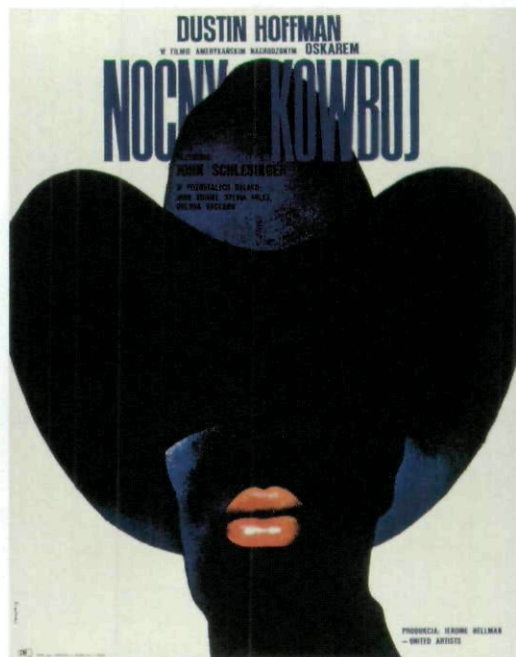


# >>playbill

A movie-poster travelogue (part two)



**The Birds** 1963  
**Director:** Alfred Hitchcock  
**Artist:** Bronislaw Zelek



**Midnight Cowboy** 1969  
**Director:** John Schlesinger  
**Artist:** Waldemar Swierzy

## Pole Position BY OTTO BUJ

WHAT MADE THE POSTWAR SCHOOL OF POLISH FILM-poster design revolutionary was its rejection of state-imposed social realism while at the same time cultivating an approach to selling cinema that was antithetical to the free-market model. The Communist authorities might have tightly controlled the films that were allowed in, but they also granted the commissioned artists a surprising degree of creative freedom. In Poland the Party would only act to censor an objectionable political message. While this approach also flourished within much of the postwar Eastern bloc (Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Romania, and Hungary), this sort of creative freedom was usually denied by the commercial film industry within the market-driven West.

The Polish designers, by far the most prolific, reconciled the fundamental objectives of advertising with the sophistication and influence of the fine arts. Their work was rooted in an allegorical tradition that could be traced back to Constructivism, Surrealism, Dada, and Abstract Expressionism. They explored ideas that incorporated the dark and obsessive aspects of Polish romanticism, drawn out of the country's unique experience during WWII, to represent their subjects in a cryptic, conceptual, and highly subjective manner. The Golden Age of Polish movie-poster design, from the Fifties through the mid-Seventies, produced a body of work that was incredibly rich and varied, characterized by pioneering artists such as Henryk Tomaszewski

OTTO BUJ is a collector and curator whose exhibition, *Representing Cinema and the Art of the Film Poster*, was recently displayed at the *Art Gallery of Windsor in Canada*.

and Eryk Lipinski, and second-generation figures like Jan Lenica, Roman Cieslewicz, and Wiktor Gorka.

For *The Birds*, Bronislaw Zelek restaged the film's avian onslaught as an advancing horde of attacking titles. The onomatopoeic pecking quality of the Polish title (*Ptaki*), when repeated, both look and sound like a murderous chorus. Zelek's design is brilliant in its simplicity, and one of the most memorable posters ever produced for a Hitchcock film.

Similarly, Waldemar Swierzy's design for *Midnight Cowboy* has become not only an iconic Polish film poster, but also the most interesting take on what was the first Hollywood film to receive an X rating. Swierzy did not observe the cult of celebrity that characterized the film's American ad campaign, and so neither Jon Voight nor Dustin Hoffman appear in the design. Swierzy's painting, fixating on the hustler's lush, red feminized lips and shadowed identity, is less about the film's gay underpinnings than it is about the inviting anonymity that goes with a paid sexual encounter.

By the late Seventies, the Polish design tradition was stagnating. Characterized by overworked illustrations that suffered from facile surrealist tendencies, the posters seemed to have little to do with the films they were supposed to represent. Andrzej Klimowski's *Taxi Driver* was one of the movement's last truly definitive works. His Janus-headed montage is seamlessly composed, yet coarse and tactile on its pulpy stock. It balances two opposing aspects of De Niro's character. The rear image captures the troubled insomniac and frustrated Vietnam vet who drives a cab at night simply to pass the time. In the foreground, however, he is clearly redefined as "God's Lonely Man." Obscured behind a pair of aviator sunglasses, he now stands poised as an avenging angel with a clear sense of destination and purpose. □

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