

Le Silence de la Mer (left) 1949
Director: Jean-Pierre Melville
Artist: Raymond Gid

Pickpocket 1959
Director: Robert Bresson
Artist: Jacques Fourastié

In the French Style

BY OTTO BUJ

BY THE TIME CINEMA APPEARED AT THE END OF THE 19TH century, there was already a French advertising tradition in place, with the ateliers of Cheret, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Mucha producing impressive lithos for operas, cabarets, and music halls. Influenced by the fine arts, their refined approach was not applied to selling cinema. Considered entertainment for the common class, movies were promoted as such. The French film industry, much like its early American counterpart, took a safe and literal approach to marketing its product in order to ensure the widest possible appeal. While the early 20th century did produce some notable exceptions—often incorporating formal elements from Impressionism, Art Nouveau, Cubism, and Art Deco—the more substantive and conceptually minded film poster designs were produced after WWII.

Raymond Gid, an architect by profession, was one of the more innovative designers of this period. Working in a nonrepresentational style, Gid took full advantage of the creative freedoms granted to him by the producers who commissioned his designs. Two major examples are his posters for Melville's *Le Silence de la Mer* (49) and Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques* (55). For Clouzot's campaign, Gid produced two different compositions, both utilizing watercolor, ink, and graphic elements. The affiche reproduced here depicts the abstracted and foreshortened figure of a man, the school's headmaster, as he sinks into a bathtub. The ghastly hands submerging the victim implicate both his wife and mistress in the conspiracy of his murder. The rising air bubbles double as reflections of the moon, the sole witness to the disposal of the corpse, shimmering on the surface of the stagnant pool in the dead of night. Gid's second design for *Les Diaboliques* features a slightly more literal arrangement of narrative

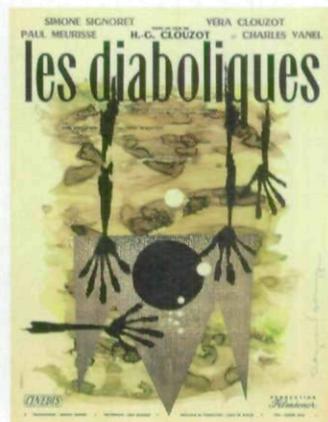
elements, including the intimate pairing of the women's silhouettes and the wicker trunk used to dispose of the corpse.

Cocteau's *Orphée* (50) is also represented by a pair of photomontage designs. Both of Jean Harold's compositions for the large-format affiches are arranged in heavy pyramidal form, combining mythological motifs with contemporary images of the actors. In the design pictured, the elements are arranged hierarchically. The Princess of Death looms monumentally over two parallel representations of the myth's players—one drawn from an ancient Greek stone relief, the other depicting the film's performers in the roles of Huertebise, Eurydice, and Orphée.

The design for *Pickpocket* (59) is an iconic representation of New Wave modernity and cool. The singular image shares the movement's ragged urgency and verité aesthetic, which here exposes the efficiency of the pickpocket at work. The austerity of Bresson's film is upheld by the spare, enigmatic snapshot that deliberately understates the complexity of the story. This large-format poster was typically pasted up in high-traffic urban areas, dominating the sightlines of passing pedestrians. Posting it in a place where such a crime would typically occur, such as a busy metro station, proved to be an especially effective and subversive advertising tactic. The poster probably triggered a panicked flurry of wallet-checking among the hustling urbanites.



Orphée 1950
Director: Jean Cocteau
Artist: Jean Harold



Les Diaboliques 1955
Director: H.G. Clouzot
Artist: Raymond Gid

By the late Sixties, the quality of French film poster design had declined significantly. The competitive market afforded few opportunities for designers or filmmakers looking to represent their work more faithfully. The craftsmanship and quality (cheaply produced offset printing replaced traditional lithography) were compromised for designs that were now consistently formulaic and far removed from the past splendors of French film poster design. □

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.

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