

The Polish School of Poster

Abstract: The article highlights the ideas of exteriority and interiority as expressed by the graphic design genre of poster. The role of poster is anticipatory and precedent to the crucial artistic experience. However, while being a work of art itself, the poster also becomes an artistic and experiential event. Such was the case of the posters created in the 1950s and 1960s in Poland by the outstanding artists whose works are known under a generic name of the Polish School of Poster. Posters by Henryk Tomaszewski, Jerzy Flisak, Jan Lenica, Wojciech Fangor, Jan Młodziejewicz, among others, are remarkable for their style based on metaphor and allusion, original lettering and painterly technique as well as humour and understatement. The influence of the poster on the public also falls within the scope of the study.

Keywords: exterior, interior, poster, Polish School of Poster, metaphor, ambiguity, painterly style

Polska Szkoła Plakatu

Streszczenie: Artykuł analizuje graficzny gatunek plakatu i jego oddziaływanie w obrębie zjawiska artystycznego znanego jako Polska Szkoła Plakatu. Pojęcia wnętrza i zewnętrżności są wyznacznikami jego ewaluacji. Rolą plakatu jest informowanie; antycypuje on i poprzedza kluczowe doświadczenie artystyczne. Plakat, będąc również dziełem sztuki, staje się wydarzeniem artystycznym i empirycznym. Takie rozróżnienie odnosi się do plakatów stworzonych w latach 50. i 60. w Polsce przez wybitnych artystów należących do Polskiej Szkoły Plakatu. Plakaty Henryka Tomaszewskiego, Jerzego Flisa-

ka, Jana Lenicy, Wojciecha Fangora, Jana Młodzożeńca wyróżniają się stylem opartym na metaforze i aluzji, oryginalnym liternictwie i malarskim warsztacie, a także humorem i niedopowiedzeniem. Miejsce i sposób oddziaływania plakatów na odbiorców są również tematem artykułu.

Słowa kluczowe: zewnątrzność, wewnątrz, plakat, Polska Szkoła Plakatu, metafora, dwuznaczność, styl malarski



Il. 1. Zbyszko Siemaszko: *Warszawa Śródmieście railway station*, 1963

to the visual impact of the poster. The image is supplemented by the informative text which may also contribute to the artistic appeal of the poster. The text conveys the information by means of various typographical elements, such as typefaces, leading, weight, reversing-out etc. However, the most dominant and characteristic ingredient of the posters of this period is the handwritten text which represents the artist's signature or the personal touch of someone who claims that "I have made it on my own". This approach was necessary as the artists involved during those years were unable to access the basic equipment commonly found in designer workshops.

Historically, the emergence of the *Polish School of Poster* occurred in the 1950s when the political and cultural situation in Poland relaxed after the death of Stalin. The dreary aesthetics that dominated the country after World War II were eventually overturned and artists were able to envisage more novel approaches and put them into practice. This led to a general explosion of artistic creativity, for example: in film and theatre productions, music concerts, and fine arts exhibitions, of both Polish and foreign provenance, which in turn were announced, and to some extent reviewed and analyzed, by a graphic design genre – the poster created by the outstanding Polish artists.² The history of the *Polish School of Poster*, however, involves a number of unexpected paradoxes, contradictions and disclosures. Artists associated with the *Polish School of Poster* did not consider posters simply as a commercial or advertising medium. They sought genuineness and refinement in this form. Dorota Folga-Januszewska suggests in her latest book entitled *Here It Is: The Art of Polish Poster* (2015) that this phenomenon emerged as the artists, being educated in the various academies of fine arts, became conscious of the limits imposed on them by traditional approaches to the genre of poster. Furthermore, they rebelled against the limits of advertising, the psychology

² Franciszek Starowieyski in one of his interviews claimed that his posters provided the public with his own interpretations of films or theatre productions. Therefore, their informative or decorative purpose was diminished for the sake of an authorial commentary and extra meaning. Comp. Skowrońska I., *Franciszek Starowiejski-artysta, skandalista, kolekcjoner*, available at: <https://niezlasztuka.net/o-sztuce/franciszek-starowiejski-artysta-skandalista-kolekcjoner/>.

of advertising and propaganda techniques, and even the actual design techniques. She claims that the crucial contribution of the *Polish School of Poster* to the created image in poster design was the strength of poetry.^{3 4}

