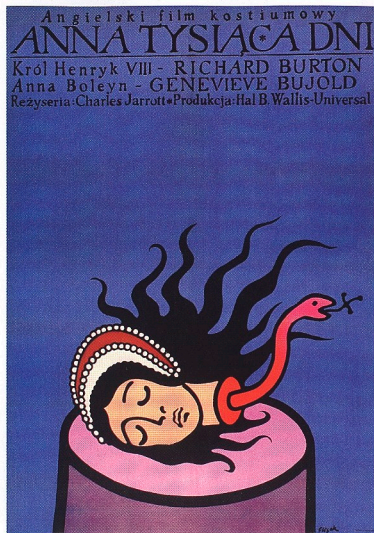


## EXHIBITION



# Not like they do it in the west

Freed from commercial constraints, Polish film posters of the second half of the 20th century were artistic triumphs, says **Michael Brooke**

The peculiar genius (for once the word is wholly appropriate) of the Polish film poster has been showcased in generous portions in London over the last few months. The Cinéphilia West bookshop's recent exhibition was so successful that it expanded mid-run, spilling over into a neighbouring hotel. The Kineteka Polish Film Festival [sic] is accompanying its Polanski retrospective with a poster display, while at the same time an ambitious project comparing British and Polish approaches to marketing British films is being unveiled at BAFTA, with the same posters also collected in a new tie-in book on the subject.

Polish poster art had a distinguished pedigree before 1946, but it was in that year that the artist Henryk Tomaszewski and his colleagues sketched out a new approach to the medium. After five artists were individually approached by a film distributor to help promote its wares, the group met in the Praska literary café in Łódź to agree some ground rules, partly financial, but mostly aesthetic. As Tomaszewski later explained,

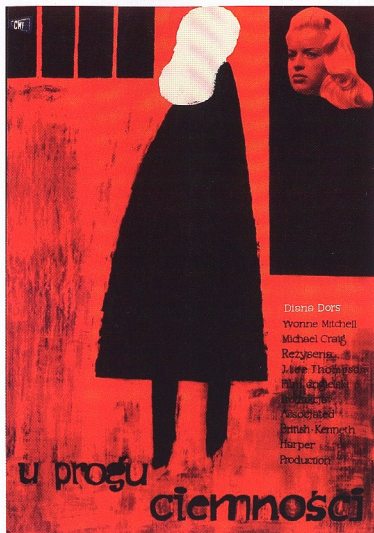
a constantly recurring phrase was "not like they do it in the west", which became an article of faith.

They were explicitly rejecting not only the sensationalism of much American advertising, but also its emphasis on the star system. Instead, they attempted to encapsulate a film's essence through graphic images that were often deceptively simple. Their art developed with surprisingly little interference, because Polish audiences were so hungry for films; denied access to their own cinemas during the war, they flocked to them in such numbers after liberation that the films barely needed advertising. As Tomaszewski observed, "The crowd was the poster, not our doodles."

The distinctiveness of what became known as the 'Polish School' of poster design was recognised abroad, winning numerous prizes at the International Poster Exhibition in Vienna in 1948, and although the artists were soon required to toe the Stalinist socialist-realist line imposed on Polish culture in 1949, by the time of Gomulka's 1956 thaw the Polish poster was so widely recognised as

a potent medium in its own right that the best examples were even reviewed by critics alongside the works they were promoting.

By then, many of the first wave of poster designers had attained influential positions in Polish art academies – Tomaszewski mentored several generations at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts from 1952 to 1985. Many became stars in their own right, including Roman Cieleszewski, Eryk Lipiński, Jan Młodziejewski, Józef Mroszczak, Franciszek Starowieyski and others. One of the most distinguished, Jan Lenica, teamed up with fellow practitioner Walerian Borowczyk to apply the collage and surrealist principles developed in their poster art to animated films. Their collaboration *Dom* broke some new ground that recent celebrations of the 50th anniversary of serious Polish animation were dated from its 1958 premiere, despite Polish animators having been active since well before the war. (Other links between Polish poster design and animation can be found in the work of the Quay Brothers and Terry Gilliam.)



By displaying Polish and British posters side by side, the new book and exhibition make a particularly strong case for the Polish approach, at least artistically. It's not that the British posters are invariably inferior (there are some excellent examples), but it's impossible to ignore the fact that most of them are hamstrung by clear commercial imperatives, often combined with contractual stipulations regarding source images, type sizes, credit positioning and critical eulogies. As British posters for British films were aimed at typically conservative British audiences, they also had to meet cultural expectations, especially if there was a familiar literary or historical source. Accordingly, the British posters for *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, *Fear from the Madding Crowd* and *Anne of the Thousand Days* follow expected star-driven heritage-cinema lines. By contrast, the Polish reinterpretations are much harder to place: Bronisław Zelek's single frayed bullet hole for the first; a contemporary-looking crepuscular embrace for the second (also by Zelek); Jerry Flisak's severed head with a snake protruding from

its neck for the third (its cross-shaped tongue pumping religious symbolism to the max). Straightforward schlock art for Hammer's *The Reptile* becomes weirdly sexualised in Maciej Hibner's hands (is it a coincidence that his composition echoes Magritte's *The Rape?*). The photo of Diana Dors in sultry glamour-puss mode in *Yield to the Night* is replaced by Ewa Frysztak's starkly childlike graphic, which looks as though it was daubed on the walls of her character's cell.

The Polish alternative isn't always an improvement – Raquel Welch's fur bikini in *One Million Years B.C.* is so iconic that Bohdan Butenko's childish cartoon dinosaur shrivels by comparison. In general, however, these posters not only mark an aesthetic and psychological advance on their British counterparts, but also provide a fascinating and occasionally troubling insight into how our national treasures and motifs appear through outsiders' eyes.

■ The poster exhibition runs until 20 May at BAFTA. The '77 Posters/77 Plakatów' book is available now. For details see [www.uw.edu.pl](http://www.uw.edu.pl)