

The Film Poster in Cuba (1940–1959)

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Translated from the Spanish by Jessica Gibbs.

Introduction

Cinematography, a public display of art and industry sustained by powerful economic interests, arose during the nineteenth century as a result of the work of various individuals. It was introduced to the public on March 22, 1895, the day on which Louis Lumière, a Frenchman, exhibited *Lasortie des ouvriers de l'usine Lumière* in Paris. Known as “the Seventh Art,” and popularly called “cinema,” it generated from the beginning its own advertising methods including the cinematic poster.

Since the beginning of its commercialization, cinematography was conceived of as a popular entertainment which did not have to be evaluated according to the ruling norms of art in order to fulfill its destiny. This meant that people enjoyed movies for their own characteristics, independent of subsequent evaluations.

Consistent with these principles, film producers and directors never hoped or wished for promotional posters to be works of art in their own right, fearing that this would detract from their fundamental goal of attracting the attention and interest of the public. For this reason, the premise of the film poster should not be confused with any other piece of advertising or expression of fine art. In spite of this, the film posters worldwide were designed by graphic artists and painters, who endowed them with aesthetic values.

Background

Less than two years after the first projections of Louis Lumière in Paris, another Frenchman, Gabriel Veyre, presented the first cinema showing in Havana on January 24, 1897.

This presentation was received with real enthusiasm, and rapidly popularized the cinema among Cubans, leading them to culturally and socially assume many of its codes, influences, language, and ethical and aesthetic values.

The first promotional posters for European, North American, Mexican, and Argentine movies arrived in Cuba with the imported films. The promotion was complemented in the country with advertisements ordered and paid for by national distributors, who had them printed in newspapers and magazines. Photographic reproductions of the most important scenes of each film were hung in the vestibules of the theaters, and later in gigantic and showy displays produced in color by national painters including Studio Chromos,



Figure 1

Title: *La Manigua o La Mujer Cubana*
 Author: Unknown
 First edition: New York, USA, 1915
 Printed: Lithograph
 Size: 28 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 42" (71.5 x 106.5 cm)
 Production: Film Cuban
 Archive: ICAIC Collection

Figure 2

Title: *Sucedió en La Habana*
 Author: Caravia
 First edition: Havana, Cuba, 1938
 Printed: Offset
 Size: 26 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 39 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (67 x 100 cm)
 Production: Film Cuban
 Archive: ICAIC Collection



Reguera, Barrios, Rivadulla-Alonso, and Vargas. These were specially designed for the facades of theaters that held premieres of films. Flyers also were distributed from house to house with the day's and the week's showings, and many specialized magazines were started.

Generally, the posters produced abroad were created by designers and painters who were part of the film industry, much like cameramen, technicians, and scriptwriters. The poster designers created them according to the directions of the film producers or directors, and the posters were then mass-produced by offset lithography.

The few posters that were designed in Cuba to promote Cuban films in the first three decades of this century were printed by offset lithography in the United States (*La manigua o La mujer cubana*, 1915, Acme Litho Co., New York), and by the Lithographic Company of Havana (*Sucedio en La Habana*, 1938). Poster production by offset lithography or letterpress printing was not economically viable for distributors based in Cuba.

Another difference that existed between the situation in Cuba and abroad was that none of the Cuban designers or printers were part of the cinema sector between 1900 and 1930, and from 1940 to 1959.

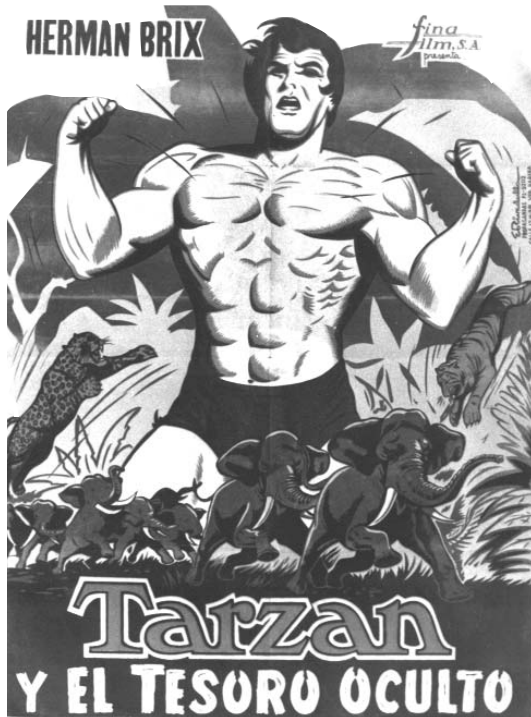


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

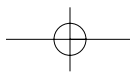


Figure 3

Title: *Tarzan y El Tesoro Oculto*
 Author: Rivadulla
 First edition: Havana, Cuba, 1942
 Printed: Silkscreen
 Size: 28" x 36" (71 x 91 cm)
 Production: Film USA
 Archive: author's collection

