

Reimagining Regional Cinema in India: Thematic Analysis of Film Posters in Punjabi Cinema

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ABSTRACT

The early years of Indian Cinema meant lesser budgets and lesser resources. Therefore the filmmakers drew their own posters. However, the art of handpainted Posters died a slow death. Graduating towards the times of 1970s, cinema goers continued to be lured by posters of Films. The Films by that time were being represented through posters created by professional graphic designers with the help of softwares. This trend continues to evolve as we find ourselves at the threshold of Artificial Intelligence (AI)¹. This paper explores the journey of the evolution of these posters in Punjabi Cinema, in particular. Though it has not been untouched by Hindi Cinema, streamlining Cinema like this dives deep into the lesser researched contours of Punjabi Cinema.

Semiotics (Berger, 2018) as a tool for qualitative content analysis has been used for the purpose of this study. This has been analysed in decoding hidden meanings in Punjabi Film Posters in terms of pictorial description, color schemes, title texts, images etc. It also explores the tightrope that Film as an art has treaded because of events like the Partition and Militancy in the state. This paper analyses the recent trends in Punjabi Cinema in terms of the content of the film which has a direct effect on its Film Posters. But like all technological trends, it will be interesting to see how AI will challenge the traditional form of storytelling through images in hindsight. Either way, AI is here to unravel unprecedented avenues for Indian Film Poster Designing and Punjabi Cinema can take cues from the former.

Keywords: Film Posters, AI, Design, Art, Punjabi Cinema, Regional Cinema, Bollywood

INTRODUCTION

The Film Industry in Punjab has had a unique story to tell. It will always be divided into two eras- pre-Partition and post-partition. Before the Partition of Punjab in 1947, Lahore was the hub of the production companies. As an aftermath of Partition, very few studios survived in Lahore and the industry started deteriorating. Efforts of revival were made through film makers moving to Bombay to utilise the machinery present there to make films. Since the impact of Partition left people with gruesome experiences, the film makers refrained from making any serious films keeping in mind the sombre atmosphere in Punjab. Thus the films of the 1950s and 1960s focussed on comedy, romance or simple family themes. Not much

¹For the purpose of this research, Artificial Intelligence will be referred to as AI from hereon.

has changed in the Punjabi Film industry but filmmakers like Gurvinder Singh² are experimenting with more social issues that haunt the people of Punjab even today.

There have been a lot of Films with the same titles but made by different Filmmakers like *Sassi Punnu*³. The Filmmakers preferred recreating age old stories like tragic romances, mythology, folk tales etc. because these Films attracted the traditional audiences that believed in such stories. This also saved the Filmmakers of the hassles of writing a script from scratch and was easier to work upon. Also because it was a formula for success at the box office no matter how many times the story had been told earlier in Films. This trend is however taken with caution in the Punjabi Films of the 21st century and the titles are rarely repeated except the sequels of any Film.

The Punjabi Film Industry has been most inextricably attached to the Hindi Film Industry as compared to any other regional cinema. Bombay and Punjab have been witness to a long history of give and take especially in the post Partition years of 1950s and 1960s. This is because Lahore used to be the hub of the Punjabi Filmmakers and studios in the pre Independence Era. Films like the first Punjabi Film, *Sheila (1928)* and many others continued to be made from Lahore. But Independence of India brought Partition with itself. The aftermath of Partition was magnanimous and unprecedented to say the least. As an unfortunate consequence, the Punjabi Film Industry in Lahore collapsed and the filmmakers who came to the Punjab of India looked towards Hindi Cinema Industry for help. Bombay, at that time, had all the required machinery for making Films, hence started the reciprocity between Bombay and Punjab. The Hindi Film Industry has played a crucial role in the revival of Punjabi Cinema. Perhaps they were simple people who were bound by the love for art that helped uplift the world of Punjabi Cinema as we see today. The mention of giving and taking has been notable in the sense that the Hindi Cinema derives a lot from the Punjabi Folk Culture, mainly the music. Goes without saying that Hindi Films are ripe with some memorable Punjabi Folk Music which renders a big ingredient in the success of those Films.

When we talk about Posters, we are essentially referring to Visual Communication (Berger,1989). Rightly so because the Film Industry has witnessed the changes in Visual Communication from an era of simple hand sketches to the threshold of AI that the Film Poster designers stand on today. Film Posters are as old as the Films in India. Therefore tracing the journey of the evolution of this art becomes relevant. This paper focuses on such a journey albeit in Punjabi Cinema. Visual Communication is essentially the mix of text, colors, graphics etc. This is used by the Graphic Designers to make Film Posters in today's times. The ability to create something from scratch and continuously improvise on the poster idea of a particular film has been imbibed into the designers by now. AI will prove to be an excellent 'assisting' tool for the designers who are already creating Film Posters with the help of existing softwares like Photoshop, Illustrator et al.

