

MARRIAGE IN THE SHADOWS



Contemporary Press Comments

Introduction

Marriage in the Shadows premiered in all four occupied sectors of Berlin on October 3, 1947: at the *Filmtheater am Friedrichshain* (Soviet sector), the *Cosima* in Friedenau (American sector), the *Prinzenpalast* in Gesundbrunnen (French sector) and the *Kurbel* in Charlottenburg (British sector).¹ At the time, a coordinated premiere in all four parts of the city was a very special event. As the commander of each sector was responsible for licensing films from other sectors, films were usually screened only in the sector in which they were produced.² The same held true for the different occupied zones of Germany.

Director Kurt Maetzig recalled what might have provided the basis for coordinating the four simultaneous premieres: "Before *Marriage in the Shadows*, I had co-founded the *Augenzeuge* (*Eyewitness Newsreel*) series and been able to arrange for distribution of the DEFA Newsreel in all sectors of the city with the four Berlin commanders. They knew me and they knew my work. In addition, the topic of the film was important to them."³ Kurt Maetzig and his main actors drove from one cinema to the next on the evening of the premiere, as scheduling had made it possible for the team to take a bow after each screening. In interviews and articles, Maetzig often mentioned that the audiences all reacted in the same way: nobody got up, nobody applauded and many people left the movie theater with tears in their eyes.

A few months after the Berlin premiere, the film was shown elsewhere in Germany—for example, at a private screening in Munich,⁴ and at the *Waterloo Cinemas* in Hamburg in early April 1948.⁵ Film historian Michael Töteberg described the Hamburg premiere of *Marriage in the Shadows*: "It was the first time that a movie from the east zone had been shown in the west zone. It was not an ordinary premiere. There was a huge photo-portrait of Gottschalk in the foyer of the *Waterloo Cinemas*. Not only the director, actors and other film people were there; numerous people who had been persecuted by the Nazi regime for political or racial reasons also came to the premiere. [Director] Veit Harlan and his wife, [the actress] Kristina Söderbaum, appeared as well; though they were not officially invited, they must have received complimentary tickets. The other guests at the premiere were outraged and felt provoked that the director of the anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda film *Jud Süß* (*Jew Suess*) dared come to this premiere! Film producer Walter Koppel, who had been in a concentration camp for five years, informed Heinz B. Heisig, the theater owner. After the *Weekly Newsreel*, Heisig called Harlan outside and asked him to leave."⁶

Marriage in the Shadows was also distributed internationally, screening in Sweden (1948), Finland (1948) and Denmark (1949). In New York, it premiered at the Little Met Theater on September 16, 1948.⁷ The film had been well received by important German daily papers and magazines in all sectors and zones, including *Der Spiegel*, *Die Zeit*, *Neue Zeit*, *Neues Deutschland* and *Berliner Zeitung*. The situation in the American press was very different, however. Although major American papers covered the film immediately after its New York premiere, they questioned the presentation of Nazis in the film (*Variety*) and remarked "that German artists have not yet acquired any perspective about the crime to which they were passive or active contributors" (*The New York Times*).

In January 1949, Siegfried Kracauer, the renowned German-Jewish film theorist who had emigrated to the United States in 1941, published an extensive review about the film in *Commentary*, a cultural magazine founded

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by the American Jewish Committee in 1945. His review, entitled "The Decent German: Film Portrait,"⁸ praised *Marriage in the Shadows* for adding "a touch of first-hand experience and valuable detail. The pictorial account of the anti-Jewish mob riots in 1938 reconstructs that organized fury with convincing accuracy; and many a conversation about topical issues sounds like a transcript from minutes." At the same time, Kracauer criticized the film for its utter lack of political awareness, arguing that in the film "decency unfolds at the expense of adult political judgment." "For the rest," he continued, "*Marriage in the Shadows* strictly avoids facing up to the facts." Kracauer ended his review with a warning about what the film implies about the German postwar political climate:

Through its one-sided emphasis on issues of personal morality, this film brings the problem of German re-education into a sharp focus.... Our correspondents in Germany report an ever-increasing rehabilitation of former Nazis and a mounting wave of anti-Semitism. One fears that the decent Germans of today may again let the evil grow without penetrating and resisting it, and may again be caught in the maelstrom with nothing left intact but their precious decency. The suicide that ends this film is the ultimate response of which a purely personal morality is capable.⁹

The following excerpts from contemporary German and American papers and magazines thus present an interesting discourse on the domestic and international reception of *Marriage in the Shadows* that reflected and was influenced by their very different experiences during and after the Nazi period.

German Reviews

***Nacht-Express Berlin* (4 Oct 1947)**

This film about the actor Hans Wieland and Elisabeth Maurer, whom he marries, is documentary (...) and in many cases a chronicle of images of Berlin under the swastika. In the street scene after the Reichstag fire. In shots of increasing "racial cleansing" and of the Night of Broken Glass, of destruction and looting that the police did not stop. The film fast-forwards to 1943, during a nighttime bombing raid, in which shattered glass again covers the street. Pulsations on the radio: "Here is England!" Fear at every sound. The ghostly visit of someone on the lam. Denunciation. Gestapo. An air-raid alcove near the steps to the basement for outcasts. A desperate person wandering around during an air raid. The suicide of a forced laborer at an armament factory. The Nazi registry with the impersonal Nazi woman who condemns the wife of a fallen soldier to deportation. The psychosis of insolent malice, smoldering cruelty. [...] But, at the same time, *Marriage in the Shadows* is an emotional drama seen from the victims' point of view. [...] Elisabeth is no longer her husband's colleague. She is pushed out of a world they had both belonged to. Tensions that are forgotten as soon as he remembers his promise to protect her. The couple's inseparability, which increases in step with the oppression and danger—this is the lasting melody that the film conveys with moving power.

***Neue Zeit* (5 Oct 1947)**

"New Style or Ineptitude"

[...] Kurt Maetzig, the director and scriptwriter, believes that the rehabilitation of cinema can only occur through new content. The truth lies somewhere between this opinion and the opposite proposition—namely, that cinema's renewal must be based on new forms. But as with any artwork, in the final analysis such renewal depends upon the degree of its success. In keeping with his premise, Dr. Maetzig built this film up on its content—and more or less neglected the optical aspect, which remains the formative element of film, or treated it in a very conventional manner. The story of the "mixed" marriage of actor Wieland and a Jewish actress from 1933 to 1943 is told in epic amplitude. [...] The composition of the script shows the same intention one

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has repeatedly seen in other DEFA films: to examine the theme in all its implications in order to more or less capture the totality of life. While the script plays out its detailed treatment of the theme to good advantage, the film is adversely affected by uncertainty as to whether this primitive sequencing of endless scenes, vignettes and dissolves with no hint of visual ingenuity is the harbinger of a new realistic style, or simply incompetence. [...]

Neues Deutschland (5 Oct 1947)

"The Most Shameful Chapter: A Film about Germany's Worst Period"

[...] Without question, the audience's applause was for the outstanding performances. But was it also for the film as a whole, for this film that opened the most shameful chapter of Nazi history—its racial fanaticism? Did the German public comprehend that we desperately need films like this, like daily bread, so we can prevent a similar barbarism forever more? Let's take their approval as a confirmation of honest abhorrence. Here the film—which perhaps even more than theater has the potential to reveal the unvarnished truth—accomplishes the most important cultural political work. [...]

