

Matt Taylor is an illustrator in the UK. When he was in college, he had a part-time job at a movie theater – which he loved – because they used to get a lot of posters – more than they needed. So sometimes the staff would...well.

MATT: Not steal it exactly but just to put it to one side for a minute and see if anyone notices. And then maybe like maybe like a leaf through the side door of the building instead of the front door. So you know if that poster is still there no one has claimed it then you know kind of within my rights to take it home.

My college dorm room was also full of posters, usually ones I got from the discard bin at my local Blockbuster.

MATT: We did get trouble at one point because they sent us the one sheet for Charlie's Angels was printed on foil and they sent in three and all three vanished because it was a cool poster that had them all kind of in silhouette like hot pink foil. And I was like yeah I wore that from my bedroom that looks amazing. So when they came to stop promotion and they found that there were no posters for Charlie's Angels we all read the riot act so they had to kind of stop it a little bit. You know we stopped it for a week or so and then we carried on in the posters.

Now for most of movie history, the posters were drawn by hand. There was a lot of care put into those designs and a lot of them became iconic. But I remember in the mid '90s noticing that movie posters weren't as artful as they used to be. I kept seeing giant images of a movie stars' heads with just the title and the release date. I was working at Warner Brothers at the time, and I remember there was a lot of talk about how stars were more powerful than ever. It was worth paying them unprecedented amount of money because the audience didn't care what the movie was about. If Tom Cruise or Will Smith was in it, they'll show up. The posters reflected that cynicism.

This is also when Photoshop came around – and I saw the same clichés over and over. If it wasn't a giant head, it was a montage inside a giant head, or a hero standing against a landscape. I remember even in 2012 with the first Avengers poster, which was a collage of the actors awkwardly cut and pasted from different publicity shots, I was thinking – is that really the best poster you could've put out there?

Rob Jones was wondering the same thing. His company Mondo is part of the Alamo Drafthouse theater chain based in Austin. Back in 2004, he was

working on silkscreened posters for rock concerts, and he wondered what if we hired these artists to create alternative movie posters that were much cooler and more ambitious than the original posters?

The posters the artists came up with had a more illustrated even abstract feel to them. Sometimes it takes a second to realize what movie they're advertising until you see the title, which is usually the same as the original poster – but that's when you're like, oh! That's a poster for *that* movie! Cool!

ROB: We were cowboy about it – eh, let's do whatever we want! And then after a while we realized oh shoot, we're getting a lot of attention we need to make sure we're legit about this as scene grew larger and larger.

Rob Jones and his company, Monodo, could've been shut down with cease and desist letters. So they preemptively went to the studios and said, look at what these artists are doing. Consider these proofs of concept. People love them. They want to buy them. Do you want to get in on this thing? To their credit, the studios said, sure.

That's when alternative movie posters became a new kind of art and business. Other companies and galleries have joined the fray like Bottleneck Gallery in Brooklyn, and Spoke Art gallery, which started in San Francisco. But Mondo is still the powerhouse in the field.

Eric Garza is one of the creative directors at Monod, and since he and Rob are responsible for assigning the majority of posters they sell, I wanted to know what's their decision making process like?

ERIC: It's a constant open communication between myself, Mitch Putnam, third creative direction and Rob, we're rapping constantly what do we need to do, what should we do? And if an artist finishes a poster, the immediate question is what do you put them on next?

Given that you have no shortage of ideas, I assume somebody has to say no at some point, how does that work?

ROB: Usually only happens if Mitch and I are fighting like cobra and mongoose in an oven, then we turn to Eric and say break the tie. Eric's like great! Thanks! I can't wait to feel like the kid of divorced parents. Let me make a choice! But that's one of the reasons why we work so well together because when Eric

weighs in we know it's from his gut, he's not worried about pissing one of us, we fight back and forth but we know we'll love each other at the end of the day.

I'm still stuck on the image of a cobra and a mongoose fighting in an oven. It would make a great illustration.

Speaking of which, when you look at all the posters on Mondo's site, it's clear that animation, sci-fi, and horror are the dominant genres. That's also a smart business choice. Fantasy genres already have a built-in audience that already likes to buy collectables.

Also, the artists like to work in those genres. Tracie Ching drew a really cool poster for Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban. It's a dark illustration where the characters are in half shadow, with deep reds and yellows. It almost looks like the poster for a Victorian theatrical show.

TRACIE: I think there's a lot more to dive into when it comes to use fantasy because there's this really creative perspective that you're already dealing with. You know when it comes to action adventure it's typically based in reality. But you know then you have like these amazing robots or these crazy aliens or some kind of like magic aspect that you have to tie in. Like there's already material to work with early you don't really have to try to make interesting it's already interesting on its own, and then you can build on that that amazing aesthetic that already exists.

