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Politics, Moral and Cinema

Catholic Film Work in Post-war Germany

Abstract

The Catholic Church saw itself as the central moral authority in the immediate post-war era and aimed at a political and social “rechristianisation” after the crimes of the Nazi era. As film was supposed to be a central device for this reeducation, the Church already dealt with this medium intensively at an early stage. “Travelling cinema” arose in Germany’s Catholic (rural) areas in order to make the presentation of films and subsequent discussions possible – even in the smallest towns. New jobs regarding the work with films were created in all dioceses, even though there was no institutional organization, such as the Italian “Catholic Action”. In the political field, the Church intervened mainly with regard to movies perceived as “bad”. “Good” and “bad” were determined exclusively by moral criteria rather than cinematic aspects. Politicians were consulted as well as members of the film industry during protests. But basically the strong position of Catholic representatives in the “Voluntary Self-Regulation Body of the Movie Industry” (Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle der Filmwirtschaft) offered the opportunity to establish Catholic arguments in the German film censorship. In support, the “Filmliga” was founded in 1950 and agitated as a mass organisation for the “good” film, following the example set by the “League of Decency” in the US. The peak of the Catholic film work in post-war Germany was the mass protest against the movie “Die Sünderin” which became the biggest film scandal in Federal German history. Neither did the protest achieve the movie’s prohibition nor a voluntary dismissal, but the public discussion led to a reinforcement of the film work in the ecclesiastical area. Until the 1950s, Catholic film work mainly supported harmonic movie material produced in Federal Germany, whereas Italian movies hardly played a role.

1 Introduction

The Catholic Church saw itself as the central moral authority in the aftermath of the Second World War. In its view and in the positive perception of the Western Allies, it was the only sizeable social group that successfully resisted the “Third Reich”. During the

first post-war years, the German Catholic Church liked to understand itself as a winner in rubble.¹ Therefore, especially bishops, as the top of the clerical hierarchy, aimed at a political and social rechristianisation after the crimes of the Nazi era.² Hence, the West German post-war society was supposed to follow Christian values.

Of course, bishops used services to teach those values, but this was no longer the only means they relied on. Right after the war, they already started to focus on mass media. Particularly because it was known how successful the National Socialists' propaganda had been between the years 1933 and 1945, the representatives of the Church wanted to have an influence on mass media, too. The top priority of initiatives in this field was cinema. In the Church's opinion, films needed to convey Christian values while violations of moral concepts should not be tolerated any longer. The bishops thought they knew about the political power of films and therefore deliberately decided to engage in this business at a time when Germany faced war destruction.

Only behind this background, it is likely to understand why one of the first conferences of bishops after the war, the Conference of the Bavarian Episcopacy in June 1945, dealt with the idea of church based film work and even decided on shooting its own film. In spite of the hardship right after the end of the war, the spiritual leaders would have approved the high costs of production for shooting a film in order to rechristianise the population. "Jugend im Sturm" / "Youth in Storm", which was the title of the envisioned film, was intended to be used in the Catholic youth work to achieve the reeducation of young Germans.³ The plan failed because of the highly restrictive US-licensing system. Nevertheless, the intention of the Bavarian episcopacy is significant: In order to convey its values, the Catholic Church was eager to use the medium film, especially in youth work to influence thought and behaviour.

It was largely unknown in Germany until 1945, but the Holy See had already been supporting the film work since the 1930s. Pope Pius XI had commented on cinema in the encyclical *Vigilanti Cura* in June 1936.⁴ Even though it only demanded that Catholics

1 Joachim Köhler/Damian van Melis (Eds.), *Siegerin in Trümmern. Die Rolle der katholischen Kirche in der deutschen Nachkriegsgesellschaft*, Stuttgart 1998 (Konfession und Gesellschaft 15).

2 Wolfgang Löhr, *Rechristianisierungsvorstellungen im deutschen Katholizismus 1945–1948*, in: Jochen-Christoph Kaiser/Anselm Doering-Manteuffel (Eds.), *Christentum und politische Verantwortung. Kirchen im Nachkriegsdeutschland*, Stuttgart 1990 (Konfession und Gesellschaft 2), pp. 25–41, at pp. 26–27.

3 Protokoll der Konferenz des bayerischen Episkopats, Eichstätt 26.–27. Juni 1945, in: Ludwig Volk (Ed.), *Akten Kardinal Michael von Faulhaber 1917–1945*, vol. 2: 1935–1945, Mainz 1978, p. 1078.

