

STEVEN HELLER



A virtually ignored trove of graphic design exists in Cuba dating from before the 1959 Cuban Revolution to the present. Nightlife ephemera from the pre-revolutionary casino era is a little more known outside its borders as are the so-called 'revolutionary posters' of the 1960s that presented a contemporary, indeed youthful, face of Castro's regime. Yet much less appreciated by non-Cubans are the handmade silkscreen film posters for Cuban and international films, designed in abstract, surreal and impressionist styles, which far surpass, in terms of ingenuity, most posters designed to promote the same movies in the United States.

Despite censorship in other areas, these Cuban film posters are freer than anything that could ever be produced in the 50 states. One reason is they would never survive the market testing or typical approval wringer. Their very existence raises the question: Why are posters produced for liberty-loving Hollywood, USA, generally so mundane, while posters promoting some of the same movies in Cuba, under government strictures, are so visually inventive?

An exhibition drawn from The Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC), the Cuban film institute, helps explain why – and its not just the ills of capitalism either. The Institute was created soon after the revolution in 1959 to promote the film medium through a range of diverse activities including cinema and television production. ICAIC also presents numerous screenings of locally produced and international films throughout Cuba each year, for which a unique poster is created by a Cuban graphic artist – and each one given incredible interpretive freedom.

ICAIC prints the majority of its originally designed film posters as silkscreens in a 20 x 30 inch format. These posters are widely distributed across Cuba, and underscore the important role that cinema and the visual arts play in contemporary Cuban life.

As part of an ongoing cultural exchange with Cuban film institutions, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science (AMPAS) mounted an exhibition during Summer 2011, 'Cuban Film Posters: From Havana to the World', featuring 125 graphically dynamic handmade silkscreen prints by ICAIC artists. The posters, including 'A Clockwork Orange', 'The Shining', 'Schindler's List', 'The Bicycle Thief', 'Z', 'Persona', and dozens of Cuban films including 'Strawberry and Chocolate', Cuba's only Foreign Language Film Award nominee to date, were donated by ICAIC to the Academy's Margaret Herrick Library.

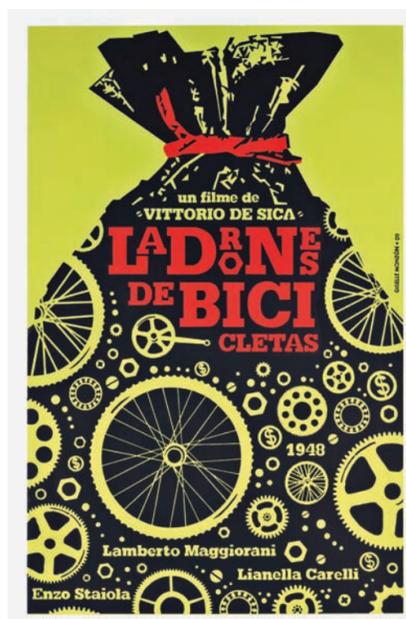
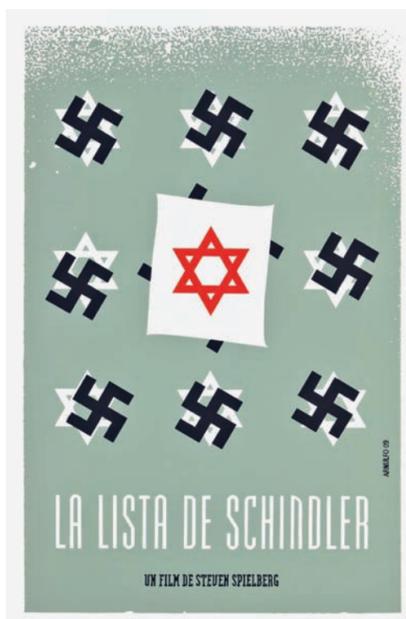
Opposite page:
La Naranja Mecanica/
A Clockwork Orange
Artist: Nelson Ponce
Silkscreen

Left:
**La Lista de Schindler/
Schindler's List**
Artist: Arnulfo, 2009
Silkscreen
Original release date of film:
US, 1993

Academy Award winner:
Art Direction,
Cinematography, Directing,
Film Editing, Music
(Original Score), Best
Picture, Writing