What's so interesting to me about these posters is that they function very differently from the original movie poster. A movie poster is supposed to be a tease – it's forward looking, it's trying to get you buy a ticket. But alternate movie posters look backwards on movies you've already seen and presumably love.

For instance, take E.T. One of the first posters in 1982 was of a little boy's finger touching a big glowing alien finger. I remember as a kid gazing at that poster in the lobby because it left so much to my imagination.

Today, one of my favorite alternative posters for E.T is by the French artist Laurent Durieux (dur-ee-YOU). Remember the scene when Elliot's mother opens the closet door and sees E.T. hiding among the stuffed animals? The poster is her point of view and it beautifully illustrates the way E.T. is trying to look vacant among these stuffed animals, but he's still vibrant and alive.

The only that's the same as the original poster is the logo and the credits underneath. I don't know what I would've thought of that poster in 1982, but I love it now because it speaks to my childhood nostalgia for 1982.

And by the way, I'm going to have a slide show of these posters on my site.

Matthew Chojnacki (chi-NA-key) wrote a two-volume book about the alternate movie poster scene. He thinks these posters can be more accurate than the original ad campaigns. Like there was a poster for Bambi by the artist Rowan Stocks-Moore where the stag was staring at you with his antler in silhouette against a night sky while Bambi hovers on the landscape.

MATTHEW: It was a dark looking movie poster and if you think about it Bambi's mom died you know it wasn't like you know the laugh fests for kids. And a lot of those tales you know have real dark beginnings. So I like these movie posters that kind of sell it for how it really was.

How do the studios feel about the artists taking that much artistic license? It depends on the studio. Some studios give them free reign -- others, not so much. Tracie Ching says:

TRACIE: Universal in particular when it comes to the Universal Monsters it's ridiculous. Even if the hoops you have to jump through to Frankenstein that they you know werewolf. If it's a direct representation of like from the film it gets real sticky.

The sticking point is often the likeness of the characters. And that gets complicated if they need to approval from an actor, or the estate of an actor. Sometimes artists are working on a time crunch and they can't wait for permission -- which has lead to some creative solutions.

TIM: I got to do a poster for The Man Who Fell to Earth.

Tim Doyle was one of the founders of Mondo. He's now an independent illustrator.

TIM: What's funny though is that they told me we could draw David Bowie but his estate was really tough. So either I had to get it perfectly or just not do it all. So I

found a way to do a man who felt the earth poster without drawing David Bowie's face and it did pretty well. So that was fun work

Can you describe what you did?

TIM: Yeah I just I drew him as the alien figure but you know his face is in shadow as he's literally falling to Earth. And the poster itself is it can hang either way like he's either falling to his damnation or you know rising to his salvation, and that the titles are inverted where you can hang in either direction.

These posters look cool online, but a computer screen can't capture how vibrant and electric the colors are in real life. These are silkscreen posters. Even illustrators like Matt Taylor can only guess what the final product will look like until it shows up at his house. Like he recently did this super psychedelic poster for Thor Ragnarock.

MATT: Like I open the box and I literally just had to kind of stop and look at it and not just from a like a point of view of me looking at my own artwork and thinking this is good because like I look at this poster now and I can see mistakes that I made on it, but just like the vibrancy of the printing is unreal, which I think partly because that one was printed on yellow paper stock. And so the vibrancy of that yellow kind of really pushes through it makes the whole thing feel a brighter.

Sara Deck is an illustrator in Ontario, and she did a really cool poster for Night of the Living Dead where the actress Judith O'Dea is flat up against a door while zombies lurk in the foreground. And Sara did three variations of the poster in sepia tone, black and white and almost black with glowing green handprints that are dripping.

As much as Sara loves seeing what the silkscreen posters look like in real life, she really enjoys hearing about the experience of the people who buy her posters.

SARA: It's a ritual for the fans. They unroll it a lot and have their own weights. I see it online, they've got their own special little poster weights to hold it because of put the paper needs to relax before you frame it. Then they go and they take it. They make the pilgrimage and get it framed and then they hanging on their wall and everybody's so excited and happy like -- see I mean like it's a whole thing that's part of it that's part of the screen print that you're missing.

The more I look at these posters, the more I wish they had been the original ad campaigns. But I know that could never happen. Even when the artists

get permission to do the likeness of movie stars, they're rendered so artistically that it can take a second to recognize their faces. But the face of a movie star on real poster has to be read in a microsecond.

Although Sara says, alternate movie posters are still marketing something to consumers. They're advertising your memories.

SARA: It's a reminder like people have reminders all the time of the things in their lives that they just really they cherish. And for some people that are pop culture fans it is the stories in the movies or where they were when they saw the movie were part of their lives as represents. It's almost like a beautiful image in a photo album on your wall. It's personal. It's so personal and I think that that's why it's so appealing.