Figure 4

Title: *Jorge Negrete*
 Author: Rivadulla
 First edition: Havana, Cuba, 1942
 Printed: Silkscreen
 Size: 28" x 36" (71 x 91 cm)
 Production: Film USA
 Archive: author's collection

Figure 5

Title: *Muertes a Plazo Fijo*
 Author: Radillo
 First edition: Havana, Cuba, 1950
 Printed: Silkscreen
 Size: 28" x 36" (71 x 91 cm)
 Production: Film Cuba
 Archive: ICAIC Collection

Figure 6

Title: *El Dueño del Mundo*
 Author: Rivadulla
 First edition: Havana, Cuba, 1952
 Printed: Silkscreen
 Size: 28" x 36" (71 x 91 cm)
 Production: Film Germany
 Archive: author's collection

The Beginning of a Tradition

It was at the beginning of the 1940s, coinciding with the boom in Argentine and Mexican cinema, that the Cuban silkscreen printer-designer Eladio Rivadulla Martinez decided to start designing and producing film posters in Havana using the silkscreen process. He thus set off on a path that he would follow for more than twenty years producing silk-screened film posters. This singular type of production became the national tradition up until the present day. No other known silkscreen designers adopted this form of poster production during the 1940s.

In those years, the print runs of posters needed by the national film distributors were very small. The distributors called for a lot of color, and required the format of the "American-type body" which was 28 inch x 36 inch (71 x 91 cm). However, the distributors had to work within a tight budget to fulfill the demands of advertisers. Under such conditions, they were only able to respond to the necessity of producing posters for films in Cuba by using serigraphy. This process had a long and sustained development in the country, beginning in the first decades of the century, and was developed primarily for printing advertisements, followed by mass-produced posters for election campaigns.

The intervention of silkscreen printing in the development of Cuban poster design generated peculiar characteristics that were evident in modeling the taste, sensibility, and aesthetic appreciation of Cuban popular culture. The film poster exemplifies these singularities of Cuban posters in a special way. It is a genre that evolved and developed systematically, and without interruption, by way of a symbiotic relationship between silkscreen printing and design. This relationship left its imprint on Cuban posters, including those produced by other printing methods, and even on the formal and aesthetic aspects of the fine art produced by the relevant national artists.

Outsized images in a daring chromatic scale of color planes appeared in the first Cuban film posters produced by the silkscreen process (handmade and in very limited editions). These examples are unusual in that their design envisioned the possibility of promoting several movies of the same principal actor in the empty spaces where different titles could be rotated. This plural idea made the posters cost-effective, and their existence made possible the established star system of those years.

We are dealing here with posters in which the hot colors associated with violent passions, the successful physical likenesses, and the expressions of the principal actors are the result of only three dyes; solutions in which an integral dominion of the conjunction of multiple designs is evident. The posters with the images of Mexican actors Jorge Negrete and Pedro Infante, Mexican actress Maria Felix, and Argentine actress Libertad Lamarque, among others, exemplify this.

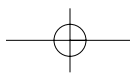




Figure 7

Title: *Antesala del Infierno*

Author: Rivadulla

First edition: Havana, Cuba, 1958

Printed: Silkscreen

Size: 28" x 36" (71 x 91 cm)

Production: Film Great Britain

Archive: author's collection

Figure 8

Title: *Mares de Pasión*

Author: Rivadulla

First edition: Havana, Cuba, 1959

Printed: Silkscreen

Size: 28" x 36" (71 x 91 cm)

Production: Film Cuba

Archive: author's collection

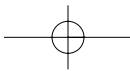


It is fitting to emphasize that in 40s Cuban moviegoers went to the cinema to do more than watch movies. They went to live, to dream, to be swept away with passion, and to enjoy themselves with their idols from the seats in the theater. The principal attraction was the iconic image of the star, more loved than admired, and from this springs the importance of the physical identification of the "boy" or "girl," as the actors were known publicly.