Academy Award nominee:
Actor in a Leading Role,
Actor in a Supporting Role,
Costume Design, Makeup,
Sound

Right:
**Ladrones de Bicicletas/
The Bicycle Thief**
Artist: Giselle Monzón, 2009
Silkscreen

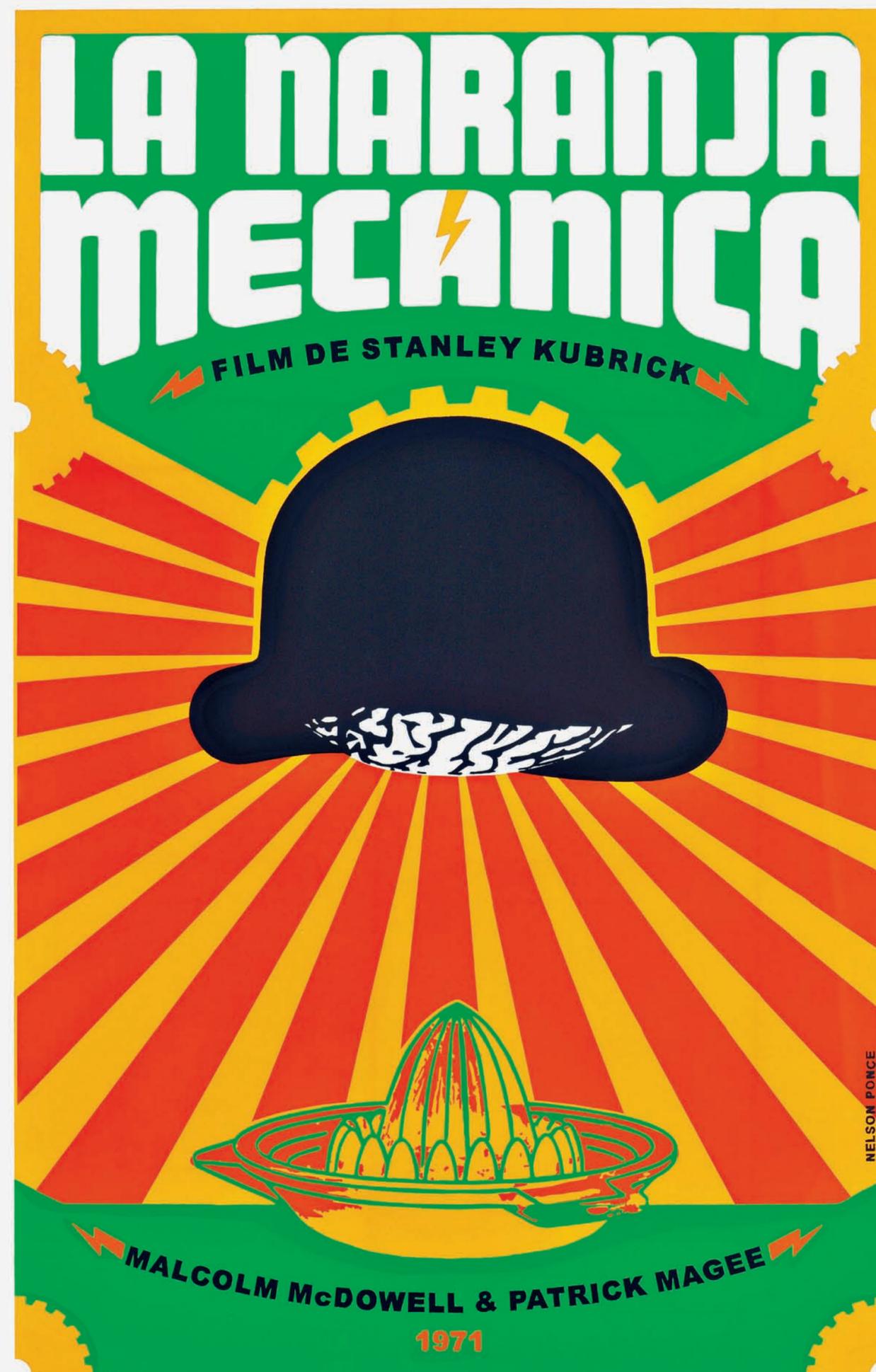
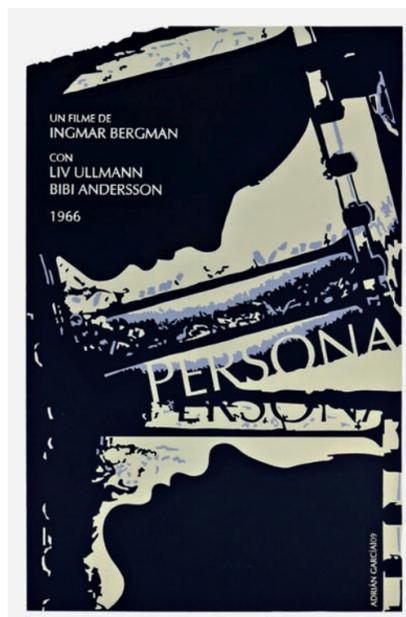
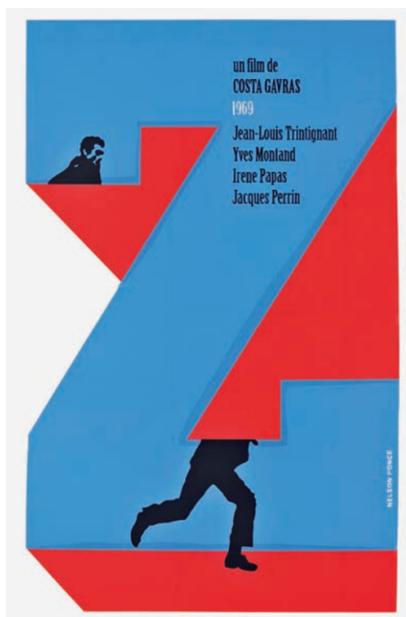