The grey, half-ruined streets of post-war Poland became the first art gallery, a venue for exhibiting posters and inviting passers-by to participate in cultural events. Henryk Tomaszewski's statement that "the gallery of the poster is the street" aptly reflects the develop-



Il. 3. Jan Lenica: *Wozzeck* (1964)

ing relationship between the poster and the space within which it appeared in the post-war period.⁵

At the same time another perspective was arising as to the sphere of their influence and display and caused the artists to pose the questions again: What is the proper space for posters and what is their proper venue? Józef Mroszczak, then Dean of the Graphic Design Faculty of Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, deliberated on these questions and came to the simple conclusion that people displayed posters in their homes because it affected them in a positive way.⁶ Thus the aesthetic function of posters prevailed. According to the urban legend, copies of the 1964 *Wozzeck* poster by Jan Lenica that had been displayed on the streets of Warsaw, quickly disappeared overnight. These posters were not

³ D. Folga-Januszewska, L. Majewski, *Oto sztuka polskiego plakatu*, BOSZ, Olszanica, 2018, p. 252.

⁴ Poetry is often defined as a condensed (verbal) expression of human feelings or ideas. In case of the discussed posters, poetry involves literary references, visual and audible images which appeal to various compartments of imagination and endow the poster with rich meaning. Prof. Jan Lenica claimed that posters should also sing.

⁵ This information is available at: https://www.poster.pl/polish_poster_artists.html.

⁶ D. Folga-Januszewska, L. Majewski, *Oto sztuka polskiego plakatu*, BOSZ, Olszanica, 2018, p. 262

removed by official censors but stolen by people who were desperate for something stunningly colourful and flamboyant to decorate their homes.⁷

What were the characteristics of the Polish School of Poster which made it stand out from the dominant European trends?

There was a general distrust of the established commercial function of the poster which caused artists to seek inspiration in other domains. The art of painting was the catalyst for the unique style of the *Polish School of Poster*. The poster had its origin in painting and artists, even in the later phases of poster design, returned to painting and were inspired by contemporary painting techniques, such as, unusual forms, stunning colour schemes and challenging juxtapositions. Metaphor was more often employed than symbols which were considered too exploited and conventionalized, while signs were regarded as too obvious and plain. The use of metaphor also allowed artists to seek associations, to convey unexpected combinations and to identify hidden similarities between ideas. As Folga-Januszewska says: “The Polish poster was a window opened to imagination and ambiguity, to double meaning”,⁸ and consequently this brought humour, irony and surreal elements to the poster art form. Typography more often relied on hand-written style than standard typeset typefaces and occasionally artists employed expressive collage lettering. In this way the poster eventually became an influential art form intended to cultivate art rather than to succumb to the pressures of advertisement.⁹

⁷ Comp. L. Majewski, *The Poster is there to Seduce*, [in:] *Vogue Polska*, 2018, available at: <https://www.vogue.pl/an/prof-lech-majewski-the-poster-is-there-to-seduce>.

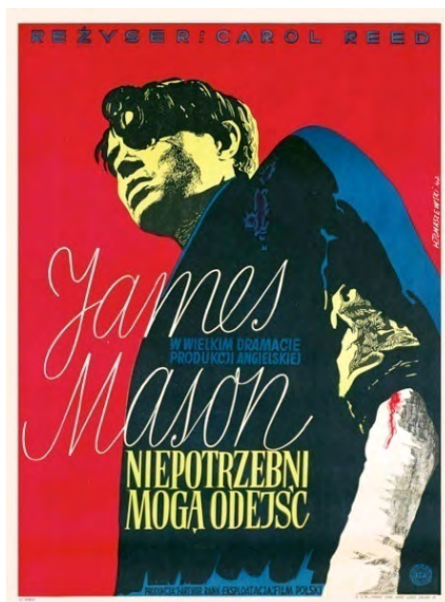
⁸ D. Folga-Januszewska, L. Majewski, *Oto sztuka polskiego plakatu*, BOSZ, Olszanica, 2018, p. 250.

⁹ *As the Polish film establishment was not concerned about commercial aspects of the studio demand the poster became artist-driven. Posters became part of fine art, and instead of being led by the lowest common denominator in public taste, artists shaped the society's taste.* – writes Guity Novin in *A History of Graphic Design*, available at: <http://guity-novin.blogspot.com/2012/11/chapter-62-modern-graphic-design-in.html>.

