

The Debate about Film Censorship: *Die Sünderin* (1951)

Abstract

Culture and film policy was fiercely contested in postwar Germany; Catholic and Protestant leaders identified the arena of film and culture as a crucial part of German public life after the war and attempted to regulate and control films in order to reclaim social and cultural power that they had not had in the Nazi era. Film and cultural policy became a cornerstone of the “fight for the Christian West,” in which church leaders and other social conservatives attempted to limit the influence of communism and American consumer culture on West Germany. The 1951 film *Die Sünderin* [*The Sinner*] became a battleground in this fight because it broke multiple taboos: nudity, prostitution, suicide, and euthanasia; it was offensive to “Christian morality,” and the church argued that because Germany was in a delicate social and moral situation, a single film could threaten the very fabric of society. Because of the campaign against *The Sinner*, the church was able to wield considerable power in German cultural reconstruction after the war. This article from the West German *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* warned that giving churches more power in the area of film policy might threaten Germany’s film industry, and they were correct: church power in film policy ultimately led to a decline in the power of Germany’s film industry both at home and abroad.

Source

Films with Appeal: On the Debate about Willi Forst’s *The Sinner*

The newspapers and radio had barely announced that both churches would be withdrawing their representatives from Germany’s voluntary film ratings board (fsk) in protest against the new Forst film *The Sinner* when long lines began to form at the box office of one of Frankfurt’s biggest movie theaters. It probably looks much the same in other cities. How can it be that Willi Forst, who managed to survive the years when Josef Goebbels ruled over Babelsberg with his reputation intact, who created such delicate and subtle films as *Masquerade in Vienna* and *Bel Ami*, slid into the disreputable arena of the shoddy and the squalid in his first big post-war film? It is difficult to grasp, so one sets out to see for oneself what kind of utterly unexpected scandal has attached to such a highly respected artistic name. Protestant pastor Werner Hess withdrew from the fsk, and Osnabrück’s Catholic archbishop Wilhelm Berning re-called the church’s film experts, with the caveat “for the time being.” It must, however, have been clear to the clergy that taking such a demonstrative stance against Forst would have an enormous propaganda effect. There can be little doubt that not only a craving for sensationalism, but also an equal measure of genuine thirst for information, will draw hundreds of thousands of people into cinemas who would otherwise never have seen this film with the quite lurid title *The Sinner*. Protestant bishop Hanns Lilje has voiced public approval for his film commissioner’s action. On the Catholic side, the top spiritual leader himself immediately began distancing the church. The churches will most likely have reckoned with a stampede to see the film. They will be saying to themselves that the more sober and discerning people who see the film, the better. It can only strengthen the churches’ authority over public morals, even if it initially means better box office returns for an individual film than it might have brought in with its own drawing power.

We do not think we are mistaken in presuming that there will now be a general debate on whether or not Forst’s film *The Sinner* has a debasing effect. Nor will there be any shortage of nasty words. In its response to the brouhaha, SPIO (Spitzenorganisation der deutschen Filmwirtschaft), the film industry umbrella organization, has already used the fatuous and misleading term “culture war.” This case is tantalizing and dangerous because a rating of “immoral” for Willi Forst’s film is neither clear-cut nor

appropriate.

This newspaper has not refrained from considerable sarcasm when it has been subjected—either from within or without—to the standard products of the cinematic entertainment business. We have stuck to our strategy of differentiation, without fearing accusations of prudery. We have distinguished between, let's say, the voluptuous and classy femininity played from the hip by Silvana Mangano in *Bitter Rice* and the far more deadly, feeble thrill of the lady seen (in) *Third from the Right*. We consider the lion's share of film sex to be enervating, since photogenic lust is cowardly lust, and we have not shied away, when the occasion arose, from pronouncing such upon even sovereign divas with the mid-market name Rita Hayworth.

For a long time now, we have been aware of the various attempts by individual Christian circles to regulate the lascivious effects of cinema. So it seems to us quite sound and sensible that Christian youth groups and, of course, other groups too, even if not explicitly Christian, should agitate against the film *Third from the Right*. If courts should be able to decide that open campaigns against erotic lasciviousness are bad for business, then we would be justified in thinking that a warning about depravity is not one of the fundamental democratic rights.

