

Resurrecting the one sheet: Alternative movie posters and the ‘secretive world of film art’

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Provocatively lauded with ‘bringing “the art” back to the one sheet’ (Chojnacki 2013a), the high-quality coffee table book *Alternative Movie Posters: Film Art from the Underground* offers 200 movie posters re-interpreted by nearly 100 artists. The book not only displays an impressive range of styles and techniques through its re-contextualised versions of cult and classic movie posters, but also simultaneously illustrates an intense nostalgia for a seemingly long-gone time when film posters acted as the most visible method of film marketing. As the introduction states, in contrast to the standardized nature of film posters today, a few decades ago marked a time when ‘Regardless of the genre or quality of the film, each poster was given 110% by graphic designers and photographers, painstakingly ensuring that their pieces properly conveyed the look and feel of the film’ (Chojnacki 2013: 4). This romanticised view of the movie poster as lovingly crafted art that *conveys* the intrinsic look and feel of the film, as opposed to *imbu*ing it with a look and feel as an essential marketing activity, is but one part of a dense layering of seductive rhetoric positions that bind the collection together. It is through the expression of these kinds of position-takings - statements and activities that signify an opposition to the standardized and corporate nature of commercial one-sheets today - that what Chojnacki terms the alternative movie poster ‘movement’, thought to have become organised and grown in the past five years (Pearson 2014), is defined and delineated.

The book offers a sense of cohesiveness to the production of alternative movie posters, as an activity that can be performed by fans (as fan art), graphic designers who provide their work for film festivals and screenings, websites such as Alternative Movie Posters (www.alternativemovieposters.com) or by galleries that commission and sell the work, such as the UK’s own Dark City Gallery. In the book and its surrounding inter-media coverage, what Chojnacki terms ‘underground film posters’ (2013: 5) can be seen to coalesce as a distinct field of cultural production that is capable of ‘imposing its own norms on the production and consumption of its

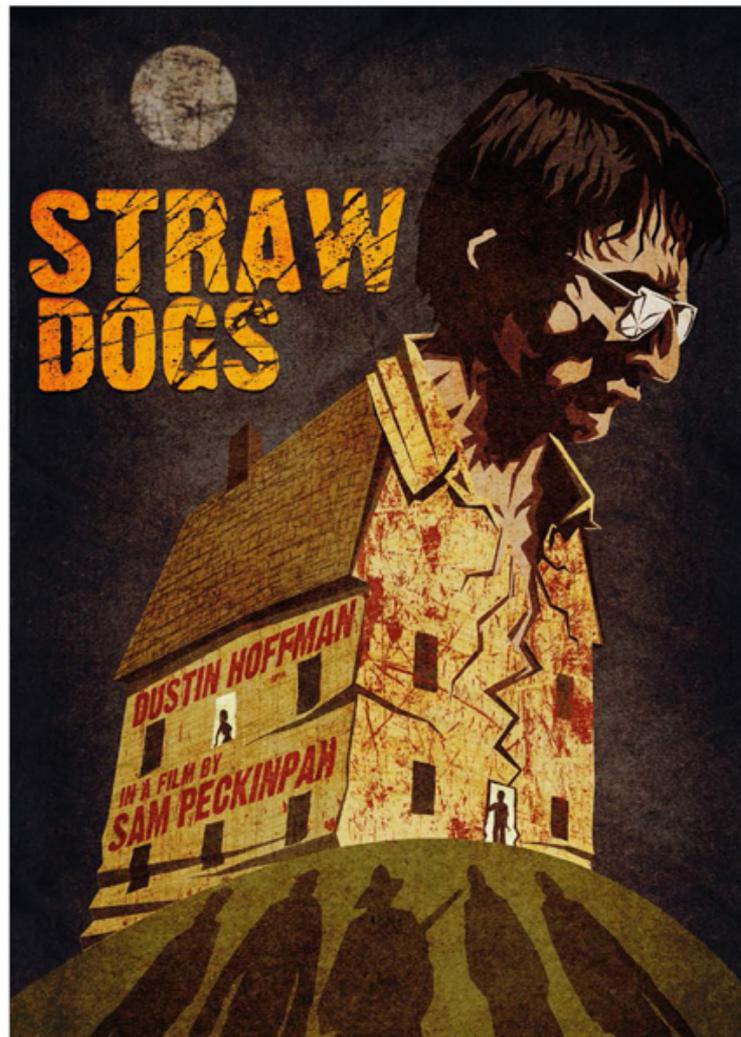
products' (Bourdieu 1984: 3). This article will look to provide a brief review of the book and its surrounding coverage in websites, press releases and interviews, in order to map out the key 'norms' and boundaries of this emerging field. Moreover, it will seek to trace how its distinct brand of oppositionality is enacted and articulated in the posters themselves, as a kind of 'warfare' against commercial mainstream film posters, production and practices.

