

Plagiarism issues in post-1998 Indonesian film posters

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ABSTRACT

There are online articles, with visual materials, stating that some post-1998 Indonesian film posters were accused as plagiarism by common people. However, academically speaking, it needs deeper skills and knowledge to prove acts of plagiarism. This paper will discuss the issues around Indonesian film posters and plagiarism, including the possibility of citing in graphic design. The research will treat film posters not only as marketing tools to promote the movies, as many people consider, but also as graphic design materials. Some terms such as appropriation, homage, and pastiche will be discussed to analyze the phenomenon.

KEYWORDS

Film posters, plagiarism, appropriation, homage, pastiche, reuse, recycle.

INTRODUCTION

The circulation of an email entitled “Indonesian film posters versus Foreign film posters” has created quite a stir recently in internet discussion forums and mailing lists. A juxtaposition of several film posters produced in Indonesia and in Hollywood (and other places such as Korea, Hong Kong, and India)

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has revealed stunning similarities, prompting readers to accuse Indonesian film-poster designers of plagiarism, because such Indonesian film posters were published after the foreign ones were. Illustrations 1-4 are some examples of the controversial posters.



Illustration 1. *Heirloom* (Taiwan, Leste Chen 2005) and *Tali pocong perawan* (Strap of the virgin pocong, Arie Aziz 2008).



Illustration 2. *Best friend?* (Fajar BGT 2008) and *Employee of the month* (Greg Coolidge 2006).

To what extent can we consider the posters (Illustrations 1-4) as plagiarism and how can plagiarism be proven in each of the sets of posters as presented? Two things are noticeable in the posters. First, there is repeated use of very similar design elements such as line, shape, value, colour, texture, and format and design principles such as balance, emphasis, rhythm, and unity in each of the sets of posters. Secondly, there is no clear indication whether the designers who worked on the posters had been inspired or had actually imitated the original ones (Landa 2006).



Illustration 3. *Pintu terlarang* (The forbidden door, Joko Anwar 2009) and *Killing me softly* (Chen Kaige 2002).



Illustration 4. *Pulau hantu* (Ghost island, Jose Poernomo 2007) and *Lost* (TV series, 2004).

This paper will discuss the phenomenon. Can we consider all of the film posters mentioned on the email as plagiarism? Or is there any different degree of so-called plagiarism in the field of art and design? To what extent could the Indonesian posters in question be considered plagiarism? The writers will also discuss about the possibility of avoiding plagiarism in a visual artwork like a film poster, including the possibility in the field of visual art as it is in written text.

The study is conducted within the framework of both film studies and graphic design. This is something new in both scholarly and popular research, since film posters are rarely considered as important in the Indonesian film industry and in the academia. However,

historians and social scientists know that the study of films and their posters can provide significant insight into how our lifestyles and values have changed over time. The constant flux of fashion, prejudices, propaganda, and social customs from distinctive and changing eras can all be found in film posters. (Nourmand and Marsh 1997: 4).

Until recently, however, there has not been any research on the issue of originality in film posters in the Indonesian context as Koszarski highlights: “for many years, movie poster were dismissed by film scholars as the most commercialized corner of the motion picture industry, of little interest to anyone studying the art of film” (Koszarski 1998: 241). For many people, unfortunately, Indonesian film posters are mere marketing tools to promote a movie and nothing more. In this paper, we consider film posters as part of graphic design, so that we will discuss some terms such as reuse and recycle techniques as well as appropriation and homage (including pastiche) to be applied in the research. The terms mentioned above are commonly used by graphic design artists. Except appropriation, which undergoes controversial discussion among artists, the other terms are permitted and not considered plagiarism. The paper will discuss whether the film posters above exemplify the terms mentioned. Before we answer the research questions above, we will discuss the reasons why film posters came into existence and look into their historical development

THE PURPOSE OF FILM POSTERS

The main use of a poster is to communicate a message. In order to do that, a poster must grab the viewer’s attention amidst all the surrounding visual clutter. Usually, a poster is produced en masse and widely circulated, so it can be seen in numerous locations by the same viewer (Landa 2006). This creates the desire in moviegoers to see the film the poster promotes.

