Collecting movie posters:
Changes in the digital age

BY: **Margaux Cerutti**

ABSTRACT

While the film poster took over fifty years to become a collector's item, the alternative poster was born as such. The article has five parts. The introduction explores the acknowledgment of the film poster as a collector's item through the advent of Pop Art. The second and third parts propose a brief historical survey of the film poster and its difficult life. This survey and the presentation of some of its protagonists help us understand why the poster obtained its artistic autonomy, overcoming its function as a pure advertising medium. The fourth part analyses three posters diversified by production: (i) the Official poster distributed in cinemas and elsewhere; (ii) the Alternative movie poster created by young independent artists; (iii) and the poster created for distribution on the Netflix platform. This analysis highlights how the different contexts of use influence the structure and composition of the posters. In this sense, the development of the Alternative poster is a perfect example of what Jenkins intends as a participatory culture, made explicit by the rise of new movements born with the affirmation of technologies based on deep-learning systems.

Collecting movie posters: Pop collection

Pop art is an artistic movement that originated in the United Kingdom in the mid-1950s and became established in the United States in the 1960s. Umberto Eco defines this movement as

an acronym [around which] are gathered artists who draw on the popular imagination, now definitively influenced by advertising, television, and information, artists who also appropriate the mechanisms and practices of mass media such as obsessive reproduction and repetition, the manipulation of colors, sizes, and shapes of objects that populate the collective imagination. (Eco 2014)

It is a movement characterized by the reappropriation of the iconography of consumer society, reproducing the stereotypical artifacts of mass industry to enhance the language of commercial art and advertising. Currying the connotation of subversive art (Eco 2014), pop art led to the conception of *everything* as an aesthetic experience. The movie poster turns out to have been a perfect example of pop art even before this art movement took hold, as it was understood as an art object conceived for advertising purposes for mass society (originally understood as industrial society); thus, an object from another era that, starting with pop art, acquired a new artistic status. This new connotation led collectors to take an interest in movie posters mainly for their stylistic 'pop' nature, conceived for mass communication, and as a collector's item because of their difficult availability. Albeit belatedly, it seems that collectors have understood and grasped this object's aesthetic and historical value, so much so that today, the poster is widely considered a visual text endowed with its autonomous artistic dignity, no longer just a functional paratext to advertise the film. If one wants to understand the collector as "an artist who accepts to express himself through images endowed with a strong symbolic power, which become an extension of the person" (Grazioli 2012), then one can easily understand why posters have become collectible. However, while the movie poster has taken over fifty years to become a collectible item, the alternative poster was born as such.

Historical survey of the film poster and its hard life

According to Barbieri (2011), the poster exemplifies extraordinary narrative figurativeness in which figures and words cohabit in the same representational space in a symbiotic relation. We typically encounter paintings in a space devoted to their enhancement so the viewer can contemplate the work. Instead, the poster "is made to impose itself autonomously on the viewer in a context full of a thousand other stimuli, conveying its message with the utmost rapidity" (Barbieri 2011: 69). The poster occupies, therefore, a chaotic space, amid which it struggles to attract the viewers' gaze and cope with the countless stimuli crowding their visual field. To do this requires a composition characterized by unprecedented, contrasting lines and shapes of immediate perceptibility (Barbieri 2011:71). At the same time, it comprises figures that, in most cases, are

accompanied by a written text that explains them to ensure a fuller understanding of the image, as is often the case with paintings. The poster's goal is to convey a message and some necessary information almost instantly, so its figures must have a clear and powerful visual impact whose precise meaning will later be confirmed and deepened by the textual components.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, posters became rampant, becoming a massive and intrusive presence in the center of metropolises and profoundly changing the citizenry's walking experience. Posters, particularly movie posters, after a stunted beginning, found considerable success thanks to poster artists, that is, real artists who understood their communicative importance early on and devoted in-depth study to them, offering an innovative and novel product for the mass communication techniques of the time. A final point to consider is "the difficult life of the film poster"[1] due to its widespread perception as an advertising product. Scholars only belatedly took an interest in movie posters, considered merely a colorful and decorative frame of film history for a long time. Moreover, it is interesting to note that even cinephiles initially did not appreciate the originality of the movie poster,[2] as their interest was motivated mainly by an emotional and passionate drive for the reference film, thus enhancing only their decorative and visual function. Ferdinando Salce, an important Italian collector, is a prime example of this because, within his collection, there are significant absences, such as the cult phenomena of the 1920s and 1930s or masterpieces belonging to French expressionism and realism (Brunetta et al. 1992).

