

Visual Semiotics of Truck Art in India: From Art on Trucks to
a Digital Art Style

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A research Paper submitted to the University of Dublin, in
partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Science Interactive Digital Media

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Summary

This is a qualitative research of truck art in India, specifically northern region covering the states of Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana. It uses the typology of semiotics as given by Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure, and follows the textual visual approach of semiotic analysis.

The purpose of this research is to apply some basic concepts from the discipline of visual semiotics to study the meaning carried by art on trucks in northern states of India. When put in context with the socio-political, and cultural knowledge of the region, the signs on trucks provide insights into the trucking culture of India and the meaning negotiated by various signs present on trucks. Secondly, this research compares the meaning of individual signs to the meaning of the same signs used in the digital art style inspired by truck art; and the meaning of truck art as a practice to the meaning of choosing this art style for branded merchandise.

The research explores the decorations on trucks as signs that work in multiple layers to negotiate meaning. These signs, cannot be bucketed into the definitions of icon, index, and symbol as they share properties of all. The final meaning of the text is ultimately a result of several decisions and the shared graphic ideology of the readers. The same signs when used digitally as part of an aesthetic style inspired by truck art, change their properties as original intent and symbolism is lost when placed outside the context of the trucking culture.

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Research questions.....	4
Overview of truck art practices in India.....	5
Trucks and the State	7
Loci of truck design.....	8
Theoretical Framework.....	10
Review of Literature.....	16
Methodology	25
Analysis.....	29
Pictorial Imagery.....	29
Calligraphy	35
Devils and Charms.....	39
Lost in transition – the digitised truck art	40
Conclusion	48
Works Cited	51



Introduction

An average truck covers about 300-325 kilometres a day (Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, 2013). It traverses from one end to another, crossing mountains, plateaus, banks of flowing rivers, and thousands of people on the highways. For this very reason, it becomes an important part of the Indian highways and the public imagination. Truck painting and decorating has emerged as a vibrant form of folk art in India, in that it is utilitarian rather than purely aesthetic. Commonly referred to as truck art, it has many motifs, iconography and colours that have now become the identity of an Indian truck. Unlike Pakistani trucks that are almost always distinctive and heavily decorated, Indian trucks drape a ‘corporate kitsch’ look in that they have a set of prescribed common features according to the Central Motor Vehicle



Figure 1 A popular motif of a bird that frequently appears on north Indian trucks.

Rules, 1989 but are also uniquely imaginative and filled with bright colours on top of that. More details on the legal restrictions on truck art will be discussed later in this chapter. Apart from the enormous splash of colours, some of the most interesting features of the Indian trucks remain to be the hand painted motifs, lettering rendered with 3D effects, and quirky yet poignant couplets written at the back.

Research questions

With many possibilities, and a century of existence, the practice of truck art has transformed trucks into giant billboards that travel the lengths and breadths of the country, often passaging through the social divides of urban and rural, private and public, and privileged and underprivileged. What must be interrogated further is:

1. How is meaning negotiated by visual elements of truck art in India?
2. How does adoption of truck art into a digital art style to create merchandise by popular brands change its meaning?¹

This study endeavours to deconstruct art on the trucks using visual semiotics, and come up with a system of codes that it operates in. We then take a look at how the meaning of truck art changes when it is converted into a digitally created commercial art style for the purpose of designing merchandise.

¹ The distinction between art on truck and digital art style inspired by art on truck must be notes. The former is the practice of decorating trucks and will be referred to as ‘truck art’ in this study. The latter is a visual aesthetic inspired by actual art on trucks and used for creating digital illustrations to sell designer merchandise.



Figure 2 'Horn Please' hand painted with 3D effects
Source: Shantanu Suman



Figure 3 Couplet on the back of a truck - 'Dil se roye, ankhon se ro na sake. Zindagi sadko pe beet gayi, ghar pe so na sake.'
(English translation: The heart cried, but the eyes didn't water. Spent all life on the roads, home was never a stopover.)
Source: Shantanu Suman

Overview of truck art practices in India

Before we delve into the visual semiotics of truck art, we need a background in order to understand the various nuances of the practice, the people involved, and the factors that influence it. Trucks, when purchased just consist of a bare chassis comprising of a cabin, engine, sub frame and running gear. The rest of the body is built to customised preferences. In

some places in India, a metal carriage is built while some use wood. Its treatment and style depend on the utility of the truck, the craftsmanship and art style of the state in which it is built, and the route that it is going to take.

It is important to note why these trucks are decorated at all. A truck is like a home for its driver. More often than not, these drivers spend days without returning home. According to All India Motors Transport Congress, total commercial vehicle population in India is 7.5 million. Of these, 3-3.5 million are on the road at any given time. The truck is also the workplace and place of worship for its driver. The life of a trucker across borders and cultures is similar: lonesome and rugged. Roads in the interior parts of countries are constructed poorly. There are high chances of meeting with an accident and very low of finding adequate health facilities. This is why charms and devils are painted on the trucks, apart from safe driving tips. Under these circumstances, the truck becomes a companion for its driver which he decorates like his home, and flaunts like his pride. However, many of the times, these trucks are not owned by their drivers. The company or an individual owner that hires the driver may give them an allowance to get it customized as per their taste or choose to decorate it themselves.

It can be concluded that the decoration of a truck is not an independent decision of its driver but a process depending upon the owner (the owner may not want to sport the beliefs of the driver, or they might decorate all their trucks in a similar way so that they are easy to identify), the driver (usually the driver wants his truck to reflect on his personality, beliefs, and life) as well as the designer/artist (what finally goes on to the truck depends on the skill of its craftsman and the style of its designer).



Figure 4 Poignant yet funny couplet behind a truck reflecting the truck ownership pattern and driver's relationship with the truck. 'Maalik ki gaadi, driver ka paseena, chalti hai road pe, banke haseena.' (English translation: The owner's vehicle, the driver's struggle, she traverses the road, like a gorgeous damsel.)

Trucks and the State

A truck is normally painted once in every 5 years to prevent its metal body from rusting and before the renewal of its permit. Painting of the truck is closely associated with its fitness test in which an RTO (Regional Transport Office) official approves of a vehicle's condition to be on the road. The Central Motor Vehicle Rules, 1989 document technically written wordy rules and regulations regarding transportation of goods in public places. Special focus is on regulations for carriage of goods of dangerous or hazardous nature to human life. Colour schemes are to be maintained for various types of trucks. For example, all trucks applying for national permit must be painted in dry leaf brown colour and have 'National Permit' written on their heads. They must also have their speed limit, and some safety precautions for the trucks written on the back. The truckers who can barely read or write are dependent on other people to explain them these rules through word of mouth. These legal formalities are time consuming and a costly affair. Truck painters who have been in the business for long are also well versed with these conditions of the State. Since the hassle of applying for a national permit is tedious

and dependant on bureaucratic and authoritarian individuals, the encoders tend to make other painting decisions that will please the RTO officials such as including national pride imagery and relevant public announcements on their trucks.