4 *Acta Apostolica Sedis XXVIII* (1936), pp. 249–263.

watch nothing but morally and ethically inoffensive films, the existence of an encyclical alone could be interpreted as a general support of this medium. Thus, formerly only a footnote of clerical responsibilities, film (as well as radio broadcast) then became an important aspect of the cultural activities of the Catholic Church.⁵

During the time of the Nazi regime, the encyclical *Vigilanti Cura* of 1936 did not gain a lot of attention in Germany. The Church's media reported about it,⁶ but the demand for Catholic film critics and a Catholic organisation on behalf of cinema-goers could not be implemented in the National Socialist state.⁷ It was only after 1945 that those ideas could be pursued. As a matter of fact, various dioceses had already addressed film work before the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany. The general crisis and the bombed cities were a pastoral challenge for the Church; still denominational based film departments were founded. The fact that older Catholic departments, which had existed in a few dioceses since the 1920s, had been forbidden to keep their film collections and projectors in 1940/1941, made the film work even harder. Both had been withdrawn to be used at the eastern front in order to entertain the troops.⁸ From 1943 onwards, the Bishops Conference of Fulda cancelled all expenses in the domain of film.⁹ Hence, the planning of the Catholic film work started from scratch after 1945. To do so, the Kirchliche Hauptstelle für Bild- und Tonarbeit (Churchly Main Department of Visual and Sound Work) was founded on the 1st of May 1946 and was supposed to encourage all the dioceses in West Germany to establish their film departments.¹⁰

5 Christian Kuchler, *Der Heilige Stuhl und die Massenmedien. Film und Rundfunk am Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts (1895–1939)*, in: Jörg Zedler (Ed.), *Der Heilige Stuhl in internationalen Beziehungen (1870–1939)*, München 2010 (Sprei-Studien 2), pp. 361–378.

6 For example, *Münchener Katholische Kirchenzeitung*, 19. 7. 1936.

7 Wilhelm Bettecken, *Dienst am Film – Dienst am Menschen. 40 Jahre Film-Dienst 1947–1987*, Essen 1987, p. 13.

8 Bundesarchiv Berlin, R 5101/23741, Letter Ministerialdirektor Berndt (Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda) to Minister für kirchliche Angelegenheiten, 11. 11. 1941.

9 Heiner Schmitt, *Kirche und Film. Kirchliche Filmarbeit in Deutschland von ihren Anfängen bis 1945*, Boppard a. Rhein 1978 (Schriften des Bundesarchivs 26), p. 190.

10 Archiv Erzbistum Köln / Archiv Deutsche Bischofskonferenz, KHBF, no. 151, Letter Bischof von Osnabrück to Direktor Kochs, 1. 4. 1946.

2 Travelling Cinema Offered by the Catholic Church

Indeed, nearly all Catholic dioceses of the Federal Republic introduced aforesaid film departments in the post-war years, like for instance the archdiocese Bamberg in autumn 1946.¹¹ Given diocesan film departments were supposed to provide information about the cinema for the Catholic parishes, to answer questions, to decide on films for religious education in school, to organise local church festivities and to offer a range of films for all areas of the dioceses.¹² Notwithstanding these involvements, the performance of the so-called “travelling cinema”¹³ was the main focus of the new-born film departments: Full-time employees of the Catholic Church offered screenings in all parts of their dioceses to provide morally and ethically impeccable films for all Catholics. These activities in Germany were no singular trend. Travelling cinemas owned by the Catholic Church as well as immobile theatres were an international phenomenon.¹⁴

The archdiocese Munich and Freising provided travelling cinema shows from February 1948 onwards, which attracted 123 865 visitors in 1949, with a total of 1 053 shows. At least for the Catholic area of Southern Germany, there is evidence for the widespread establishment of decentralised offices. In the middle of the 1950s there were, for instance, only five offices in the large diocese Regensburg. The most significant amount of offices, however, was reached in the much smaller diocese Augsburg; 14 offices were established here until 1954.¹⁵

But the heyday of the travelling cinema did not last very long. The triumph of a new formative medium, the television, which spread increasingly over the 1950s and 1960s from the cities to the rural areas, caused economic troubles for all Catholic film activities. So the rise of television prompted most German dioceses to quit their travelling film screenings at the end of the 1950s.