But what about Forst's *Sinner*? For all the unseemliness of its subject, the first two-thirds of the film are made with a gentleness, largely with artistic tact, and moreover, using artistic means. A young middle-class woman is seduced by her stepbrother. The realism of that hideous event is rendered in entirely artistic terms. They are evident not only in the form of a recollection monologue, but also in the finely-wrought suggestive details, delicately focused on the girl's experience, and the excellent cinematic symbols, such as the fading lamp, the half window that lets only a sinister half-light into the miserable chamber, and many more similar expedients.

The film recounts particulars from the sinner's life as a harlot or rather a barmaid that are downright illuminative of our era and rendered thoughtfully and with humor. One example is the scene where young officers swarm the pretty barmaid, and the gray uniforms, with their eagles and other, well-known insignia suddenly morph into the simpler, olive drab blousons sporting "USA" brand markings. One of the film pastors argues that the real scandal is her return to the life of a prostitute, the selling of herself for the love of a man whom she wants to save. But that argument seems to us poorly formulated, and could take away from legitimate objections to the film. There have been women who, out of love, for instance for their starving children, have sold themselves. Nobody can forbid art, whether it be a book, or a film, or some other medium, from depicting such tragic and shocking subjects. What makes the motif in *The Sinner* indecent is how it's done. Offensively dressed up with so-called art and aesthetic posturing around the sun, and the light, and the pagans of old, with a grand, grand love made of papier mâché; that is what makes the horrifying "victim" unsavory and debauched, if you can use such a lofty word for a trip into the back room of eager human defilers. The bounds of decency are also crossed when the audience learns that the sinner, whose heart has been turned by her love for the painter, no longer really understands the art of selling love. The offence is in the nuances, the artistic choices. The love story of an incurably ill painter living on borrowed time contains segments of artistic appeal, love scenes full of fervor and the kind of reticence that separates art from schlock. Here we will mention the wonderfully acted scenes of blissful love in Venice and Positano. Who would have thought that after the banal, postcard grandeur of *Wedding Night in Paradise* that St. Mark's Square could ever again be a cinematic discovery? Oh, how boldly shot the steep stairs of Positano between the chunky white houses are, and how Forst cleverly follows the actress Hildegard Knef as she runs like a long-legged thoroughbred to the beach, and how that scene ends in an unimpeachable finale of passion! We could point out many more superbly done scenes, particularly as regards the confident camera work. They will not go unnoticed, even abroad, where they have almost forgotten that Germany can produce highly sophisticated art. There can be no doubt that the artistic merits of the film *The Sinner* will stand firmly in the way of its

moral denunciation. It has rarely been so clearly proven that great acting (Knef and a surprisingly focused and distinguished Gustav Fröhlich) and great cinematography can paper over the cracks in a script and its dialogue.

But the film, especially its final third, also contains long passages that can quite simply be called nothing less than foul nonsense. The lovely photogenic death, along with its nauseatingly mawkish expressions of love, is reminiscent of *I Accuse*. It is a gamble on the secret erotic titillation of sentimentality, which seems to us even more pernicious than the absurdity and immorality of the mere act. The nude images, verging on the laughable, appear far more damnable to us than the return to prostitution—for the love of the painter and for money—to which film pastor Hess so objects. We greet with applause the fact that the actress Hildegard Knef can match the erotic aura of her Italian colleague Silvana Mangano, the fascination of her classy svelteness, which most pleases us in combination with her long, horsy face, in which an almost bulky mouth presents an odd contrast to a cerebral brow and cold, fair eyes. The woman has her spot in art. But it is incomprehensible that a man like Forst pulls out that beauty, presents her lasciviously, and hangs an image of her over the fireplace that might have been painted by the former president of the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts and would be classified as the mythological genre of the Nordic lady, by chance without a swan this time, if that bastion of meat inspection, the House of German Art, still existed. The carnal rage and fury of the fatally ill painter heightens the scene's indelicacy. We will permit ourselves here to diverge from the opinion of the central committee of the voluntary ratings board and say that the film does not reach the limits of what is "permissible," or more aptly decent, but in fact goes far beyond them.