Loci of truck design

A truck has four parts that have scope of design. The features and elements that constitute these three parts are broadly described below:

- Fronts usually entail a title of ‘Public Carrier’ or ‘Goods Carrier’ apart from ‘National Permit’ written on the top. Sometimes they also carry the name of the operating fleet and the route taken by that truck. The name of manufacturing company is clearly visible in the middle and in some cases, it is even highlighted with paint. Frequently at bottom, near or sometimes even on the front headlights, eyes are placed. They can even be placed on the sides, adjacent to the headlights. The eyes have thin eyebrows, mascara on eyelashes, and eye shadow as well. It lends a feminine nature to the truck, however at the bottom it is many a times tagged with a manly name such as ‘Prince Coach’ or ‘Road King’. The fenders can also be used to give it another name or to mention the members of one’s family. Religious denotations and devils or charms are often present too. Strips of reflective tape are commonly used as a method to prevent accidents. When mud flaps are present, a quick line is sometimes found on those, divided in two parts. For example, ‘jiyo aur jeene do’ (English translation: live and let live), ‘suhana safar’ (English translation: pleasant journey), etc. is written on them.
- The back is where paintings are made if the structure of the truck permits. Most of the writing on the back reflects the driving etiquettes and rules of the land. Another name is usually given to the truck at the back. This is also the most visible area and hence the thoughts of the drivers are etched here – in form of a couplet, a social message or simply a road safety tip.

- Sides of a truck are divided into panels due to the structure of its chassis. Each of the panels can be used for a different purpose. Usually, this is where the contact information of the owner, driver and painter comes. Even though there is enough space for accommodating a full-fledged painting, it is only used as a medium to promote business since trucks are primarily utility vehicles. Apart from displaying contact information they might also carry some popular motifs. On locations such as valve box and diesel tank, calligraphic letters are used for signage.
- Other than these, even the interiors of the trucks are decorated since that is the area where a driver spends most of his time. It includes pictures of deities, religious symbols, wooden work, cheap lights that make the environment jubilant, and plastic toys.



*Figure 5 Cabin roof of a decorated truck.
Source: Shantanu Suman*

Theoretical Framework

Much like David Scott's (1995) study of European stamp design, to elucidate the complicated design structures, themes, and narratives of truck art in India, we are borrowing the descriptive terminology derived from the field of visual semiotics. In particular, Peirce's typology is a precise tool that facilitates a discussion of multiple layered semioses occurring on trucks art. A sub-domain of semiotics, visual semiotics defines the way visual images communicate a message. We will try to derive meaning using semiotics, by interpreting markings on trucks (both linguistic and non-linguistic) as signs. Scott used the same approach of textual and visual which is neither strictly visual nor literary. It does not treat signs as, binary but rather sees them as a site of interactive and overlapping of types of signs. To investigate truck art through the theory of visual semiotics, we first need to familiarise ourselves with some of the terminology within the domain of semiotics that will then serve as our toolkit in our analysis.

The study of semiotics concerns itself with the sign, the codes or systems into which they are organized, and the culture within which they operate. A sign can be anything that is physically perceivable such as a word, sound, visual image, etc. It operated on the postulation that the users recognise it as a sign.

Considered one of the forefathers of semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce (1998) came up with a triangular model of how a sign signifies meaning that has 3 points – *sign*, *object*, *interpretant*. All 3 elements are understood in relation to each other. The sign refers to something other than itself, what it refers to is the object and what the user understands of the sign is the interpretant. Thus, interpretant is the mental impact of the sign combined with the experiences of the user.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1974), an equally important figure as Peirce in the field of semiotics, divided a sign into two components: the *signifier*, which is a psychological impression that the sign creates such as the sound, image, or word, and the *signified*, which is

the mentally inferred concept or meaning that the signifier represents. The relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and conventional. In other words, signs can mean anything we agree that they mean, as well as mean different things to different people. Nonverbal signs can produce many complex symbols and hold multiple meanings. Thus, the signifier and the signified, both are products of cultural and habitual experience of the user. Peirce's use of sign is closer to Saussure's use of signifier while his interpretant is roughly analogous with Saussure's signified. Saussure does not attend to the 'object' (or 'referent') — that is, the external reality outside the system of signification, but is interested only in the mental idea that the sign represents.

According to Peirce there are three different types of signs— *icon*, *index*, and *symbol*. Icons bear similarity to their object in appearance or character. For example, a vector graphic of an upward airplane is an icon of a departure terminal. An index on the other hand, is connected to the object and thereby refers to its object by the virtue of association. For example, a knife and a fork are always used to eat food, and thus form an index of a restaurant. A symbol has no reason to represent its object other than out of agreement, convention, or rule. For example, a small case 'i' in a solid circle means information desk to us because we are used to it and we have agreed upon it. It must be noted, that the examples given here do not mean that they are bucketed into icons, indices, and symbols. The same sign can be display multiple properties. For instance, the fork and knife in its graphical form is an icon of a real fork and knife, but, because of the existential connection of cutlery to restaurants, they can be used as a metonym to index restaurants. Furthermore, a knife and fork's simple vector graphic is adopted in a standardised semiotic system on the roadside and at the airports. This provides a shift towards being a symbol through familiarity, as we start associating it to mean 'restaurant', without even going through the interpretative process of unravelling the icon functioning as a metonym. This is an example of Scott's textual visual approach discussed above.

Saussure and his disciples, Pierre Guiraud (1975) and Roland Barthes (1967) categorise the relationship between the signifier and signified using the terms- *arbitrary*, *iconic*, *motivated*, and *constrained*. The arbitrary nature of a sign means that there is no direct connection between the two, other than that of a convention, rule, or agreement. It is similar to what Peirce called a symbol. Iconic is understood similarly to the icon described by Peirce. This means that for a signifier to refer to its signified in an iconic way, it must draw its character from the signified. Motivated and constrained can be used interchangeably in the context of a signified and signifier. When a signifier is motivated or constrained by its signified, it is more iconic and less arbitrary.

Convention is an important concept in signification and communication. It can be formal or informal. In *formal convention*, there are prescribed rules, that define the nature of the relationship between a signifier and its signified. When we construct a sentence, we follow the formal conventions of a language and its grammar and it produces a signified in the mind of a user. On the contrary, *informal convention* is born out of habit and exposure to the same pattern repeatedly. This can be illustrated by the way we greet each other when we meet. In some cultures, it is a norm to greet another person by folding your hands to show respect, while in some cultures the norm is to shake hands. Both the signs are learnt by being a part of a culture that practices these gestures and agrees that it holds a certain meaning. Convention is what makes a sign communicate by generating a response among the users, and without it the sign cannot have any social meaning.

Signs are organised into *codes* in two ways, as per Saussure, and that's how their meaning is determined in relation to other signs which is important in the study of linguistics. The first is by *paradigms*. A paradigm is a set of signs from which a user has to pick a unit to be used. All the units in a paradigm share some similar properties but are distinct from each other in some way – both in terms of the signifier and signified. For example, all the letters in

the English alphabet have a distinct glyph (signifier) and sounds (signified) but are similar to each other in that they stand for a phoneme. Thus, they constitute a paradigm. We must pick letters of our choice to form words which in turn stimulate a signified in the mind of a user. The features that help us distinguish a signifier from another are known as *distinctive features*. The second is *syntagmatic*. A syntagm is the process of combining a unit of a paradigm with another unit of the same or different paradigm. Thus, a word is a syntagm of letters chosen from the paradigm of English alphabet. The rules or convention that define the way these units are combined is important in deriving meaning of a sign with respect to its relation to others. For example, grammar or syntax of a language determines if it is correct to say 'I is happy'.

Barthes took this one step further by differentiating the encoder from the decoder and bringing the socio-cultural bias of the two into the equation. He described the structural relationship between the signifier and signified as two orders of signification. The first one is similar to the model of Saussure, and deals with the sign as a combination of signifier and signified, and the relationship of this sign with the external reality that it implies. This is known as *denotation*. One of the ways in which the second order of signification works is called *connotation*. In this, the signifier itself is a sign, i.e., a combination of signifier and signified as in a denotative sign function. So, for example in denotation, the grapheme for '4' (signifier) refers to the sound one makes to call out the digit 'four' (signified). But if we used a particular regional style of the number 'IV', the unity of its signifier (particular regional style of grapheme) for that signified (the numeral) could become a signifier in a connotative sign whose signified was the region. A connotative sign treats the meaning of a sign as an interactive concept which changes as per the feelings, attitudes, and experience of the users.

