

From Silkscreen to Silver Screen: An Interview with Eileen Yaghoobian

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Rock music is so significant in Western culture that it has spawned many other arts and crafts, from fashion to graphics. Eileen Yaghoobian, an Iranian-born, Canadian filmmaker based in Vancouver, has spent the past five years exploring one such by-product—the rock poster—for her first feature-length documentary, *Died Young, Stayed Pretty*. Tracing the medium from the 1960s to the present, DYSP had its U.S. premiere earlier this year at the SXSW Film Festival and is currently touring the country—including a run at New York’s IFC Center from July 17–23. The ICA in London is releasing the film in the UK this October, and the DVD is available in Canada and coming soon internationally. The title comes from *Some People Can’t Surf*, Julie Lasky’s book on Art Chantry—a key player in the film and major influence on the poster scene—in reference to Marilyn Monroe; Yaghoobian fesses, “I had the title before I shot the movie!” The director’s short films and videos have screened in festivals and exhibitions internationally, and her still photography is in the permanent collections at Houston’s Museum of Fine Arts, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and the Canada Council Art Bank in Ottawa. At the outset of DYSP’s whirlwind tour, we caught up with Yaghoobian long enough for her to tell us why rock posters hold such fascination and why the art form has endured.

Heller: I’ve been a fan of rock posters since the psychedelic days. How far back would you say your interest goes? And what made you decide to do a film about them and their makers?

Yaghoobian: I’ve always been a fan of indie rock, but my interest in poster art didn’t thrive until just prior to the making of this film. The idea to make *Died Young, Stayed Pretty* came at a dark time in my life. I was grieving the sudden death of my youngest brother, this having followed the death of my oldest brother. I was living in his apartment and surrounded by memories. To cheer me up, an old friend sent me a link to GigPosters.com [an online archive and community] and I instantly connected to the stark, powerful imagery of rock poster art from the 1970s and onward.

I was drawn to the cultural and political dialogue that pervaded each piece, as well as the artist’s individual expression of “rock ’n’ roll.” Passion for art and music is what ultimately drives the poster-art scene—as well as my own interests. I also love the fantasy of the “underground.” I wanted to see if it existed, and to see if the feelings derived from posters mark out a physical space in comparison. Where is off the radar?

Heller: I understand you funded this yourself. Is that true?

Yaghoobian: I took a risk and made a feature film with out-of-pocket money. I lone - wolfed the project, traveled solo for three years filming on location—from Austin, Chicago, Nashville, Seattle, Providence, Calgary, and all across the USA and Canada. Kinda like a band on tour.

Heller: Lucky for you, all but a small few of the artists are alive. Who among them would you say made the deepest contributions to the field and film?

Yaghoobian: Art Chantry—one of the most widely known poster artists, whose aesthetic epitomized the Seattle punk music scene—greatly contributed to the film. Art’s raw cut-and-paste posters of the punk era created a visual language that absorbed into mainstream culture. His use of typography and graphics influences the rock poster and the graphic design scene today. Art speaks in my movie about a Dead Kennedy poster, and that their name alone caused a mass reaction of people tearing down posters from the street. The power of artists to reevaluate culture and throw it back in its face has been stolen back by the power structure. Chantry says that being president—referring to Bush—is the new punk, that he’s put into office to destroy the culture around him and that he’s the ultimate punk!

During the filming, which was a strange time in the United States, I asked whether posters could have some sort of power to influence. There was a popular anti-Bush poster campaign during the Bush/Kerry election, but Bush still got re-elected. I thought it was lovely that this time the Obama posters were pro-Obama and not anti-McCain—maybe that made the difference. “Shock and destroy” didn’t have as much power as the pro-iconic, celebratory feel of the past election.

Heller: Are there others who you feel define the poster design field?

Yaghoobian: Derek Hess, known for his irony and sense of humor, was a significant player as well. And of course, Frank Kozik, best known for integrating Mickey Mouse and Hanna-Barbera characters into his rock posters.

Heller: What, if any, were the challenges in making this film?

Yaghoobian: I had enough footage—200-something hours of it—to make four docs! I chose to tell this particular story. Some people wanted the film to be what it’s not—they wanted to see facts and truth in a world that blurs the line between fantasy and reality. When I was filming DYSP I received so much criticism regarding the peg of the film. With a film like this, you can easily get caught in the traps of the glitter and gloss of rock ‘n’ roll. If you’re not careful, it can sink you. But I chose to go with what I love most about music and rock posters. My movie is about the community of poster makers and the cultural dialogue that lives in the posters. I knew that some people would want the traditional documentary structure, and want to be fed information by narration, or by the history of poster art, but that wasn’t the kind of film I wanted to make. I wanted to be “true” to rock ‘n’ roll! I wanted to cut it as though I were cutting-and-pasting a poster. The history of rock posters is in the location filming—it’s in their worlds, in their conversation, in their studios, spaces and work.

Heller: Was it hard to get distribution?