Berliner Zeitung (5 Oct 1947)

"A Filmic Avowal"

A film like this pulls the curtain back and forces the countless people who are once again starting to feel sorry for themselves with great abandon to stop and re-focus on what brought about the world's hatred of us ... and what makes the ability to forget so difficult for a world that lives in another state of mind than we. [...] During the screening, the merciless storyline elicits our participation and involvement, starting at the exact moment we see a sign saying "Jews Not Allowed" at the beach at Hiddensee. [...] The satanic mill starts grinding and critical voices are quickly silenced; artistically and technically, the moral indictment could have been more open to question without losing its intuitive power. [...] The film does not grip the guilty conscience of Germans, so much as their repressed memories. The film's unquestionable merit is that it does not let you leave with the reductive and incorrect impression that only evil Nazis were responsible! [...]

Der Spiegel (11 Oct 1947)

"Real Life Was the Model"

Real life was the model for this film. It tells the story of Joachim Gottschalk who, together with his wife and child, departed this life in the fall of 1941. Gottschalk, although not an exceptional actor, was an extremely likeable, natural and idiosyncratic actor and had achieved success on stage and in the movies. He had appeared at the party held after the premiere of his last movie, along with other German artists, and had brought his wife. Goebbels, called the "patron of German film," had asked to be introduced and kissed her hand. Afterwards, "someone" drew the minister's attention to the fact that Mrs. Gottschalk was not Aryan. Goebbels, who always pretended he didn't care what people said about him, was apparently afraid of malicious giggles. He asked Gottschalk to divorce his wife. [...]"

Berliner Zeitung (4 Jan 1948)

"The Will to Renewal: Berlin Art Scene Seen from Moscow"

The magazine *Sovetskoje Iskustvo (Soviet Art)* published an article with the headline "Berlin Contrasts," by I. Sacharov, dated December 27, 1947. We extracted the following notes from this article. [...] "The film *Marriage in the Shadows*—recently produced by the young Berlin film production company—strongly presents the will to renewal in German art. [...] This moving creation by Kurt Maetzig, the young dramaturg and director, turned this drama of life into an outstanding work of the new German cinema." [...]

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***Die Zeit* (29 April 1948)**

"A Film in Memory of Gottschalk in Hamburg"

Similar in topic to the Bavarian film *Zwischen gestern und morgen**—Sibylle Schmitz, the Jewish wife of an actor, commits suicide—and thanks to the good script, based on a novel by Hans Schweikart, and Kurt Maetzig's subtle directing, *Marriage in the Shadows* is the most poignant and compelling indictment of the torture of humans by other humans that we have seen in German postwar cinema. This is because, although very realistic, this film seems very internalized and scrupulously avoids making concessions to popular taste, superficiality and sentimentality. It is of no significance that the somewhat unoriginal beginning of the film could have been tightened up, nor that the impression is created that resistance and support for those persecuted was only to be found among common people.

* *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow* (dir. Harald Braun) premiered on December 11, 1947

***Evangelischer Film-Beobachter* (16 April 1949)**

Postwar production repeatedly sought films that could do justice to events of the recent past and that would grip viewers, to make them reflect and rid them of the resignation and blasé attitude of the last years. But the audience tired, became indifferent and—most dangerously—opposed the efforts of films that were presented as well intentioned, but whose intrusive tendency was to repeatedly insist upon their great guilt. The call for an end to interminable accusations and for absolution and forgiveness in the Christian sense trailed off in the rising productions.

Almost two years after its premiere (this oversight is incomprehensible to us), we see the DEFA film *Marriage in the Shadows*, which with its real impact reaches a tired and no longer open-minded viewer. The film addresses the audience from human depths. It calls for humanity, rather than leveling accusations or pointing the finger. [...] Truth and some fiction created a film that opposes terror with humanity—it is at once depressing and liberating. We watch the film from the point of view of survivors. And of those who have been healed? [...] *Marriage in the Shadows* is a film that we, as Christians, must not ignore.

