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UCSB History 133C Source Exploration

### **The West German Film That Defied Christian Ethics and Ignited Controversy**

Forst, Willi. *Die Sünderin*. GHDI. February 18, 1951.

[https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=993](https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=993).

In 1951, the West German populace had been grappling with the devastating impact of World War II for five years. The war's lingering effects fostered a sense of collective moral culpability, catalyzing the creation of escapist works aimed at alleviating these feelings. Underlying these creations, however, was the influence of institutions of the Christian faith. Along with the post-war period bringing economic and political hardships, it also revealed a fragile ethical foundation. Due to the heavy focus on denazification and rebuilding, the public lacked a moral identity, causing these institutions of the Christian faith to gain renewed necessity and, consequently, greater power. This dynamic had a significant impact on the arts, with many filmmakers avoiding themes that might challenge prevailing moral or cultural norms. However, one ambitious director, compelled by the dull artistic environment and personal reasons, decided to take action, resulting in the release of the highly controversial film *Die Sünderin* on February 18, 1951, in West Germany. Unsurprisingly, given the precarious social climate, the film's debut sparked intense domestic controversy. Its perceived subversive elements—stemming from its exploration of taboo subjects such as prostitution and euthanasia—provoked a backlash. By addressing these realist themes, *Die Sünderin* directly confronted the one seemingly unassailable moral authority in post-war West Germany: the Christian faith.<sup>1</sup>

Its director and creator, Willi Forst, was already an established figure in the entertainment industry preceding its release. Forst (1903-1980) was an actor and film producer known for escapist and romantic works during the Weimar and Nazi periods.<sup>2</sup> Under Nazism, the director produced films such as *Operette* (1940) and *Vienna Blood* (1942) that were apolitical and set in romanticised Viennese settings. Notably, in these works, Forst abstained from adhering to the status quo of perpetuating Nazism, thereby giving them an ideological bent. As a result, Forst's

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<sup>1</sup> Fehrenbach, Heide. "The Fight for the 'Christian West': German Film Control, the Churches, and the Reconstruction of Civil Society in the Early Bonn Republic." *German Studies Review* 14, no. 1 (1991): 39–45. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1430153>.

<sup>2</sup> "Willi Forst." Wikipedia. Last modified April 25, 2024. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willi\\_Forst](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willi_Forst).

reputation was never tarnished by association with Nazism, unlike many of his contemporaries. By not making wartime films that had an ulterior motive of augmenting the regime's influence, but instead undermining it by preserving Viennese identity through its inclusion in his works, Forst saw himself as conducting a "silent protest."<sup>3</sup> In contrast, *Die Sünderin* was anything but quiet in its approach to challenging the prevailing paradigm. Because the film bore a *realistic* depiction of life—shown through the presentation of prostitution—and philosophical depth of morality, particularly through the merciful assisted suicide at its denouement, it stood out as a non-escapist work.<sup>4</sup>

The creation of the 1951 avant-garde film aimed to spur a cultural renewal during a time when escapist approaches in film dominated stylistic norms. As previously mentioned, Forst never overtly contradicted the status quo, making the release of this realist film a **significant** departure from his previous escapist image. The director had a yearning to shake things up artistically, describing his view of his career and sphere as "taking shelter." The film's publication was approached by Forst in a staunch manner, refusing to acquiesce to what he characterized as "a personal insult" to alter the work's original form despite the risk of tarnishing his reputation. During the film's initial examination to determine its suitability for public viewing, West Germany's film regulator, the FSK, indicated that editorial cuts, notably of the lead female protagonist appearing nude, would be necessary to meet institutional requirements for release. In response, Forst spurned these requests and threatened to release the film without approval, challenging the regulator's authority. Accordingly, the committee escalated the situation to its highest level, conducting what historical imagination sees now as a consequential vote. The vote, which passed in favor of the film's release, saw half of the opposing votes cast by members of the Christian faith, foreshadowing the film's most potent opposition. Thus, because *Die Sünderin* was led by a steadfast creator, it has retained its original form.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Daviau, Gertraud Steiner. "Willi Forst: Bel Ami in the Third Reich." *Modern Austrian Literature* 32, no. 4 (1999): 46–56. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24648891>.