Gian Piero Brunetta, a great historian of cinema, emphasizes two elements: on the one hand, the importance of writing a history of the film poster, but on the other hand, the difficulties that can be encountered in attempting to draw a general picture of it consisting of definite and clear-cut contours. Since the origins of cinema, the period around the release of a film has been characterized by a massive production of material – for example, posters, playbills, and set photos posted outside movie theaters, or even brochures dedicated to individual actors. One could rely on this range of materials to attempt to reconstruct the story; however, this would turn out to be only a trace, a synopsis of a fresco of which we know only the myth (Brunetta 2002: 81). As mentioned earlier, the film poster had a difficult life, mainly due to the lack of interest shown by historical, scientific, and other communities. However, it is necessary to point out that the poster, by its very nature, is a product characterized by a short life due to the advertisement of films that only occupy movie theaters for a limited time, beyond which the promotional materials become obsolete.

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[1] https://www.museofermoimmagine.it/la-difficile-vita-del-manifesto-cinematografico/ (site closed)
[2] At the same closed site

Moreover, it is a product made of an easily perishable material; paper, in fact, by its very nature, is already susceptible to the passage of time. In this context, the issue is exacerbated since movie posters, primarily until the mid-twentieth century, were generally posted outside movie theaters without any kind of protection, thus exposing the product to sunlight or bad weather and promoting its deterioration. In any case, despite the difficulties mentioned above, some scholars have taken an interest in the history of the movie poster, attempting to trace a continuous line of it by following different references. Some have traced the history of the poster by applying it to the history of cinema (Dacre 2020); others have problematized its iconography and memory (Brunetta 2002); and still others have traced the different cultural styles or focused on the stylistic evolutions of a single country (Della Torre 2014). There remains, therefore, no doubt that the history of the film poster is difficult to make autonomous since it remains irrevocably linked to cinema or other fields, such as advertising. Many volumes dedicated to the history of advertising posters consider the seventh art posters an excellent example of promotional efficiency. Only but a few, though, deal solely with the history of film posters.[3]

At the end of the nineteenth century, cinema was born, and in a short time, its public performances became regular events. Early forms of film publicity developed simultaneously, improvising the use of hand-painted wooden boxes or the typical sandwich board.[4] Jules Chéret is considered the pioneer of modern poster artists. Being able to best interpret the atmosphere of his era by tracing it through his poster illustrations, he became a key figure in the development of the film poster. In 1890, Chéret produced a lithograph for the short film program *Projection Artistiques*, which depicts a young woman holding a sign with showtimes. Generally, early film posters contained a single block of written text announcing the film's title, the producer, and the director. It was not until 1896 that lithographer Marcellin Auzolle created a poster for a specific movie. This contained some scenes from *L'Arroseur arrosé* by the Lumière Brothers (A. and L. Lumière 1895). Until 1910, movie posters consisted mainly of a drawing of an audience, usually of an elitist nature, sitting in a cinema or theater intent on watching a short film.[5] The audience, drawn in color, watched black-and-white images from the advertised short film. Until this time, actors remained anonymous for several reasons, chief among them not wanting to be directly associated with this new medium whose future or true essence was unknown. However, as early as 1908, production companies began to receive mail addressed to 'nameless actors.'

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[3] For more on the relationship between cinema and advertising, see Codeluppi (2020), Federico and Ragonese (2020), and Mazza (2019).

[4] Sandwich board advertising is a promotional technique that involves dressing a person with two boards tied by two ribbons placed on the shoulders.

[5] For more on the link between audiences and cinema, see Brunetta (1989).

One case that led the major film industries to deal with the novelty was that of the Biograph Girl. Carl Laemmle, a film producer, and owner of IMP enacted one of the first publicity stunts of the time, announcing the supposed death of the actress known as Biograph Girl. He subsequently arranged for her to appear in a plaza in St. Louis. The case became sensational when many more people showed up to see the actress than had shown up a week earlier to see then-U.S. president William Howard Taft (E. Poole and S. Poole 1997). Suddenly, movie posters had to incorporate the new status of the actor figure. Beginning in 1910, therefore, there were significant changes in the advertising sphere. Lobby cards were introduced, consisting of eight small posters (8″ x 10″) printed in two colors and hand-colored, which contained scenes from the promoted film and were serially displayed in theater foyers. Moreover, a new poster format was introduced, changed from 'one sheet' to 'three sheets,'[6] giving the posters a larger physical space and, consequently, more useful visual space in the eyes of the users. The Motion Picture Patents Company[7] was dissolved, favoring greater freedom in creating movie posters, no longer limited by the censorship guidelines imposed by the company. Finally, a muslin backing, a kind of very fine-weave cloth, was added to the posters, thus encouraging their reuse.