Left:
Z
Artist: Nelson Ponce, 2009
Silkscreen
Original release date of film:
France/Algeria, 1969

Academy Award winner:
Film Editing, Foreign
Language Film – Algeria

Academy Award nominee:
Directing, Best Picture,
Writing (Screenplay – based
on material from another
medium)

Right:
Persona
Artist: Adrián García, 2009
Silkscreen

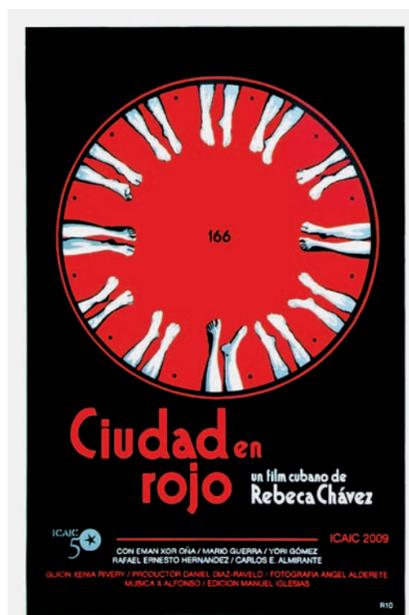
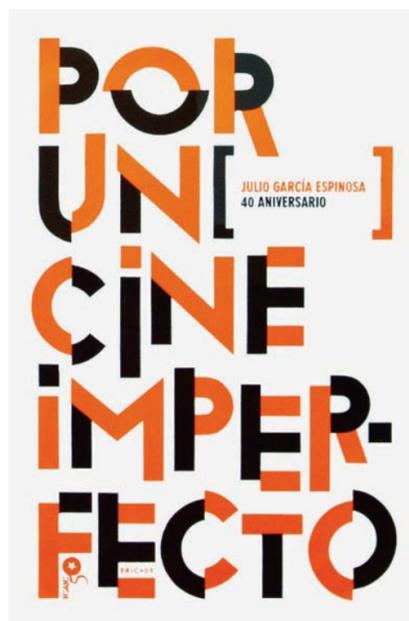


As part of the Academy's educational and cultural exchange with film professionals and students in Cuba, in December 2010, members of the Academy's International Outreach Committee traveled to Havana to participate in the 32nd International Festival of New Latin American Cinema. At the festival, the Academy also showcased the exhibition 'From AMARCORD to Z: Posters from Fifty Years of Foreign Language Film Award Winners.'