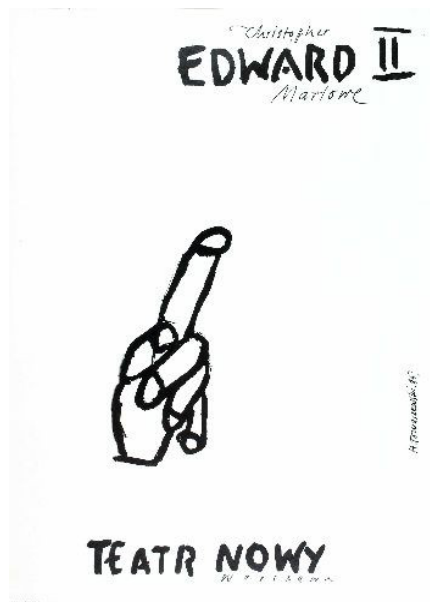
A number of artists are in particular associated with
the Polish School of Poster:

Henryk Tomaszewski is exceptionally diverse in terms of styles and his posters sometimes leave the observer with the impression that they have been created by different artists. A painter by profession, he was a leading figure of the *Polish School of Poster* and a renowned professor at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts. The beginning of his career is marked by a departure from the Western film poster tradition that focused on film stills, portraits of actors and, typically, bold lettering used to advertise the films and promote box-office success.

In Tomaszewski's *New York Times* obituary, James Victore, a poster designer, was quoted as saying: "rather than illustrating actual scenes [Tomaszewski] suggested the mood of the films by applying filmmaking technique". This approach was applied to a diversity of other art disciplines, for example, theatre and circus performance or sculpture whose distinctive techniques and methods he tried to emulate in his



Il. 4. Henryk Tomaszewski: *The Odd Man Out* (1947)



Il. 5. Henryk Tomaszewski: *Edward II* (1986)

posters.¹⁰ Therefore, one of Tomaszewski's acclaimed film posters *The Odd Man Out* (1947) features an image of the leading character, played by actor James Mason, captured at a low vantage perspective and outlined against the solid red background, while at the same time strongly cropped. The lettering utilizes an interesting variety of styles that do not distract the viewer from the main figure.¹¹



Il. 6. Henryk Tomaszewski: *Henry Moore's exhibition* (1959)

Another style is illustrated in the poster Tomaszewski created for Henry Moore's exhibition in Warsaw (1959). The white cut letters imitate simple sculptural forms with open spaces characteristic of Moore's style. The second "O" in the sculptor's name functions as a plinth supporting his iconic statue *Mother and Child*, whereas the modest lettering in black and white is unobtrusively squeezed between consecutive letters. In contrast, Tomaszewski's poster for the theatrical production of Christopher Marlow's *Edward II* (1986)

¹⁰ S. Heller, Henryk Tomaszewski, Leader of the Polish Poster School, dies at 91, *The New York Times*, Sept. 14, 2005, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/14/arts/henryk-tomaszewski-leader-of-the-polish-poster-school-dies-at-91.html>.

¹¹ *Painterly in style, Tomaszewski's image references to the crucifixion and martyrdom as portrayed in religious painting; with Johnny painted on a blood red background – a very different reading of the film's noir atmosphere.* This opinion was expressed by Nigel Arthur in *The Polish Poster Art for classic British Films*, available at: <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/polish-poster-art-classic-british-films>.

is a humorous minimalist composition entirely based on a graphic style which clearly brings out the meaning of the play.



Il. 7. Jerzy Flisak: *Hitman* (1960)