Originally designed to attract attention and create desire, film posters are also the principal means of telling people what is showing at the cinema (Nourmand and Marsh 1997). As such, it is imperative that a poster is well designed; otherwise, it most certainly will be ignored when mounted in the midst of other visual communication effects or placed in an environment offering interesting sights and sounds. With effective use of words and visual imagery, a good poster becomes an object to return to, repeatedly, for contemplation, enjoyment, or provocation (Landa 2006). Among graphic design applications, only the poster has been successful in capturing the attention of museum curators, art critics, social historians, and the public, including the community of fine artists. But, this statement does not apply in Indonesia.

Nowadays, the imagery of the film poster has come to be known as “key art”. The film poster is expected to unlock the heart of the film – in around 60 second or less – and generate enough interest for people to watch the movie it depicts (Nourmand and Marsh 1997). Film posters are displayed inside and outside movie theatres, and elsewhere on the streets or in shops nearby. The

same poster images would appear in a film exhibitor's press book and may also be used on websites, DVD-packaging, flyers, advertisements in newspapers and magazines, etcetera (Wilson 2011).

As a collectible item, a film poster has its own appeal for many different groups. For film buffs, it brings back nostalgic movie-going experiences (Nourmand and Marsh 1997). The effect of text and image and colour composition interests graphic designers. Historians and social scientists know that the study of films and their posters can provide significant insight into how our lifestyles and values have changed over time. The constant flux of fashion, prejudices, propaganda, and social customs from distinctive and changing eras can all be found in poster art.

In conclusion, a good film poster should fulfil its design and marketing purposes. As stated on a 1984 poster for *Die Neue Sammlung* by Studio Mendell and Oberer Graphic Design, Munich, "Design ist Kunst, die sich nützlich macht" (Design is art that makes itself useful).¹

THE CURRENT STATE OF INDONESIAN FILM POSTERS

In early 2000s, the Indonesian film industry revived after a long hiatus. Movies of good quality were screened in movie theatres across the country, up against foreign movies, mostly those from Hollywood. In all this, the film poster showed its power in promoting local films. In places in Indonesia where internet was scarce and people still relied on doing things manually, seeing the film poster in all its other forms (newspaper ads, billboard, and etcetera) was still key to attracting interest from moviegoers.

A film poster is designed not only to meet the expectations of the consumers, but to satisfy the film producer as well, since the right of the posters belong to the producers. The number of films produced and the demand for producing marketing materials have affected the graphic design industry, where many designers are now employed to create posters and other marketing materials, from stationery to websites.

As has been discussed in the first paragraph, an email entitled "Indonesian film poster versus Western film poster" has been in circulation on web forums and mailing lists because of the similarities of these Indonesian-produced posters to foreign film posters. The similarities were so stunning that even to the most naïve, it would seem that the sample foreign film posters had become templates simply glossed over with pictures of local actors and the Indonesian language. Many common people commented that plagiarism was exemplified in those samples.

Of course, in this global era, the look and the feel of those film posters are closer to Hollywood style as well as other popular film posters from Korea, Japan, and Thailand. It is predictable since Hollywood dominates and control world cinema industry,² not only in marketing and distribution, but also in

¹ [Http://www.die-neue-sammlung.de/z/muenchen/faq/m-o_de.htm](http://www.die-neue-sammlung.de/z/muenchen/faq/m-o_de.htm).

² About the global domination of Hollywood, please check *Hollywood's dominance of the movie industry: how did it arise and how has it been maintained?* (Silver 2007). Hikmat Darmawan

the techniques of narrative storytelling (Sasono et al. 2010). The main issue, however, is not Hollywood dominance, but rather the culture and political economy of Indonesian film industry. Before we discuss deeper about it, we will first elaborate the definition and technical terms of plagiarism.

DEFINITION OF PLAGIARISM

The use of the word “plagiarism” immediately conjures a negative meaning and puts a person accused of it in bad light. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1981: 870) describes ‘plagiarize’ as:

[...] to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own: use (a created production) without crediting the source [...] to commit literary theft: present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source [...].