During the 1920s, the seventh art was finally established as a mass product, elevating the first stunted posters to artistically illustrated ones. The approach of well-known artists commissioned to portray the era's first stars led to the final abandonment of announcements and a clear shift to the graphic illustrations of film scenes. In the same years, a new printing process known as heliotyping was also developed and used mainly for lobby cards. With the advent of sound in the cinema, the demand for new films increased exponentially, and with it, so did advertising, with an ever-increasing demand for producing movie posters. Their appearance in these years changed dramatically. First, due to the introduction of color offset developed by the Morgano Litho Company:

> This process made it possible to photograph the artwork provided by studios through screens separated by color. While not as colorful as the stone lithography posters, the color offset process produced sharper images. Over the next twenty years, the two processes would continue to be used. However, by the 1940s, the color offset would replace stone lithography for all poster printing. (E. Poole and S. Poole 1997)

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[6] One sheet, the first standardized measure of movie posters, corresponds to 41″ x 27″. Other sizes were later introduced, such as three sheets (41″ x 81″), six sheets (81″ x 81″), and twelve sheets (82″ x 162″). We even had twenty-four sheets (246″ x 108″) capable of being recognized from a distance, such as from highways (E. Poole and S. Poole 1997).

[7] Founded in 1908, the Motion Picture Patents Company was a consortium bringing together the major U.S. motion picture production companies.two ribbons placed on the shoulders.

Secondly, due to the rise of Art Deco, whose wide-ranging influence also impacted movie posters. Specifically, detailed backgrounds were eliminated, leaving an entirely white or at least monochromatic space on which letters of different styles and sizes underscored represent the poster's typographic creativity.

In the 1950s, the rapid spread of television brought cinema into its first crisis; in fact, the film industry focused production almost exclusively on films that could achieve great success, leading to the development of the blockbuster phenomenon. The movie posters for these films were characterized by rich details with bright, vivid colors – iconic connotations that would continue to be significant elements of posters throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The movie posters of Philip Castle, a professional in airbrushing, encapsulate all these features. Castle worked closely with director Stanley Kubrick, who commissioned him to create posters for his most famous films and allowed him to work directly on the sets, thus fostering a perfect interpretation of the film setting in his movie posters. Two works are the most representative of this close collaboration: the illustrated poster for *Full Metal Jacket* (S. Kubrik 1987) and the poster for the film *A Clockwork Orange* (S. Kubrik 1971) (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Examples of Philip Castel's movie poster art.

Both posters are a perfect example of the detailed and colorful style of the time, typical of the modernist aesthetic (Edwards 1989). Toward the end of the 1960s, a further change brought low-budget cinema to the top of the box office, which, by dealing with unprecedented themes – bringing then-taboo topics such as loneliness, youthful restlessness, and sexuality to the forefront – interested the new generation. The low-budget production of these independent films – that is, films produced without the intervention of a major film studio – also affected the style of their posters: dry, often monochromatic, and with few compositional elements. Many of these posters, however, were quickly replaced by their photographic versions – a phenomenon that, as will be seen later, will cause the abandonment of the movie poster in its original format. During these years, posters were generally divided into two main compositional forms. The first had a choral characteristic, attempting to encapsulate several film scenes in a single image through an illustrated collage, transforming heterogeneous chaos into a single harmonious image. In the second case, a single expressive figure capable of summarizing and symbolizing the entire film was chosen or specially created.

The 1970s witnessed the beginning of the gradual transition from illustrated to photographic posters, which, however, would only be completed in the 1990s. Due to the advent of the digital age, the illustrated poster had to struggle for survival till its ultimate demise in the early 20th century. One of the last illustrated posters in the entire film production is from 2001, namely *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (C. Columbus 2001). Another critical factor for the final abandonment of the illustrated poster was the popularization of video players, which landed in all American and European homes from the beginning of the 1980s.[8]

However, despite the 1950s, cinema did not experience a real crisis as posters did. Given the changed distribution, with film tapes or DVDs available on supermarket and store shelves, the poster had to transform and become reusable and available in multiple formats, thus losing its original intrinsic value. Although the need to draw attention became increasingly prominent, the production of posters and videotape covers became bland, uniform, and stereotypical. Significant causes included the development of computer graphics, which drastically reduced the time frame for work: If an illustrated poster required long months to produce, with technological developments, it would take only a few hours to create a composition of frames and photos taken from the set. In addition, stereotypes began to characterize and symbolize the various film genres. For a love story or romantic

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[8] The abandonment of the illustrated poster is closely related to the advent of videotape distribution since a simple image with easy technical reproducibility was chosen for the covers, thus favoring a photographic-style image.

comedy, a half-length couple intent on lovemaking would be depicted; for an action film, the protagonist would be placed in the center of the poster with his back turned but slightly looking toward the viewer and holding his weapon; or again, in horror films, the close-up (for example, eye detail) became almost a ritual imperative for every film.

