



Typography and Diversity
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Opportunities for New Digital Typefaces Inspired from Lettering in Bollywood Film Titles and Street Graphics in India

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Abstract: Cinema came to India in late 19th century when the first cinematography show was organized by Lumiere Brothers on 7th July 1897 at Watson Hotel in Bombay. Indian cinema is defined by the films produced in different languages across India. Bollywood is a Hindi language film industry based in Mumbai. Since the beginning, Bollywood had shown a dynamic culture of film publicity which includes several forms across the timeline. Title design is one of the key elements of film and film publicity materials and plays an important role in communicating the theme of the film. Before the arrival of digital technology in early 1990s, film titles were designed manually. Because of this there are significant variations in title design in terms of colour, letterform and visual texture. Introduction of digital technology affected the livelihood of lettering / poster artists and forced them to look for other options. Most of them found their way in different sectors like signboard and number plate design. In this transition, along with the skills, they also brought influence from film titles to street signboards, which are later reflected in few digital typefaces. This paper looks into the transition of lettering art from film publicity materials to the signboards and sees how one hurdle has created another opportunity and resulted in to new development bringing diversity in term of letterform structure, colour, style and overall look. This paper highlighted lettering in film poster with focus on title design and lettering on signboards mainly focused on shop signs. It also listed examples of the key letters having potential of digitalization.

Key Words: *Bollywood, Digital Typeface, Film titles, Lettering, Signboards, Street Graphics*

1. Introduction

India has a history of diverse visual culture and languages. This includes street graphics, folk art, local art and craft, theatre art, Cinema and many more. Street graphics mainly includes signboards and street art created in public locations. Film poster is also a part of street graphics which has its presence since the inception of cinema in Indian. India has witnessed the first motion picture in late nineteenth century on July 7th 1896 when for the

first time a cinematograph show was organized in Watson’s hotel in Mumbai (Thoraval, 2000). Indian cinema industry is defined by the film produced all across the country in different languages. It is a regional based industry which reflects the cultures of different states of India (Mazumdar, 2003). Bollywood is Mumbai based Hindi cinema industry known for its melodramatic and multi genre nature of the films. It is one of the most popular, diverse and successful industry in the world (Ahmed, 1992; Matusitz & Payano, 2012). Films produced from this center are of hybrid nature and mostly produced in Hindi language showing influence from India as well as foreign culture (Devraj & Bouman, 2010). Bollywood has very rich and diverse pattern of visual culture in terms of film publicity which has profound influence on the visual culture in India across the timeline. Film publicity ranges from newspaper advertisement to the big hording and banner art. Figure 1 illustrates the different dominating forms of film publicity in Bollywood.

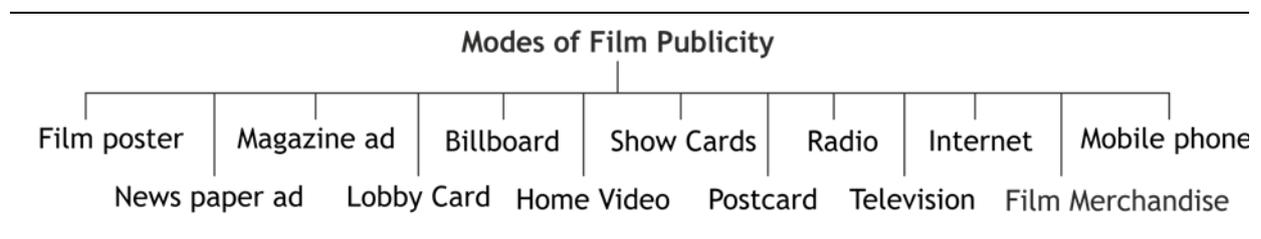


Figure. 1 Different forms of film publicity in Bollywood.

Title gives an identity to a film and many a times act as a logotype (Bell, 2002).It is interesting to see that most of the publicity material feature film’s title as an integral part. Unlike the conventional typography, title design has been explored in many ways like letter’s structure, colour and visual texture to convey meaning and theme of the film directly to the viewers. It also features other design variables like juxtaposition of image and text, use of image as text and transformation of type into image to make title more expressive (Shahid & Udaya Kumar, 2017).

