Picturing Cinema: How Movie Posters Shape Cinema Cultures (London, 12–13 May 27)

London, King's College, May 12–13, 2027
Deadline: Dec 1, 2026

Iain Robert Smith

Before social media campaigns, before television commercials, and even before trailers, movie posters were used to advertise films and attract audiences to cinemas. Taking advantage of advances in lithography, design, and printing that began in the late nineteenth century, posters quickly became one of the primary and most visible forms of film advertising. Through colour, typography, and graphic art, posters promoted film genres, stars, plots, special effects, production companies, and many other aspects of movies. In effect, the poster distilled a film's appeal – or, in some cases, its assumed appeal – into the text and images that could be contained on a single sheet of paper.

As physical objects, movie posters have their own material histories, shaped by the paper on which they are printed, the techniques through which they are produced, and the spaces in which they are displayed, collected, and preserved. In some cases, movie posters are one of the few remaining remnants of films that no longer survive. Yet the movie poster has not disappeared with the emergence of digital forms of film promotion. In an era of streaming platforms, online distribution, and social media, posters continue to play a significant role in the marketing and circulation of films, even as their modes of production and dissemination have been transformed.

Despite their significant role within cinema history, movie posters remain a curiously understudied topic within film and media studies scholarship. While numerous coffee-table books have documented and reproduced collections of movie posters, the academic study of the movie poster remains surprisingly limited. This relative neglect may in part reflect the poster's longstanding association with advertising and commercial culture, alongside a tendency to regard its promotional function as self-evident rather than as something requiring sustained critical analysis.

This two-day in-person conference at King's College London invites scholars to consider what methods we can use to research and study the movie poster. This might include consideration of where and for whom a poster was produced; who designed, commissioned, and distributed it; the industrial, cultural, and political contexts in which it was created; where, when, and how it was displayed; its relationship to the film and its wider promotional campaign; its reception and circulation; and its subsequent afterlife as a collectible, archival object, and cultural artefact. We are particularly interested in papers that consider the role of public and private movie poster collections in shaping our understanding of posters, including questions of collecting, cataloguing, preservation, fandom, access, and provenance.

We aim to bring scholars working across film studies, visual culture, art history, and related fields into dialogue with each other.

Topics may include, but are not limited to:

- The history and development of the movie poster
- The work of individual poster artists and designers, such as Saul Bass, Hans Hillmann, Boris Grinsson, Tom Chantrell, Barbara (Basha) Baranowska, Tongdee Panumas, and Akiko Stehrenberger, as well as lesser-known and anonymous practitioners
- The relationship between individual authorship and the collaborative and industrial processes through which posters are designed and produced
- The movie poster as an art object, cultural artefact, and/or commodity
- Posters in relation to histories of film promotion, cinema-going, and exhibition cultures
- Materiality, production, and printing technologies
- How posters construct stars, filmmakers, genres, and other aspects of film culture
- Posters and the representation of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality
- National and regional traditions of poster design
- Transnational circulation and cultural translation of film posters
- Poster collecting, fandom, and the afterlife of posters
- Posters in the digital era, including digital design, online circulation, and alternative movie posters
- Archives, museums, private collections, preservation, and provenance

Please submit an abstract of 300-500 words including 5 references to scholarship or archival material your paper will engage with, along with a short biographical note (up to 100 words) through our Google Form: https://forms.gle/RcPktHCoSoLQ133E8.

If you have any questions, please contact us via email at: picturingcinema@gmail.com

Deadline for submissions: Tuesday 1st December.

Successful applicants should expect to be notified by Friday 18th December.

Conference Organisers: Iain Robert Smith (King's College London) and Martin L. Johnson (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill).

Keynote Talk: Sir Christopher Frayling (Royal College of Art) with Tony Nourmand (Reel Art Press).

Reference:

CFP: Picturing Cinema: How Movie Posters Shape Cinema Cultures (London, 12-13 May 27). In: ArtHist.net, Oct 21, 2026 (accessed Nov 24, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/54695>.