The end of the illustrated poster led to a flattening of the originality of the poster itself. This statement is not meant to generalize; in fact, some of the photographic posters are anything but banal and conventional – in some cases, photography and graphics ideally identify the essence of the film. However, for some cinephile collectors, the photographed poster will never acquire the value of an illustrated poster.

The poster artist, this unknown

Poster artists, often anonymous, are film painters in an ongoing struggle to have their works recognized, elevated, as autonomous, and not serving the commissioning needs of the film industry. This hard struggle began with the origins of the film poster and continues to the present day, fought by poster artists with the sole weapon of perfecting their style and making it particularly recognizable and unique since poster artists were seldom allowed to sign their works. Indeed, as Burke argues, "Film artists, historically have had to be people who could put away their egos, because that studios and design were hitting there, didn't want them to get credit."[9]

Only in the 1960s, therefore, artists started receiving credit for their work, and only a few became famous. Among them is Reynolds Brown, a poster artist who created the movie posters for most science fiction and horror films of the 1950s and made his work a true art. His works, such as *Tarantula!*, *Attack of the 50-Foot Woman* (N. Juran 1958) or *Ben Hur* (W. Wyler 1959), are among the most sought-after by collectors (J. Arnold 1955) (Fig. 2). For these film genres, the poster was essential, because it was also characterized by a solid creative component capable of recreating otherworldly worlds and creatures that attracted the interest of the audience; something quite difficult to achieve with the special effects of the time.

In that same period, there were rare cases in which artists collaborated directly with studios, an example being the American painter Norman Percevel Rockwell, whose peculiar style, recognized as romantic realism, characterized some film posters of the period, such as *The Magnificent Ambersons* (O. Welles 1941), *A Time to Love and A Time to Die* (D. Sirk 1958) and *Along Came Jones* (S. Heisler 1945) (Fig. 3).

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[9] Quote taken from the documentary 24x36: A movie about movie posters (K. Burke 2016).

Figure 2. Examples of Reynolds Brown's movie poster art.

Figure 3. Examples of Norman Percevel Rockwell's poster art.

It was in the 1960s that the figure of the poster artist began to be considered fundamental to the graphic communication of posters by American studios. This new partnership developed thanks to figures such as the illustrator Robert M. Peak, known as "the godfather of the movie poster," [10] whose unique and distinct yet malleable style created a wealth of posters for Hollywood, as he was able to adapt to and

[10] Artist's webpage: https://www.illustrationhistory.org/artists/robert-peak, last access May 11, 2023.

Figure 4. Examples of Robert M. Peak's movie poster art.

communicate any film genre. From the quintessential romantic comedy *My Fair Lady* (G. Cukor 1964) to historical films and dramas such as *Apocalypse Now* (F. F. Coppola 1979), or from the musical *West Side Story* (J. Robbins and R. Wise 1961) to the pure action films of the infamous James Bond, such as *The Spy Who Loved Me* (L. Gilbert 1977) or *Superman* (R. Donner 1978) (Fig. 4).

One of Hollywood's most sought-after artists, and one who has undoubtedly influenced other great poster artists – such as John Alvin, known for being the artist of *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (S. Spielberg 1982) and *Blade Runner* (R. Scott 1982) – is Steve Chorney,[11] who created the posters for *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (Q. Tarantino 2019) and *The Greatest Showman* (M. Gracey 2017). Also worth mentioning is Richard Amsel, known for the first Indiana Jones, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (S. Spielberg 1981), and *The Sting* (G. Roy Hill 1974) (Fig. 5). The lack of popularity of these artists is mainly because most studios did not allow poster artists to sign their pieces; nevertheless, it is unavoidable to understand their value.

When one thinks of a film, especially before the advent of the digital poster, one is much more likely to think of its poster rather than of a single scene as, for example, in the case of the iconic shark in *Jaws* (S. Spielberg 1975), designed by Roger Kastel. However, artistic creativity in the 1980s increasingly gave way to photographic super-realism, resulting in the advent of the photographic poster. It was much less demanding in time and money and would replace the illustrated poster from the 1990s onward. Another astute idea in the 1990s was that illustrated movie posters should represent animated films exclusively. Coming out of nowhere, the idea was eventually abandoned.

