Parallel to the founding of Federal Republic of Germany in May 1949, West Germany was on the lookout for new sources of national self-esteem. The concept of a “nation of culture” was a suggestion from intellectual circles, and one which met with broad acceptance until the beginning of the Wirtschaftswunder (“economic miracle”) in the mid-1950s. In a country which had been forced into unconditional capitulation, whose economic system had collapsed, and whose political order had disintegrated, culture had very few rivals. The notion of the Kulturnation depended on aspects of not only recognized high culture but also contemporary art. Particular attention was devoted to classical antiquity, Christian motifs, and modern aesthetics. This was especially true for the fine arts. References to the immediate Nazi past were employed in parallel with the Passion or ancient statues of gods, as we see in Otto Dix’s “Ecce Home” or Gerhard Marks’ sculpture, “Gefesselter Prometheus.”

Classical or Christian themes often appeared in an explicitly “modern” form as a way of bringing up to date a past which, with the general social consensus being to avoid allusions to actual historical events, had taken on a character of eternal validity, though not one which was entirely divorced from history. This was repeatedly integrated into the context of individual and collective identity constructs, and in this cinema played a significant role. The apparently apolitical entertainment film proved to be a suitable medium of communication about the nationalist socialist past, contemporary events, and future developments. Traditionally, cinema is regarded as an interface between the individual psyche and social discourse. Popular films take up the longings and fears of a wide audience and lend them a specific aesthetic form which in turn informs the audience’s imagination and ideas. As Stephan Lowry argues, film, the individual, and society all shape each other. In the period after the Second World War, the task at hand was to

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1 Otto Dix, “Ecce Home II mit Selbstbildnis hinter Stacheldraht (Ecco Homo II)” (1948) or Gerhard Marks, “Gefesselter Prometheus” (1948/50).
restructure the political system, the economy, and society, and to integrate the individual into this new community. Cinema became important in this context.

The film Die Sünderin (The Sinner, 1951) by Willi Forst provides a good example of cinema’s role in the post-war period. I argue that the film creates a complex web which, while pointing to the future, alludes to classical antiquity, Christian narrative, and National Socialism to make the death of a woman in the contemporary present interpretable as a sacrifice legitimated by the cultural tradition and required for the creation of a new state community unencumbered by the legacy of the past.

The film tells the story of the love between a male artist and his female model, a motif which has a long tradition in what we might call “artist myths.” Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz find its beginnings already in ancient narratives, as in those relating that the woman depicted in some of the works of the early fourth-century Athenian sculptor Praxiteles was the artist’s mistress. Breaking out of this tradition, however, the focus here is not on the artist but the model, who through her relationship with the painter is elevated from a prostitute into a loving and self-sacrificing partner, who eventually helps the terminally ill artist to end his life and then takes her own. Through a convoluted flashback structure, the story is told back to front, so that the film begins and ends with the death of the painter and the model. Two conflicting patterns of interpretation are suggested. Seen as the story of a relationship, the film tells of the failure of a great love. In the death scenes, the images signalize deep intimacy while the plot is driven by betrayal and loneliness. The painter believes that his lover has a great future before her, but she secretly follows him into death. Seen as an art film, on the other hand, the outlook is much more hopeful. The death of the pair is underscored by a slow fade-out, but then the final frame shows a close-up of a female nude entitled “Phryne.” Completed just before the death of the lovers, the painting represents both the painter’s magnum opus and the pinnacle of the collaboration between the painter and the model. The scene is slowly illuminated until the painting is resplendent in bright light. A new day seems to have dawned. This use of lighting suggests to the audience that the work is a masterpiece, and encourages the belief that both painter and model will live on in art history.

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2 Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, Die Legende vom Künstler: Ein geschichtlicher Versuch, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1980) 148–150. The volume was published the first time in 1934 in Wiener Krystall Verlag.