By Movie Lovers, for Movie Lovers

Chojnacki's ability to so decisively align the movie poster with the loftier aspirations of art hinges on the book's ability to re-associate the one-sheet with the concept of the artist. While the posters naturally draw the eye to the centre of each page, surrounding the works is a side bar containing the name, location, and website of the poster's designer. Underneath each poster is a short interview section, which asks some variation on a series of key questions that look to discover the story behind each poster, its influences, the designer's preferred medium, or their favourite film and/or genre. This fleshing out of the artist's individual persona and style stands in marked contrast to a lengthy history of movie poster art, where designers have largely been left faceless, and posters 'un-authored'. Notable exceptions to this rule, who feature as prominent examples of the kind of 'long lost' movie poster art (Chojnacki 2013: 4; Chojnacki 2013a; Rosanes 2013), include graphic designer Saul Bass, responsible for many of Alfred Hitchcock's title sequences including *North by Northwest* and *Psycho*, and the posters for *Vertigo* and *The Man with the Golden Arm*; Bill Gold, who has designed nearly 1,000 film posters from 1941-2011 including *Casablanca*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Exorcist* and *Alien*; and Drew Struzan, who illustrated posters for *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

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Straw Dogs
27 x 40 in (69 x 102 cm)



BEHIND THE POSTER: *Straw Dogs* is one of my all-time favorite films, though admittedly, as I get older it gets more and more difficult to watch. There's a brief shot toward the end of the movie in which Dustin Hoffman stands slumped over the body of one of the men he's just killed, and he doesn't look triumphant, just sad and sweaty and bloody. The way he stood there really struck me and the idea for the poster came to mind. I modeled his look in the poster after that exact shot.

INFLUENCES: The recent wave of alternative poster designers have been the biggest influence. Olly Moss, Daniel Danger, Kevin Tong, Tyler Stout, to name only a few.

FAVORITE FILM / GENRE: The entire Coen Brothers' filmography. Their style is almost a genre unto itself.

FIRST FILM: *The Wizard of Oz*. The tornado in that movie still gives me the creeps.

ADDITIONAL REMARKS: It's an honor to be featured in this book alongside so many other great artists and designers. Here's hoping the alternative poster "movement" (if we can call it that) actually has some influence on mainstream poster design.

A sample page from *Alternative Movie Posters: Film Art from the Underground*

What these alternative posters share with Bass, Gold and Struzan is the prominence of the 'auteur figure', which according to Matt Hills, is often recuperated by fans regardless of the collaborative nature of the film industry (Hills 2002: 100). Concerning the far more individual nature of poster art creation, the recuperation of the auteur in this instance seems to be far less problematic, yet still wilfully

overlooking the fact that most of the poster art contained within has been commissioned by galleries or for events, and that it stems from well-known, already established works of film and other media. The inscription of the book's particular kind of cult status is inextricably linked to the romantic ideology of the auteur (Hills 2002: 100), which creates a sense of resistance to largely un-authored, mass produced poster designs. This is not unfounded; for instance, blogger Christophe Courtois offers collages of hundreds of studio posters grouped by their uncanny similarities and repeatedly overused designs (Abraham 2011; Courtois n.d.). The way that the auteur is articulated in discussions surrounding the alternative movie poster is thus somewhat similar to the way that it is discussed in relation to filmmaking, distinguishing those that make 'original' posters/films from those 'metteur en scenes' who lifelessly render texts that originate elsewhere (Buscombe 1999: 24).

However, evident is a hierarchy of auteurs that places the 'fan auteur' at the forefront of the alternative movie poster field. The ideal artist in this case is not just the master of his/her art, but also a movie lover, a fan producer who has taken it upon themselves to form a politicised statement against the standardised nature of commercial one-sheets. Described as an 'underground network of designers, who also happen to be huge moviegoers' (Chojnacki 2013a), the press release for the book states that 'these artists have single-handedly reinvented movie posters and did it simply because they have a passion for film and a love of design' (Anon. 2013). Writer Dan Solomon suggests that the movie posters contained within are 'independently produced pieces of fan art' (Solomon 2013), while the press release for the book states that 'Frustrated by the lack of imagination and quality, designers from across the world took it upon themselves to revive the lost art of film one-sheets by creating their own posters' (Anon. 2013). This bears many similarities to a 'good' fan identity that is 'constructed against the imagined other of the "bad" consumer' (Hills 2002: 3), except here the fan seemingly also has the opportunity to be the prized artist. Both the ideal 'fan-auteur' and ideal consumer are united by a common goal, 'as rescuer, as savior, as warrior, as saving culture, as fighting for it, as opposition, as artistic, as creative, as producer' (Hills 2002: 4). The cultural product of a grassroots and fan-owned movement, the alternative movie poster is a statement against the Goliath of the Hollywood studios who are accused of killing movie art. It is through this battle that the producers and collectors of this kind of movie poster art

are given a sense of solidarity, 'built around their specific interests and practices' (Gelder 2007: 144).