The terminology described above gives us the apparatus required to perform an analysis of the signs within truck art in India. Following this, the second chapter analyses literature on truck art within South Asian countries and discusses the state of scholarship on related topics

in the field of semiotics. The third chapter provides the methodology and research tools used in this study. Post that, the analysis will document some of the signs, paradigms and syntagms of truck art in India with the help of images. It will detail the various cultural aspects of these signs and the convections that govern the syntagms. It contextualises the use of those signs in order for the users to associate it to any meaning. The second half of the analysis consists of understanding the encoders and decoders of digital truck art as understood by the brands and their press releases. We will compare the intended encoders, decoders, and thereby the text of the two art forms. Further probing will attempt to understand the dichotomy of meaning constructed by truck art created by rudimentary painters in its original form on the roads, to that of the digital art style inspired by truck art created by trained artists on their computers to be adapted and printed on merchandise. It will also look at commonalities of the two art forms, if any, in the scope of visual semiotics. The fifth chapter will be a summary of the key findings and investigation of this study. Furthermore, it will discuss some of the limitations of this project and scope in future.



Review of Literature

Truck decoration is a popular and entertaining form of folk art that originated in the Indian subcontinent as trucks and lorries driven by Sikh transporters started painting a portrait of their spiritual Gurus, or the founders of the Sikh religion (Paracha 2016). The portraits were painted with the loudest of colours and crude aesthetics. Simultaneously, Muslim transporters and drivers began to paint portraits of famous Sufi saints on their trucks and lorries. While the tradition of painting on, beautifying, and writing on the body of trucks may have been a direct extrapolation of the culture of decorating tools/machines/cattle in the region (pre-independence India and Pakistan), it is also practiced profusely in other countries such as Japan, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Kenya, Philippines, USA, Turkey, Bangladesh, and Indonesia, presumably with varying degrees of complexity and historical context.^{2,3} Ranging from minor decoration using recurrent motifs, scribbling couplets on trucks, and painting graffiti on to their bodies, to decorating using different media, lights, and carvings – truck art practices in different countries are as unique as its people and situations. Owing to the relatability of the contents and pervasiveness of the trucks in India, the practice caught the attention of common people, visiting foreigners, media, and films.

² Decotora truck are exceedingly modified long-haul trucks that are nothing short of a transformer at a disco. Commonly featuring neon or ultraviolet lights, extravagant paints, and kitschy yet futuristic designs, this merely 50-year-old subculture was inspired by the 1970s film-series "Torakku Yaro" (Truck Guys). See Tatsuki 2007 for the essence of the Japanese subculture of decotora (decorated truck) in pictures.

³ Truck Art: a Decade of Graffiti captures graffiti art trucks as seen up and down the American East Coast. See Cavalieri 2010.

Formal study of truck art first began in early 1970s when many scholars were lured by the political and cultural significance of the practice in Afghanistan.⁴ However, as a direct impact of the invasion of the Soviet Union and deteriorating political conditions, the researchers pulled out in the late 1970s. Some of the earliest works that documents truck art is in praise of design and limited to its visual aspect. *Afghan Trucks*, authored by Jean-Charles Blanc in 1976 is a photographic time-capsule of the culture and ethos of the region seen through the window of truck art before the debacle of the civil war. *Automobile Kunst in Pakistan, 1990* by the German cultural scientist Jürgen Grothues primarily provides an indexical photographic evidence of the era when the pictures were clicked, but also gives a brief introduction to the linkage between the meaning of the art form and the culture within which it exists. Another coffee table book, *Art on Wheels* (Renata von Oppen, 1992) focuses on the design and graphical magnificence of Pakistani trucks among other smaller vehicles such as buses and carts. Attempts to situate this art form in the matrix of socio-political relevance were made by a short paper in *African Arts* titled *Nigerian Truck Art* (Jack Pritchett, 1979). After spending several months with photographer Lawrence Manning observing trucks and speaking to their drivers and owners in the Muslim north of Nigeria, Pritchett notes, ‘truck art can be used as a window through which we can view a particularly Nigerian view of life and death, a view expressed by a set of images borrowed from various sources: the movies, growing Nigerian nationalism and traditional folklore.’ He spotted a theme of violence and power prevalent in truck painting also pointed to the fact that some drivers prefer to display elements from their daily life instead of images of power and violence on their trucks.

⁴ A doctoral dissertation on truck art in Afghanistan was written by Marie Benedict Dutreux in Paris in 1978. It was based on her field work in Kabul.

The most systematic and thorough research on truck art that acknowledges its dynamic nature and recognises a truck as ‘moving art’, comes from *On Wings of Diesel*, a book on Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan written by Jamal J. Elias in 2011. Researched for over ten years, it explores vividly the political, religious and social aspects of the Pakistani society which provides for a background to the visual regime to which these trucks contribute. This is what sets it apart from the previous academic ventures into study of truck art—ethnographic accounts of truckers’ life or documentation of the aesthetically appealing motifs used on those trucks. It is interesting to see how an Islamic society accepts these visual symbols (even religious ones) and perceives it since Islamic worlds are often understood as opposed of visual representation. Touching upon the reason for painting of trucks, Elias writes:

Despite this lack of obvious economic benefit, it is the norm for fleet owners to authorize the driver to take the vehicle to a coachwork shop at company expense and have it decorated according to his own taste (although in the case of many fleets all trucks have similar lettering and colour schemes). Given the lack of direct economic benefit in decorating a truck to the owner or operator, and the absolute pervasiveness of this form of art; it becomes obvious that the motivation to decorate lies somewhere else. The motifs represented on trucks display not only aesthetic considerations, but also attempt to depict aspects of the religious, sentimental, and emotional worldviews of the individuals employed in the truck industry.

In chapter 9, Elias writes about the shifting nature of elements of truck decoration, such as religious images and epigraphy, spatial locators, and portraitures, as signifiers in a visual language. He suggests that ‘images on trucks possess ambivalent or multivalent significations,

their messages shifting with different audiences and also across time...the back of the trucks remains the most semiologically undetermined aspect, and one where personal expressions have always played a greater role than on the sides. The locus of pithy statements and jokes, it is also the part of the truck to display some of the most specific socio-political statements in truck decoration, and also ones that are primarily pictorial rather than textual.'

He defines a syntactical constraint of signs as per the location of the truck they frequent on and discusses in great lengths the choice of portraiture on the back of the truck. As per his observations, the trucker's (driver, owners, and painter alike) act of choosing a person (a public figure who they admire, relate with and also feel comfortable in associating with) and painting their portrait on the back of his truck is a proof of his participation in a collective consciousness and of publicly positioning of himself in the spectrum of Pakistani socio-political ideologies. They not only celebrate their idol in this vision, but also glorify them as their link to power. Elias adds, 'in all cases, the leader is depicted with visual symbols that signify authority and access. High-technology weaponry, flags, microphones, and Western dress all signify goods and status that lie beyond the reach of truckers who, as a class, constitute a marginal group regardless of their regional or ethnic background.'