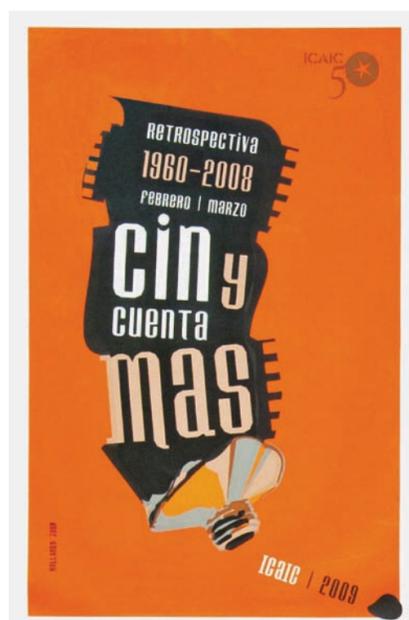
Nunca será fácil la herejía un documental de Jorge Luis Sánchez/Herey Will Never be Easy, A documentary by: Jorge Luis Sánchez Artist: Hollands, 2009 Silkscreen



Left: Por un cine imperfecto: Julio García Espinosa 40 Aniversario/For an Imperfect Cinema: The 40th Anniversary of Julio García Espinosa Artist: Eric Silva, 2009 Silkscreen
Right: Cuidad en Rojo/City in Red A Cuban Film by Rebeca Chávez Artist: Jorege Rodríguez Díez, 2009 Silkscreen Original release date of film: Cuba, 2009

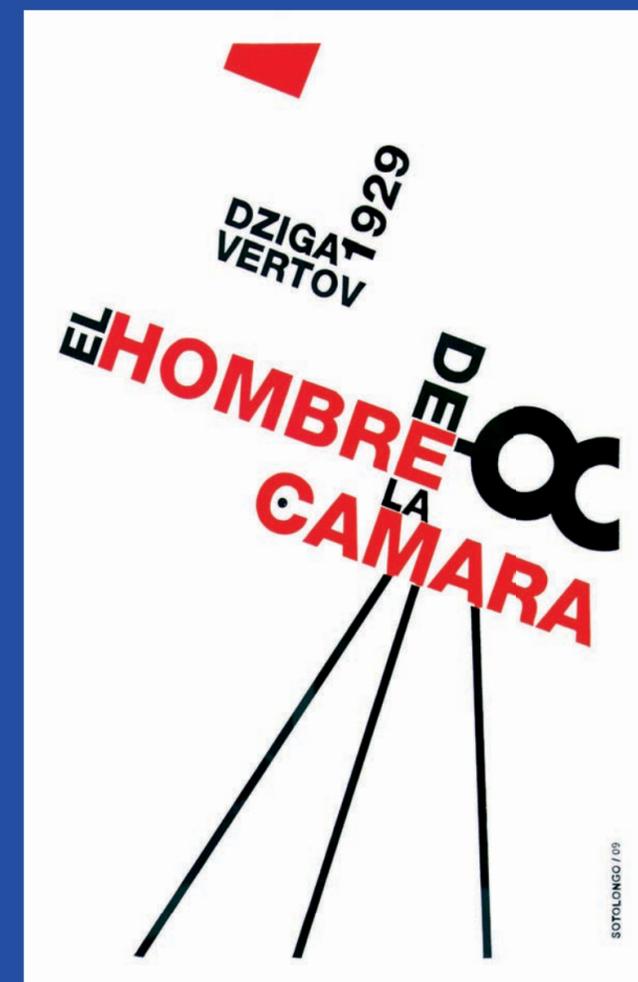


Left: Retrospectiva 1960-2008, Febrero - Marzo Cincuenta mas/Fifty and More A retrospective: 1960-2008, February - March Artist: Hollands, 2009 Silkscreen
Right: X Festival Internacional de Documentales Santiago Álvarez In Memoriam/10th International Santiago Alvarez In Memoriam Documentary Festival. Santiago de Cuba. March 8-13, 2009 Tagline: 'Documentary Cinema: The weapon of our people' Artist: Mirabal, 2008 Silkscreen