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[11] Artist's personal page: http://www.stevenchorney.com/ - last access date May 11, 2023.
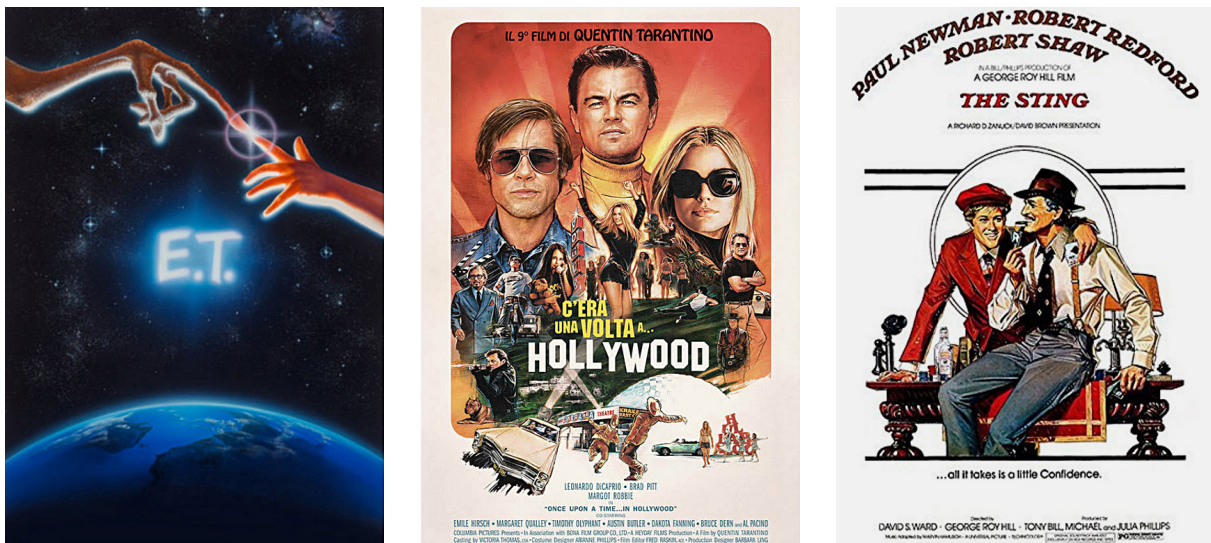
Figure 5. Examples of John Alvin, Steve Chorney and Richard Amsel's movie poster art.

In the mid-2000s, to fill the void left by the definitive abandonment of illustrated movie posters, especially by Hollywood, independent artists, and galleries began selling limited-edition screen-printed posters. This choice led to the rapid growth of a multimillion-dollar industry, with prints selling out online in seconds, again attracting the attention of Hollywood studios to reconsider the illustration of their posters.[12] Moreover, from here arose a common need for all enthusiasts in the field, whether illustrators, graphic designers, or collectors, to design or commission alternative posters to the official ones, bringing to light a new artistic movement from the constant production of artwork. The most famous include Alamo Drafthouse Cinema and Mondo, a movement that, probably for the first time in history, allowed an alternative output to be more successful than the official one.[13]

Comparing posters: The official, the alternative, and Netflix

A common trend in today's movie poster landscape is to create several posters for the same movie. A proper advertising campaign unravels gradually to generate a sense of expectation and desire to know the story hinted at by the poster. As noted above, computer graphics not only benefited production timelines – from months of work to a few days – but also reduced production costs. These advantages led to the conception of new types of posters marked by different names, styles, and strategies

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[12] Source from 24x36: *A movie about movie posters* (K. Burke 2016): a documentary exploring both the world of movie posters and the birth, death, and resurrection of the illustrated movie poster.
[13] For further study, see Chojnacki (2013).

used to promote the movie, following the typical laws of advertising campaigns. In this case, we can differentiate three categories of posters: Official, Alternative, and On-demand. The first category concerns posters produced by the Studios for the film's advertising campaign and its audience. In this case, the poster designer follows a precise scheme for the composition dictated by the marketing department. These are, in fact, standard types that have been established over time and follow a precise order of release. The main types include the Advance, the Character, and the Main (or Official) posters. The second category, Alternatives, as we have seen, involves the creation of posters after the release of the movie for an audience of fans or collectors. Therefore, poster makers enjoy unlimited creative freedom and offer their own interpretation of the movie's central themes. Finally, the third category concerns on-demand posters, created solely for online distribution, so it varies depending on the platform and usually involves the re-use of the Main or Character poster or simply a frame to which the title is added. This initial categorization was necessary to introduce the following analysis, specifically for the chosen poster sample. Therefore, the object of study is three posters (Fig. 6) of *Lord of the Ring: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), an iconic film of the new millennium. Therefore, a brief plastic analysis is proposed by applying the three categories identified by A. J. Greimas (1984): *topological*, *eidetic*, and *chromatic*.