11 Archiv Erzbistum Bamberg, Rep. 4/3, no. 323, Diözesansynode 1946, pp. 37–38.

12 Bischöfliches Zentralarchiv Regensburg (BZAR) 245.26, Tagungsbericht zur Konferenz der Leiter der Diözesan-Bild- und Filmstellen in Königstein am 21./22. August 1947.

13 For travelling cinema in general cf. Martin Loiperdinger (Ed.), *Travelling Cinema in Europa. Sources and Perspectives* (KINtop 10), Frankfurt a. M. 2008.

14 Cf. the chapter written by Lutz Klinkhammer in this volume.

15 BZAR, 245.00 Kultureller Bild- und Filmdienst München: Geschäftsjahresbericht 1949; 245.35, Tätigkeitsbericht des Diözesan-Filmwerkes Regensburg vom 6. Oktober 1954; Archiv Bistum Augsburg, GV 1639, Ausstellung. Audiovisuelle Technik im Bildungsbereich, 25. März – 1. April 1977, p. 2.

The relatively short period of travelling film shows between 1948 and the late 1950s has been pointed out as a “decade of success”¹⁶ of the Catholic film engagement. This is definitively true with regards to the audience that had been reached. Especially in the southern and western parts of West Germany millions of Catholics became recipients of the Church’s initiative. But this was primarily a phenomenon of the rural areas, a development which could have already been observed in other countries.¹⁷ As many commercial cinemas had opened in the urban area during the post-war years, the temporary alternative of the Catholic Church concentrated on the countryside. The rural audience accepted the rather improvised shows in parish houses, community centres or pubs because commercial cinemas were too far away. Another significant point was the fact that most Catholics in West Germany lived in smaller towns that numbered from 1 000 up to 10 000 inhabitants whereas the proportion of Catholics in urban areas only reached 32.5 %.¹⁸

Therefore, the biggest success of travelling film shows is highly connected to the rural areas: Eventually, a broad section of the population gained access to a formerly frowned upon medium because of the church based initiatives described above. This intentional involvement in the film business was the opposite of the skeptical and strict censorship carried out by the Adenauer-administration. Until the end of the 1950s, the government’s main goal was to protect the population from film productions in general.¹⁹ The Church, however, embraced the popular means of entertainment and rather preferred to support media education. For this purpose, it offered discussions after every film screening focussing mainly on moral aspects but also leaving room for aesthetic questions. Therefore, these discussions can be regarded as a certain attempt of media education for people living in the countryside, at a time when and at places where the audience did not yet understand film as a product of art or a contemporary means of expression.

16 Antonius Liedhegener, *Katholische Filmarbeit in Deutschland seit den Anfängen des Films. Probleme der Forschung und der Geschichtsschreibung – Stand der Diskussion. Tagungsrückblick*, in: Hermann-Josef Braun / Johannes Horstmann (Eds.), *Katholische Filmarbeit in Deutschland seit den Anfängen des Films. Probleme der Forschung und der Geschichtsschreibung*, Mainz 1998, pp. 131–143, at p. 142.

17 Daniel Biltreyst / Lies van de Vijver, *Cinema in the “Fog City”. Film Exhibition and Sociogeography in Flanders*, in: Judith Thissen / Clemens Zimmermann (Eds.), *Cinema beyond the City. Small-town and Rural Film Culture in Europe*, London 2016, pp. 223–236.

18 Karl Gabriel, *Christentum zwischen Tradition und Postmoderne*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 72000 (*Quaestiones Disputatae* 141), p. 105.

19 Stephan Buchloh, “Pervers, jugendgefährdend, staatsfeindlich”. Zensur in der Ära Adenauer als Spiegel des gesellschaftlichen Klimas, Frankfurt 2002, pp. 184–185.