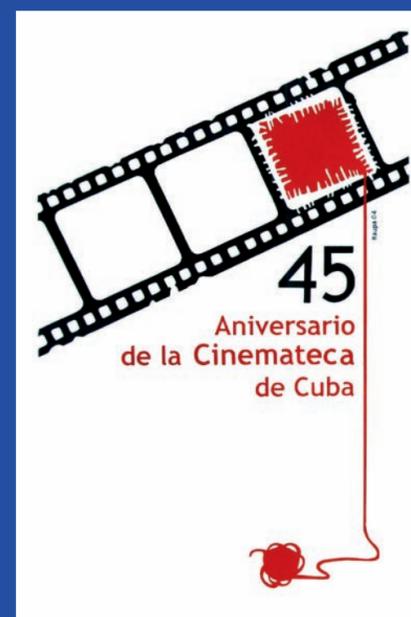


The virtuosity of these images, some presumably inspired by abstract East European aesthetics imported decades ago from Poland and Czechoslovakia, is not entirely surprising. Cuban political posters produced by the Organisation of Solidarity of the People of Asia, Africa & Latin America (Ospaaal), which have been documented and are fairly well known among the those in the know, were often skillfully rendered and imaginatively conceived. Created after the Cuban revolution, they were influenced by the more progressive Iron Curtain artforms and exhibit a unique graphic language that has roots in Europe. But ultimately they express a distinct graphic accent, which could be categorised a 'Revolutionary Cuban Style.'

Like the Russian Constructivists of the twenties, and the Polish poster artists of the seventies, and even the French Atelier Populaire of 1968, this Cuban visual language expresses a pent-up creative zeal - not politically but aesthetically. This Cuban graphic style exudes a sense of individual freedom. Ironically, the freedom to produce carnivalesque movie posters in Cuba.

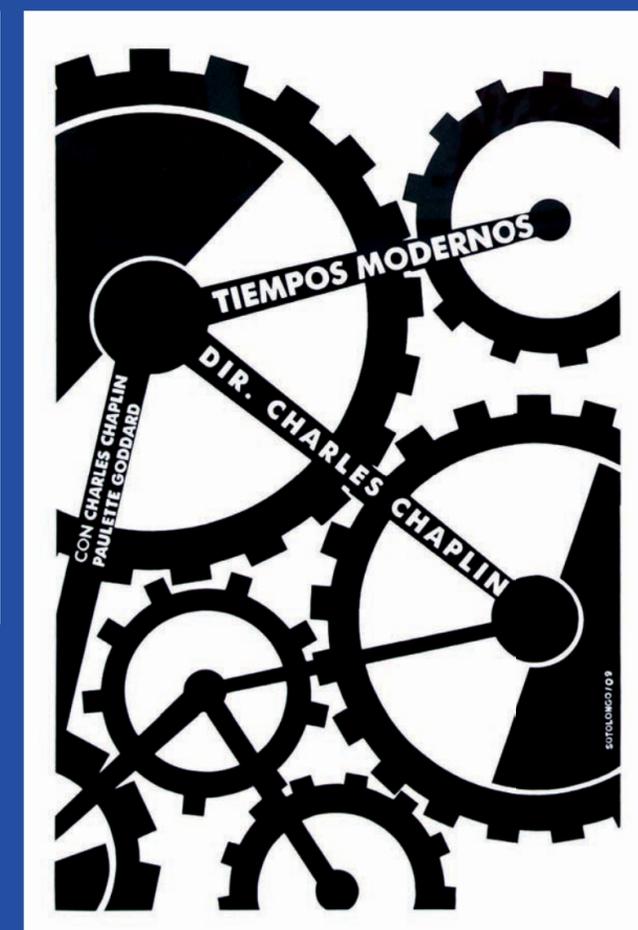


Top: El hombre de la cámara/ The Man With The Movie Camera Artist: Claudio Sotolongo, 2009 Silkscreen



Bottom left: 45 Aniversario de la Cinemateca de Cuba/Cuban Cinematheca (cinematheque) 45th Anniversary Artist: Raupa, 2004 Silkscreen

