Fan-Made Film Posters
Remixing the Experience of Cinema

The multiple crises of cinema
From the second half of the twentieth century, but most significantly over the last three decades, cinema has changed dramatically. The films have undergone significant changes, many of which have been linked to the advent of digital technologies, in the form of production practices (digital filmmaking) or CGI imagery (visual effects).

However significant and intense these changes have been, they are to be understood in conjunction with other transformation processes, for as Christian Keathley notes: "The way in which both cinephiles and ordinary viewers consume films have been transformed more radically, and more consciously, than have the movies themselves."

Thus the crisis lies not only in the decay of celluloid—the material reality of film. But it can also be observed in both, mutated consumption practices (e.g., video-on-demand) and structural mutations of the production of films (e.g., crowd-funding).

Theory Mutations
From the perspective of film studies, the collapse or disjunction of its object of study has prompted debates of a challenged ontology of cinema. What can be said to be specific about cinema? What objects can and/or should be studied by film studies?

Theory too is mutating in order to address these issues, new tensions are being drawn out that suggest possible centripetal forces of coherence. It is thus not surprising to see a shift in focus from the filmic artifact to the cinematic experience, a shift echoed, symptomatically, in the adjacent field of aesthetics.

The overall claim being that in spite of the ontological fracture, there still is a central, specific discursive thread in the way we experience films, in our relationship to cinema.

The “distribumer”
Under the aforementioned considerations there are film posters. Somewhat ignored by film theory (they are not films) but undoubtedly part of cinema experience, film posters have endured the digital onslaught. Not only have they remained an essential item of traditional promotion, posters have also undergone metamorphoses in their own right, an example of which is the fan-made film poster or to explicitly inscribe it within this event: the remixed poster.

I have tracked down these posters from two overlapping online communities: graphic designers and cinephiles. In most cases what I found surprising was the active engagement of cinephiles and designers as well as their conscious intellectual investment into the posters, much in the fashion of film bloggers vis-à-vis traditional film critics or scholars, but through a sort of visual rather than verbal contact surface.

Here I want to summon Alvin Toffler’s concept of “prosumer” (producer-consumer) in order to posit a category for theorizing the practice of fan-made posters through its practitioners: the “distribumer” or distributor-consumer. Such category in turn suggests a framework that brings closer together and eventually comprises two sub-areas of Film Studies: film industries and film audiences.

Jamais Vu and the film-historical imaginary
On another level, the proliferation of alternative film posters has been substantially enabled by the internet; as I have mentioned, most of these images originate and circulate in niche online-communities before finding their way out into seemingly analogous off-line circles such as cine-clubs or collectors societies.

The pervasive availability of alternative, unofficial imagery about films therefore suggests an invocation of what Marijke de Valck calls "the film-historical imaginary". In the form of the “multiplicity of pasts” but also and most perplexingly in the concept of jamais vu: experiencing something as if it was for the first time despite having actually experienced it before. Here I propose a second category for theoretically undertaking these posters: the aesthetics of recombination. Different from pastiche insofar as a different modality of aesthetic response is encouraged; the “new-old” instead of the hodgepodge.

These move implies a framework that yokes what Zimmerman and Hudson call “radical historicism” with aesthetics and psychology.