Particularly, plagiarism in posters as a graphic design product means “the unauthorized use or close imitation of an existing artwork and the representation of it as one's own original work” (*Ethics in Graphic Design*).³ Unfortunately, there is nothing original in art works. As Kleon stated, “Every new idea is just a mash up or a remix of previous ideas” (Kleon 2011: 9), so what artists should do is “to steal like an artist”. Every artist is liable to the question, “Where do you get your ideas?”. The honest artist answers, “I steal them” (Kleon 2011: 5). Furthermore, Kleon wrote that “every artist is a collector. Not a hoarder, mind you, there is a difference: hoarders collect indiscriminately, the artist collects selectively. They only collect things that they really love” (Kleon 2011: 13).

So, how do artists “steal” ideas ethically? First of all, artists steal ideas ethically by reusing images appropriately. Mark Vallen (2007) stated, the reuse of images in art should be based from significance as objects of art or history, and not just because the artist likes “the images”. The artist should avoid relentless mining of images: the hasty examination and extraction of information from the collective past as performed by individuals who do not fully comprehend it.⁴

Secondly, artists steal ideas ethically by recycling art. Lincoln Cushing (2007) stated,

Aside from the legal issues of plagiarizing work (as would be the case with living artists or those with active legal estates), the broader ethical questions of appropriate methods such a particular source material are rarely discussed among artists [...] copying art is unethical and illegal regardless of whether or not the image is copyrighted.

called it Hollywoodism in a chapter titled “Kondisi global; Hollywoodisme dan kita” (Global condition; Hollywoodism and us) in *Menjegal film Indonesia; Pemetaan ekonomi politik industri film Indonesia* (Eric Sasono et al. 2011).

³ “Plagiarism and appropriation”, <http://www.ethicsingraphicdesign.org/legalities/plagiarism-and-appropriation/>, accessed on 12-5-2011.

⁴ See <http://www.art-for-a-change.com/Obey/index.htm>.

On the other hand, Cushing also writes that there are many situations in which using pre-existing art makes sense. Cushing (2007) offered some tips to cite artistic creations:

1. Admit that you have used pre-existing art in your current work. This happens when you trace, scan, web grab, or otherwise use someone else's distinctive or substantial design element into your own art.
2. Anticipate the exposure of the piece. It is always the right thing to give credit where credit is due.
3. Do your research. Where did the image come from? Determining this can often be quite difficult, and many artists (wrongly) assume that it is unknowable, but a little research can go a long way.
4. Ask for permission.
5. Give specific credit on the final piece. This is important for all items; including the ones that have drifted into that giant grab bag, we call the “public domain”. Say something about where it is from. This can be as simple as a credit line at the bottom in small type.

Many political posters recycle vibrant images from the past and make them current. Such practice is common, but unfortunately, credit is rarely given.

Cushing provides two posters (see Illustrations 5 and 6) that have citation:



Illustration 5. Poster of “Sacred Motherhood” and a credit text for original artist typed in small along the bottom of poster.

RED PEPPER POSTERS, San Francisco, California, 1976. Drawing by Luther D. Bradley, for the Women's Trade Union League of Illinois, 1907.



Illustration 6. Walter Crane's logo and publication date (1895) on bottom left, revision artist's name (Jos Sances) and date (2005) on bottom right.



PROVING PLAGIARISM: APPROPRIATION, HOMAGE, AND PASTICHE

In practice – without the proper knowledge and training – it is quite challenging to differentiate between plagiarism and “appropriation”, “homage”, and “pastiche”. Appropriation refers to the direct copying of an existing work of art. The aim is to create a fresh perspective and therefore a new meaning or set of meanings for a familiar image. Appropriation, however, raises questions of originality, authenticity, and authorship.⁵ Homage in art is all about publicly showing respect or tribute to an artist. In the world of graphic design, a graphic designer may show respect to a past master or to an admired artist by alluding to his or her work. In the digital age, it is easier now to duplicate or borrow from other works and this artistic practice may be used to pay homage to the original artist.