<sup>4</sup> German History Docs. "Director Willi Forst and the Making of *Die Sünderin* (1951)." Accessed December 2, 2024. <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/director-willi-forst-and-the-making-of-die-suenderin-1951.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Fehrenbach, "The Fight for the 'Christian West,'" 45.

Although the release of the 1951 film was dramatic, its subsequent public reaction was even more unpredictable. Catholic commentators were the most critical and active in their interpretations compared to others, as they collectively harbored a sentiment of dread that the moral structure of society was on the brink of collapse. During the film's initial screening in Regensburg, Catholic clergy opposing the film fomented riots, and screenings were disrupted by stink bombs. This forced the mayor of the city to halt the screening due to a “threat to public health,” allowing the zealots to succeed in their operations.<sup>6</sup> In a later effort by Catholics to undermine the film’s viewability, a much more notorious sequence emerged. Ten days after its public release, a highly influential Catholic figure, Cardinal Frings, delivered a fiery sermon condemning the film. Members of the Christian faith were incensed because the film continued to be screened in Cologne despite widespread protests demanding its removal. In his speech, Frings characterized the film as *evil* and subversive to the moral norms of Christians in Germany, admonishing his followers to avoid viewing it.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, his sermon galvanized a German Catholic priest to lead a protest in Düsseldorf that demanded the cessation of the film's screenings. Notably, during his participation in the demonstration, he was alleged to have thrown stink bombs, leading to his arrest. Although he was eventually acquitted due to a lack of evidence, the Catholic Church's involvement left a notable mark on the film's release, as this case attracted widespread domestic attention.<sup>8</sup>

### **Annotated Bibliography in Chronological Order**

Cardinal Frings, "Pastoral Sermon against *Die Sünderin* (February 28, 1951)," *Kirchliches Mitteilungsblatt für das Dekanat Herne* [Church Bulletin for the Herne Deanery], no. 10, March 11, 1951, HSTA/Bestand NW 158/244, Blatt 58; reprinted in Klaus-Jörg Ruhl, ed., *Frauen in der Nachkriegszeit 1945–1963* [Women in the Postwar Era, 1945–1963] (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag, [1988]), 115–16, [https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=4590](https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=4590).

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<sup>6</sup> Fehrenbach, “The Fight for the ‘Christian West,’” 46.

<sup>7</sup> Cardinal Frings, "Pastoral Sermon against *Die Sünderin* (February 28, 1951)," *Kirchliches Mitteilungsblatt für das Dekanat Herne* [Church Bulletin for the Herne Deanery], no. 10, March 11, 1951, HSTA/Bestand NW 158/244, Blatt 58; reprinted in Klaus-Jörg Ruhl, ed., *Frauen in der Nachkriegszeit 1945–1963* [Women in the Postwar Era, 1945–1963] (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, [1988]), 115–16, [https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=4590](https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=4590).

<sup>8</sup> "Vor 25 Jahren starb der Ruhrkaplan Carl Klinkhammer," DOMRADIO.DE, January 8, 2022, <https://www.domradio.de/artikel/als-bunkerpfarrer-duesseldorf-unvergessen-vor-25-jahren-starb-der-ruhrkaplan-carl>.

This 1951 pastoral sermon by the highly influential Catholic Cardinal Frings (1887-1978) is in response to the avant-garde film *Die Sünderin* releasing in Cologne despite mass protests and condemnation from the Catholic and Protestant churches and their followers. The speaker, Cardinal Frings, is highly revered in the Catholic community due to his preceding noble behavior of resisting Nazism. With his high social stature in the Christian sphere, and consequently, a strong sway over the populace, he conducted an exhortation, impeaching the film, characterizing it as “evil” and subversive to the moral norms of Christians in Germany. In an incandescent tone, Cardinal Frings admonishes his followers from viewing the film, while also urging theater owners to sacrifice monetary gain by not showing it. The effect of this speech is heavily consequential, leading to the infamous German Catholic priest, Karl Klinkhammer trial.

Fehrenbach, Heide. “The Fight for the ‘Christian West’: German Film Control, the Churches, and the Reconstruction of Civil Society in the Early Bonn Republic.” *German Studies Review* 14, no. 1 (1991): 39–63. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1430153>.