Alternative Movie Posters seeks to rescue and reclaim a cultural form that the dominant value system denigrates (Fiske 1992: 30), one that is generally seen as peripheral to a film text and in service to it as part of a larger concerted marketing campaign. However, while its strategies confer a sense of opposition and rebellion towards the negatively defined and dominant Other of commercial Hollywood, overall this is tempered by a drive towards legitimation, valorisation and high class. The capitals through which it operates, despite the fact that many of the films contained within the book may be considered 'lowly' or within the realm of 'bad taste', speak distinctly of art and high culture. These examples, handpicked from thousands of submissions by Chojnacki, run on limited sets of prints that sell out within minutes 'and are now the most coveted collectibles amongst movie and design aficionados' (Anon. 2013), generating 'hundreds, sometimes thousands of dollars per piece among collectors' (Chojnacki 2013: 5). John Squires goes further to describe the book as a 'veritable art gallery that you can hold in your hands' (Squires 2013), while Amazon reviewer Lori A. Zoss mentions that the 'page stock is premium and the colors are very vibrant making it a pleasure to take in with each turn of the page' (Amazon 2013). All of this, including its re-association with the auteur figure, is indicative of an 'ideology of quality' (Hills 2002: 100) and the operation of a high level of cultural capital that gears the book towards an exclusive elite of moviegoers and aficionados. If this is a concerted attempt to inscribe cult status and market resistant tastes back to movie fans, it is an exceptionally seductive and effective one that disguises its consumerism as a cultured, informed, democratic and ethical practice. Squires states, 'buy the book and save movie poster art today' (2013), illustrating the desire to elevate the book from being merely a commercial venture. More broadly, this is indicative of a combined set of cultural strategies that aim to separate the movie poster from its function as marketing and advertising, in order to rescue and respect it as an art form in its own right.

'Semiotic Guerrilla Warfare'

The sense of resistance that binds these works together can be linked quite clearly to subcultural ideologies on many levels; in terms of the choice of posters contained within, the surrounding discursive positioning strategies, and the style and design of the posters themselves. In particular, the alternative movie poster seems to be an activity that is engaged in varying degrees with what Dick Hebdige (quoting Umberto Eco) terms 'semiotic guerrilla warfare', where war 'is declared on a world of surfaces' (Hebdige 1979: 105). In one way, this can be seen in the sheer number and variety of posters and styles contained in the book, which according to Chojnacki harks back to the 1970s and 1980s when "poster artists would try to out-do each other with fresh techniques and eye-popping graphics" (Solomon 2013). Ranging from pop art, to minimalism, collage, comic-book stylings, through to the kinds of exploitation-style graphics that would not be out of place on the front cover of a VHS from the video nasties era, 'variety' in itself clashes with a notion of a relatively limited set of poster styles offered by the studios, which are often tied to certain genres (Gray 2010: 53).

If this is indeed a kind of warfare against the standardisation of movie posters, then the author's 'attacks' fluctuate in force and effect. Some seek to offer new and refreshing takes on old favourites, foregrounding design, aesthetics, and technical skill. Other posters, for instance Rowan Stocks-Moore's for *Bambi* and Lure Design's for *The Shining*, re-locate significant objects and place them within a different position or ensemble of signs, so that 'a new discourse is constituted and a different message conveyed' (John Clarke cited in Hebdige 1979: 104). *The Shining's* poster cleverly and humorously toys with the film's genre and tone in its faux travel advertisement that boasts happily, 'Come Relax at the Overlook Hotel', with its 'Swell Caretakers! Absolute Isolation! Fantastically Cruel Winters! Never a Dull Moment!' This is rendered in stark black and white, however, which confuses the tone of the piece and makes it unclear about the kind of movie world that the audience will be entering (Gray 2010: 52). Stocks-Moore's design for *Bambi* does this exceptionally well, creating friction with pre-conceived readings as a 'family' film. Through its black, silhouetted depiction of a stag with nearly glowing eyes, it rejects the whimsical and charming graphic style of Disney (and furthermore, any association with the studio) and instead portrays an inherent darkness in the film. Resistance is configured within

the designs themselves, not only towards dominant ideologies concerning the way that poster art 'should' look and function, but also against dominant interpretations and readings of the films themselves.