Based on the poster making techniques, the whole timeline can be divided into two parts: pre-digital and digital. Pre-digital can be again subdivided into hand painted and cut-paste. Figure 2 illustrate the timeline with key features and examples.

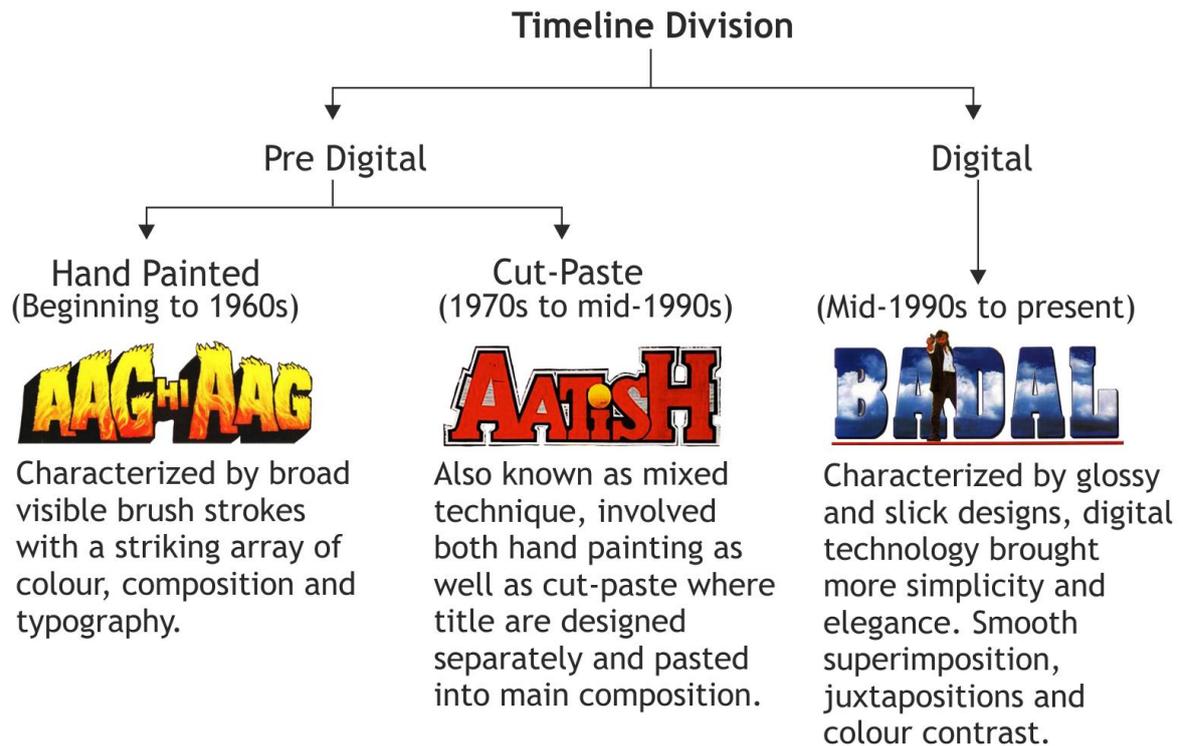
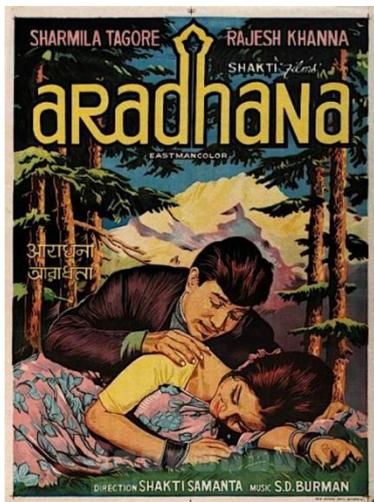


Figure. 2 Timeline based on poster making techniques.