Pastiche can be considered a form of homage. The term “pastiche” denotes a technique that employs a generally light-hearted tongue-in-cheek imitation of another artist’s style. The result might feel a bit jovial, but it is usually respectful. In graphic arts, within the context of this research, pastiche would mean “a visual artwork that is based on another’s design or style. It also could refer to a work of art that mixes styles, materials, and etcetera”. Pastiche is very influential in popular culture, such as in the World of *Star Wars* by George Lucas – which is often considered to be a *pastiche* of traditional science

⁵ The practice can be traced back to the Cubist collages and constructions of Picasso and Georges Braque made from 1912 onwards, in which real objects such as newspapers were included to represent themselves. In the eighties Sherrie Levine reproduced other works of art, including paintings by Claude Monet and Kasimir Malevich.

fiction television serials (or radio shows) – or works by Quentin Tarantino, such as *Kill Bill* Volume 2⁶ or *Inglorious Basterds*⁷, which often pay tribute to pulp novels, blaxploitation and/or Chinese kung fu films, though some say his films are more of homage.

Imitating another's work can be judged from different perspectives in relation to appropriation, homage or pastiche. These terms will be used to help identify and measure the degree of plagiarism committed in the selected film posters presented in this paper.



Illustration 7. *Drive angry* (Patrick Lucier 2011) and *Dedemit Gunung Kidul* (The ghost of Mount Kidul, Yoyok Dumprink 2011).

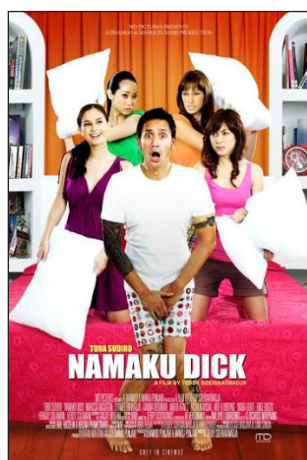


Illustration 8. *Namaku Dick* (My name is Dick, Teddy Soeriaatmadja 2008) and *Hot chick* (Tom Brady 2002).

⁶ See http://odeon.typepad.com/silverscreen/2004/04/art_as_pastiche.html. Accessed on 8-4-2012.

⁷ See <http://dearcinema.com/article/inglorious-basterds-by-quentin-tarantino/4307>. Accessed on 8-4-2012.

As can be seen, the posters are very similar to foreign film posters in terms of design elements. For example, we can see (Illustration 7) that the poster of the local film *Dedemit Gunung Kidul* has many similarities to *Drive angry*. A closer look at it reveals a left steering wheel, considering that Indonesia applies right hand driving. Also in Illustration 8, the film poster *Namaku Dick* is comparable with *Hot chick* in terms of the position and numbers of the figures and other images such as the closet, how the main character holds his crotch, the ambient colour of the curtain. In addition, “chick” rhymes with “dick”. These stunning similarities can also be seen in the film posters *Rasa* and *Closer* (Illustration 9), as well as in Illustration 1 and 2. So far, there is no single indication of any use appropriation or homage techniques.



Illustration 9. *Rasa* (Feel, Charles Ghozali 2009) and *Closer* (Mike Nichols 2004).

Illustrations 10 and 11, and also Illustration 3 can be considered exemplifying homage in art. They have iconic elements that are commonly used by artists. The posters that have iconic elements, however, are set apart from one another by their composition. Iconic element in artworks that depict the horror film genre may be an image of a woman standing in front of a mirror. This element is used in the poster of *Setan budeg* and in other film posters from overseas as found in this study (Illustration 10). However, it can be seen in the different posters that their composition is different from one another, including the juxtaposition of other elements like the use of shadows and a comb. In horror film posters, for example, the “eyes” as an iconic element, appear in many horror film posters as can be seen in Illustration 11.



Illustration 10. *Setan budeg* (Deaf ghost, Findo Purnowo 2009), *The wig/Gabal* (Korea, Won Shin-yeon 2005), and *Unborn* (David Goyer 2009).



Illustration 11. *Kala* (Deadtime, Joko Anwar 2007), *The skeleton key* (Iain Softley 2005), *The eye* (Oxyde and Danny Pang 2002), and *The return* (Asif Kapadia 2006).

Another example of an iconic element used to depict conflict or confrontation is the face-to-face images of conflicting characters as can be seen in the film posters of *Bride wars*, *Pocong vs. Kuntilanak*,⁸ and *Fredy vs. Jason* (Illustration 12). The posters, however, do not have the same look and feel.



Illustration 12. *Bride wars* (Gary Winick 2009), *Pocong vs. Kuntilanak* (David Poernomo 2008), and *Fredy vs. Jason* (Ronny Yu 2003).