The impact of AI on Content creation in media is a budding phenomenon in India. Therefore the ability of AI to significantly impact the Media & Entertainment Ecosystem in India

²*Anhe Ghore Da Daan*(Alms For A Blind Horse, 2011), and *Chauthi Koot* (The Fourth Direction, 2015) premiered at Venice and Cannes Film Festival respectively

³*Sassi Punnu* title has been made into a Film many times- in 1939 by Dawood Chand, 1965 by S.P.Bakshi, 1983 by Satish Bhakri

cannot be undermined. This can be rightly measured by a phenomenon called ‘a cultural feedback loop’. Various movie posters can be re-rendered in AI. In layman terms, this means that these posters can be re-created and reimagined using AI. This AI generated art is however a long way to go sans the human touch of creativity. With the advent of tools like DALL-E, there begins an exploration of this ‘algorithm induced imagery’ in Indian Cinema. Though this trend is seeing better acceptance in the visual effects of the films, still image cinematic posters in India are yet to welcome this one!

Film posters can loosely be categorised on the basis of their genre. As a more mechanical interpretation of this word, genre represents the different points of viewing and interpreting signs and symbols in the visual media. These different points of view are of the film makers and the audiences. The kind of genre that a Film falls into determines the kind of poster that the Film will present. This statement holds a larger prevalence in Punjab where the films prefer carrying the theme of what appeals to the audiences. That being said, film makers largely refrain from adding any unprecedented creative touches to the posters because they rely on more formulaic representations of what comprised an appealing film poster in the past. The extent of how appealing the poster is, is determined by the past responses of what the audience has liked and is therefore recreated.

Similarities can be traced in the way Punjabi Films in the genre of Family Films⁴ are represented through their posters. Most of the films have had a representation of the entire caste or at least the prominent actors on the poster to represent the huge star cast that a film has combined with the theme of a family film that the genre follows. A representation of the above phenomenon lies with the Film poster of *GoddayGodday Chaa (2023)*⁵, starring prominent actors of the Punjabi Film industry namely Nirmal Rishi, Sonam Bajwa, GitazBindrakhia, Tania and Sardar Sohi. The Film classified itself with the genres of Comedy, Family and Drama. Posters of the Film depict the same through the light hearted photos of the actors of how the film deals with a serious issue albeit in a dramatic comedy.

All these different outlooks comprise what is generally called the ‘Poster Culture’ in Films. As with the evolution of any culture, this is also a constant evolution of the changing perceptions of what comprises a good poster. The appeal to the audience, star power, reflections of the genre, are some of the aspects that film makers keep in mind while getting the posters created which tends to heavily overpower the fancies of a technology like AI. That being said, the technology of AI is comparatively new for the Indian Film market and more so for the Punjabi Films, in particular. But the Punjabi Films have welcomed the digital era with open arms and have been using softwares like Illustrator, Photoshop etc. to create different versions of the Film Poster.

As the times change and the Punjabi Film industry is moving forward, we witness the shift to social media wherein the Film posters are released by the directors and actors on their social media platforms⁶ like that of *Gaddi Jaandi Ae ChalangaanMaardi (2023)* starring Ammy Virk, Binnu Dhillon, Jasmine Bajwa, Jaswinder Bhalla to name a few.

⁴ Family Films, for the purpose of this research, refers to all kinds of films that are perceived by film makers for an entire family to be watched together irrespective of the age or gender.

⁵*Godday Godday Chaa*. 2023. Retrieved from <https://shorturl.at/bDNU9>

⁶For the purpose of this research, social media refers to instagram and snapchat.

Back to the basics, a Poster is mostly the starting point of building excitement for the film which is very evident in their poster releasing style. Such posters are referred to as Teaser Posters. The teaser poster of a film does exactly that - teasing the audience. This creates an excitement of the film beforehand. Also, as is the poster culture, a teaser just gives out the basic information without giving away much of what the film has to offer.

A recent example of a teaser poster release combining the elements of both 'social media use' and 'excitement creation' is that of *Chamkila*, a film by famed Bollywood Director, Imtiaz Ali to be released in 2024. The film is based on the story of Amarjit Singh Chamkila whose songs were a massive hit in Punjab of the 1980s. Chamkila will be played by popular Punjabi singer, actor Diljit Dosanjh and actress Parineeti Chopra. This Film is also the perfect example of the amalgamation of Film Industries in Mumbai and Punjab.

The Poster Culture in Punjabi Films still prefers sticking to the basics when it comes to Romantic stories - a general poster depicting the star couple in different poses which is more often than not preshot. *Nigah Marda AayiVe*(2023)⁷ starring Sargun Mehta and Gurnam Bhullar is just that for the audiences. But the film watching audience in Punjab is now exposed to a greater variety of content in terms of tragic love stories (*Qismat*, 2018)⁸ which are making a comeback after the yesteryears of Films like *Heer Ranjha* (1932)⁹ which also happened to be the first sound film in Punjabi Cinema.