Towards the end of the book, he writes about 'truck art' as not the art on trucks, but as a design style used to decorate souvenirs that are available to purchase in Pakistan. According to Elias, the absence of trucks, truckers, and the veritable element of their lives makes such an art operate outside of the *habitus* occupied by the truckers, and cater to the bourgeoisie who not only control the nature and definition of art but also possess the disposable income to buy

such products.⁵ Although he clearly renounces any comparison of the dynamic, mobile art on truck, to the static artefact that objectifies and fetishizes ‘truck art’ by using it as its style, he does not comment about the shift in the meaning making and how it impacts the individual signs or the code that organizes the signs.

Due to the common history, language, and culture of India and Pakistan, the work of Elias is pivotal for this research. Since both the nation states share their pre-partition trajectories – especially in case of the introduction of trucks to the subcontinent by the British Government (sometime after the first world war to smoothen the functioning of its administration) – many interactions of the truck art with the society bear a similar narrative.⁶ While it helps in that this study can borrow the basic skeleton and findings of a similar research in Pakistan, it also makes it easy to distinguish the impact of different legal and political landscape in the two independent countries.

When the world marvelled at the beauty of and paid scholarly attention to the history, meaning, and relevance of various versions of truck art across the globe, the charm of Indian

⁵ A concept by Pierre Bourdieu, habitus means the naturalization of beliefs, attitudes, and practices through structures that existed in the past. “Habitus is neither a result of free will, nor determined by structures, but created by a kind of interplay between the two over time: dispositions that are both shaped by past events and structures, and that shape current practices and structures and also, importantly, that condition our very perceptions of these.” (Bourdieu 1984: 170)

⁶ There is no documented history of trucks in India but existence of regulation bodies and relevant committees points to introduction of trucks in India in 1920s. For example, the Indian Roads Development Committee (Jayakar Committee) was set up in 1927. See *Study on Trucking Operations in India – Problems & Potential* 2000.

trucks captured the imagination of Bollywood film makers. Bright colourful trucks featured in films as props for romantic songs (for example in *Dil Bole Hadippa*, 2009 and *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi*, 2008) and rusty utilitarian trucks became the cinematic symbol of an honest working man's grit (for example in *Gadar*, 2001). The over exposure to trucks on the roads rendered them as a common fact of quotidian life for most people but there was a large number of blogs that encapsulated the wit of truck drivers and the aesthetic sense of truck artists with the authors offering their own theories of how and why it happens. Newspapers too published about the artistically done trucks and the trucking culture from time to time but the design was almost always termed as 'kitsch'. *Running on Empty* (Revati Laul, 2008), a documentary produced by NDTV showcases the life of Ranvir Singh Chauhan, a truck driver who travels from Delhi to Guwahati. It offers an insight into the proceedings of logistics in India as well as the problems that it faces. The film comments briefly about AIDS as a pressing issue, harassment of drivers on road, difficult road conditions and all that it takes to bring a cup of tea to our homes.

It was not until 2013 that an Indian scholar from University of Florida named Shantanu Suman published his Master's dissertation exploring the subject from the perspective of design



Figure 6 *Horn Please*, a documentary by Shantanu Suman. (Source: Shantanu Suman)

and culture. As a design professional and student, he went on to create a well-researched award-winning documentary titled *Horn Please* (named after a ubiquitous phrase written on almost all trucks in India) that traces various components of the practice through interviews and field work. Divided into nine chapters (The Fuel to Truck Art, Travel Companion, Lettering, The Soul, Speed Breakers, Transformation, Indian Truck Art going places, The Next Gen, and The Crossroads) the film explores various facets such as the significance of truck art in India, time and cost involved, the process, truck as a home/wife, transformations, and future of truck art.

Two coffee table books appreciating the beauty of Indian trucks and relishing the wit of the quotes on their back came out in 2014 by the same name – *Horn Please: The Decorated Trucks of India* by photographer Dan Eckstein, and *Horn Please: Trucking in India* by Pawan Jain and Divya Jain. Though both the books had the same name, the former was a just a collection of pictures while the latter was an attempt by SAFEXPRESS, one of India’s biggest supply chain and logistics company, to use photos of colourful trucks in order to advocate for better policies and legal support for the truckers.

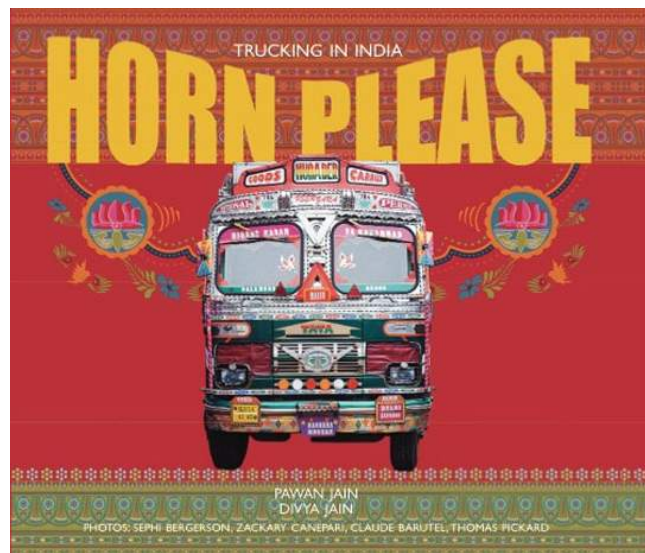
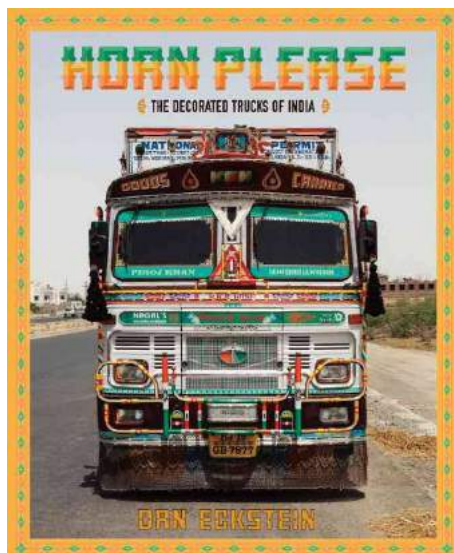


Figure 7 (Left) *Horn Please: The Decorated Trucks of India*, (Right) *Horn Please: Trucking in India*

Jürgen Spitzmüller's essay *Floating ideologies: Metamorphoses of graphic "Germanness"* discusses the graphical ideology of 'Germanness'. Spitzmüller suggests that certain 'graphic means' or visual style can become relevant to cultural groupings by the virtue of association, and therefore they can be perceived as representing that group, by people internal and external. The same can be seen in the fact that the bold 3D lettering on trucks has come to be associated with not just trucks but with India as a whole.

European Stamp Design: A Semiotic Approach to Designing Messages by David Scott is a book that analyses stamps as text, using tools of semiotics. In the absence of any similar study on Indian truck art, it was particularly helpful in understanding the methodology and process of textual analysis. References to it will be made in the text as and when relevant.

As can be seen from the above sources, the state of scholarship on truck art in India is miniscule and barring a few researches and photo books, the world of academia has not taken notice of it yet.



Methodology

For a successful and accurate research, a suitable methodology is imperative. To understand the meanings produced by truck art, I have used qualitative research design since my study questions needed an approach which requires arguments and facts to come to conclusions rather than statistical analysis of collected or pre-existing data. Under the qualitative method, I have made use of both primary and secondary research data. The form of data under both the categories has been explained in the paragraphs below.