3 “Der Film-Dienst”: The Impact of Catholic Reviews on the Reception of Commercial Movies

Another part of the Catholic film work aimed at the entire population introducing denominational film criticism. Catholics with different professional backgrounds gathered, even in the later GDR²⁰ or other European countries,²¹ in order to discuss commercial cinema.²² In West Germany, an interest group was formed right after the visit of the first West German theatrical production “Sag die Wahrheit” (Germany, 1946). Some Catholic students met in Düsseldorf because they were disappointed by the content and style of what they had seen. Under the guidance of Klaus Brüne, they started writing film reviews as part of their Catholic youth activities.²³ This commitment led to the foundation of the magazine “Film-Dienst” and was supported by bishops from 1950 onwards.²⁴ This print matter easily became the leading medium of the Catholic film work: Every film that was shown in German cinema was being reviewed in the magazine. Certainly, the main focus was on the moral and ethical dimensions of the films. Therefore, all films were evaluated based on a fixed framework which had been developed by the “International Catholic Film Office” (Office Catholique Internationale du Cinéma, short OCIC), an approach in line with the pontifical encyclical *Vigilanti Cura* from June 1936:

- 1 = Suitable for everyone, even children.
- 1E = Suitable for everyone, even children, with just a few restrictions.
- 2J = Suitable for adults and adolescents from the age of 16 up.
- 2 = Suitable for adults.
- 2E = Suitable for adults, with restrictions.

20 Alexander Seibold, *Katholische Filmarbeit in der DDR*. “Wir haben eine gewisse Pffiffigkeit uns angenommen”, Münster 2002, pp. 65–96.

21 For example: Natalie Fritz / Charles Martig / Fabian Perlini-Pfister (Eds.), *Nur für Erwachsene*. *Katholische Filmarbeit in der Schweiz*, Zürich 2011.

22 The effort of Catholic reviews in two West-German towns are shown detailed in: Dörthe Gruttmann, *Film Culture and the Catholic Milieu in the Münsterland*. Billerbeck and Telgte in the 1950s, in: Thissen / Zimmermann (Eds.), *Cinema beyond the City* (see note 17), pp. 38–51, at pp. 42–48.

23 Klaus Brüne, *Damals fing auch der Filmdienst an*, in: Bernd Börger / Karin Korthmann (Eds.), *Ein Haus für junge Menschen*. *Jugendhaus Düsseldorf 1954–1994*. Beiträge zur Geschichte der katholischen Jugendarbeit, Düsseldorf 1994, pp. 67–71, at p. 70.

24 Protokoll des Konvents der westdeutschen Bischöfe zur Sitzung vom 27.2.–1.3.1950, in: Annette Mertens (Ed.), *Akten deutscher Bischöfe seit 1945*. Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1950–1955, Paderborn 2017, pp. 88–95, at p. 93.

- 2EE = Suitable for adults, but with significant restrictions, only for adults with good faculty of judgment.
- 3 = Not recommended due to ethically or religiously dangerous impact on the average spectator.
- 4 = Rejected, because the film directly or indirectly antagonises faith and tradition.²⁵

This grading system by “Film-Dienst” was supposed to guide all Catholic readers in Germany to watch “good” films and avoid “bad” ones. The magazine’s sales figures verify its long-lasting impact on the film industry of post-war Germany. The paper was able to produce a circulation of 13 000 copies in 1952.²⁶ Furthermore, the reviews also made their way to the non-clerical daily press, since some newspapers could not afford their own editorial department for films. So they used the reviews of “Film-Dienst”, but seldom revealed their readers the origin of their texts. Hence, the denominational film criticism acquired broad significance.

The next promising initiative of the Catholic Church had only restricted success due to lack of consistency. In some areas, Catholic priests were pressured by bishops to publicly display the magazine’s reviews next to the current cinema programme on notice boards. Believers were able to inform themselves about current productions and the recommendation of the Church. Even though the initiators wished to control the Catholics’ visits to the cinema, the aforementioned notice boards were never installed nationwide. In 1952, there were only 2 614 of them in all dioceses of West Germany which is not much considering the total amount of 1 804 Catholic parishes. 413 could be found in the archdiocese Cologne, 273 in Freiburg, 211 in Münster, 177 in Aachen, 139 in Regensburg and 114 in Munich and Freising.²⁷ The publicly displayed reviews were designed to make people avoid productions which were graded with a “3” or “4” whereas films with a positive review could be supported in all Catholic parishes. Therefore, the chaplaincies were asked to keep the display current at all times.²⁸ In consequence, laymen were needed to keep up with the controls, like the youth department in the small town Grainau with only 2 250 inhabitants that kept three notice boards current at once.²⁹ It

25 Bettecken, Dienst (see note 7), p. 12.

26 Protokoll des Konvents der westdeutschen Bischöfe zur Sitzung vom 27.2.–1.3.1950, Mertens, Akten (see note 24), pp. 366–371, at p. 370.