Before the digital revolution, hand painted lettering used to be characteristics feature of film publicity materials and commercial signboards. Handmade techniques of poster making have contributed in developing a unique visual language in both the sectors with lots of variations. This was due to the involvement of different style and techniques (Shahid & Udaya Kumar, 2017). Title design was done either by lettering or calligraphy. Both the techniques involve the creation of letter shapes but there is no any system so that these letters can be replicated in same proportion. Because of this one can notice variation in every letterform used again (Alessio, 2013). But due to globalization and introduction of digital technology in mid-1990s, Indian streetscape witnesses a “culture shock” replacing the rich visual and symbolic culture (Mathur, 2005). This almost put an end to the diversity in street graphics especially in signboards and brought uniformity in terms of materials, colours, layout and use of typeface. Opposite to this, practice of title design remains unchanged and customized expressive lettering continued based on the requirement of story and theme of the film. Digital technology also hit hard to the artists involved in film publicity industry. In the film ‘*Fading Canvas*’ by Manohar Singh Bisht, many poster artists have acknowledged the power of digital technology and its adverse effect on their livelihood (Bisht, 2015). Because of this many of them forced to look for other jobs.

For example Parvez¹, Prithvi Soni², painter Shabbu , Charan (featured on *handpaintedtype.com*) and most of them found their way in different professions like art exhibitions, signboard and number plate design (Kureshi). This transition brought lots of influence from their previous profession to the new field and one cannot ignore the influence of title design on street graphics specially signboard design.

As across the timeline poster making techniques and printing technology have changes vigorously influencing the letterform structure and colour, this paper tried to emphasis the distinctive feature of letterform as well as overall title to see the variations. This study has only investigated title design in Bollywood film poster and signboards (see figure 3) and an attempt has been made to understand the key visual design attributes which have been passed on to signboard design.



Source: Osianama



Photo credit: Nanki Nath



Figure. 3 Subjects of investigation: Film Titles and Signboards.

¹ Parvez is a banner and poster artist based in Lucknow. He took the profession of *number plate design*. According to him, the introduction of digital design and advance printing technology took the job of many artists who rely on film publicity industry for their livelihood.

² Prithvi Soni is a poster and banner art designer based in Bombay. He shifted to the field of *art exhibitions* after digital revolution in the industry. According to him, though digital technology has snatched the job of many artists, it has also brought revolution in film publicity. It has provided the opportunity of generating many options in quick time frame, use of digital image and many more.

2. Methodology

This paper is based on the analysis and observations carried out on 886 popular film's titles. The popularity is based on three parameters: highest box office collection, award winning and milestone films in Bollywood cinema. Then the selected samples were compared with the signboards, especially shop signs to see the influence if any in direct (exactly copied) as well as indirect (with modifications) form.

Visual semiotics approach has been utilized to understand the title design. Visual semiotics is one domain of applied semiotics which deals with the study of signs, sign systems, and communicative processes in a specific context (Rose, 2012). This study is more emphasized on syntactic and visual semantic part (see figure 4) to understand the structure and meaning making in title design.

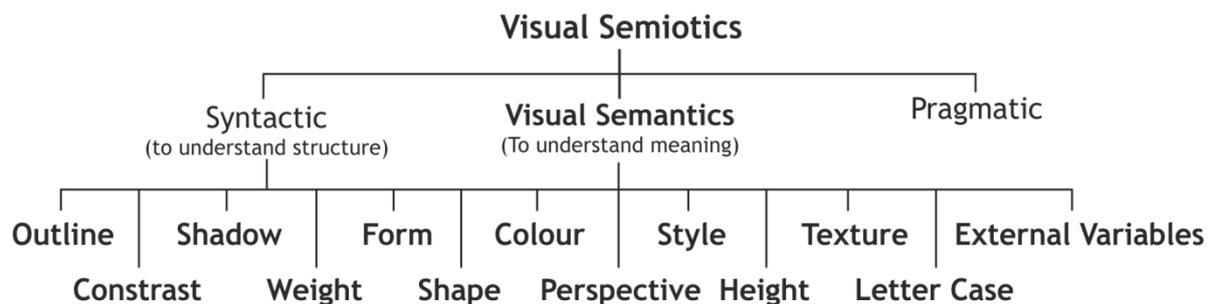


Figure. 4 Framework to understand structure and meaning of the film titles.