Primary Data: As part of an earlier dissertation titled ‘Truck Art in India: Reflecting on Ideas of Public Space and Subculture’, I had collected material such as images and interviews of truck drivers and painters in 2013. Here the material is applied to semiotic analysis and to build an understanding of truck art. The images were clicked at Punjabi Bagh Transport Nagar and Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar, New Delhi, where trucks from Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, and Rajasthan are lined up; and Kamla Market, near New Delhi Railway Station which houses many transport companies. I resorted to convenience sampling as in the case of interviews I was largely dependent on the other person for their participation. All my interviews were based in Delhi. The interviews with painters were participatory wherein I caught them while they were at work at Punjabi Bagh Transport Nagar and asked questions.

Secondary Data: There were only a few sources that were helpful for this research. These included:

- **Books:** There are no books on truck art in India but I referred to *On Wings of Diesel* by Jamal J. Elias for his extensive study of truck art in Pakistan and *European Stamp Design: A Semiotic Approach to Designing Messages* by David Scott for understanding how to analyse truck art using semiotics.

- Journals: None of the journals contained articles on truck art in India, though there was a paper by Jamal J. Elias which was an earlier edition of his book. I found an essay on semiotic analysis of graphics by Jürgen Spitzmüller called Floating ideologies: Metamorphoses of graphic “Germanness” and a study on trucking operations of India by the Central Institute of Road Transport.
- Web links: These include various websites and blogs. Websites were helpful in providing information regarding various icons and symbols as well as their cultural context. Blogs also helped in finding out about expert opinions of some designers on truck art.

To undertake this research, theoretical framework of semiotics has been used, as described in chapter 1. The aim of this research is to deconstruct the visual elements of truck art and to understand the hidden narratives that get indirectly or directly circulated in the society. A method which perfectly allows me to dig deep in my analysis, is the qualitative method of textual analysis. Textual analysis is any kind of qualitative examination of message content and characteristics, but more narrowly it refers to a type of analysis that combines aspects of social science research with features derived from the humanities. These methods are better at revealing the latent, or below-the-surface, meaning of messages than the traditional quantitative content analysis (Buddenbaum 2001).

To gain a clearer understanding on the method, we first need to make ourselves clear on the concept of a ‘text’. According to the book, *Introducing Cultural and Media Studies: A Semiotic Approach*, a text is ‘a combination of signs’. Having said that, a sign has been described as ‘anything which produces meaning and is a social element that requires an audience to function’ (Bainbridge, Goc, Tynan 2011). This research considers truck art to be

its text. Truck art as a text consists of several imageries and units of decoration that can be seen as signs. These signs, through their visuals and glyphs create meanings.

Textual analysis, as a method has developed from the work of French structuralists in the 1960s – particularly from the work of Roland Barthes (1915–80). Barthes believed that any kind of popular cultural product could be ‘decoded’ by reading the ‘signs’ within the text. It is one of the primary tools media researchers use to understand how meaning is made from media texts (Bainbridge 2011).

As described in chapter 1, Barthes took Saussure’s concept of ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’ and used it to describe a second level of signification. Barthes argued that when the signifier ‘dog’ produces the signified ‘dog’ (in which we visualize a four-legged creature), it indicates only the primary level of signification. He then adds that this primary level of signification is also available for a second level of signification. The sign ‘dog’ produced at the primary level of signification is available to become the signifier ‘dog’ at a second level of signification. This may then produce at the secondary level the signified ‘dog’: an unpleasant human being (Storey 2008). He also explains the terms – connotations and denotations, which are necessary to understand the method of textual analysis.

In *Elements of Semiology*, Barthes (1967) substitutes the more familiar terms ‘denotation’ (primary signification) and ‘connotation’ (secondary signification): ‘the first system [denotation] becomes the plane of expression or signifier of the second system [connotation]...The signifiers of connotation are made up of signs (signifiers and signifieds united) of the denoted system (Storey 2008).

Using the above definition of textual analysis, signs on trucks will be analysed, and meaning will be derived out of it. We will also use the same process to unpack the meaning of the same signs on visuals created using the digital art style inspired by truck art.



Analysis

As discussed earlier, a truck in India is typically adorned with pictorial imagery, embellishments, calligraphy, and other physical decorations. The fact that the truck is decorated at all is a sign that functions as an informal convention. It is a symbol of the trucker's love for his truck and desire to make it appear like a home; and indexes the length of the route – the more time a driver spends in a truck, the more he tends to decorate it. Thus, truck decoration is a series of syntagmatic choices and all the constituting units of truck art by themselves are signs - signifiers that have a signified. There are several signs present on a truck but due to limitation of time, this study will only discuss the signs that are widespread and help in comparison to truck art's digital counterpart.

Pictorial Imagery

Paintings or stickers can often be seen on the sides or backs of the trucks. They are always iconic in that they bear similarity to the object that they represent, but have multiple layers of signification embedded onto them. Some of these signifiers tend to be more constrained by the object than the others by the virtue of style that governs the number of colours, details, and strokes used. The style of the painting also serves as an index of the state in which the truck has been painted. The subject of the motifs connotes the faith, attitude, and personality of the truckers. We will analyse the variations and contribution of some of the more popular signs below:

1. National Flag: The tricolored flag is almost like an informal convention of truck art as it is present on almost all decorated trucks. Other than being an icon, it is also a symbol of patriotism. It cannot be said to what degrees it's actually a symbol of patriotism in the heart of the trucker, an index of them being nationalists in order to please the RTO officials, or an informal convention that is followed just because everybody else has it

and the painter knows how to make it. While its signifier is motivated by the signified in some ways since it's rendered along with a podium, shown with curves as if hoisted and being gently whirled by the air; it is sometimes given more arbitrary features. The orange colour is usually replaced with a darker red in order for it contrast with the rust orange base colour or it may be seen without the chakra, the chakra might be off-centre, or the number of spokes in the chakra could be lesser than 24 as in the actual Indian flag. All these variations are an index of a particular artist's style. Accompanying text in Hindi or English establishes the admiration for the nation further by offering a salute or proclaiming that 'India Is Great'.

For a nation that speaks several languages, has varied cultures, and diverse ethnicities, very little binds India apart from its national identity. Since national flag is an important element of the Indian national ideology, the flag as a sign on the truck becomes a part of its graphic ideology. To a decoder, it confirms the trucker's acceptance of his Indian identity, and agreement to the national agenda of growth for all above an individual.



Figure 8 Two national flags painted at the back of a truck.



Figure 9 Different trucks with a flag painted on their sides.

2. Cow and calf: Cows have held a sacred position in the Hindu mythological texts. The sacred Vedic cows, unlike the rest of foreign cows, are zebus meaning that they have a hump near the shoulder, large dewlaps, and droopy ears. They are pictorially depicted with a golden cloth that covers them, and other golden embellishments. However, a large number of times, the motif consists of not only a cow, but also a calf. Cow as a mother became a popular imagery during the Indian nationalist movement with many similarities to the *Bharat Mata* (mother India – a patriarchal personification of a distressed India which was a call to its Indian sons in order to provoke them to save the country) (Korom 2000). Thus, a cow (and calf) on the truck serves as an icon of the animal, index of countryside farms where most of the drivers come from and have friends or family working as farmers, and a symbol of religious and nationalist affiliations of the trucker. The religious connotations of the sign are confirmed with the inclusion of ‘Om’, a Hindu chant, on the golden cloth covering the cow.

Interestingly, in addition to the holy image of the animal, it has become an important political tool in the hands of right wing Hindu outfits, challenging the "outsiders" - Muslims and Christians who are classified as the "beef eaters" (Jha 2002, Rao 2011). Thereby, when put into context, the cow connotes participation in expressing Hindu identity and the syntagmatic process of choosing this icon over anything else becomes a possible assertion of aligning with the right-wing Hindu Nationalists.

