

RIOT MATERIAL

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Hollywood in Havana: Five Decades Of Cuban Posters Promoting U.S. Films

October 3, 2017 By [Nancy Kay Turner](#)

**Part of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA
at The Pasadena Museum of California Art
Reviewed by Nancy Kay Turner**

“Necessity is the mother of invention” —English language proverb

“Hollywood in Havana: Five Decades of Cuban Posters Promoting U.S. Films” is a small but potent exhibit, part of Pacific Standard Time/ Los Angeles/Latin America (PST/LA/LA) at The Pasadena Museum of California Art until January 7, 2018. The posters in this exhibit were produced by The Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematograficos (ICAIC) or the Cuban film Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry from 1961-2012; all of them are silkscreened and are uniformly 29 1/2 inches by 20 1/4 inches. Images Courtesy of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics

The Cuban film posters on exhibit here are conceptually witty, generally succinct, bold, and pack a strong visual punch. The Cuban graphic designers truly were doing more with less by using a limited palette – often just the white of the paper with a black image and red lettering. Spectacular use of Escher-like ambiguous figure-ground relationships, hard-edged, flat and unmodulated color, highly saturated simplified palette and a sophisticated use of font and text is readily apparent. Moreover, the Cuban innovations include distilling the essence of narrative into clear and clever symbols without using the movie star’s own image (with the exception of Chaplin’s alter ego The Little Tramp). The 1972 *Cabaret* poster by Claudio Sotolongo is a case in point. A large black abstract shape sweeps down diagonally from the right corner to left. There is a white shape over towards the right edge that has a shapely black shape within it. Eventually, the eye realizes that the large black form can either be a curtain with the leg of Sally Bowles emerging onstage or it can be seen as a dark (literally) symbol of Nazi aggression about to sweep Sally and her kind off into oblivion. The red lettering announces the title of the movie, with the director and the two stars underneath. It is a simple but formidable image. A 1973 poster for the Alfred Hitchcock movie *Frenesi*, which is about a serial killer who strangles his victims with a necktie, is by Antonio Perez (Niko). The main image (Robert Longo and the creators of *Mad Men* probably saw this poster) is the cropped, diagonal prone shape of a man with the white of his face and shirt standing out in high contrast to his black suit. The background is blood-red and a striped tie loops around an apple, with the only text in lower case white elegant lettering announcing “frenesi.”



Courtesy of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics

Many of these Cuban posters are a love letter to both American films and to the Pop Art and the counterculture movements of the nineteen-sixties. The sixties in America were filled with political and social foment that spawned a fantastical flowering of political posters (many of them anti-war and consequently anti-government). The Fillmore West music posters, coming out of the San Francisco hippie music scene, were also a major influence. Many of these iconic posters had barely discernible bubble text, vibrant op-art complementary colors and flowing repeated shapes. Alfredo Rostgaard, a graphic designer for ICAIC (1966-1970) acknowledged this when he explained that his ideas and design came from “(Saul) Bass and (Saul) Steinberg, and also from the protest songs...”

The curators of this exhibit wanted the audience to understand the impact of the Revolution and the embargo that was imposed on Cuba by the United States had on these artists. A little history is in order here. Under the Batista regime, there was a very high illiteracy rate, especially in the rural areas. The Castro regime set about to quickly change this by promoting films and formed the ICAIC to do just that. There is a wonderful film in this exhibit entitled *Por Primera Vez/For The First Time* (1967, director Octavio Cortazar) that documents the visit of a mobile truck to a small, isolated rural town to show a film to residents who had never seen a movie before. The look of utter disbelief and pure pleasure on their faces as they watch the “moving pictures” is reminiscent of the tender Italian movie *Cinema Paradiso*. Both films highlight the warmth and excitement as the entire community comes to view the film: young and old, men, women and children share in this communal experience where they laugh or cry and poke each other in wonder and joy. There is a sense of a shared experience illustrated here that we seem to have lost. An interesting side note – the United States Information Agency had operated mobile cinema vans to screen U.S. propaganda films before the revolution and probably established this precedent.



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The total trade embargo that the United States imposed on Cuba in 1962 meant that the artists often had to improvise when creating the posters by limiting the number of colors and using silkscreen rather than offset lithography. In the early sixties, the posters were printed in small runs and on small scale to save paper, with as much as fifty percent of the paper left blank to save ink. Within this framework, the artists were still able to create intensely memorable images. Antonio Reboiro, who was a graphic designer for ICAIC (1963-1982), explained: “Being in ICAIC was like being on a different island. They were difficult times artistically, as in all fields; there was an attempt to implement Socialist Realism...and the ICAIC opposed this aesthetic, believing...that the revolution could be modern, without Stalinist ideas.” It is also amazing how many American films ended up being shown in Cuba despite the complete embargo. They may have been bootlegged copies, or perhaps were brought from other countries or even smuggled in by filmmakers.



Courtesy of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics

Charlie Chaplin and his character The Little Tramp are much beloved by the Cuban people and his image is everywhere here. The poster for the aforementioned documentary *Por Primera Vez* shows a highly simplified Chaplinesque figure – the head almost a white rectangle with the eyes, eyebrows, nose and moustache (but no mouth as a way to represent the silent movie star), drawn in an irregular, childish scrawl. A black top hat is plopped atop the white face with two bunches of curly hair quickly drawn attached to the brim. The flat and unmodulated grass-green background against the profusion of brightly colored, swirling flora and fauna joyfully threatens to overtake the figure. Simplified but not simple, this delightful image manages to create a sense of Chaplin popping up from behind the flowers and surprising both the audience and himself.



Courtesy of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics

The spectacular black and white poster for *Tiempos Modernos (Modern Times)*, the 1936 silent movie that Chaplin himself directed, is by Claudio Sotolongo. Printed in just black on white with small and large gears turning, this poster is unusual by not using any reference to Chaplin's own iconic image. Instead it focuses on the tedium of the production line inexorably moving along. Chaplin's face as The Little Tramp is so beloved that it is used as the face of Cuban Cinema on posters. A poster announcing "45 años cinemateca de Cuba" (1961, Rafael Morante, silkscreen) has a high-contrast image of Chaplin with his bowler and hair becoming one black shape. His eyebrows and black-ringed eyes, two dots for the nose, simplified moustache and mouth float on a white background. Superimposed on his hat is an impromptu party hat drawn loosely with red and green colors, while a few confetti-like dots float inconspicuously in the background. This image still manages to feel fresh, spontaneous and delightful in its economy of line and image. It is great fun to see the posters for *Clockwork Orange*, *The Silence of The Lambs*, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* and *Schindler's List* among the many posters shown here all that are so very imaginative. My only problem with the exhibition was in the unimaginative installation, with the posters shown one after the other in the rectangular space.

This is a valuable exhibit to visit and soak in the universality and far reach of the American motion picture industry. The founders of the ICAIC were Alfredo Guevara and Saul Yelin, and it is due to their insistence on artistic freedom that so many artists and writers flocked to work at ICAIC. It is to them that we owe these extraordinary posters, which showcase the resilience, vibrancy and humanity of the Cuban people.

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