

## Film Review: 'Original Bliss'

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**Martina Gedeck is remarkable as a woman whose spiritual crisis has perverse consequences in Sven Taddicken's fresh, disquieting film.**

An elegantly disquieting investigation into the interrelation of faith, violence and sexual degradation, held together by a rivetingly sure-footed performance by German star Martina Gedeck (“The Lives of Others”), recent Munich Film Festival premiere “Original Bliss” might be most impressive for how much it resembles its lead character: calm and orderly on the surface, but roiling with inchoate perversities underneath. There are times in director Sven Taddicken’s film when, were it not for the fixity of Gedeck’s stare, her absolute intensity of purpose, we might mistake the drama for a straightforward tale of a beaten wife’s escape from her abusive partner, and her reclamation of her sense of worth in the arms of another man. But “Original Bliss,” adapted from Scottish author A.L. Kennedy’s 1997 short story collection of the same title, is much more unsettling, and much more original, than that.

With subtle notes of discordance introduced into even the most seemingly banal of exchanges — often just by having Daniela Knapp’s steady and graceful camera hover on Gedeck’s face just a fraction longer than the scene’s ostensible drama requires — the film lures us into an understanding of the colossal desperation that her character, Helene Brindel, conceals beneath a conventional exterior. Opening with a woozy camera move that roots us to her as she turns over and sits up, sleepless, in her marital bed, it establishes insomnia as only the most obvious and recent symptom of her profound psychological and religious crisis.

At some point in the near past, Helene lost her faith: her personal relationship with God, whom for most of her life she “felt in all things.” Her husband (Johannes Krisch), whose

breakfast and packed lunch she prepares during those dark insomniac hours before she passes out in front of the flickering TV, seems only moderately concerned for his wife, whose faith he had never understood and never approved of anyway. He is self-involved, perhaps a little pompous in his dealings with her, but feels peripheral to her apparently complacent housewife lifestyle. Until, that is, in the first of several shockingly visceral moments of domestic violence, he slams her hand in a drawer in response to a minor perceived infraction. More horrifying still is Helene's mute, routine resignation while her bruised and bleeding knuckles are bandaged: this has happened before.

In an effort to sort out her insomnia, she lies to her husband and goes to Hamburg to meet popular psychologist Eduard Gluck (Ulrich Tukur). Gluck initially seems like he might be her white knight, but is revealed to have his own uncontrollable compulsions; they embark instead on a relationship that will either be the salvation or the ruin of them both.

A woman's complicity in her own abuse is a potential narrative minefield recalling that of Paul Verhoeven's recent Cannes sensation "Elle." But Taddicken's film is a different animal: arguably a more sincere attempt to understand the psychology behind such corkscrew logic, rather than mining it for its salacious potential. But it is no less arresting for being a quieter and less ironic take, while Helene's religiosity adds another dimension of interest. Was her faith, like her marriage, only ever an offshoot of her masochism? Is her masochism Helene's own original sin? What happens if we derive bliss from the same place that causes us intense pain?

This is an interpretation of the source material (adapted for screen by Taddicken, Stefanie Veith and Hendrik Hölzemann) that could easily trip over itself in the level of complexity it attempts. But Gedeck is truly outstanding at bringing Helene through the story's convulsions in such a way she feels extraordinarily real, even as she continually surprises us. Tukur is a perfect foil as the archetypal shrink-who-needs-a-shrink, giving Gluck an edge of puppyish likeability despite his repellent pathology.

Taddicken has said in interviews that his film, in addition to such previous works as "Emma's Bliss" and "Getting My Brother Laid," is not preoccupied with the question of whether one is loved, but whether one deserves to be. That said, "Original Bliss" goes far beyond conventional self-help wisdom. As much as there is an element of "learning to love yourself" to the story's arc, the means by which both Helene and Eduard try to get there are deeply dubious, and the film's own stance on them laudably inconclusive — though the very slight sense of mischief that creeps in at the end is a welcome note, establishing Taddicken's compassion for his flawed-and-then-some characters.

This cool, intelligent reluctance to judge people behaving in such deviant and dangerous ways is what so elevates the film and what so unsettles the audience. Rather than being told who to support and who to condemn, we are left on a knife-edge of ambivalence over a different, knottier question: are those who find genuine sublimation in inherently self-destructive behavior to be pitied or — perish the thought — envied?

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Reviewed online, Berlin, June 30, 2016. (In Munich Film Festival — New German Cinema; Karlovy Vary Film Festival — competing.) Running time: 101 MIN. (Original title: "Gleißendes Glück")

## **Production**

(Germany) A Wild Bunch (in Germany) release of a Frisbee Films production in co-production with Saarländischer Rundfunk, Bayerischer Rundfunk, Cineplus Filmproduktion, Senator Film in association with Arte, Sky Deutschland. (International sales: Picture Tree International, Berlin). Produced by Alexander Bickenbach, Manuel Bickenbach. Co-producers, Marc Gabizon, David Kehrl, Frank Evers, Helge Neubronner.

## **Crew**

Directed by Sven Taddicken. Screenplay, Taddicken, Stefanie Veith, Hendrik Hölzemann, based on the short story collection by A.L. Kennedy. Camera (color), Daniela Knapp; editor, Andreas Wodraschke; music, Riad Abdel-Nabi, Wouter Verhulst; production designer, Juliane Friedrich; costume designer, Ute Paffendorf; sound, Matthias Haeb.

## **With**

Martina Gedeck, Ulrich Tukur, Johannes Krisch. (German dialogue)