It is utterly understandable that the churches are distancing themselves. But the fact that they are only doing so now, with a film whose artistic merits are indisputable and numerous, does not make the case any more pleasant, and it complicates the situation. Why did the pastors not act much earlier and shed their share of responsibility for film, which is now a market, a commodity, and a product of what might be called the cultural assets industry? Perhaps because the one or the other skirt was a centimeter, or a half-centimeter longer? Do they think they can wave through, as less pernicious, the kitsch that is disguised as harmless?

We are not asking these questions in order to discredit the initiative of the church representatives in the case of *The Sinner*. We are doing it to prevent new blunders. We hear from church circles—we know that opinion is divided within the churches on how the process should work—that the suggestion is gaining ground that the church representatives should only return to the board if they are given greater influence within the voluntary ratings bodies. We consider that path a dangerous one. The censor is not the producer. But it can be made partly responsible for an overall situation without having contributed to its creation. What would we gain if the church were given veto rights in the voluntary ratings system? Gray mediocrity would triumph for a time, until financial collapse destroys the entire institution. Of course there must be film censorship, by which we mean self-censorship. The churches and related organizations have the opportunity to be represented indirectly by non-ordained people they trust. That way, they would get back their freedom to act, because they would be rid of the responsibility for what has just been approved.

All that, admittedly, runs into the negative. When the two Christian churches, albeit with varying degrees of intensity and involvement, undertook an attempt at their own film initiative, the result was the famed *Keepers of the Night*. Our fierce negative criticism attracted a certain amount of mistrust and fierce defensiveness. *Keepers of the Night* was a morally pristine film, made with the best of intentions and an attempt at an unusual topic for film. *Keepers of the Night* became a big, in fact a huge hit. And yet the film remains artistically average and, more blameworthy, it did not go beyond the kind of conventionalism that is always created when the authorities are in charge. *Keepers of the Night* is—and nobody so far has disabused us of this notion—a film whose theme does not represent the primal experience of our time.

The god of *Keepers of the Night* is the “kind god” of the relatively comfortable burgher era of the day before yesterday, the same kind god who takes care of a person’s spiritual harmony when individual blows of fate fall and doubt and despair reign. What about *The Sinner*? Please excuse us the parallels. It, too, is a bourgeois film in a way that we are no longer bourgeois. *The Sinner* is our lady of the camelias, souped up for 1950. The luxury, the outer and the inner, are from the day before yesterday, meaning from a time when the bohemian types on the margins of polite society were far more interesting than the respectable citizens themselves. For us, the degenerating effect of *The Sinner* that film pastor Hess talks about in his letter to SPIO is not so much due to the subject matter of the fallen woman. The barmaid is far too luxurious, far too much of a literary cliché and sentimental staffage out of the nineteenth century, where Willi Forst always felt very much at home, for us to believe she is suffering the wretchedness, physical and emotional, of the woman in *Without Pity*. It is just pasted on and prettied up.

As much as we understand the churches’ rejection of the film *The Sinner*, we feel it necessary to say once, including in this case, that our films suffer altogether from a lack of the courage to be truthful and ruthless. When the director of *Keepers of the Night*, Harald Braun, states that he did not wish to make a film that would appeal to one hundred thousand people, but rather to five million, those words reveal the actual malady with ludicrous candor. We do not want films if and because they appeal to this or that number of people. What we want instead are elemental, truthful films. The complicated economic counterarguments are stupid, because they come from people who still imagine that laypeople will fall silent when experts try to spin the tale that films like *Without Pity* or *Volcano* do not exist. They exist. We even believe that they have appeal, although we cannot say for how many millions of people. But it is surely in the millions ...

Source of original German text: Karl Korn, “Filme, die ankommen: zu der Auseinandersetzung über Willi Forsts ‚Sünderin‘,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, January 24, 1951, p. 6.

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