Film Review

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Freedom on the Fence

Produced by Andrea Marks
Directed by Glenn Holsten and Andrea Marks
Music by Michael Coolen

40 min.
Order the DVD from www.freedomonthefence.com or www.collectiveeye.org

Films on graphic design are few and far between. In
recent years, the most notable has been Helvetica, directed
by Gary Hustwit, which gained a successful theatrical
release as well as broad aftermarket distribution. What
made that film engaging were the interviews with
designers who spoke about their ambivalent relationship
to the typeface that was intended to replace almost all
others as the ultimate tool of clarity in the modern world.

More recently, a feature-length documentary on Milton
Glaser has been making the rounds. With its emphasis
on Glaser’s latest work, the film successfully conveys his
continued vigor and love of design, both signs of encour-
agement to those who may have had doubts about his
continued influence on the current design scene.

Freedom on the Fence, produced by Andrea Marks,
a professor of graphic design at Oregon State University
in Portland, and directed by her and documentary
filmmaker Glenn Holsten, is a different kind of film.
Its subject matter is Polish posters and, unlike either
either of the two previously mentioned documentaries, it is
as much about the context for designing as it is about
design itself. The film begins with the situation after
World War II in Poland when Warsaw and other parts
of the country that had been destroyed needed to be
rebuilt. The principal figure in the initial part of the film
is Henryk Tomaszewski, the first important designer in
Poland’s postwar poster renaissance. The directors were
able to film an important interview with Tomaszewski,
who described how he was invited to create posters to
advertise a group of American films that were being
imported to Poland just after the war. He said he would
undertake the commission only if he could make the
posters different from those done for the American
releases of the films. With license to do that, he contacted
a group of artist friends who proceeded to create a genre
of visually powerful artistic posters that relied heavily
on personal drawing and lettering. The artists rejected
technological supports, eschewing photography as well
as type for the most part. They preferred instead highly
individualistic drawing styles, frequently influenced by
Surrealism, and equally individualistic hand letters.

Following the initial interview with
Tomaszewski, the film proceeds through a series of
themes, each announced with a separate title. These
cover not only the artistry of the genre but also relations
with the censors—who were omnipresent since Poland
was a Communist country, the poster’s contribution to
the Solidarity movement, and finally competition with
unbridled capitalist advertising once the Communist
economic system in Poland collapsed after the Soviet
Union disintegrated in 1989.

The directors tell a compelling story. As it is
narrated through interviews with other Polish designers
besides Tomaszewski, along with critics, curators, and
poster collectors, the fate of the Polish poster is inextri-
cably and paradoxically bound up with the Communist
system’s constraints on public speech. This motivated
the designers to find ways of getting around the censors
by inventing brilliant metaphors that conveyed political
messages indirectly. Once Communism collapsed, the
state-funded commissions from film producers, distrib-
utors, and theaters dried up and the designers were left
to compete with the advertising agencies that flocked to
Warsaw to service their new national and international
clients. The directors show scenes of gargantuan visual
ads for new commodities that exceed, by many times, the
more intimate viewing scale of the posters. One of the
most poignant scenes in the film is an interview with one
of the older designers, Wiktor Gorka, who says bitterly
that the new advertising and its effect on Polish society
is worse than the earlier Socialist Realism.

As the narrative unfolds, the directors show
many poster images, which move across the screen as if
they were characters in the story. These are supple-
mented by rare documentary footage of poster classes
at the Warsaw Academy of Art, exhibitions at the
Poster Museum in Wilanów, and workers putting up
posters on the streets of Warsaw. The visuals are accom-
panied by Michael Coolen’s edgy musical score, which
highlights the dramatic context in which the posters
were produced. Though some of those interviewed
speak in English, others do not and the translations of
their Polish comments are adeptly handled with subtitles
that become part of the film’s graphic identity rather
than words simply laid over photographic images. My
one quibble with the narrative is that it presents the
destruction of World War II as the impetus for the poster
movement, whereas the story really begins at the turn
of the 19th century with the posters of the Young Poland
movement and then the emergence of modernist posters
by Tadeusz Gronowski and other Polish designers in the
1920s.

The film provides no answers as to the future
of the Polish poster. One can only imagine that Polish
designers will continue to re-invent themselves and
find new ways to make strong visual statements, even
without having to contend with censors. Since the
world is not perfect, there is plenty of room for critical
discourse and the postwar tradition of Polish posters
offers a trenchant example of how that might occur.