Bottom right: Tiempos Modernos/ Modern Times Artist: Claudio Sotolongo, 2009 Silkscreen Original release date of film: US, 1936





Top:
Cabaret
Artist: Claudio Sotolongo,
2009
Silkscreen

Bottom left:
Hemingway
Director: Fausto Canel
A Documentary in Black
and White
Artist: Eduardo Muñoz Bachs,
1962
Silkscreen

Bottom right:
La Soga/Rope
Artist: Giselle Monzón, 2009
Silkscreen
Original release date of film:
US, 1948



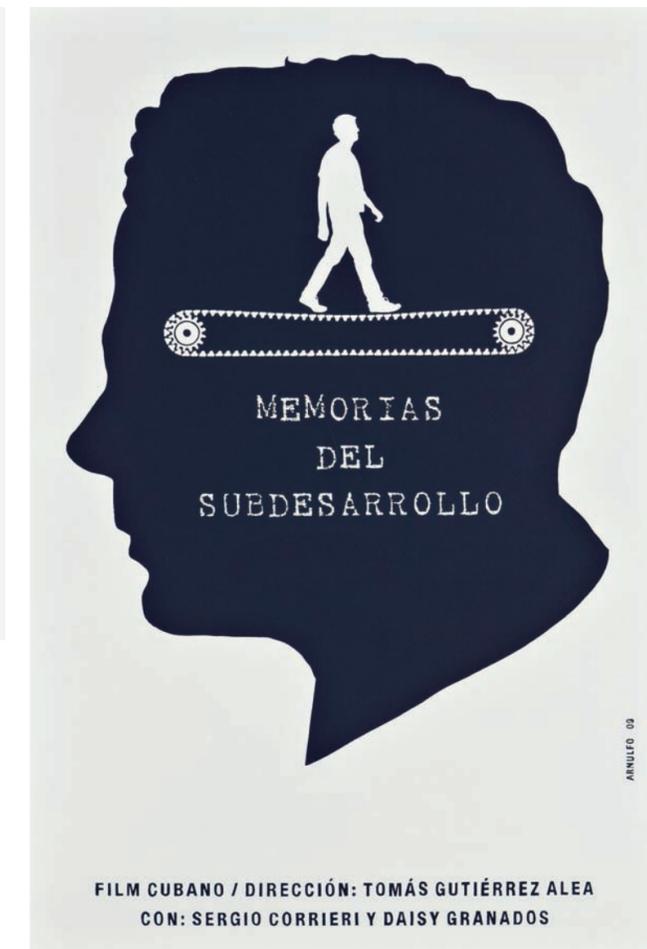
At first glance these gems of visual acuity and typographic expression do not follow the conventions of posters but rather more like book covers and jackets, in running a conceptual and formal gamut, from decorative to symbolic, from comic to serious, from expressive to surreal. In fact, as in Iron Curtain Poland and Czechoslovakia, surrealism enabled the artist and designer to mask certain visual ideas that might offend the censor's eye. The dislocation of reality also provides greater opportunities for pictorial adventures. In addition to surrealism, economy of space is the other thing almost all these posters have in common. Maybe the inspiration – and playful style – for these just came instinctively.

One of the most interesting things about this collection, note the curators, is that older films, like 'Cabaret' for instance, was recently released in Cuba, and the dated artist's signature on the poster is from one or two years ago. As censorship was strong, and seems to be easing more and more these days, certain films were not released until very recently and that is when the poster was commissioned. The versions of a poster for 'Schindler's List' are both dated 2009.

Design archeologists have long been uncovering various one-off lost items that fit nicely into the overall history. But rarely is such a treasure as this. It is always easy to edit a critical mass of material into a solid body of work, but even allowing for some lesser works, the sheer quality of this quantity of posters is incredible. And what a model of excellence these posters are for all to see – maybe even someone in Hollywood, USA. Maybe some day, they'll catch up with Cuban film posters.



Left:
Cria Cuervos/Cria!
Artist: Eduardo Muñoz Bachs,
1977
Silkscreen
Original release date of film:
Spain, 1976



Right:
Memorias del Subdesarrollo/Memories of Underdevelopment
Artist: Arnulfo, 2009
Silkscreen