‘If the organisation is a cow, then milk is the wealth that flows out of it. Whole milk is the top line and butter, the bottom line. These are the metaphors by which Indian mythology communicates its ideas on wealth’ (Pattanaik 2017). The sign also connotes a trucker’s desire to do more business, and churn out better profits.



Figure 10 Cow and calf (left) and just the cow (right) painted on a side of the truck.

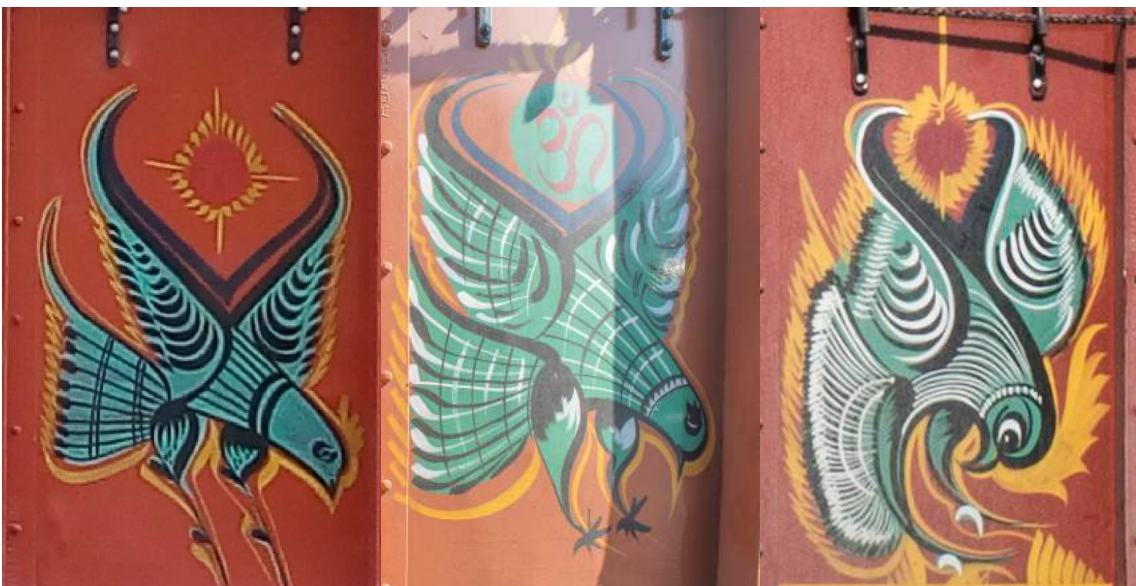


Figure 11 Different versions of a bird painted on side of the truck. Image on top right corner clicked in Rajasthan, others in Delhi. (Source for top right image: Shantanu Suman)

3. Bird: A bird portrayed on many trucks is identified as an eagle by many people associated with truck art in India including Suman in his research, and Farid Bawa who runs a project called All India Permit, where he urges people to support the truck art movement by owning an authentic Indian masterpiece commissioned by artists working with him (Bawa). ‘The eagle, is an emblem of speed for these trucks. It is a way for the owners to show the world that they have the vision to be successful and their trucks have the precision to master the roads.’ Reads the description of one of the products on his online shop. The cause for this conclusion could be due to its beak, shorter wings, and brown colour. However, eagles are very hard to spot in India and an eagle’s wings are not shaped the way it is on this motif. As per the many drivers interviewed by me, the motif is that of a falcon who was said to belong to Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru (Dhami 2011). Although, going by the religious texts he had a white falcon, the one that is found on Indian trucks can be of many colours, but mostly it is yellow brown or blue green.

As many followers of the Sikh faith belong to the Punjab region of northern India, this motif is understandably very common on trucks in Punjab. What’s fascinating is the inclusion of a similar bird on trucks in other north Indian states as well. Rajasthan, for example, has a bird (possibly a hawk, going by the intricate dashed lines) in the same position, but with a different stylistic rendering. This is perhaps because of the large number of Punjabi drivers in the trucking industry. Until about 10 years ago, every second truck driver came from Punjab, says Naveen Gupta, secretary general, All India Motor Transport Congress (AIMTC). This has had many implications and contributions in creating a trucking culture of its own, like is evident from the fact that Punjabi cuisine can be found across India at any small highway joint – known as

dhaba (Dhall 2012). Thus, the bird, due to its ubiquitous exposure became a part of truck art on many other state's truck art as well.

Speaking in terms of semiotics, the bird on the truck serves as an icon of the bird, but more importantly as an index of the state in which the truck is decorated. For some users, the signifier is producing the signified of their Guru's bird and has symbolic linkage to their faith, but not all users (encoders as well as decoders) feel that way.

Calligraphy

Hand rendered lettering on trucks is very common. It is packed with little hints and is an index of a particular artist's and region's style. Phrases such as *Horn Please, Horn OK Please, Blow Horn, Awaaz Do, Use Dipper At Night, Keep Distance, etc.* are commonly written in block letters at the back of the truck in roman characters, even if it is transliterated Hindi. As discussed earlier, the crown of the truck also uses hand lettering for writing National Permit, name of owner or transport company, or name given to the truck mostly in roman letters. For these above-mentioned texts, the painters use ultra-bold, slab-serif lettering with angular or curved serif terminals to create a 3D effect which is typical of hand painted writing in India.⁷ Other messages such as speed limit, safety precautions, and the couplets are also written in English running hand. The couplets that are Indian trucks' claim to fame appear in Hindi as well as English, handwritten in cursive letters or when a particular quote becomes very popular – pasted as stickers. As an example, this section will discuss one of the most omnipresent and mysterious phrase at the back of the trucks – Horn Please or Horn OK Please.

The slogan Horn Please or Horn OK Please is the anthem of trucks in India. It simply means to use the horn before trying to pass, since most trucks do not have functional side view

⁷ “Hand Painted Indian Typography.” Richard Frazer, 24 Dec. 2012, richardfrazer.com/blog/hand-painted-indian-typography/.

mirrors and lane discipline is seldom observed, if there are lanes at all. The question is why is there an 'OK' in the middle? There are several theories about the origins of this phrase, but the most intriguing one dates back to World War II, when many trucks in India ran on kerosene. These trucks could explode easily if hit, so it was important to warn other drivers 'Horn Please, On Kerosene' (Chari 2017). Another explanation is that the phrase originated from trucks made by TATA. Since 'OK TATA' is a common way of saying goodbye in India, truckers placed an 'OK' next to the TATA logo, with 'Horn Please' painted on both sides but not connected to it in any way. However, the truckers or the painters themselves have no idea about this history of the phrase. They are merely reproducing what they see with some variation.

As a sign that appears on the back of the trucks, it is an informal cultural convention that denotes that one should blow the horn. But it is symbolic because we have learnt to understand it on the road along with driving etiquettes, and hence must only use the horn if we wish to overtake. For a person who is not a part of the trucking industry and reads this sign while driving behind the truck, it also works to build a connection with the trucks and thus the person learns that sign as symbolic of trucks. In a broader sense, the repetition of this sign on a large number of trucks creates a coherent association to trucks in minds of the readers, thereby making the sign a style signifier of trucks. The variations of design, shadow, colours, positioning, scale, and bevelling are an index of the painter's style (Nelson 1996). Another interesting aspect of this sign is the use of English to create it, where most of the encoders are not able to read and write. It points to the iconic nature of the sign whereby the truckers are able to identify the sign as is without any training in the English language, purely based on its shapes, colour, and placement. Here, instead of being a string of letters, the sign is an icon of another sign's signifier whose signified was to simply honk before overtaking. But with consistent repetition, the sign is an iconic reference to the original sign's signifier.