It's also a declaration of taste to let people know this is the kind of culture I'm into. And Tim Doyle says these posters are great for people who the types of movies that don't have a lot of memorabilia.

TIM: You know I mean we live in a world where John Carpenter's The Thing, which was a bomb at the box office, is you know a cult hit still today. And so the fact that there's any merchandise for it at all is kind of a novelty. Back when you know I was doing the Blade Runner prints, there was nothing you could buy for Blade Runner.

I think I just realized something. I own one of your prints of Blade Runner. Which is really just the one that it's got like an Atari on the corner and it's got its Deckard who's he's eating noodles in the rain?

TIM: Yes from behind. Yeah, yeah, that's me.

Holy shit!

TIM: (Laughs)

Oh my God. Because I was in Austin and I saw that and I didn't know what it was. I didn't know it was an alternative movie or anything but I was like oh my god this is gorgeous. And so as you're talking I'm looking at it and I look at the signature and I'm like, is that Tim Doyle?

TIM: That's-a-me!

It's framed in my office -- a dark blue and neon pink illustration of a rainy dystopian cityscape from a movie I fell in love with when I discovered a VHS copy of Blade Runner in a strip-mall a bike-ride away from my childhood home.

But the business of alternative movie posters has changed in the last several years. There's a lot of money at stake now in these works of art, and money changes things – for better or worse. We're going upmarket, just after the break.

➤ **BREAK**

Remember when Matt Taylor talked about his psychedelic Thor Ragnarock poster? Well, if you ordered that poster from Mondo's website in January 2018, you would've paid \$60 for it. Now it's selling on eBay for \$215.

MATT: Every day I'll get a couple of e-mails from people saying oh you know why can I buy this, you know can I buy your Thor poster, and it's the same reply which is "unfortunately not, it's a limited edition, it came out, it's sold out." If you want it, you can but it on eBay. Then it becomes a question of how much do you want it?

You see, the business model that Mondo pioneered is limited runs for movie posters. Eric Garza and Rob Jones say they do that for two reasons. First, they're a small operation.

ERIC: At this point we're releasing so many posters in a year, it doesn't make sense we can't keep all these screens or films ready or on standby, we'd feel an entire warehouse having that many screens ready for constant production so it's a way to keep the wheels rolling that way something is not evergreen.

ROB: Yeah if you went hard on every freaking release it would seem kind of gross, it would seem more like a money grab, which is not that great which is not that great. We do occasionally try to do timed editions because a poster is so freakin' out of sight, that we're like oh man, this is going to piss too many people off if we don't make this more widely available.

But this is also a choice. Rob doesn't love the fact that we live in an age when everything is available all the time. For him, limited editions are a throwback to an era when things had a sense of value beyond what you paid for them.

ROB: It's like back in the day I used to hunt so hard for records, I spent a summer in London working at a pizza shop, and every weekend I went to every record shop in London that sold singles of my favorite band, it was so great when I would find the one thing I was trying to look for at other joints to discover, I felt like Indiana Jones almost and now I can get it at a click and I don't bother to listen.

I get that. I also remember going being a teenager hunting down rare comic books, bootleg cassettes of concerts and other buried treasures.

But some younger fans are upset about limited editions because they grew up in a world where everything they want is just a click away. And it's not just a question of convenience. It's considered a cool thing to do -- not being exclusionary. But Rob says, well kids:

ROB: Welcome to the world! I miss out on a lot of stuff too, oh my God! They sold out of the Tiki mugs I was trying to get them, I had three people trying to get them! We experience the same kind of thing but not with Mondo but other companies and I don't know what you get it, it makes it that much sweeter.

Have you been surprised by how much some of these posters go for re-sales on eBay?

ROB: Uh, yes. I've been floored before.

Matthew Chojnacki, who wrote two books about alternative movie posters, is not surprised by how much these posters are going for on eBay. And he says this is a problem with all collectables. Like when he goes to ComicCon, Matthew says he sees people walking out with huge bags of merchandise they're clearly not buying for themselves. They're flippers who want to clean the tables so they mark them up online.

And so when Mondo announces they have new posters for sale, the flippers have bots ready to snap up those posters in less than a minute.

MATT C: You know if you can get in there in 30 seconds and you have the luxury of sitting at your computer at work as a Twitter announcement comes in and then you have 30 seconds. You know it gets a little bit tiring and it does wear out fans that legitimately want that new Star Trek poster. The idea that they roll their eyes and they have to go to eBay to spend 400 dollars when the poster costs 30 -- that stinks especially when especially when it's the day of. It's one thing if you're buying it two years later and the value went up. That's fine. But if it's the day of the idea that you want it and then five minutes later it's going for ten times the value on eBay that that's just wrong, I think.