Gudiya is the first horror film that was released in 2023. A first in the history of Punjabi Cinema, this film reshapes the narrative of horror storytelling in the region.

Punjabi Films are also witnessing the times of going through a linear process of Poster releases to build up the excitement for their Films. A recent case in point is *Kali Jotta* (2023) starring popular Punjabi actress Neeru Bajwa, Wamiqa Gabbi and Satinder Sartaaj.

Films also delve into the need to explore the transformative power of technologies like AI to conceive the future that the media industry holds. That being said, the Film Posters in Punjab have started incorporating technology in their Film Posters albeit slowly. But as is with the Hindi Film Industry, the Punjabi Films are yet to welcome a technology like AI. As the poster designers rightly cite that AI can be treated more as an assistive tool for human creativity. But the designers don't see it as a replacement of human touch in poster designing. AI can however be useful for designers in aiding the process of human ideas while creating Key art¹⁰.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An attempt at Methodological Triangulation has been done in this study to analyse the aspects of AI in tandem with the Film Industry. Triangulation also has been viewed as a qualitative research strategy to test validity through the convergence of information from multiple sources. Finding scholarly works on Hindi Cinema or some selected regional cinema

⁷*Nigah Marda Ayi Ve*. 2023. Retrieved from <https://shorturl.at/gmEHU>

⁸*Qismat*. 2018. Retrieved from <https://shorturl.at/fozM4>

⁹ *Heer Ranjha*. Retrieved from <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0231708/>

¹⁰This is the artwork which can be replicated across various media platforms like print, television, posters, now social media thumbnails etc.

are comparatively easier. There has been extensive research on Hindi Cinema in India. But findings on Punjabi Cinema have been quite minimal. Therefore the literature in the field of Punjabi cinema is limited and scattered, to say the least. Drawings have been made from the film related articles written by film historians in Punjab. Chapters on this regional cinema in various books which have been largely scattered over various areas of interest have been consulted. Writings by Ashish Rajadhyaksha (1998) have been consulted to analyse the trends in Indian Cinema over the decades and gain insights on films that are not extensively mentioned elsewhere. There have also been a lot of sources that have been useful in providing first hand information of their experiences and knowledge about the Punjabi Cinema. Some of these have been primary sources in the form of oral testimonies and nostalgia shared by the older generation witness to the independence era. There is however a benefit of doubt that we need to give to this source of information as the generation is marred with age related health issues of memory. The information received by them has been largely limited to the decades around the independence of India. Their experiences have been sought to explore how Punjabi Cinema marked its name on the Film map during the 1940s to 1960s essentially. Due to a gap in scholarly research in this area, various online platforms have also been consulted. They are mainly the online forums discussing Punjabi culture like subreddits on Reddit, comments on youtube videos etc. To authenticate the information provided in these online discussions, we have had conversations with Ph.D Scholars in various universities in Punjab. For the technological aspects of this research, namely the evolutions in technologies, particularly AI here, we have had extensive discussions with graphic designers and filmmakers working in various production houses in Mumbai and Delhi.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. Tracing the gradual evolution of themes portrayed through Film posters over the years.
2. Understanding the changing techniques of poster designing in films.
3. Analysing the reflection of culture in the way Film posters have been designed.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent has Bollywood impacted Punjabi Films and its techniques of designing?
2. How has the Punjabi Film Industry maintained its momentum despite the sensitivity of events in the state?

METHODOLOGY

Though *Christian Metz* pioneered the application of Saussurean semiotics to film, the works of *Sonesson* to do what we call a 'Pictorial Analysis' as a subset of Semiotic Analysis will be relevant to this study. The Rhetoric Model of *Göran Sonesson*, a Swedish Semiotician, which compares pictures with different devices as in a metaphor has been used to conduct this research. For the purpose of this study, a qualitative approach has been adopted in the form of Semiotic Analysis. Considering the fact that the culture, socio economic background and other miscellaneous factors play an important role in influencing how the people read signs

that surround them, therefore we have found the relevance of this method in the context of this study of Punjab and its Films. Since such researches trace the journey of the transformation of an entire culture in film, therefore thematic analysis as an approach has been used for analysing. Thematic analysis has been used to analyse and draw patterns from the plethora of Punjabi films made over the years. Semi structured interviews have been conducted as part of discussions with people mentioned in the course of this research, namely graphic designers, film makers and people working at production houses in various capacities. Such information has further been substantiated by discussions with research scholars at various universities. Oral testimonies have also formed a part of the research design.