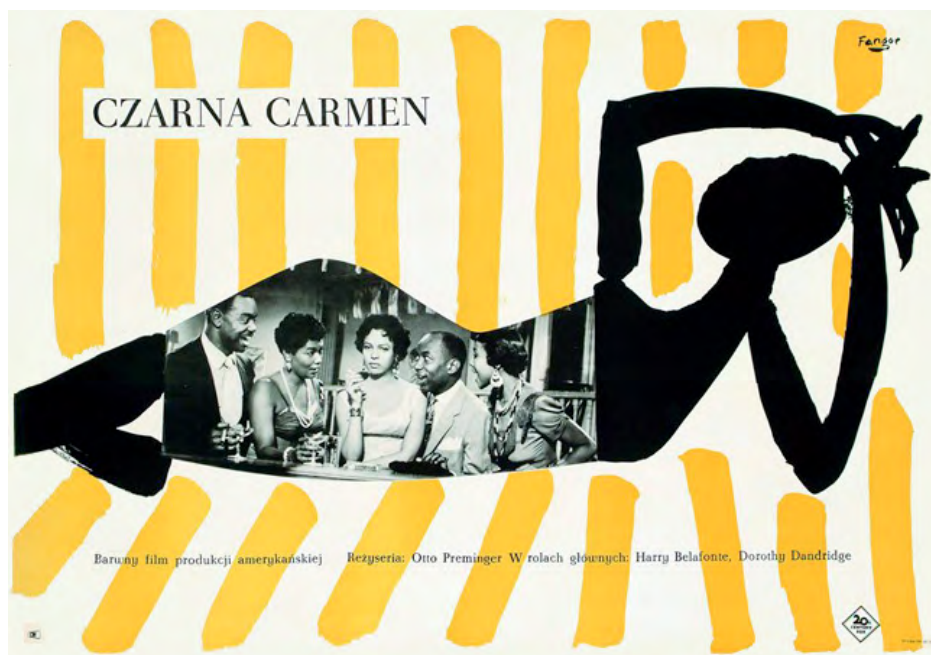
Il. 8. Jerzy Flisak: *Brutti, Sporchi e Cattivi* (1978)

Jerzy Flisak's poster style is often described as clumsy, deliberately ugly, non-aesthetic, and almost casual.¹² His posters *Hitman* (1960) and *Brutti, Sporchi e Cattivi* (1978) display similar rhythmical repetition of shapes, the unusual inclusion of text and a great deal of wry humour even though the former appears to have a more immediate appeal with its minimal forms and graphic ambiguity of the negative space.

Wojciech Fangor's *Black Carmen* (1959) is often described as an ingenious combination of graphic elements and photography which results in a simple and direct communication of the film plot it seeks to represent. The horizontal orientation of the poster is unusual but lends itself perfectly to the carefree attitude of the reclining woman. Her outstretched female silhouette indicated by freehand curvy lines is interestingly juxtaposed with bold vertical and oblique yellow strokes.¹³

¹² Comp. Guity Novin, *A History of Graphic Design*, available at: <http://guity-novin.blogspot.com/2012/11/chapter-62-modern-graphic-design-in.html>.

¹³ See other posters where a similar designing approach was used, e.g. posters by Wojciech Zamecznik to the film *Cette Sacrée Gamine* or by Jerzy Jaworowski to *Albi*.



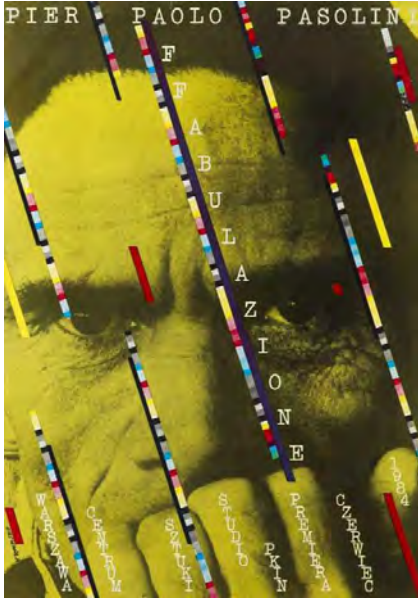
Il. 9. Wojciech Fangor: *Black Carmen* (1959)

Roman Cieślęwicz is another artist who made use of a collage technique. His poster for Pier Paolo Pasolini's film *Afabulazione* exploits a photographic portrait of Pasolini transformed by lines running through it. These are diagonal and colourful and also convey information. They may be read as artist's thoughts or inspirations or merely as film strips and they undoubtedly add dynamism to the otherwise bleak photograph.

