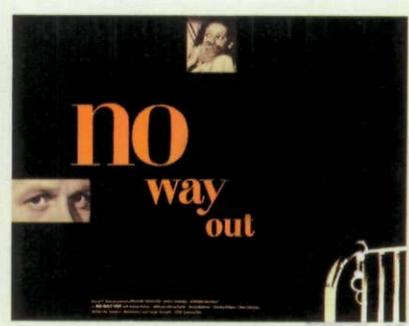
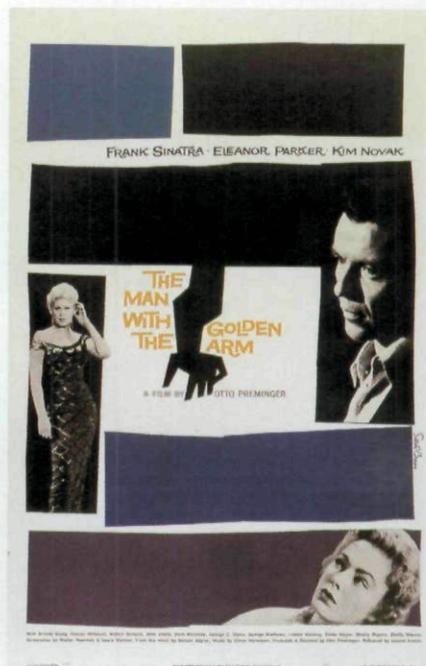


Wages of Virtue 1924
Director: Allan Dwan
Artist: Unknown



No Way Out 1950
Director: Joseph L. Mankiewicz
Artist: Erik Nitsche



The Man with the Golden Arm 1955
Director: Otto Preminger
Artist: Saul Bass

Buy American BY OTTO BUJ

OVERCOOKED CLICHÉS FOR MOVIE POSTERS HAVE BEEN served up by Hollywood admen since the silent era. Pressured to appeal to as many potential ticket buyers as possible, studio posters played it safe by blowing up the head of a bankable celebrity or spotlighting a signature moment of romance or action. For that reason, the history of American poster design is dominated by endless tiresome formulas. The few exceptions demonstrate stylistic sophistication rooted in the fine arts, like the Art Deco design of *Wages of Virtue* (24), but that's about it. So went the drill through the Thirties and Forties—with some interesting anomalies produced by the race and exploitation film-genre ghettos—until Saul Bass in the Fifties.

Known for brilliant minimalist forms, bold color fields, and emblematic images, Bass (1920–96) was without peer. His first commission, a small contribution to a campaign involving designers Paul Rand and Erik Nitsche, was for *No Way Out* (50). But the credit logo for *Carmen Jones* (54) inaugurated a legendary 13-film collaboration with Otto Preminger. Next up was Bass's campaign for *The Man with the Golden Arm* (55), whose jagged cutout arm created a simple yet indelible metaphor for heroin addiction. (The original one-sheet maquette didn't feature stars Frank Sinatra, Kim Novak, or Eleanor Parker, but Bass was ultimately pressured into incorporating them into the design.) Other key Preminger gigs include *Anatomy of a Murder* (59), *Saint Joan* (57), and *Exodus* (60). He also went on to design posters for Alfred Hitchcock (*Vertigo*, 58), Billy Wilder (*One, Two, Three*, 61), and many others.

By the late Sixties, the Bass "look" had become dated, but the

level of sophistication he introduced will be with the medium forever. His singularity of vision, if not style, influenced the more innovative American posters of the period, including *The Thomas Crown Affair* (68), *Bullitt* (68), and *Downhill Racer* (69).

In the less commercial art-house realm, small independent distributors could experiment with advertising, given that its audience was more open to such an approach. Key examples include the Walter Reade Organization's release of Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Teorema* (68), and New Line Pictures' inaugural title, *Sympathy for the Devil* (70). Too small for the National Screen Service (the supplier of standardized promotional materials), the posters were printed in odd sizes and small quantities, and sent out to venues by the distribution companies themselves.

In the Seventies, indie firebrand John Cassavetes adopted a similar model, exercising total control over advertising for the films he directed and distributed. He produced a series of compelling designs that often incorporated the photography of his coproducer Sam Shaw. The campaign for *A Woman Under the Influence* (74) consisted of three designs, two specifically showcasing Peter Falk and Gena Rowlands. The candid shot of Ben Gazzara is one of many evocative photos used to promote *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (76). In the poster shown, Shaw captures the soul of the film in an image of Gazzara's conflicted character suspended in a queasy moment of identification with the viewer. □

OTTO BUJ is a collector and curator whose exhibition, *Representing Cinema and the Art of the Film Poster*, was displayed at the Art Gallery of Windsor in Canada in 2007.

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