



Solaris 1972 (USSR)
 Director: Andrei Tarkovsky
 Artist: Andrzej Bertrandt (Poland)



*The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz** 1955 (Mexico)
 Director: Luis Buñuel
 Artist: Hans Hillmann (West Germany)

Plastered

I CAN'T IMAGINE THAT ANDRZEJ BERTRANDT'S CRYPTIC POLISH poster for *Solaris* could mean anything to anybody unfamiliar with the film. The spare design, consisting of a concentric grid positioned dead center and topped off with some modernist titling, could easily be dismissed as little more than a relic of Seventies East European sci-fi chic. But those who have an intimate understanding of Tarkovsky's movie will be immediately attuned to the artist's intent. I read the oblique geometric form as a manifestation of divinity, rendered as the scientific phenomenon that the film's cosmonauts encounter. It converges on a multicolored core that could just as well be the obscure divine entity that we imagine but whose identity is never explicitly articulated in the film (apparently due to pressure from the Soviet censors).

The year was 1993 and I had to have that poster, forfeiting \$250 to a New York dealer just to make it mine (by today's standards not an unreasonable price to pay). Seeing how the process of comparing various posters to their films can enrich the experience of cinema, I began to seek out truly unorthodox interpretations (typically art-house fare). I soon learned that more often than not they did not issue from a film's country of origin, but could be created for releases in places such as Cuba, Czechoslovakia, or Japan, each of them taking a unique and idiosyncratic approach to marketing. At a time before any of this type of artistry was systematically documented—facilitated by the

arrival of the Internet—my quest involved networking with fellow collectors and dealers from around the world to track down the most unusual and illuminating poster representations of a film.

Unlike other pop-culture ephemera, such as books, cards, records, and magazines, film posters were never intended to be sold to the public. They were produced by the distributor exclusively for theater display, to be returned immediately thereafter. At that point they were usually destroyed. Those that have been preserved also had to endure wars, natural disasters, mishandling, and the ravages of time. It's not uncommon for posters, particularly those from before WWII, to be either unique or one of only a few known to exist.

My collection eventually developed into a traveling exhibition, *Representing Cinema and the Art of the Film Poster*. What distinguished these works from their commercial counterparts was that their designers weren't motivated by the demands of glorifying celebrity, illustrating dramatic high points, or employing the bombastic taglines that predominate in film posters in the U.S. The artists instead chose to address an implicit or essential aspect of the film, preparing the viewer for a complex and subjective relationship with what they were about to see.

A range of design traditions throughout the 20th century nurtured

*Hans Hillmann's artwork for the West German poster of Buñuel's *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz*—a film about a man obsessed with the idea of killing women but incapable of doing so—makes an appearance in Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* on the wall of Marina Vlady's bedroom.



Le Feu follet 1963 (France/Italy)
Director: Louis Malle
Artist: Hans Hillmann (West Germany)



RoGoPaG* 1962 (Italy/France)
Directors: Rossellini, Godard, Pasolini, Gregoretti
Artist: Vaca (Czechoslovakia)

this approach. They rarely took hold in the capitalist West but were particularly influential in Poland, which produced the most significant body of poster work after WWII. Breaking with Stalin's restrictive, state-imposed social realism, many Polish designers were inspired by the artistic innovations of the Soviet Constructivists, among other contemporary art movements. Within the Communist bloc, the pressures of competitive advertising were nonexistent, and as a result artists were granted broad artistic license to interpret their subjects.

This creative freedom was antithetical to the rigid strategies of film advertising in the market economies of the U.S. and Western Europe. There were rare exceptions, however, including the body of work produced by the independent West German distributors of the Sixties, as well as some of the more conceptually minded designs from France and Japan. In the U.S., the most relevant exception to Hollywood's formulaic traditions came from designer Saul Bass, who, in partnership with Otto Preminger, Alfred Hitchcock, and other prestigious directors, exercised decisive control over the representation of their films with his iconic signature style. Within the Hollywood system, such freedom was rarely granted. The studios were unwilling to take the risk that a challenging poster design might discourage ticket buyers.

WHILE POSTERS CAN BE ENJOYED AS WORKS OF ART OR historical documents, the film experience is vital to a full appreciation of the artist's intentions. By seeing the film and the poster firsthand, the viewer has an opportunity to for-

mulate an individual response to both, one relative to the other. One recent discovery reminded me why I am so compelled to collect in the first place. Over the years I had come across the West German poster for *Le Feu follet* a few times, but never having seen Malle's film, I did not find the image of Maurice Ronet partially obscured by dead leaves compelling. But after finally seeing the film in 2005, the poster came to life with new, resonant meaning. The film was a revelation, and the motivation for Hans Hillmann's elegiac design was now clear. The evocative poster was less an advertisement than it was a funerary marker, an autumnal memorial to Ronet's character, as well as to the film's lingering, melancholic air. I realized that even after almost 15 years of collecting, familiarity with a film's richness was still central to the full appreciation of a poster artist's intentions. Just like Bertrand's design for *Solaris*, Hillmann's poster remains an intellectual and emotional touchstone, possessed with the spirit of a film that only those fortunate enough to know it will be able to recognize. □

OTTO BUJ is a collector and curator whose exhibition, *Representing Cinema and the Art of the Film Poster*, was recently displayed at the Art Gallery of Windsor in Canada.

*Replacing the image of Christ from a Renaissance painting with a lavish spread of foodstuffs, Vaca's irreverent montage illustrates the underlying message of *RoGoPaG*: the impossibility of reconciling the materialism of contemporary European society with traditional religious and cultural values.

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