FINDINGS

As observed by Jorge Frascara (2004), a good visual communication design is based on measuring the extent to which it has been comprehended by the audience and that there are no principles in evaluating aesthetics that can be universally agreed-upon. When we talk about film language, it inevitably starts with the Film Poster. This research paper has been an attempt at reflecting upon the ways the cinema of Punjab is creating its own cultural identity through the films while taking cues from Bollywood albeit slowly. It has been a slow and careful evolution of cultural symbolism through films and their posters considering the ebbs and flows that the state of Punjab has witnessed over the decades.

Identified Themes:

1. Diasporic Aspirations

The aspirations of a diaspora are largely prevalent due to use of symbols like monuments (*Sardara and Sons*,2023)¹¹, (*Chhalla mud kenahi aaya*,2022)¹², aeroplanes, mention of foreign places like England, Southall, London in titles itself etc eg. (*Aaja Mexico Challiye*, 2022)¹³

2. Sepia Tone

Period Film Posters are usually showcasing sepia tone and greenish tints (*Mastaaney*,2023)¹⁴, (*Maurh*,2023)¹⁵ possibly reflecting the old rural traditional touch of the content of the Film which has been a successful formulaic factor in luring the people of Punjab into Cinema Theatres.

3. Experiments with Graphic Posters sans the stars

As is with Films made in Bollywood, our mass culture finds the Posters starring the actors of the Film more attractive as opposed to the graphic ones. This contributes in a big way to the

¹¹ Sardara and sons. (2023). Retrieved from <https://rb.gy/c8t462>

¹² Chhalla mud ke Nahi Aaya. (2022). Retrieved from <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt21309170/>

¹³ Aaja Mexico Challiye. (2022). Retrieved from <https://rb.gy/nfbruf>

¹⁴ Mastaney. (2023). Retrieved from <https://rb.gy/db2200>

¹⁵ Maurh, & Mauhar, J. (2023). Retrieved from <https://rb.gy/rr6zyj>

lesser creativity of graphic designers in Film Posters. The creation of innovative designs through softwares like Photoshop, Illustrator etc. in Posters without the touch of the ‘star system’ for Films, renders it ‘lifeless’ from the audience point of view. (*Manje Bistre*,2017)¹⁶, (*Nadhoo Khan*,2019)¹⁷. These Films are a case in point of how Film posters are trying to move to more digitally creative posters without adding the actors on the poster. Yet the visual publicity of the film is incomplete without at least one such generic poster that features its major stars.

4. Homeland vs Diaspora

Mostly the look of the Film Poster reflects whether the Film is based in Punjab or outside India. (*Tu Hovein Main Hovan*,2023)¹⁸, (*Kali Jotta*,2023)¹⁹- Both February 2023 releases, the look is evident in clothes, settings etc.

DISCUSSION

As mentioned before, triangulation of methods have been used to test the information convergence from different sources. So far, only extended conversations have been done with multiple sources regarding the context of this research. There is a need to ask a proper set of open-ended questions to be able to codify the findings better. Lack of scholarly works in the cinema of this region coupled with the tumultuous history of the state of Punjab, limits certain dimensions of this research. The ideologies of the people in Punjab has been shaped by the way the State has weathered various storms over the past eight decades, almost. As a result, discussions with several subjects over the course of this research can also come from a place of varied human perceptions. Somewhat similar leverage can be attributed to discussions with various designers in the Film industry. Thus, this research has been a culmination of myriad thought patterns coupled with research findings. Utmost efforts have been made to verify all information of participants from multiple sources before drawing conclusions in this research.

CONCLUSION

Over the decades, we have witnessed a gradual disappearing of the hand drawn Film posters. They are more of a thing to be kept as a vintage collectible in the current times; courtesy of the overpowering technologies. Rightly so, when technologies save on both time and cost, the commercial gains make the film industry grasp it with both hands. That being said, the film makers of Punjab have had to deal with the emotions of generations with sensitivity to make the culture of Films a fascinating experience. This work marks a mere starting point on which other works in the area of Punjabi Regional Cinema can be based. These are general trends that have been observed in the Poster making designs as the Punjabi Film Industry has gained more exposure to Filmmaking. We are yet to streamline the trends and should refrain from

¹⁶ Manje Bistre. (2017). Retrieved from <https://rb.gy/j6k6a9>

¹⁷ Nadhoo Khan. (2019). Retrieved from <https://shorturl.at/ixyS3>

¹⁸ Tu Hovein Main Hovan, Bawa, A., Maavi, S., & Nayyar, R. K. (2023). Retrieved from <https://shorturl.at/yAK36>

¹⁹ Kali Jotta, & Kour, H. (2023). Retrieved from <https://shorturl.at/kDH67>

fitting them into watertight compartments. As research will be conducted over the course of time, this work of scholarship shall be constantly reviewed, added and enriched with valuable findings.

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