Jan Lenica and Jan Młodożeniec also belonged to the first generation of the *Polish School of Poster*. Jan Lenica is credited with coining the term the *Polish School of Poster*¹⁴ and his richly coloured, expressive, vivid and eye-catching poster *Wozzeck* was discussed earlier in this article. Another Lenica poster *The Blue Bird* (1957) gives an angry and gloomy interpretation of Federico Fellini's film. The dominant figure of the eponymous bird (or priest) is set against a black

¹⁴ The term was first used in *Graphis* in 1960. Prof. Jan Lenica authored many theoretical texts on poster art.

background constructed of nervous, irregular cross-hatched lines that enhance the ominous impression of the whole.



Il. 10. Roman Cieślewicz: *Afabulazione* (1984)



Il. 11. Jan Lenica: *The Blue Bird* (1957)

The End of the Night (1957) by Jan Młodożeniec is a well-balanced and well-conceived composition of pictorial and textual elements in black and white that are unified by the idea of negative space. His meticulous and clear-cut style is visible in other posters he created.



Il. 12. Jan Młodożeniec: *The End of the Night* (1957)

The second generation of poster designers were either disciples of their predecessors or emulated the work of the *Polish School of Poster*, for example: Waldemar Świerzy, Franciszek Starowieyski, Stasys Eidrigevičius, all of whom made diverse and important aesthetic contributions to the field of poster design. It is important to note that during this time the “first generation” artists continued to be prolific in terms of their output and their styles continued to evolve.



Il. 13. Waldemar Świerzy: *Sunset Boulevard* (1957)



Il. 14. Waldemar Świerzy: *Blow up* (1966)

Waldemar Świerzy was a full-fledged graphic designer who designed posters, book covers and illustrations, stamps and record sleeves for which he received many international awards.¹⁵ His style, however, is much indebted to painting, especially to modern abstract trends. *Sunset Boulevard* (1957) is one of his most recognisable posters. It focuses quite traditionally upon a central human figure. This is a technique he used in nearly all his outstanding posters including a memorable gallery of jazz musicians. His designs consistently

¹⁵ Waldemar Świerzy in 1959 won Grand Prix Toulouse-Lautrec at the First International Film Poster Exhibition in Versailles for the *Red Inn* poster; followed by the third prize for *Two Stories of Happiness* at the same event in 1962. In 1970, he received the 1st prize at the Biennale de Sao Paulo and in 1975 and 1985 his posters for *The Promised Land*.

concentrate on the portrait of the person presented and this dictated the painting style and technique, the metaphor employed or simply an expression spontaneously captured. The poster *Blow up* (1966) is composed of colourful enlarged pixelated dots and shows the correspondence between the film subject matter and the pop art style he chose to use. Ewa Gorzadek established the relationship between Świerzy's techniques and how they were perceived in the exterior street spaces when she wrote: "From close up these posters resemble a multi-coloured mish-mash of abstract items such as pasta-like lines, splashes, smudges, spots, dots and streaks giving the impression of randomness. They become legible only when seen from a certain distance, the gay mish-mash then revealing a human face or figure, and the artist's intention becoming clear".¹⁶



Il. 15, 16, 17. Franciszek Starowieyski: *Mademoiselle* (1970); *Samuel Zborowski* (1980); *The MoMA Exhibition* (1985)

Franciszek Starowieyski drew inspiration from baroque art and had an uncanny penchant for the macabre and the surreal. His posters reveal a virtuoso draughtsmanship, haunting imagery frequently combining death and erotic motifs, which is wittily manifested in the poster *Mademoiselle* (1970), attention to detail and masterfully rendered chiaroscuro effects. In his poster *Samuel Zborowski*

¹⁶ E. Gorzadek, in *culture.pl*, available at: <https://culture.pl/en/artist/waldemar-swierzy>.

(1980) the formal composition and the use of hexagonal shape reflects the tradition of coffin portraits of Polish noblemen in the 17th and 18th centuries. Starowieyski was the first Polish artist to give a solo exhibition in MoMA in 1985 for which he created a specific event poster.

Stasys Eidrigėvičius's posters are influenced by the 20th century traditions of painting and bring to mind the conventions of cubism and surrealism. The puppet-like figures, such as represented in the poster *Uncle Vania* (1989) have an eerie blank gaze and are executed by means of a monochromatic palette, the use of sculptural forms and with a meticulous attention to the irregular texture. The entire image remains in the mind of the viewer as a unique form of poster art.