The value that Cuban distributors put on these posters was similar to that of foreign producers. It depended on the identification and the attraction of the public as a guaranty of their usefulness. The frequency with which the above-mentioned posters were reissued throughout the years is proof of their recognized effectiveness.

Systematization, Evolution, and Development

By the end of the Second World War in 1945, many events of a political, economic, social, and cultural nature had taken place on a universal scale. This brought about the increase, development, and systematization of the production of cinema posters in Cuba. During the war years, the principal North American and Mexican movie producers had practically displaced the European cinema in Cuba but, in the new world order the revitalized Italian, French, and Spanish film industries arose and brought new ideas and trends. A new galaxy of European stars very quickly achieved popularity among Cubans after the start of the 50s.



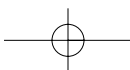
However, European promotional cinematic posters did not catch on in Cuba for several reasons. Their graphic styles were not popularly assimilated, the titles of the films were in other languages, the formats were larger or smaller than the existing poster frames, and the prices were higher. The most important reason for their rejection was that North American, Mexican, and Cuban poster designers had achieved a very deep identification with the viewers.

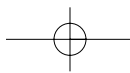
These factors contributed to and determined the increased production of posters in the country, and consequently stimulated the increase in styles, the development of artistic and textural values, and the enriching of the chromatic scale with more homogeneity and harmony. This last development was the fruit of successful innovative experiments converting opaque pictures into transparent ones, and the reversal of the classical printing sequence, made possible thanks to the design resources happily combined with the printing system. This fusion of creativity and technology allowed the posters to communicate more effectively.

I would like to point out that the validation of the film posters discussed here does not only derive from their success in representing the physical features of the actors, their well-balanced and structured composition, and their attractive coloring, but also from the associative mechanisms and images made concrete in the designs in a coherent form during the creative process, taking into consideration the aims, techniques, and materials used in the production within the available budget. In several examples, we can see pop art anticipated and, in others, ideas later taken on and legitimized by postmodernism.

I should also say that the Cuban film poster, since it began, has embodied an ample legacy coming from diverse sources taken on board creatively. These include formal elements belonging to North American, Mexican, and European film poster production, the spontaneity and bright colors of Cuban painting by anonymous artists since the colonial period, the visual narrative from comics, the impact and chromatic contrast of political posters, the principles foreseen at the Bauhaus of the integration of art and technology, the lack of inhibitions of the movements inspired by the vanguard of European art and, of course, the fundamentals of publicity and visual communication.

Already in the 50s, the symbiosis of design and production by the silkscreen method had been very fruitful at different levels. The development and systematization of a concept of design created in the poster production of those years, the homogenous styles, graphic solutions, and similar forms of composition, the presence of particular elements from letterpress printing, original combinations which gave a hint of the contents of the film in the forms and colors of the titles, and novel chromatic contrasts that united with the communicative aims which produced them and the



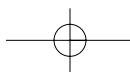


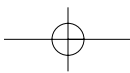
techniques of the screen process employed by the different artists of this visual promotion, formed a type of school with its own identifying characteristics.

In the above-mentioned decade, along with the film posters produced by Rivadulla Propagandas, others in Cuba were created by the Almela Studio, the Cillero and Machado Studio, the Dekora Studio, and the Sante and Dominguez Studio. The film posters were produced by direct orders from foreign distributors, principally Mexicans, Argentines, Italians, Frenchmen, and North Americans who were all based in Havana, as were the studios of this kind of film advertising. At the end of the 1950s, the silkscreen designers Barrios, Avila, and Abelardo all were involved in the promotion of films. Together with Rivadulla, they prepared silkscreen production posters for the Institute of the Cinematic Art and Industry (ICAIC) after 1959, beginning a new creative stage of international transcendence for the Cuban film poster.

One can add that the production of film posters in the period between 1940 and 1959 was sustained by principles similar to those that governed silkscreen printing as a fine art, because the designer and the silk-screen printer were the same artist. This silkscreen printer designer created the image specifically for mass production by the silkscreen process, selected the printing technique, determined how many dyes to use and in which order, made the stencils, and executed transformations and additions along the way, mixing the colors in accord with the need for self-expression. Of course, when dealing with the conception of the posters, self-expression was modified to satisfy the principal aim: the visual communication to which the creator was committed, even though the psychic process of this creative action sometimes was maintained in a conscious form and sometimes in an subconscious one. For this reason, these examples were aesthetically successful achievements of undoubted artistic value.