*Figure 12 Photographs of backs of truck with HORN OK Please/HORN PLEASE written on them
(Source for top image: Meena Kadri
Source for rest of the images: Shantanu Suman)*



Figure 13 Photographs of backs of truck with HORN PLEASE written on them
(Source: Shantanu Suman)



*Figure 14 Photograph of back of truck with HORN OK Please/HORN PLEASE written on it
(Source: Shantanu Suman)*

Devils and Charms

Truck journeys are long and roads are often poorly maintained. Accidents are common and health facilities are not easy to find. The Asian Institute of Transport Development study on trucking operations in India revealed (Study on Trucking Operations in India – Problems & Potential 2000):

In India, nearly 70,000 persons are reported to be killed and over 3 lacs injured due to accidents on roads in a year. According to Central Institute of Road Transport (CIRT) survey, the heavy commercial vehicles which comprise only 7% of the total vehicles are involved in 50% of the road accidents. About half of the truck accidents occur during the night.

Devils are frequently drawn on the front and rear fenders, sides, or on the rear axle itself. They all come with unappealing features such as horns, fangs, outstretched tongue and an elaborate moustache. Their job is simple – to keep evil at bay and to prevent accidents. Many other charms and religious symbols can also be found on trucks, such as the OM sign, swastikas, nimbu-mirchi (a combination of lemon and chilies that's said to ward off evil), and shoes. It's not uncommon to see a shoe or a worn off slipper dangling from the back of a truck with the message 'Joota no. 9' (English translation: shoe size: 9). The shoe itself is an index of a thrashing, and it is a symbol that is culturally taught to be a warning to suggest that if you mess

with me, I'll hit you with my large shoe. 'Buri nazar waale tera muh kaala' (English translation: One with the evil eye, thy be shamed) is a popular slogan at the back of the truck to ward off the evil. All of these singular units, together form a paradigm and the truckers choose one or more out of these to put on the truck.



Figure 15 Photographs of crown of trucks with devils painted on them

Lost in transition – the digitised truck art

Many elements of truck art, due to constant exposure, have become an index of trucks for the common public. Seeing this as an opportunity to connect with their audiences, many brands have tried to use truck art inspired graphics in their merchandise. In the process of using elements of truck art, brands adjust the signs as per their brand personality and graphical style, the taste of their audience, and other cultural aspects of the trade. In this section, we will discuss this appropriation, and thus conversion of a folk art that practices freeform personal expression, into a constrained mass-produced digital art. To do so, we will analyse some of the products by popular brands known for their edgy and graphical merchandise in India and compare the signs discussed so far.

At this point, it must be noted that the audience in case of truck art is not necessarily the public. The art on the trucks, as discussed in the first chapter, is to make the truckers feel at home,

make the government officials sanction a fitness test easily, and lastly to make a statement about the truckers' personal beliefs and attitudes. However, when we are talking about merchandise, the art has a clear commercial motive of selling it to a target audience. This target audience is youths or mid-aged people of metropolitan cities who can afford to buy merchandise for a slightly expensive price if it has good quality graphics on it.⁸⁹

Some of the common ways in which appropriation of truck art alters its meanings are discussed below:

1. Imagery is an important part of a truck's graphical ideology. In using truck as a style for creating digital truck art as well, imagery plays an important role in defining the brand ideology. Therefore, designers make an informed decision of including or excluding certain motifs. The national flag is dropped out because of many reasons. Firstly, the constitution of India has many strict rules concerning the use of national flag in wearables. Pushed by athletes and sport teams, a recent legislation of 2005, the houses of the Parliament passed a bill that allowed for the use of the national flag for wearing above the belt, if worn in a respectful manner.¹⁰ However, since many of the illustrations that are produced for brands tend to go into different types of products, including socks, pants, slippers, bags, bottle openers, mats, bags etc. and the people are

⁸ "Chumbak Creates Waves among the Youth with Its Quirky 'Desi' Appeal." ReleaseMyAd Blog, 14 Jan. 2016, blog.releasemyad.com/2016/01/chumbak-creates-waves-among-the-youth-with-its-quirky-desi-appeal/.

⁹ "My Business: Indian Youth Brand Happily Unmarried." BBC News, BBC, 23 May 2012, www.bbc.com/news/business-18164049.

¹⁰ "You Can Wear the National Colours, It's Legal." Dna, Daily News & Analysis, 6 Dec. 2005, www.dnaindia.com/india/report-you-can-wear-the-national-colours-it-s-legal-1000952.

extremely sensitive about the respect given to the national flag, it's a good idea to not include it in the design to avoid controversy. Another reason for omitting the flag most of the times is that it is a symbol of national ideology which the brand as well as its audience may not wish to be associated with.

2. The culture within which truck art operates has many nuances of its own, as discussed in the previous section and the introduction chapter. The same art motifs when used outside that context of the trucking culture do not represent the same ideals. The culture within which designer merchandise operates, concerns the youth of India (Kumar 2013) There may be overlapping of practices and attitudes in both the cultures, but ultimately the difference of income, education, and lifestyle creates a big gap between them. For example, the icon of cows is an index of homeland for the truckers, but the same sign is a mere icon of a street animal for the youths of metropolitan India. Keeping this in mind, a lot of changes are made to the original motifs while including them or they are completely left out. Another example of such cultural appropriation would be the use of a swastika on trucks. Swastika is a symbol of Hindu mythology and is widely painted on trucks but when creating merchandise for a globally connected youth, the designers leave it out due to its symbolic representation of Nazism (Skidmore 2017).
3. Calligraphy on a truck is a form of expression and its intricate details are an index of the painter's style. However, when digitized, the text becomes highly arbitrary as the designers digitise it and print the same design on thousands of products. It no longer has any variation from other pieces. Calligraphy on truck also derives some meaning from the locus of its painting. For example, when written on the cow, it behaves like a title for the truck, and when painted at the back, it's like a parting message or the end credits of a movie. For a static object printed with truck art styles imagery, this

perspective is invalid and thus the illustrators violate the informal convention of placing particular texts on certain locations.

4. Unlike truck art in which different motifs and elements of the art themselves are signs that are organised into paradigms, and painters choose signs from it to include on the truck; for illustrators, the entire style of truck art is a single unit chosen from many other styles that may form a paradigm. The use of truck art as a style for their illustrations is an icon of actual truck art, and an index of kitsch and Indian culture. The iconic nature of the style can be motivated or arbitrary depending on the product being designed. For example, if the illustrators create an illustration of a truck with truck art on a t-shirt, it is more iconic than a mug carrying the phrase Horn Please along with the colour schemes and a few small patterns from the truck art.
5. The nature of the medium itself makes it very difficult for a painter to alter mistakes. Illustrations created on a computer on the other hand are easily fixable. The painter therefore has to be a lot more well trained and practice the same stroke over and over again before getting to paint the truck using pigment. The illustrator has a reference point of the photographs used to copy the style and come up with a much neater outcome. The many errors or lack thereof that might be spotted in truck art are an index of its people, their qualifications, and education. On illustrations, the same errors are kept deliberately as a mocking index of the truck art, and not of its own creators.

To illustrate this further, we will deconstruct the images of some products from popular brands such as Chumbak and Happily Unmarried.