Il. 18. Stasys Eidrigėvičius: *Uncle Vania* (1989)

Eventually, the circus poster is a curious and conspicuous theme associated for several decades with the *Polish School of Poster*. All the artists discussed in this article appeared to use the circus poster as a non-ideological platform for illustrating their unique style and humour. There are innumerable variations upon this theme, for example: Świerzy's nonsensical monochrome *Bear* (1974), Hilscher's vibrant and gaudy *Zebra* (1979), Młodożeńiec's mischievous depiction of *Clown with a Slingshot* (1974) combined with a bright lettering collage, and Tomaszewski's use of his favourite shape - the circle - in his minimalist and condensed poster *Circus* (1965).

This discussion has focused so far on the intrinsic qualities of the *Polish School of Poster*, that is, the internal or centripetal route the artists followed. However, to conclude it is worth adopting the opposite



Il. 19. Waldemar Świerzy: *Bear* (1974)



Il. 20. Hubert Hilscher: *Zebra* (1979)



Il. 20. Jan Młodożeniec: *Clown with a Slingshot* (1974)



Il. 21. Henryk Tomaszewski: *Cyrk* (1965)

exterior or centrifugal perspective to illustrate how the values espoused by the *Polish School of Poster* expanded and grew internationally.

As early as 1952 and 1953, two studios of poster art opened in the Warsaw Academy of Fine Art directed respectively by prof. Henryk

Tomaszewski and prof. Józef Mroszczak. The artists, associated with the *Polish School of Poster*, won international awards and participated in exhibitions and competitions in Poland and abroad. Some Polish artists went abroad to teach in renowned foreign art schools and published books and articles on the theory and practice of the poster. Both Lenica and Fangor taught at Harvard University, Lenica also in Berlin and Kassel, and Świerzy at the University of Mexico.¹⁷ In 1966, the first Biennale of Poster was held in Warsaw and in 1968, the Museum of Poster was established in Wilanów to display a permanent collection as well as organise exhibitions and reviews. This expansion was described by Zdzisław Schubert (1978): “irrespective of its short life in the streets as its primary function, (the poster) has succeeded in entering museums, to become an object of artistic confrontations; it has entered numerous private collections and become an export item”.¹⁸ ¹⁹ In addition, evidence of mainstream interest in poster design is reflected in its influence on other media. An example of the phenomenon of poster design being incorporated into film footage and imagery in American film productions can be seen in Meyers film *What Women Want?* (2010) in which the Hilscher’s poster *Circus* (1965) and Tadeusz Trepkowski’s poster *LOT* (1953) are featured. Another film *Beginners* (2011) by Mike Mills featured a graphic designer’s home interior decorated with Andrzej Krajewski’s poster *Woman Times Seven* (1968) and Maria Ihnatowicz’s posters *La Horse* (1971) and *Wielka Majówka* (1991).

Unlike the prevailing movements in Europe, in particular the Swiss post-Bauhaus international typographic style, the *Polish School of Poster* offered an artist-driven, painterly approach to the art of poster, based on ambiguity and metaphor.²⁰ Furthermore, contrary to its intrinsic features, this utilitarian graphic design genre did not try to exert pressure or influence the general public but instead ventured

¹⁷ The full list of schools can be found at <https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/polska-szkola-plakatu>.

¹⁸ For example: private collections of Krzysztof Dydo in Cracow or Martin Scorsese in the USA.

¹⁹ Z. Schubert, *The Polish Poster*, Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza RSW, Warszawa, 1978, p. 14.

²⁰ The International Typographic style was in favour of simplicity, legibility and objectivity achieved by means of sans-serif typography, grids and asymmetrical lay-outs. The hallmark of the style is also photography used in place of illustrations as an evidence of information clarity and trustworthiness. The whole design is meant to convey the ideas of objectivity and functionality.

to evaluate modern ideas, phenomena and artistic events. The poster was originally conceived to exist in the public space but turned out to fit the private space equally well. Thus it became a medium which is not only glimpsed while passing by in the streets but is also gazed upon and contemplated in private spaces.²¹ Wherever posters are displayed they are undoubtedly created to engage and amuse and this may be the most important legacy of the *Polish School of Poster*.

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²¹ Such a duality of external and internal functioning of poster might conform to Hannah Arendt's distinction between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. However, such an argument is difficult to prove as Hannah Arendt's philosophical thinking did not concern visual arts.