The first poster presented, as mentioned above, belongs to the movie's official campaign and features a two-dimensional rectangular format that runs vertically. Starting from the base of the poster, we find the title *The Lord of The Ring* – featuring the iconic Anikon font, now culturally associated with the trilogy after its worldwide success – and the subtitle *The Fellowship of the Ring* (font: Albertus MT). Next, the illustrated part of the poster is always developed vertically. In this case, we can easily distinguish two parts. The first, placed above the title sees a single block of faceless knights positioned within a light fog that makes the background blurry in contrast to the figures with sharp lines and dark colors of the knights. The second part characterizes the entire upper part of the poster; the illustration is organized to present hierarchically all the characters in the story. In the center, we find Frodo Baggins, the one who wears the ring and, in this case, even marked by the inscription that marks the trilogy's principal object. All the other characters appear on two levels: a first level featuring the protagonist's faithful traveling companions in half-length and a second level where we find the faces of four other helpers. The hierarchical order in appearance follows the implicit laws of movie poster construction and the imperatives of strategic marketing. It reflects the relative importance of the characters in the storyline while prioritizing names and faces familiar to the audience.

Figure 6. Official, alternative and Netflix's posters, of the movie *Lord of the rings. The fellowship of the ring.*

Some things need to be said about the chromatic category. The whole poster is composed of a continuous juxtaposition of light and dark colors with mainly brown tones, a color predominantly associated with earth and materiality. The trilogy tells the story of a company that undertakes – on foot (= earth) – a journey, a mission that has as its goal the destruction of a ring (= material). Another interesting aspect is that every member of this company, representing the *good* in the story, is delineated by sharp lines. Each character, though small, is clearly discernible by the viewer, who in turn is directly addressed by the characters' gaze. On the other hand, the characters representing the *Bad* side appear as an indistinct group of knights whose identity we need not even care about.

The Alternative poster takes on the same *topological* category as the official poster. It is a two-dimensional rectangular format that runs vertically. Again, at the base of the poster, we find the title, but this time, it is drawn following only some features of the trilogy's official font (this detail concerns, in particular, the letters L, R, and S). Another textual element we find in the upper part of the poster where, contrary to the other two examples, we see a tagline, "One ring to rule them all." The illustration created by Paige Reynolds and Justin Erickson, known as Phantom City Creative,[14] is a typical, well-constructed *trompe-l'œil* highlighting the figure of Gandalf, the wizard protagonist of the saga. In this case, the play of light and dark is crucial. The entire illustration uses colors in green tones and is placed in sharp contrast to an all-black background. Green is the color predominantly associated with destiny (Pastoureau 2018: 217)[15] and, in this case, with the hope of succeeding in the company's mission to destroy the ring. The physical element with which green is associated is nature, characterized by its richness and abundance, again highlighting the theme of travel and land (the movie was predominantly shot in New Zealand, a country famous for its varied natural landscapes). But returning to the illustration, we can see how the *trompe-l'œil* construction takes up three land levels. First, the underground caves where Gollum lives. A second level is represented by Gandalf's thick foliage, associated with growing grass and, thus, the meadow, on which the small, stylized silhouettes of the company walk. Each character is rendered in a stylized manner, but with details that leave no doubt as to which character we are looking at – in order from right to left, for example, we find Gandalf with his hat, Legolas distinguished by his bow, and Gimli with his ever-present axe. The stylized characters walk along the brim of the wizard's hat, which makes mountains out of meticulous shading and jagged contours that fade toward the black background.

Finally, we turn to the poster made for On-demand distribution. In this case, we chose the poster distributed by the Netflix platform.[16] It is in a rectangular two-dimensional format, but unlike the posters just analyzed, which are vertically developed, it is developed horizontally. For this poster, a single image was chosen, a frame from the movie, with only one character represented: Gandalf. The spatial representation in a horizontal format dictates the entire construction of the poster, which consists of only two elements from left to right: the title and Gandalf. The simplicity of the poster's construction involves choosing a few emblematic elements easily associated with the movie. The title repeats the graphic features of the Official poster, and the selected character is undoubtedly among the most representative of the saga. Choosing to focus the construction of the poster on a couple of emblematic graphic elements and to

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[14] Artists' page: https://www.phantomcitycreative.com/ - last access May 11, 2023.
[15] For further study, see Agnello (2017).
[16] Movie selected on May 4, 2023.

place its format horizontally is closely related to the context of the poster's use. The placement and horizontal format reflect the so-called *scrolling*, the characteristic way the user moves to choose the movie on the streaming platform. Finally, this poster echoes the color category of the official poster, permeated with colors in brown, predominantly dark tones, from which a single light source comes from the upper right corner, toward which Gandalf is heading, thus evoking the theme of the journey.