This article provides a broad context of post-war West Germany, highlighting the newfound influence religious institutions had gained, particularly in film censorship. It offers insightful background into why *Die Sünderin* was viewed as controversial, exposing readers to the tense social environment of the time. It delves deeply into the film's production process, offering a comprehensive account of the pivotal voting sequence that determined its release. Additionally, it provides a keen illustration of the film's themes and the impact it had on the religious populace, offering the reader a clear understanding of why it was such a contentious work.

Daviau, Gertraud Steiner. “Willi Forst: Bel Ami in the Third Reich.” *Modern Austrian Literature* 32, no. 4 (1999): 46–56. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24648891>.

This document focuses on the dynamism of Forst's artistic style and only somewhat discusses *Die Sünderin*. It provides a valuable lens into the types of works the director created preceding the production of the 1951 film, revealing a history of crafting romanticized Viennese-style films. It offers a deep insight into Forst's psyche during his Nazi-period works, asserting that he deliberately abstained from creating films that augmented the regime's influence. It uniquely portrays the director as an artist with a

history of contradicting the status quo, rather than the typical reductive portrayal of a director who solely produced mainstream works.

Hester Baer, "5 'Through Her Eyes': Regendering Representation in Willi Forst's *The Sinner* (1951)," in *Dismantling the Dream Factory: Gender, German Cinema, and the Postwar Quest for a New Film Language*, 127–160 (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781845459451-008>.

This contemporary writing explores the film's impact and plot while also elucidating how its immoral themes contributed to its success and controversy. This document is unique in its analysis, highlighting how its contentious nature positively affected it monetarily. The author astutely observes how the female lead is portrayed with an emphasis on her figure, explaining how Forst intentionally uses stage lighting to isolate the actress and draw attention to her presence. Additionally, she asserts that Forst's career was on the decline, which led him to create such a controversial film. She dispels the director's assertion that he has an artistic thirst, stating that it was merely a veil to hide his true reasons: pecuniary interests. The crux of the author's argument hinges on inference and lacks sources to substantiate her claims. Critically, the author does not play devil's advocate, only buttressing her own thesis throughout the narrative, thereby weakening the foundation of her work.

Barbara Schrödl, "Phryne Paves the Way for the Wirtschaftswunder: Visions of Guilt and 'Purity' Fed by Ancient Greece, Christian Narrative, and Contemporary History," in *Ancient Worlds in Film and Television*, ed. Almut-Barbara Renger and Jon Solomon (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2013), 299–307. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004241923\\_017](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004241923_017).

This contemporary writing offers a unique insight derived from *Die Sünderin*, asserting that the nudity and suicide portrayed in the film are intended to convey a symbolic message of Germany's recent loss of innocence and newly gained national guilt. The author substantiates this with clues from the film, revealing aspects that are not readily apparent to viewers. Although her thesis relies on making inferences, she adds credibility to her assertions by referencing similar methods used in historical works and Christian myth. Lastly, she observes that the film uses biblical references to wipe the slate clean of the Nazi past and highlight the value of middle-class conservative values. Comparatively,

her analysis is much more substantive than that of any other author due to her uniquely drawn conclusions about allegory being present in the film.

"Vor 25 Jahren starb der Ruhrkaplan Carl Klinkhammer," DOMRADIO.DE, January 8, 2022, <https://www.domradio.de/artikel/als-bunkerpfarrer-duesseldorf-unvergessen-vor-25-jahren-starb-der-ruhrkaplan-carl>.

This article commemorates the 25th anniversary of the death of the Catholic priest Carl Klinkhammer, who participated in a protest that led to his notorious arrest. The case attracted widespread domestic attention, leaving an indelible mark on the film's release due to the Catholic Church's involvement. The author describes the event and notes Klinkhammer's unsubstantiated accusation but only briefly touches upon his rationale for participating in the protest, omitting his personal feelings about *Die Sünderin*.

"Willi Forst." Wikipedia. Last modified April 25, 2024.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willi\\_Forst](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willi_Forst).

This Wikipedia page provides essential information on the director, along with a comprehensive collection of the director's life events and works, allowing one to understand his departure from apolitical musicals to an avant-garde realist film. His production of *Die Sünderin* is also mentioned; however, its controversial impact is omitted.