Illustration 13. *Paku kuntilanak* (Kuntilanak’s nail, Findo Purnowo 2009) and *True blood* (TV Series, 2009).

Pastiche is used to mix up various design elements from pre-existing posters. The film posters *Paku kuntilanak* and *True blood* (Illustration 13) are similar yet different in that *Paku kuntilanak* uses other elements from other

⁸ *Pocong* is a local ghost, a corpse wrapped in a shroud. When a Muslim person dies, he/she is wrapped tightly in his/her death shroud and placed into his/her grave without a coffin. *Kuntilanak* (or *pontianak* in Malaysian term) is a local female vampiric ghost, or the spirits of woman who died while pregnant. More detail, please check <http://www.squidoo.com/malaysian-ghosts-ghouls-goblins>.

posters such as the image of the tongue and blood. Another set of examples is Illustration 14, *Love actually*, *Babel*, *Love*, and *Cinta*. The posters seem to have used similar elements but their composition is different from one another.



Illustration 14. *Love* (Kabir Bathia 2008), *Love actually* (Richard Curtis 2003), *Cinta* (Love, Malaysia, Kabir Bathia 2006), and *Babel* (Gonzales Innaritu 2006).

FILM POSTERS DESIGNERS: ARTISAN VERSUS ARTIST

The big question still remains: Why are there many cases of film poster plagiarism in Indonesian cinema industry? As mentioned earlier, the culture and political economy of Indonesian cinema industry affect the phenomenon. First, the film producers think that film posters are only the tool of marketing. Thus, they treat a poster designer as an artisan, not as an artist who has creative freedom. From this framework, we can see that the film producers are clients for the poster designers. They do not realize that film posters can be beyond advertising, such as art form as discussed earlier.

In Western countries, film posters are considered art forms which can be exhibited in museums or art galleries with curatorial processes,⁹ or become collectible items¹⁰ highly valued and sold in prestigious auction such as Sotheby's and Christie's.¹¹ In themselves, the posters have their own market and fans.¹² There are even some online stores, such as allmoviereplicas.com, offering the posters with statements below:

Collectible and decorative, these authentic tributes to some of the biggest box office smashes ever are the perfect addition to your movie memorabilia collection, or to dress up your apartment, home theatre, game room or dorm.¹³

One success story of a film poster collector was Tony Nourmand, world authority on vintage film posters. Nourmand is a collector turned dealer, and co-owner of the Reel Poster Gallery in Notting Hill, which now has just 30 rare pieces, worth thousands of pounds. Nourmand believes that generally, the most popular movies seem to generate the most popular posters (Nourmand and Marsh 1997). And there is even a website dedicated to value original posters called Posterappraisal.com. The website is owned and run by Rudy Franchi, who has been a pop culture collectibles appraiser on the Public Broadcasting Service series *Antiques roadshow* since its first season 17 years ago as well as owned The Nostalgia Factory and nostalgia.com. In the website it is stated that the site is "[...] an information site about the value of original posters (movie, war, travel, advertising), vintage advertising (signs and tins), political memorabilia, ocean liner ephemera, animation cells and just about any other twentieth and late nineteenth century collectible."

In Indonesia, there is no such "special" treatment to film posters. Film poster exhibition or auction, or any transaction of the posters as (expensive) collectible items is rare occurrences. We can find many tie-in film merchandises in Indonesia, such as screenwriting book, original soundtrack album, or storyboards but not the posters.¹⁴

The situation can become even worse: as marketing tools, posters are

⁹ For example, the works by Vladimir and Georgi Stenberg, post-Bolshevik poster artist who were relatively forgotten until a major retrospective at the MoMA in 1997. The works also exhibited at Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York. See <http://www.eyemagazine.com/blog/post/brothers-in-arts>.

¹⁰ One of the shops which curate and sell film posters as collectible items is *Mystic of Mondo*. See <http://www.slashfilm.com/mystique-mondo-changing-face-movie-posters/>.

¹¹ Koszarski writes: "Sotheby's and Christie's report poster sales in the six-figure range for collectible Universal horror classics like *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, with close to a half-million dollars being paid for the current record holder, *The mummy*" (Koszarski 1998: 241-242).