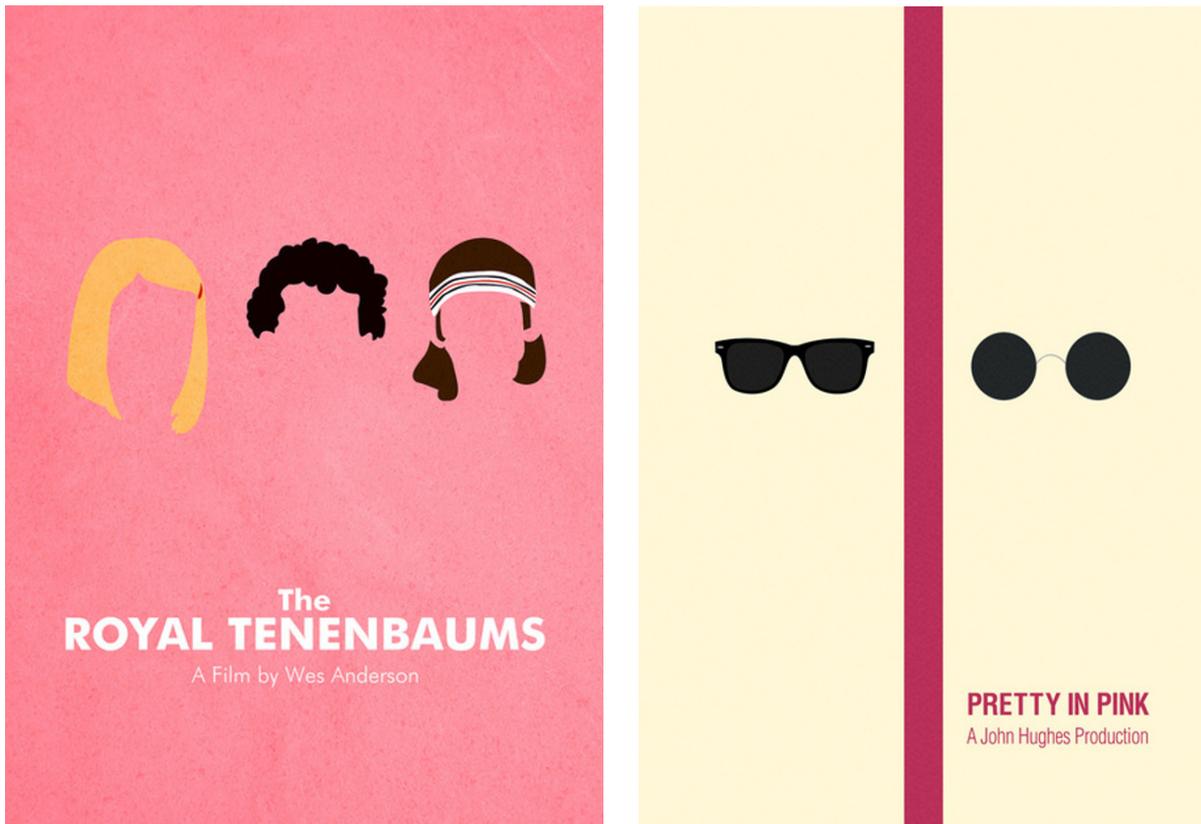


Lure Design's poster for *The Shining* and Rowan Stocks-Moore's design for *Bambi*

At no time is this oppositionality conveyed more vehemently than when discussing star intertexts, with the focus on celebrity on movie posters proving to be a major bugbear for both the author and critics. 'Instead of using paint brushes to create inventive works of art', Chojnacki writes, 'they [are] instead using them to remove blemishes and wrinkles from celebrity headshots' (Chojnacki 2013: 4). Marga Deona states that

'today's crop of posters hinge on a comparatively banal treatment, with a celebrity's face occupying a sizable real estate... The focal point of movie posters has since shifted from hyperbole to headshot, leaving the delicious dirty work to the trailers' (Deona 2013).