Before proceeding with the analysis, it is necessary to make some brief remarks on the concept of *paratext*, introduced by Gérard Genette in 1982, since we want to understand the movie poster as a paratextual element of the filmic text. First, the concept of *paratext* means a group of elements that represent the text – in Genette's case, a literary text – that give it the nature of a book (i.e., title, subtitle, notes, cover, illustrations, etc.). However, it is essential to draw attention to the presentational function associated with these elements, more precisely, the "strictly functional character" of the paratext. In other words,

> The paratext, in all its forms, is a fundamentally heteronomous, auxiliary discourse in the service of something else that constitutes its raison d'être, [...]. The functions of the paratext constitute a very empirical and very diverse object, which must be grasped inductively. (Genette 1987:13-14)

Wanting to understand the movie poster as a paratextual element of the filmic text and Genette's definition – which considers each element capable of giving identity to the text and being a product of a specific cultural and social context – we can categorize certain graphic elements. To further clarify, some choices in constructing the posters we analyzed are closely related to their function of identifying the filmic text – such as the title, characters, and colors. A specific context of production and reception influences other choices.

Consider the first poster analyzed, which is of the Official type and produced to be posted in movie theater lobbies. It places all the trilogy's main characters at the center of the composition, with their gazes directed toward the viewer, creating a feeling of the latter's participation in the story. In this case, the context of production and fruition projects the advertising function of the poster, designed to convince the viewer to choose *The Lord of the Rings* as the next movie to see at the cinema. On the other hand, the construction of Alternative and Netflix posters ties to the *rhythm* of the "production and reception context of the product" (Marrone 2007: 239). A poster designed for on-demand distribution needs fast production and fruition – think of how we choose a movie by quickly going from one poster to another until we find the one that catches our attention.

In contrast, Alternative posters are associated with a much slower production and reading time. Since this is a personal creative process, the artist dictates the processing timeframe that will end when he is fully satisfied. Regarding fruition, taking up Barbieri's (2011) differentiation we have already discussed, the Alternative poster enjoys a

space dedicated to its enhancement as for a painting. In this case, therefore, the context of fruition changes totally, as the paratextual element lives an autonomous life, no longer linked to the advertising function of the movie.

In recent years, mainly due to the fame gained by these posters, many studios have opted to collaborate with artists belonging to the Alternative Movie poster world. We should emphasize, however, that such collaborations never concern main Main or Advance posters, characterized by an advertising purpose, but always artistically independent posters. Illustration survives today thanks to this world that devotes time and creativity to making movie posters, disregarding their aspect as viral marketing media. By problematizing their context of use, it becomes essential to understand that with the advent of digital platforms for movie distribution, the illustrated poster is not the medium designed to attract the viewer's attention immediately. It is intended for a longer reading time and is more suited to projects like exhibitions or festivals such as those commissioned by Mondo[17] or galleries specializing in pop culture like Grey Matter Art[18] or Hero Complex Gallery.[19]

The Alternative movie poster as visual participatory culture

The Alternative Movie Poster Movement began not as a current defined by a precise theorization but by a circle of artists, fans, and cinephiles moved by a common goal. As it turns out, the difficult life of the poster and the complex process of recognizing the work of illustrators and poster designers do not allow for a linear historical and stylistic trace of the film poster, even though it has been part of the collective vision for much of its existence. Indeed, it is the context of the use of this object that has determined its evolution: Throughout its history, it has gone from the walls of houses in new and large metropolises to the lobbies and facades of cinemas, and then to a digital screen, which defines its size depending on the device used.

However, the sharing of posters, whether on a cell phone, a computer, or a TV, does not transcend the fact that the printing of posters has become a vain practice, not only for commercial but also for creative reasons. Indeed, the compositional and creative standardization dictated by the rules of the advertising market has created a lack and, at the same time, a need around the film poster. In other words, the lack of creative freedom in the stylistic construction of movie posters has generated a collective need on the part of a

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[17] For further study, see Bird and League (2017).

[18] Grey Matter Art, founded in New York in 2013, is a company specializing in creating limited-edition movie and entertainment posters. They aim to make this product unique and original, especially a collector's item. Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/greymatterartllc

[19] Hero Complex Gallery in Los Angeles specializes in contemporary and pop art-themed exhibitions, presenting both established and emerging artists. Fb page https://www.facebook.com/HeroComplexGallery/?ref=page_internal

specific community – consisting mainly of illustrators, graphic designers, cinephiles, and fandom[20] – who expressed the will and the need to return the movie poster to its original version, a tangible object, a space of creativity that gives life to an extraordinary narrative figurativeness. This need was born 'from below' and involved only film art fans, not the producers. Creating a movement typical of the participatory community (Jenkins 2006) – that is a set of activities and practices that are structured around the media, in this case, the cinema, promoted by people who are not limited to being just consumers but who also take on the role of producers (prosumers), playing an active role in an event or process. In this view, 'participation' means not only taking part in a particular movement and being able to influence and shape the outcome of the process, distinguishing it from other forms of interaction. In the case of the alternative movie poster, it is what Jenkins calls 'bottom-up creativity' – a drive from interested audiences, often marginalized at the boundaries of a dominant discourse, that becomes capable of appropriating in an original way many products intended for a generic "mass audience" (ibid. 2006).