It can be a bummer for the artists too. On one hand, the fleeting nature of these posters makes them really desirable. But when Tracie Ching's work is resold on eBay, she doesn't see any of that money.

TRACIE: And so it's something I've struggled with because I really hate the fact that somebody is literally just doing it to make a profit. I'm not sure what to do with it. I really wish for the really limited stuff I was able to offer, I was able to offer it to people who were not going out just throw it on eBay.

Another downside to the success of alternate movie posters – there are a lot more of them, which was not the case when Tim Doyle started in 2004.

TIM: You know it was really easy to get people's attention back then you know like I had my artwork pop up on the front page of iO9 go viral on Reddit. And you know Slashfilm was covering it and Ain't It Cool News back when that was relevant. Now it's such a crowded market getting anybody to notice you is tough.

And for collectors, there's only so much room on their walls.

TIM: Eventually some of these dudes are going to get married, and their wife's going to be like what you doing? We have bills. All of course furniture can't be flat files.

Tim is actually worried the whole market is a bubble.

TIM: I realized a few years ago if I'm going to make a living and make a go at it as a silver screen print artist I can't live or die by these investment collectors. And so I started opening up my runs to you know will have a limited edition first but then we'll print it again in an open edition to where anybody can buy it. And you know I've got a lot of pushback from that initially. People have been telling me my career is over for 10 years now.

Why was that so controversial with people like getting mad at you and saying your career is over?

TIM: Well because they couldn't see these things these art prints as anything other than investment vehicles.

Matthew Chojnacki also thinks it's a bubble. But he says:

MATTHEW: I think it's a moving bubble if that makes sense.

No but it's a good image though.

MATTHEW: Yeah. Think of it like a moving bubble. And I think the original fans of the alternative movie poster movement have probably moved on to collecting

other stuff and ephemera that's out there. So these 5000 people that are fervent collectors kind of disappear, but then there's others to replace them.

I see what he's getting at. The Alien franchise is one of the popular sources of material for alternative movie posters. The first two films came out before a lot of these buyers were born. So it stands to reason that new generations of fans will keep discovering the Alien franchise, and they'll want posters of their own. Also nostalgia is another moving bubble. Today's teenagers will eventually become nostalgic for current hit films, and they'll want original art to remind them of those moments in their lives.

And because alternative posters are making money, the studios are taking notice and official movie posters are starting to get more creative again.

Also, their business model has changed. Not many stars can open a movie just based on their name anymore. The real money is in sci-fi fantasy franchises with licensed characters. How do you get people excited about your newly rebooted character? You need a good illustrator to figure that one out.

And the studios need multiple ad campaigns across social media from the poster tease to the BluRay edition, so they're hiring artists from the alternative movie poster scene. And Disney and Marvel have commissioned shows at Mondo's gallery in Austin.

I actually wondered if the studios are ruining this movement by co-opting it. But Tracie Ching says – nah!

TRACIE: I don't think it has it's not like you know when your parents join Facebook. It ruins Facebook right. It's not like that I think if anything it's encouraging because you're getting this recognition from the institution that you got started in this for you know they're the ones producing movies you love movies. Now the record is recognizing something you're doing in relation to what they've been doing. So I think if anything it's encouraging and of course it's wonderful you get a check from a major studio, right? And again as long as they like are respectful, right? It's totally cool to have this bleeding of like the commercial institutional side of things merging with you know, the other, the indie the artists in the streets that sort of thing. (laughs)

The movie poster is a strange thing. It's a work of commercial art about another work of commercial art. And since theater owners are worried about people showing up at the theater and not staying home to watch everything on their devices – I say, why not turn your theater marquee into an art gallery, full of beautifully designed silkscreened posters? And to get the full effect, you have to see them in person.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Matt Taylor, Matthew Chojnacki, Sara Deck, Tracie Ching, Eric Garza and Rob Jones of Mondo.

In case you were wondering, the guys at Mondo are not big collectors of alternative movie posters, but Rob's home is full of collectables. He has a Doctor Who pinball machine, a replica of a rocking chair from A Clockwork Orange, although his current obsession hunting down the first concert poster at the Houston Astrodome with Judy Garland and the Supremes.

ROB: Yeah that happened! Supremes played Houston with Judy Garland opening or Judy Garland headlining! And she did not do a good show, but I want the poster so bad! But I can't find it.

Although Eric Garza says something else will catch your attention when you first get to Rob's place.

ERIC: Before you walk in his house there's a welcome mat that says "Welcome Motherfuckers." And if you know Rob he doesn't call you by your name, he calls you motherfucker, so it really is like walking into his head.

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