Although many of the posters contained within the book make use of Photoshop and other digital programmes to create their works of art, the use of such techniques to beautify celebrities seems to represent everything false, manipulated and superficial about movie poster art today. Deona's concern that the focus of movie poster art has shifted to celebrity, leaving most of the 'work' to the trailers, bears some similarity to the fate of Polish poster design. Where once handcrafted posters were the most prominent method of advertising and marketing, and were thought by Jan Wdowiszewski, (organizer of the International Poster Exhibition in 1898) to 'act like a mirror for society's physical and mental way of life' (Austoni 2010), warnings of the death of Polish poster design at the end of the 20th century accompanied their plummeting popularity. Agnieszka Dydo, co-author of *The Polish Poster of the 21st Century* (which includes 600 reproductions of Polish posters designed between 2001 and 2007) could be speaking of the fate of movie poster art today when she writes that 'Along with the reform of the socio-political system considerable changes occurred in the way posters were produced and how they functioned' (Warzecha n.d.). In particular, this changing function could relate here to Deona's comments concerning the ability of actors to stipulate how much 'real estate' they may occupy on poster designs and how they are featured, and further, the shifting prominence of the movie trailer in marketing campaigns with the advent of social media and streaming platforms such as YouTube. In keeping with the space offered by the alternative movie poster artist to toy with these conventions, many of the posters thus take a somewhat resistant approach to the way that celebrities are depicted. Nowhere does the celebrity head shot feature in this book; celebrities may be made into cartoons, their features altered, or their names rarely featuring at all. In the case of Chay Larazo's posters for *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *Pretty in Pink*, the faces of the actors are removed altogether, (incidentally, using Photoshop) leaving only iconic hairdos and sunglasses. It is difficult not to see such choices in this handpicked collection as a dig at posters that have been 'reduced to simply communicating who was in the film, instead of conveying the bigger picture - the spirit of the film' (Chojnacki 2013: 4).



Chay Lazaro's posters for *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *Pretty in Pink*

Chojnacki offers the theatrical release poster for *The Exorcist*, as a key design that was able to 'visibly grab moviegoers, but also captured the essence of the film' (Solomon 2013). As I have discussed elsewhere, one of the key facets to *The Exorcist* poster in terms of its industrial location as both a studio horror film and New Hollywood product, is its relative impermeability (Pearson 2013). While the silhouetted image of Father Merrin peering into the unknown has certainly become an iconic image tirelessly reproduced in subsequent re-releases, it reveals little about the kind of gore and scares that the film is now well known for. *The Exorcist* reflects an uncomfortable position as a product intended for the widest possible audience; avoiding the lowbrow associations with subversive themes and excessive gore, and offsetting the riskier aspects of its production (ibid). The elusive concept of a poster capturing the 'soul' or the 'essence' of a movie is thus truly judged by the beholder - if it is something that can be captured at all. This battle to convey 'the film's spirit' (Solomon 2013), using 'clever design and artistry to get a film's point across' (Webster 2013), seems to be another way of articulating a practice of endlessly deferring the narrative surrounding these films - most of which are already

considered 'cult' or 'classic' - and struggling against iconography that has been 'manufactured, mapped out as a limited set of connotations' (Hills 2002: 105). Producing an alternative movie poster, or indeed seeking them out, offers 'endless interpretation and speculation predicated upon a point of identity or closure at which the narrative will expire, and a point which is endlessly warded off' (Hills 2002: 108). It allows producers to mine films paratextually long after their release, in pursuit of an ambiguous notion of a film's 'essence' that can never truly be pinned down. Attempting to capture the soul of a film can thus be viewed as another way to articulate oppositionality, not only against 'official' readings that appear to offer closure in terms of how a film should be read and how it can be represented (Hills 2002: 109), but also against the 'throwaway' nature of film posters that are designed to be read at a glance and appeal to the widest possible audience.

In Closing: An Alternative Poster Movement?

Paul Kirkham, author of *Saul Bass: A Life in Film and Design* is quoted on the sleeve of the book, saying 'Each is fascinating on its own terms but the sum of the parts is even more so' (Chojnacki 2013: inside cover). This certainly seems to be the case, both in terms of seeing the posters and their designers brought together, and taking into account the variety of reviews, press releases, blogs and interviews that converge with the book and articulate its distinct ideologies. *Alternative Movie Posters* serves to focus the practice as one that exists within its own emerging field of cultural production, which also operates transnationally, with the posters in this book hailing from over 20 countries. The existence of such posters at all proves that the art form of the movie poster is not dead, and it will be interesting to see whether in time poster artwork more broadly does indeed begin to change. However, I would suggest that the alternative movie poster has more value to those invested in the field as a high-quality collector's item, and an exclusive and resistant cultural practice. As John Fiske points out, 'people in these subcultures keep devising new ways of tearing their jeans' (Fiske 1992: 17); these aren't just movie posters, they are *alternative* movie posters, and it seems unlikely that they will be 'selling out' to the mainstream any time soon.

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