27 Archiv Bistum Passau, OA I/13, Letter Generalsekretariat der katholischen Filmliga Deutschland to Heinz d’Hone, 3.10.1952.

28 Amtsblatt für die Diözese Regensburg, 18.8.1950.

29 Archiv Erzbistum München und Freising, Seelsorgeberichte, Dekanat Werdenfels, Pfarrei Grainau, 1953 (no. 706).

can thus be concluded that the interference of the cinematic programme was not only assigned to bishops and priests but was rather done by a variety of Catholics in order to achieve a 'clean' film industry.

The Catholic film work found its broadest resonance not by encouraging "good" movies, but by fighting "bad" ones. In the immediate post-war era, the focus was solely on national productions. Hence, in 1946, the films "Sag die Wahrheit" / "Tell the Truth" and "Der Apfel ist ab" / "The Apple has Fallen" led to disagreements between representatives of the film industry and Catholic experts. As a result, censorship was discussed but immediately dismissed. Nonetheless, the Protestant, as well as the Catholic Church, urged to be part of the new "Voluntary Self-Regulation Body of the Movie Industry" (Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle der Filmwirtschaft). Not surprisingly, representatives of both Churches were part of this board from the beginning. This engagement was neither questioned by politics nor by the film industry itself because the Church was associated with its official authority concerning ethical questions.³⁰

Even though members of the film industry outnumbered those clerical representatives, their positions regarding the content of a film were important,³¹ since moral criteria were remarkably relevant to judge any production. This becomes apparent when looking at the approval of film screenings on certain public and clerical holidays: Every film was evaluated not only for age restrictions but also for its suitability for screenings on holy days like Good Friday, All Hallows, Day of Prayer and Repentance or others. Therefore, films with any horror effects or farcical content which did not focus on so-called "real problems" or an "ethical topic" were prohibited to be shown in German cinema at given holy days. This regulation forced the film industry to follow the structure of the Church year,³² which proved a clear success of the Church's involvement in the film industry. After one year of work, the Church's strong position within the committees of the Voluntary Self-Regulation Body of the Movie Industry was not questioned. Moreover, both politics and Church were fully aware of the power the Church held to influence the population's approval of cinema programmes.

30 Jürgen Kniep, "Keine Jugendfreigabe!" Filmzensur in Westdeutschland 1949–1990, Göttingen 2010, pp. 45–47.

31 Axel Schwanebeck, *Evangelische Kirche und Massenmedien. Eine historische Analyse der Intentionen und Realisationen evangelischer Publizistik*, München 1990, p. 420.

32 Buchloh, *Pervers* (see note 19), p. 207.

4 The Biggest Film Scandal in West German History: “Die Sünderin”

Nonetheless, the situation changed suddenly due to the release of “Die Sünderin” / “The Female Sinner”, directed by Willy Forst, in January 1951, a film which is widely known as the perhaps biggest scandal in the history of West German films. For understanding the scandal, the film’s plot needs to be outlined: Marina (Hildegard Knef), who has been a victim of abuse by father and brother as a child, works as a prostitute and gets to know the ill artist Alexander – they fall in love. After a surgery cannot help to save Alexander, Marina decides to help him end his life with pills. After doing so, she commits suicide as she refuses to live without him.³³ The director Willy Forst shows the double murder using very romantic and sentimental pictures. It is apparent why this film triggered the Catholic film work’s objection. Forst’s film did not display Christian values, instead it dealt with prostitution, concubinage, the assisted dying of a sick person and suicide – exactly those topics that the Catholic film work sought to prevent. Therefore, the Church demanded the film’s prohibition, referring to prostitution and suicide as gravely immoral. The Voluntary Self-Regulation Body of the Movie Industry did not follow this request, arguing that it could not determine a corruptive effect. “Die Sünderin” was released, placed under a ban for young people under the age of 16 and was not allowed to be shown on holy days.³⁴ As a consequence, the Catholic, as well as the Protestant Church, resigned from the committee. Headlines in contemporary newspapers for example in Munich’s “Abendzeitung” reading “Sünderin vertreibt Pfarrer aus der Film-Selbstkontrolle” / “‘Die Sünderin’ banishes priests from the Self-Regulation Body of the Movie Industry” drew some additional attention to the film.