American Reviews

***Variety* (15 Sept 1947)**

[...] *Marriage in the Shadows* represents the first time that Germany's slowly reviving cinema industry has dared to tackle the story of anti-Semitism during the Nazi nightmare. But other aspects of this film, unfortunately, tend to weaken the dramatic point. The dominant flaw lies in the handling of the Nazi terror. Instead of a fresh slant born out of direct experience, Kurt Maetzig, the film's writer and director, dishes only a series of stereotypes. The Nazi psychosis and the Jewish tragedy are presented only as reflections of countless American and Russian pix on the same subject. This second-hand approach gives the film's tolerance message a peculiarly mechanical quality. [...]

***The New York Times* (17 Sept 1948)**

[...] This semi-factual drama of how two lives were shattered by the Nazis' maniacal anti-Semitism throws no new light for American moviegoers on an infamous interlude in history. Indeed the picture, which opened yesterday at the Little Met Theatre, follows a pattern that has become stereotyped, thus leading one to suspect that German artists have not yet acquired any perspective about the crime to which they were passive or active contributors. It is, however, encouraging to note that the German cinema is being used in some measure to reflect the nation's shameful disavowal of the fundamental principles of humanity, respect for one's fellow-man. Pictures such as *Marriage in the Shadows* must be a bitter pill for the Germans to

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swallow, but they may prove to be effective purgatives in time. It is unfortunate just the same that *Marriage in the Shadows* does not possess more sharply apparent dramatic quality, for then its persuasiveness would be more penetrating. [...]

Commentary (Jan 1949)

"The Decent German: Film Portrait," by Siegfried Kracauer

[...] The story ... of a popular Berlin actor and his Jewish wife, herself a prominent actress, [...] is only the nucleus of a plot which clearly aims at driving home the impact of Nazi anti-Semitism on all those liberal-minded Gentiles and Jews who in happier days unhesitatingly mingled with each other. *Marriage in the Shadows* is a chronicle of the German middle class under Hitler. [...] We knew all this. Yet in confirming it [the film] adds a touch of first-hand experience and valuable detail. The pictorial account of the anti-Jewish mob riots in 1938 reconstructs that organized fury with convincing accuracy; and many a conversation about topical issues sounds like a transcript from minutes. The film's specific merit is its honesty, which sometimes produces effects far more impressive than the glamour of Hollywood: a gay pastoral scene sandwiched between two episodes of anguish illuminate the nightmarish character of a universe in which sublime art neighbors on crude terror, and I do not recall any suicide on the screen that can match the film's concluding sequence with its drawn-out silences and its finality. [...]

Introduction, compilation of press excerpts and translation by Hiltrud Schulz, DEFA Film Library UMass Amherst.

1 filmportal.de

2 Schenk, Ralf, "Zwischen den Zonen. *Ehe im Schatten* und andere Filme zwischen Ost und West," *film-dienst* 21/1997.

The article discusses film distribution within the Berlin sectors and the German occupied zones, regulated by the *Kontrollratsdirektive Nr. 55* (Allied Control Council's Directive No 55) dated summer 1947. www.imdb.com (accessed on July 1, 2013) lists for four distribution companies for the territory of Berlin—Amerikanischer Allgemeiner Filmverleih (American sector), Atlas-Filmverleih GmbH (British sector), Internationale Filmallianz (French sector) and Sovexportfilm (Soviet sector)—and the following companies for distribution outside Berlin starting in 1948: Norddeutscher Filmverleih Adolf Bejör (British zone, Hamburg), Schorcht Filmverleih (American zone), Willy Karp-Film (British zone). Westfalen-Film is listed as a distributor for West Germany starting in 1952 and DEFA-Filmverleih for East Germany.

3 Ibid.

4 Agde, Günter. "Kurt Maetzig Interview," *Filmarbeit*. Henschel Verlag: Berlin, 1987.

5,6 www.filmmuseum-hamburg.de (accessed on July 1, 2013).

7 www.imdb.com: the US distributor was Gramercy Pictures (II).

8 Kracauer, Siegfried. "The Decent German: Film Portrait," *Commentary* January 1949: 74-77.

9 Ibid. 77.