¹² In 2012, there was a documentary on gig poster community phenomenon titled *Just like being there*. See <http://www.slashfilm.com/just-there-trailer-gig-poster-documentary-premieres-sxsw-2012/>.

¹³ See <http://www.allmoviereplicas.com/Movie-Posters.html>.

¹⁴ Starting from 2009, Perpustakaan Nasional (National library of Indonesia) published a book series called *Poster film Indonesia* (Indonesian film poster), which contain three books based on historical and chronological years (pre-Independence in 2009, post-Independence in 2010, and 1980-1990 in 2011) written by Adi Pranajaya.

considered less important than other elements of film industry. Nourmand laments that, nowadays, the concept of original artwork no longer exists. As quoted in Nourmand and Marsh (1997), Nourmand underlines that in the 1940s and 1950s posters were one of the most important ways of attracting cinemagoers. Today, a studio producer does not pay much attention to designing a poster because it plays such a small role in advertising, especially in Indonesia.

We must state here that the quality of the content of the movies has nothing to do automatically with the posters. First, as stated, the film poster is more into marketing and subject to business decision of the producers rather than aesthetic or artistic decision of the directors. And, as we can see, in film poster books or store such as Mystic of Mondo many B movies or exploitation film posters that became cult collectable items are curreted well and sold.¹⁵

ANOMALY CASES OF INDONESIAN FILMS

There are, however, some posters of good quality such as those of Joko Anwar's films. His famous movie *Pintu terlarang* (The forbidden door) has a series of superbly designed original posters by the designer Mayumi Harlot (Illustration 15). Although the posters that were finally used for the movie's official promotion were different and lesser in quality (albeit just a bit), it was a good example of how, if properly done, a poster can truly depict and sell a movie.¹⁶



Illustration 15. Unofficial poster *Pintu terlarang*, designed by Mayumi Hartoyo.

¹⁵ For examples of the posters curreted and sold in the gallery, check: <http://www.slashfilm.com/photos-mondo-opens-gallery-sci-fi-show-including-star-trek-dune-akira/>.

¹⁶ For the discussion of Mayumi's works related to the poster, read: <http://mushkies.wordpress.com/2011/02/12/pintu-terlarang-dan-seni-grafis-9-tahun-kita-berlari-1-yang-teramati>; accessed on 7-4-2012.

Good film posters have also been made for recent great movies such as *Ada apa dengan cinta* (What's up with love?, Rudi Sujarwo 2002), *Laskar pelangi* (Rainbow troops, Riri Riza 2008), *Perempuan berkalung sorban* (A woman with a turban necklace, Hanung Bramantyo 2009), etcetera.

When a film producer (alongside with the director) views the film poster not only as a marketing tool but also as an art form, good quality film posters will emerge. These kinds of posters might not become collectible items, exhibited in museum or gallery, or sold in auction, yet, at least they exhibit some aesthetic quality.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, a graphic design approach has been employed to investigate elements of plagiarism. While it is easy to detect similarities in film posters, in visual art tradition it is difficult to prove that a poster is not original. The same poster in a different colour can be considered a new art work. There is no such thing as pure originality in art works. So, it is very important to understand artistic techniques, such as reuse and recycle, as well as some conceptual terms such as appropriation and homage. As the techniques of "reuse" and "recycle" are common in graphic design, this paper recommends graphic designers to use citation as part of recycle techniques to avoid plagiarism.

By definition, we conclude that Indonesian posters in Illustrations 3, 10, 11, and 12 apply homage technique; whereas Illustrations 13 and 14 show pastiche elements. On the other hand, Illustrations 1, 2, 7, 8, and 9 indicate plagiarism since they use appropriation without citation or any other information indicating that the posters have copied some existing works of arts properly.

We argue that, in Indonesia, film posters are treated as marketing tools and producers tend to ignore their function as art forms. Surely, in the global era, poster designers are exposed to global film posters and might be prompted to "steal" the poster film style of Hollywood and of other successful film industry such as those from Korea and Japan. What is decisive here is the attitude of the decision makers, since the producers have power to dictate the artist and own the rights of the film posters. We conclude that the culture and political economy of Indonesian cinema industry show lack of awareness and appreciation for the aesthetic and artistic nature of film posters. We need to have a further research to elaborate the relationship between the quality of film posters and the culture and political economy of film industry.

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