Subsequently, especially the Catholic Church organised protests against “Die Sünderin”. The magazine “Film-Dienst” graded it with “4 – Rejected” and recommended a joint boycott because the film depicted a “ethische Atombombe aus Erotik, Exhibitionismus und Blasphemie”, an “ethical atomic bomb of eroticism, exhibitionism, and blasphemy”.³⁵ The apodictic verdict of the “Film-Dienst” was also recognized by the official Voluntary Self-Regulation of the Film Industry.³⁶ The text which was displayed on over thousand notice boards in Germany caused a scandal and mass protest revolving around the screening. The Catholic boycott led to intense debates concerning “Die Sün-

33 N.N., Die Sünderin, in: Lexikon des Internationalen Films, p. 3000.

34 Kniep, Keine Jugendfreigabe! (see note 30), pp. 53–68.

35 Film-Dienst, 23. 2. 1951.

36 Kniep, Keine Jugendfreigabe! (see note 30), pp. 49–50.

derin”, lasting approximately four months, while the protest peaked from February to April 1951. The vast variety of Catholic people objecting the film is noteworthy because the whole Catholic milieu protested against “Die Sünderin” – ranging from bishops to village priests and from the leading organisations of Catholic associations to the individual Catholic. The main prospect behind all protests was the prohibition of the film release in local cinemas. To mention one example, several thousand people demonstrated in Regensburg. But not all of them wanted the film to be dismissed; instead, they stood up for freedom of art: While 400 people protested against the release of the film, 3 000 tried to achieve the opposite. Finally, the film was shown in local cinemas. In other cities like Aachen in Rheinland, there were no large public discussions on the question, if the movies could be shown in the local cinemas. According to the local newspapers, a rather small talk on an academic level was organised. It discussed standards in German films in general and pointed out, that “Die Sünderin” would not be the only problem.³⁷ Comparable things happened in all larger towns: almost everywhere the Catholic protests were unsuccessful. The only dismissals of the film took place in small towns in strictly Catholic areas, for the cinema operators did not want to openly challenge the local priests despite financial losses due to the dismissal.

In total, the Catholic protest was not victorious, on the contrary, “Die Sünderin” became the most successful film of 1951. Many of these visitors wanted to form their own opinion about the scandalous film – even if they were members of the Catholic Church.

But did the Catholic protest fail in general? It is hard to tell. The main concern of the Catholic film work was the struggle for moral decency in social life not the prohibition of this precise film alone, it just used the production “Die Sünderin“ representatively. Those descriptions of the protest that solely focussed on the very short nude scene of Hildegard Knef fall too short to uncover the roots of the criticism.³⁸ Instead, the cinematic portrayal of various topics contradicting the Church’s idea of morality made “Die Sünderin” unacceptable. The main focus of the professional Catholic film work’s protest was the final scene, where both protagonists commit suicide: To display an alleged merciful killing in an almost romantic way appeared highly problematic. Furthermore, the temporal closeness to the crimes of euthanasia committed by National Socialists made this scene highly problematic and aroused recollections to the Nazi-propaganda film “Ich klage an” / “I Accuse” (1941). Thus, the Catholic film work did not want to tolerate the

37 Aachener Volkszeitung, 10. 2. 1951.

38 For example: Axel Schildt, *Moderne Zeiten. Freizeit, Massenmedien und “Zeitgeist” in der Bundesrepublik der 50er Jahre*, Hamburg 1995, p. 142.

given unchristian representations and decided on a general protest – with the danger of helping advertise “Die Sünderin” in many ways.

The Voluntary Self-Regulation Body of the Movie Industry needs to be considered as the most important political aim for the implementation of Catholic concerns because the controversies about “Die Sünderin” demonstrated that this was the only committee where decisions about a film’s release were effectually made. The Catholic film work needed to strengthen its position from within in order to prevent spectators from watching morally questionable films in the future. In fact, the committee itself was weakened after the resignation of both Christian Churches and tried to restore the co-operation. It is not surprising that both Churches considered a return to the committee only a few days after their departure. Since neither the committee members themselves nor society raised any doubt against a renewed membership, the Churches held a strong position to bring in their own terms: They re-entered the Self-Regulation after it was assured that representatives of the Church could participate in decisions about every production in the future.³⁹