3. Title Design in Bollywood film poster

Film's title has occupied every space from title sequence to others film publicity materials. Similar to film title sequence which helps to nurture audience expectations, suggest the film's overall theme and setup the storyline (Gross, 2015), expressive title of the film has a power to evoke the films overall mood to the viewers at first sight. Since the beginning, it has got special treatment and occupied significant place in may film publicity medium like film poster, lobby cards, show cards, muhurat Cards, banners etc. Figure 5 shows the example of few publicity materials for film *An Evening in Paris* (1967) and use of title in the layout.



News paper advertisement



Poster



Song Synopsis Booklet



Lobby Card

Figure. 5 Title used in publicity materials of *An Evening in Paris* (1967).

Title syntax shows different design variables which has been referred as visual attributes in this paper. These attributes act collectively to make intended meaning out of a film title along with providing good visibility and distinctive feature. Table 1 illustrates the different attributes and its major significance in title design with examples.

Visual Attributes	Major Contribution	Examples
Shadow	Helps to make title stand out in poster layout and increase its legibility from the far.	ANKHEN
Outline		Abhimaan
Weight	Creates emphasis and makes the title loud. Mostly bold titles are evident.	amanush
Contrast	Increases the legibility but are less evident in Bollywood films title.	ACHHUT
Height	Creating emphasis and increase legibility from the far. In most of the cases larger x-height is evident.	anuraag
Style	Helps in depicting mood and feelings like steady, comic, speedy etc.	BARSAT KIRAT
Letter case	Creating emphasis and increases readability and legibility. Uppercase is evident in most of the titles.	BANDINI
Visual Texture	In depicting connotative meanings related with mood and theme of the film.	AAKROSH
Letterform Structure	Helps in depicting connotative mood. For example rounded form mostly associated with comedy whereas sharp and edgy with action, adventure.	Angoor COMEDY OF TWINS
Perspective	To create large impact. Helps in creating mood associated with genres like historical, action and adventure.	DHARMAM

Title Shape	Contribute directly in perception of meaning without any ambiguity.	
Letter as image	To generate direct and symbolic meaning. Act as effective tool to communicate theme of the films to illiterate as well as literate audience.	
Image as letter		
Word as image	To create direct meaning in most of the cases.	
Juxtaposition of Type & Image	Helps to intensify communicative power of letter as well as word and show strong denotative property	

Table. 1 Visual attributes and their contribution in title design. Source: (Shahid & Udaya Kumar, 2017)

4. Adoption of film title's attributes in Signboards

Title shows direct as well as indirect influence on signboards. Nanki Nath and Ravi Poovaiah have found the significant influence of movie poster themes on the colour trends used in the shop signs of cities in India (Nath & Poovaiah, 2015). It is interesting to look at how colour being a primary visual attribute, helps to reflect the thought and aspirations of particular time period influenced by socio-political setup in India. Influences have been in many terms inspired from different art and craft movement and local scenario. In this section we are only discussing only significant attributes which has been key stimulus for the transition and influence on signboards. These are colour, title shape, letterform, Visual texture, background panel, and external design variables.

4.1. Colour

Colour is one of the most significant attributes in title design which play great role in conveying the mood of the film. In case of Bollywood film's title, it is more symbolic in nature (Shahid & Udaya Kumar, 2017) and its use is very genre specific (Haggard, 1988). It also helps in visibility and distinction in crowded visual information. Looking at 886 samples, it shows interesting statistics, wherein 81% cases shows only four colour and their combinations. These are red, Yellow, White and Black. Use of limited colours in early time is also because of the printing technology and colours availability. Use of red and yellow might be because of its visibility from the far and ability to stand out in dark background. These types of combinations have also been explored in signboards design. Figure 6 illustrate list of dominating colours with examples of both film titles and signboards.