This is the correct interpretation of what the Alternative Movie Poster Movement has succeeded in doing, that is, appropriating the movie poster intended for the public and offering an original alternative that is creatively free from imposed schemes and intended for a niche audience, thanks to which it has developed and allowed the emergence of new artists and new compositional techniques. When we think of the world of the alternative poster, we can, therefore, speak of the manifestation of a participatory culture that has developed from below and established itself thanks to the community of fans that has been created around it to such an extent that it has become a proper, well-organized and designed industry, in which products not only sell in a very short time but are also very successful on platforms such as eBay or Amazon, where some pieces are resold for ten times the original price. Communities have been created, for example, by Mondo, whose posters have been so successful that they have been included in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science's[21] film poster archive and the Heritage Actions catalogue[22] and have also led to collaborations with major film industries, such as the 2011 collaboration with Paramount Pictures, for which they made custom posters for *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (M. Bay 2001) and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (J. Johnston 2011). Mondo is just one example of how a community, such as a fandom, can actively create new movements to support their passions. With the advent of new technologies based on deep learning, new creative movements have emerged, like the

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[20] Jenkins (2006) introduced the notion of fandom to acknowledge the emerging interactive dynamic between content producers and their audience. In this context, fans actively engage with the media, contributing fresh content.

[21] The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science, founded in 1927, is an honorary professional organization to support the development of the domestic and international film industry.

[22] Heritage Actions is the largest collectibles auctioneer and third largest auction house in the world, as well as the largest auction house founded in the U.S., https://www.ha.com/ - last access date May 12, 2023.

creation of movie posters of films that do not exist, showcased with the example of *Goncharov*.[23] In 2022, a user of Tumblr[24]– a microblogging and social networking platform that allows people to post multimedia content – created a fake movie poster (Fig. 7), sparking lengthy discussions about the film's main themes, inventing multiple intertwined storylines, an imagining a stellar cast (Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, Gene Hackman, and Harvey Keitel) with actors closely associated with the role of gangsters.

Another case is the creation of sites such as This Movie Does Not Exist,[25] where, using artificial intelligence, movie posters or synopses of movies that do not exist are created. Such examples make one understand the importance of the film poster, which cannot be considered merely as a decorative object of a film advertising campaign but a true poster bearer of signs capable of recreating a reality belonging to an existing film or of an imaginary nature.

Figure 7. Goncharov's movie poster.

In conclusion,[26] we have demonstrated how a movement such as the Alternative Movie Poster Movement, born to propose an alternative, has become the favorite choice of the audience, meaning not only cinephiles but also collectors. We have also shown that the collection of official posters no longer happens for various reasons and that the collection of alternative posters has become a real independent case. The collection of movie posters deviates from the typical collections of the early twentieth century, where entrepreneurs, wealthy bourgeois, financiers, or high-society women formed important collections by making them public to expand their self-image and status – a part of social rituals to be exhibited (De Benedictis 1998). Nowadays, alternative movie poster collectors, for the most part, are personalities who tend to hide their hobbies at

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[23] For more: https://www.ilpost.it/flashes/goncharov-tumblr-martin-scorsese/, last access May 15, 2023.

[24] Link: https://www.tumblr.com/, last access May 15, 2023.

[25] Link: https://thismoviedoesnotexist.org/, last access May 15, 2023.

[26] I would like to thank the reviewers for giving me insights for possible further study, specifically a comparison with another paratextual element such as the trailer (and its possible fake version), and a comparison with other types of alternative movie, for example, the one concerning variant covers of comic books.

home, jealously guarding their objects; this choice is probably dictated by the fact that the posters satisfy their intimate desires.

Francesco Poli's description reflects this phenomenon as concerns a specific category of collectors, namely those who feel "an almost pathological attraction to collecting, as a satisfying activity in itself. For many, one's collection becomes a totalizing reality, in which one projects one's identity entirely as if it were a kind of organism endowed with an autonomous life" (2009). Poli also emphasizes how an alternative movement has successfully brought out the empathetic side that posters manage to bring out in their audience. The advent of online distribution platforms has moved audiences away from sharing the movie theater. Simultaneously, though, it has fostered the emergence of new communities and sharing experiences inspired by a common passion for cinema, particularly its visual aspect. The outcome is the creation of a new community based on participatory visual culture.

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AUTHOR

Margaux Cerutti PhD candidate, Department of Human Sciences, Libera Università Santissima Maria Assunta (LUMSA), Roma, Italy.