Simultaneously to the negotiations about re-entering the Voluntary Self-Regulation Body of the Movie Industry, the Catholic Church founded its own “Filmliga” / “film league”. Catholics were urged to join in order to support the Church’s ideas and concerns in the area of film. Although the association had already existed since 1950, it only became popular after the controversies about “Die Sünderin”. Members of this film league, Catholics over the age of 16, assured via signature that they would never watch films contradictory to Christian faith and to follow the church based film ratings. Furthermore, they promised to boycott cinemas that showed films which the magazine “Film-Dienst” advised against. At last, members of the Catholic film league guaranteed to support films rated as worthwhile.⁴⁰ Starting point for the film league’s success was the first “Sonntag des Films” / “Sunday of film”: In October 1951 the local priests of all West German parishes publicly read out a pastoral letter of the Bishops Conference answering questions concerning films. Afterwards, more than 1.5 million people signed the film league’s pledge within only one year. However impressive this relatively high number of members may be, the film league was not successful. The film industry was barely impressed because most people signing the pledge did not go to the cinema anyway and therefore did not belong to the film-makers target group. On the one hand, the film industry did not care about it and on the other hand the Voluntary Self-Regulation Body of the Movie Industry already managed to involve the church based initiatives in

39 Kniep, *Keine Jugendfreigabe!* (see note 30), pp. 69–74.

40 *Amtsblatt für die Erzdiözese München und Freising*, 17. 10. 1951.

its own programmes. So the “Filmliga” did not achieve what it intended and became just a temporary side-project of Catholic film work.

5 The Outcome of the Catholic Church’s Engagement

At the end of this discussion the question arises whether the failure of the “film league” is representative for the failure of Catholic film work in general. Was the church based commitment between the years 1945 and 1955 just a flash in the pan without gaining any long-term significance?

At first sight, this might be true as even large protests did not ensure success, like the example of “Die Sünderin” verifies – but these boycotts have not been the most important aim. At second sight, it needs to be noticed that the intensive discussion triggered by the medium film enabled a wide social stratum to deal with the reception of films and even reached people who showed no interest in any film matters before. People who were primarily socialised with film productions of the “Third Reich” now started to consume media more critically. Especially in rural areas the screenings presented by the Church were the first opportunity to discuss the content of cinematic products. For the first time film was understood as a means of art which makes people ponder about the world. Even if the discussions primarily addressed questions of Catholic moral grounds, the film-work itself catalysed media criticism in all (Catholic) parts of the population. At the beginning of the 1950s, it became highly likely that television would become the key medium in a society which only stresses the societal relevance of the Catholic pioneer work.

The Church used different means to pursue its original goal, the rechristianisation of the people. The film work, including the support of “good” films, is just one example. While the great impact stayed a “chimera”,⁴¹ it is important to stress the significant societal impulse given by the Catholic engagement in the film sector. In rural areas the influence of the Catholic initiative was enormous, which could be shown using the example of travelling cinema and film reviews.

Furthermore, the Catholic agenda connected to film was politically successful: The denominational film work could be implemented in all relevant West German committees of censorship. The Catholic position within the Voluntary Self-Regulation Body of the Movie Industry (FSK) was the most important achievement, which was even

41 Thomas Großbölting, *Der verlorene Himmel. Glaube in Deutschland seit 1945*, Göttingen 2012, p. 93.

strengthened after the discussion on “Die Sünderin”. So it can be said, that already at the middle of the 1950s the acknowledged position of the Catholic Church in the Federal Republic was mirrored in its influence on the most important mass medium of the time. The German representatives of the Church quickly became an important player in this field. The Church started as the guardian against anything harmful. Plural media industry in Germany was only emerging in the late 1950s. The developments in German film productions can be retraced in accompanying developments in the Catholic film work.⁴² In this light even the scandal around “Die Sünderin” was just a loss at first sight. This public conflict helped stabilise and strengthen the position of film in the Church’s field of interest in general. Furthermore, it established the membership of churchmen in governmental and half-governmental media institutions. Film history of the early German Federal Republic, therefore, cannot be written without mentioning the engagement of the Catholic Church.

42 Christian Kuchler, *Kirche und Kino. Katholische Filmarbeit in Bayern (1945–1965)*, Paderborn 2006, pp. 242–248; in general: Christina von Hodenberg, *Konsens und Krise. Eine Geschichte der westdeutschen Medienöffentlichkeit 1945–1973*, Göttingen 2006.