Conceived of originally for the urban population, with no distinction between social classes, cultural levels, sex, creed, or race, the Cuban poster achieved social consensus. Its influence spread, sensitizing people and making them aware of collective aesthetic appreciation. Like all authentic art, it went through transformations during its uninterrupted historic evolution in which faithfulness to tradition was accompanied by innovative spirit.

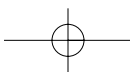
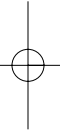
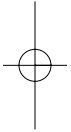


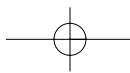


Appendix 1

Structural Scheme in the Production and Distribution of the Cuban Cinematic Poster (1940–1959)

- 1 The film distributor gives the order to the silkscreen technician, detailing the integral components and the objective: to attract the potential viewer to see the film which was going to be shown.
- 2 The silkscreen technician conceived the graphic response, bearing in mind the target audience, the available budget, and the technical possibilities for its production. The designer calculated the cost and the profit. He decided on the technique to employ and the colors to print.
- 3 The designer interpreted the goal he was given, deciding how to make the required components stand out. He structured the space looking rationally at the images, the titles, and the credits. He adjusted the quantity of colors and the techniques needed.
- 4 The silkscreen technician analyzed the project. He decided on the technique and the order of printing the colors. He prepared the stencils for printing by hand. He prepared the colors and reproduced the work.
- 5 The printed posters arose as a result of the direct interrelated intellectual and manual activity of the designer and the silkscreen technician, as well as the indirect contribution of the distributor, the intermediary between the producer and the spectator.
- 6 The silkscreen designer delivered the printed posters to the distributor. He then offered them to the exhibitor of the film. (Note: The silk screen technician and the designer were the same person in those years.)
- 7 The exhibitor acquired the posters he considered necessary. He proceeded to display them at the poster sites at strategic urban locations.
- 8 The potential viewer, as the destination, decided in the last instance the efficacy of the poster, in agreement with his spiritual and emotional interests and his sensory receptive experience.





Appendix 2

Designers of Cinematic Posters

Posters printed by relief (or letterpress printing), and lithography (1900–1939)

First generation:

- Jaime Valls
- Enrique Garcia Cabrera
- Conrado Massaguer
- Antonio Perdices
- Enrique Crucet
- Juan Orol
- Enrique Caravia
- Oscar Reguera

Posters printed by silkscreen (1940–1959)

Second generation

- Eladio Rivadulla
- Almela
- Cillero and Machado
- R. Radillo
- Sante and Dominguez
- Barrio-Avila
- Abelardo

Appendix 3

Film Distributors Based in Havana, Cuba (1940–1950)

Alex Film, Allied Artists, Astol Films, Barral Films, Bernades Films, Berndes Films, Blanco y Travieso, Capitolio, Caribe Films, Carmona Films, Carlos Perez, Cifesa, Cine Periodico, Columbia Pictures, Cofran, Continental Films, Cuba Mexico, Cubmex, Eladio Novo, Faustino Films, Fenix S.A., Filmica Antillana, Film Exchange, Fina Films, Fox Films, Francia Films, Franco American Film, Heliodoro Garcia, Ibero American Films, Ideal Films, International Films, Italia Films, Liberty Films, Lippert Films, Justo Suarez Films, Llarena Films, Reynaldo Medina, Mercurio Films, Metro Goldwyn Mayer, Monogram Pictures Corp, Motion Picture, Negrete, Noticuba, Oro Films, O. Rank, Pan American Films, Paramount, Pelicuba, Pelmulas de America, Pelmulas del Caribe, Pelimex, Pelmulas Mexicanas, Selecciones Capitolio, Republic Pictures, Reynaldo Medina, RKO Radio Pictures, Sol Films, Tropical Films S.A., Universal Films, Vicente Blanco y Cia., United Artists, and Zenith Films.

In 1959, the employees from the most important North American film distributors organized socialist cooperatives: Cooperativa RKO, Cooperativa Metro, and Cooperativa Warner Bros.