Yaghoobian: If I thought making the film was hard—you find out soon after your final cut that there is this monster-machine set in place for distribution. This is really the hardest part, after spending years of your life on a project, fighting to have your movie seen. You float, not knowing how/when to deliver to your audience who are waiting patiently to see your movie and email you and ask you why they can't see your film! Wow, I can't tell you how hard that is. But now I really want to make my next movie. I've been lucky to have this film fly on its own. People are into it. With the digital world, your audience catches you online and then travels with you—it's wonderful.

Heller: What has been the high point for you?

Yaghoobian: The material kept me going—*Died Young, Stayed Pretty* is really a comedy. The people in my film are truly funny. Their stories are humorous and their obsessions are endearing. It's interesting that this perfect mix of humor, reality and drama is able to unfold in a nonfiction film. These fragments of real life are wonderful—the true gifts of documentary filmmaking. The location filming was a high point... the places and people I met, and the wonderful surprises that happen when you're filming on location. Like the conversation at Sam's BBQ where my subject is talking about the economy and predicting the recession while in the background a man is struggling to get his wallet out of his back pocket... the teller, in the end, reaches over to grab it. Moments like this were high points, every step of the way.

After three years of location filming, my last stop was Brian Chippendale, who's also in the band Lightning Bolt, in Providence, Rhode Island. All these questions I had were suddenly answered by Brian... without having to ask. He offered the perfect ending to my film, a great scene.

Heller: What did you learn that you had not already known about the genre?

Yaghoobian: Mark Greenberg, the film's composer, said to me when he first saw the cut, "Out of these dirty, murky places comes this shining art and community," and I was allowed to bear witness to it, fully. There is this amazing, shining art and community. I try and share that with audiences.

Heller: Is there an essential difference between the first rock posters and the current gig posters?

Yaghoobian: Posters once had functionality to them. They were made cheaply as B&W fliers, Xeroxed and stapled to a pole on the streets. Now, there's more of an "underground" existence online. Before GigPosters.com, rock posters were made for one show, for one night, and maybe a hundred people saw them. But now they are archived on this site and the world can see them. Because of this, they have become valuable collectible items, handmade and color silkscreened.

What's lovely is that, regardless of how things have changed, poster makers still post their ideas, loves, passions, voices, views, and politics on a telephone pole, advertised illegally, strewn throughout the urban landscape. These personal pieces of propaganda become part of the street, and erode with the street; stolen or attacked by people, or broken down by weather and time. They live short lives, placed in odd circumstances, and they're really only there for the purpose of a rock show. Pasted to gritty surfaces they reshape space; it's beautifully powerful.

Poster artists are an ultimate paradox—a seemingly powerless subculture with power. They are powerful because they are thieves of their past. They appropriate from popular icons, ad makers and illustrators from old magazines, acting as sorts of gods to engineer a band's image. They have learned a powerful way to communicate through promotion and advertising, but they use their skills to promote a band they love. They are true fans.

Heller: I heard that Bill Graham, the legendary master of the Fillmore, gave posters away at the end of shows to get people out of the theater. What is the true purpose of a rock poster? Is it advertising, a souvenir or a brand?

Yaghoobian: In the film, Art Chantry talks about posters as artifacts... Because they're considered advertising for a show, they can't really be art. After the show is over, and the band breaks up, what's left is an artifact, cool and desirable.

Heller: How has the rock poster been impacted by changes in technology? No more black light?

Yaghoobian: I think it's more black light now than ever! That's its appeal. That's what makes the posters "valuable items." Hand-colored silkscreen... Tom Hazelmyer talks about this in the film, that if they make these designed and hand-silkscreened posters, it has a value, and then a poster becomes desirable and collectible. Before it was dispensable but functional.

Most of the poster artists in my film make their living from design work—an outcome of technology. Still, most of them print their own posters, old school. Technology has affected the poster artists in my film that *don't* print their own work, like Art Chantry.

Funny enough, the process of making posters can be very archaic and primitive—as Mark Greenberg, who created music for the film, describes it, this is “a process and community built from piles of discarded crap and cheap warehouse spaces... not clean and sterile laboratories.”

Heller: What do you want your audience to take away from seeing the film?

Yaghoobian: [To appreciate] the way that rock posters re-envision all cultures. A Turbonegro poster presents Elvis as a gay sailor! A post-apocalyptic city surrounds bunnies walking into a bonfire for an Andrew Bird show. M&M's as the ultimate hero because they can walk into a building in flames to save people, because they only melt in your mouth. Bullets shot through a big red target on a poster printed on metal, the target symbolizing the Japanese flag, for a Pearl Harbor Day show for the Japanese punk band Teengenerate. Twisted stuff! And sublime.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press) and most recently *Design Disasters: Great Designers, Fabulous Failure, and Lessons Learned* (Allworth Press). He is also the co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson), *Becoming a Digital Designer* (John Wiley & Co.), *Teaching Motion Design* (Allworth Press) and more. www.hellerbooks.com