderin>.

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