1. Truck t-shirt by Chumbak: As can be seen in the picture, HORN OK PLEASE is written as a title of the design, using one of the wheels in the truck as its letter. HORN OK PLEASE is also written on the front of the truck body. It has no practical use to be there

but since it's a static t-shirt, the sign is a mere icon of the sign that is symbolic of truck art in India. The spelling error here is not an index of the illustrator's bad grammar but an index of writings on the truck. The cow here is not the zebu as seen on the trucks, neither is it a motif on the truck. It is a commuter cow in the truck which is also a common sight on the highways in India, but what is not common is to see a Holstein Friesian with a black and white patched coat and pink lips. The inclusion of a foreign cow is an index of an illustrator who is exposed to graphics from across the globe. It also cleverly does away with the religious, nationalist, and political symbolism attached to the cow. Another point of disparity here is the text INDIA IS GREAT on the crown of the truck. The crown of the truck is reserved for writing NATIONAL PERMIT and the name of the truck owners or a name given to the truck. But the truck in the illustration is not an actual truck and it doesn't have any practical purpose. The illustrator can take the liberty of writing this text on top of the truck crown. Here, it can also be noted that this text is an index of the brand philosophy of Chumbak that 'was founded in 2010 as an idea for creating a range of fun souvenirs for India and Indians'.¹¹ Apart from that, the whole illustration itself, due to its outlines, number plate, and the colour scheme of the truck is an icon of a real truck since it is retaining the dry leaf brown colour of the trucks in India and has more similarities too such as a devil and snake in the front and lemon chillies hanging at the back. The devil and the lemon chilli however, are not symbolic of keeping evil at bay. A lot of the symbolic and indexical meaning of individual signs in truck art is lost in digitising and using it as an art style.

¹¹ As stated on their website: <https://www.chumbak.com/about/>



Figure 16 Horn Ok Please t-shirt (Source: Chumbak)



Figure 17 HORN PLEASE Mug (Source: Happily Unmarried)

2. HORN PLEASE mug by Happily Unmarried: The pictorial motifs are used as a pattern which is iconic of truck art. The big difference here is that of scale. On trucks, the birds are much bigger, and are almost the same size as that of each letter on the truck. However, the illustrator here has to consider that the connecting point to the audiences is the text, and the shape of the mug allows for only so much. Everything else gets diminished in size and importance. The bird is not a symbol of religious faith or an informal convention of the trucking culture. It is only an icon of a truck art motif. The

primary text on the mug HORN PLEASE uses the same techniques as a painter such as ultra-bold slab-serif glyphs, bevelling, and shadows to create a 3D effect. Many a times on trucks, there is an error in gauging the source of light, and keeping it coherent. The shadows fall on different directions for different letters. However, the creation of a type by trained graphic designers leaves little room for such an error. Interestingly, however, this mug's graphic does not take into consideration that it is printed on a curved surface. The style of the text here is not an index of the illustrator's individual style but an icon of truck art's sign, whereas the complete sign is a metonym to index truck art.

It can be seen from this analysis that decorations on trucks are signs that work in multiple layers to negotiate meaning. These signs, cannot be bucketed into the definitions of icon, index, and symbol as they share properties of all. The final meaning of the text is a result of positioning, scaling, and colouring of these signs with regard to each other, as well as the cultural experiences, emotions, and understanding of the reader. The same signs when used digitally as part of an aesthetic style inspired by truck art, become largely iconic. The brands or the illustrators embed new indexical properties into the sign and shed the symbolism deliberately unless it appeals to a large base of their audience.



Conclusion

The purpose of this research was twofold. Firstly, it intended to apply some basic concepts from the discipline of visual semiotics to study the meaning carried by art on trucks in northern states of India (Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana). The basic thesis was that this analysis, when put in context with the socio-political, and cultural knowledge of the region, would provide insights into the trucking culture of India and the meaning negotiated by various signs present on trucks. Secondly, this research compares the meaning of individual signs to the meaning of the same signs used in the digital art style inspired by truck art; and the meaning of truck art as a practice to the meaning of choosing this art style for branded merchandise.

As explained in the first chapter, a truck is an important part of the Indian highways and the public imagination. The practice of truck art silently (or with blaring horns), negotiates meaning that is accessible by billions of readers everyday – which in itself is reason enough to take a careful look at the practice. Many researchers of truck art such as Elias and Suman argue that truck art is representative of the beliefs and philosophies of truckers. However, this research shows that it is not the only deciding factor. Elias discusses the sociocultural landscape in Pakistan to contextualise truck art but does not touch upon any legal restrictions. In India, the legal infrastructure as well as its enforcers play a vital role in influencing art on truck – but they are not just restricted to the rules. The enforcers who are in direct contact with the truckers influence them into adopting messages of the ruling government. The nuances of truck art, as described in the introduction help in building an understanding of the trucking culture in India which in turn helps in decoding the importance and nature of signs in truck art better.

The use of some basic semiotic concepts (such as Peirce's and Saussure's typology) provided the tools for a systematic search for meaning in the signs used in truck art. The theories and philosophical aspects of semiotics can be very detailed and vigorous, and this body

of work does not claim to make a contribution to furthering the academic aspects of semiotic analysis. But it does illustrate that the application of semiotics to a subject such as truck art can be a useful and systematic tool of analysis. The basic takeaway was that truck art is embedded with numerous semiotic messages that are worth exploring through analysis using tools derived from study of semiotics.

The study of truck art is relatively undocumented in India, even though it makes a compelling case of narrating the story of a country. As described in the second chapter, there are only few books and newspaper stories that explore the background of this practice in India. However, there is a large number of bloggers, especially foreigners perhaps because of a sudden cultural flux, who took interest in decoding the aesthetics and cultural meaning of truck art on their online blogs. This study relies heavily on primary data collected by me in a previous study in Delhi and by Shantanu Suman in Rajasthan for a background in understanding the trucking industry and for images to analyse. Due to the limitation of resources and time, the sample data is only from two states and thus the findings cannot be extrapolated to the entire country.

In the fourth chapter, detailed analysis of popular motifs that appear on truck art has been performed. Due to time constraints, only 3 motifs, 1 calligraphic phrase, and a paradigm of devils and charms has been analysed to showcase the range of semiotic meanings in seemingly simple drawings, patterns, and letters. Each sign shows properties of being an icon, index, and symbol. Many informal conventions have also been spotted in the practice of truck art. The meaning of these signs also changes when they are seen together, instead of being analysed separately. For example, if a big cow and calf at the back is the only motif on a truck, it has a different meaning than having a small cow and calf alongside many other motifs. Thus, the meaning of the text is deduced from many other factors such as positioning, scaling, and colouring. The cultural experiences, emotions, and understanding of the reader is equally

capable of changing the meaning of these signs. For example, in the analysis of the bird, the icon produces different symbolic interpretants as per its context, geography, and the extent to which the reader shares the graphic ideology. These textual analyses are useful in the comparison of the same signs when created digitally using truck art as an aesthetic style. This transition, renders most of the signs largely iconic as it becomes an icon of actual truck art. New indexical properties are coded onto the sign and the original symbolism of the sign is lost.

The considerations in both art forms are drastically different. For example, a truck is a moving vehicle with practical purpose. It is primarily intended for business, and as discussed before there are many predefined rules and regulations that truck art must adhere to. The real estate on a truck that is used for painting is thus what is left out after including the other mandatories. In case of branded merchandise, digital art has to be printed on a material and must be adapted according to the product that is being designed. As Marshall McLuhan noted, medium is the message. The form of the medium embeds itself on any message that it transmits. The same is visible in the comparison of truck art on the truck and as a digital art style. Exactly same signs on trucks carry different meanings as compared to their digital counterparts on branded merchandise.

This research is a humble beginning of academic scholarship of truck art in India. The semiotic analysis of trucks from across all states can lead to a wealth of knowledge. The art on truck comes packed with many signs and study of those with help of visual semiotics can help in tracing the history of India's graphical ideology.

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