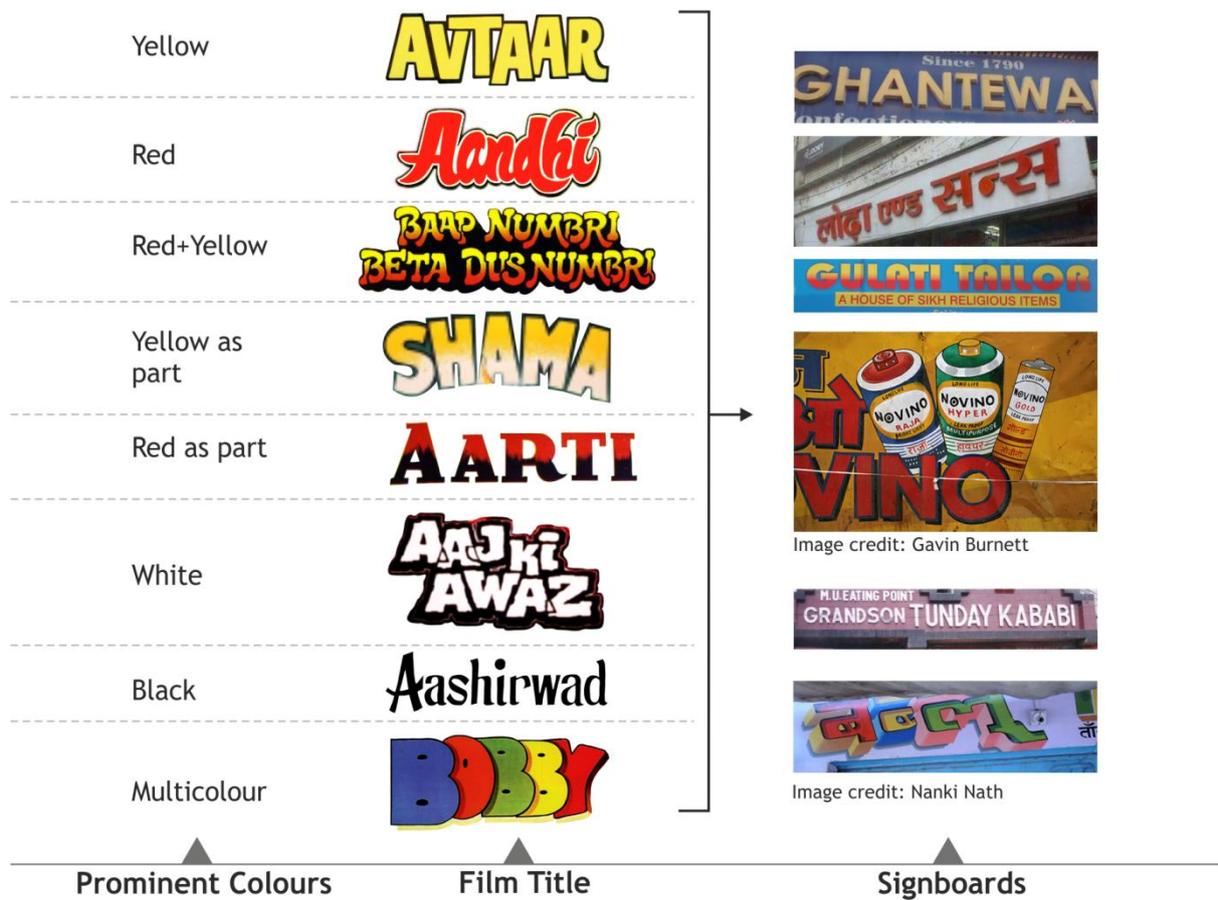


Figure. 6 Prominent colours used and its influence on signboard design.

4.2. Title Shape

Overall shape of the title has also influence on streetscape in India. Title design has been featured in nine prominent shapes in the film posters. It appears that the use of different shapes is guided by the theme of the film like in *Footpath* (1953) where shape and look of the title itself give a sense of footpath. Similarly firm structure with perspective in *Dharm Aur Qanoon* (1984) and *Dharmatma* (1975) is going well with the storyline and theme of the film. Similar adaptation can be noticed in the signboards but the purpose may be different. One reason can be to create different look so that signage can stand out in crowded platform full of signboards and advertising materials. Figure 7 shows different style with examples and their adaption in the signboard design.

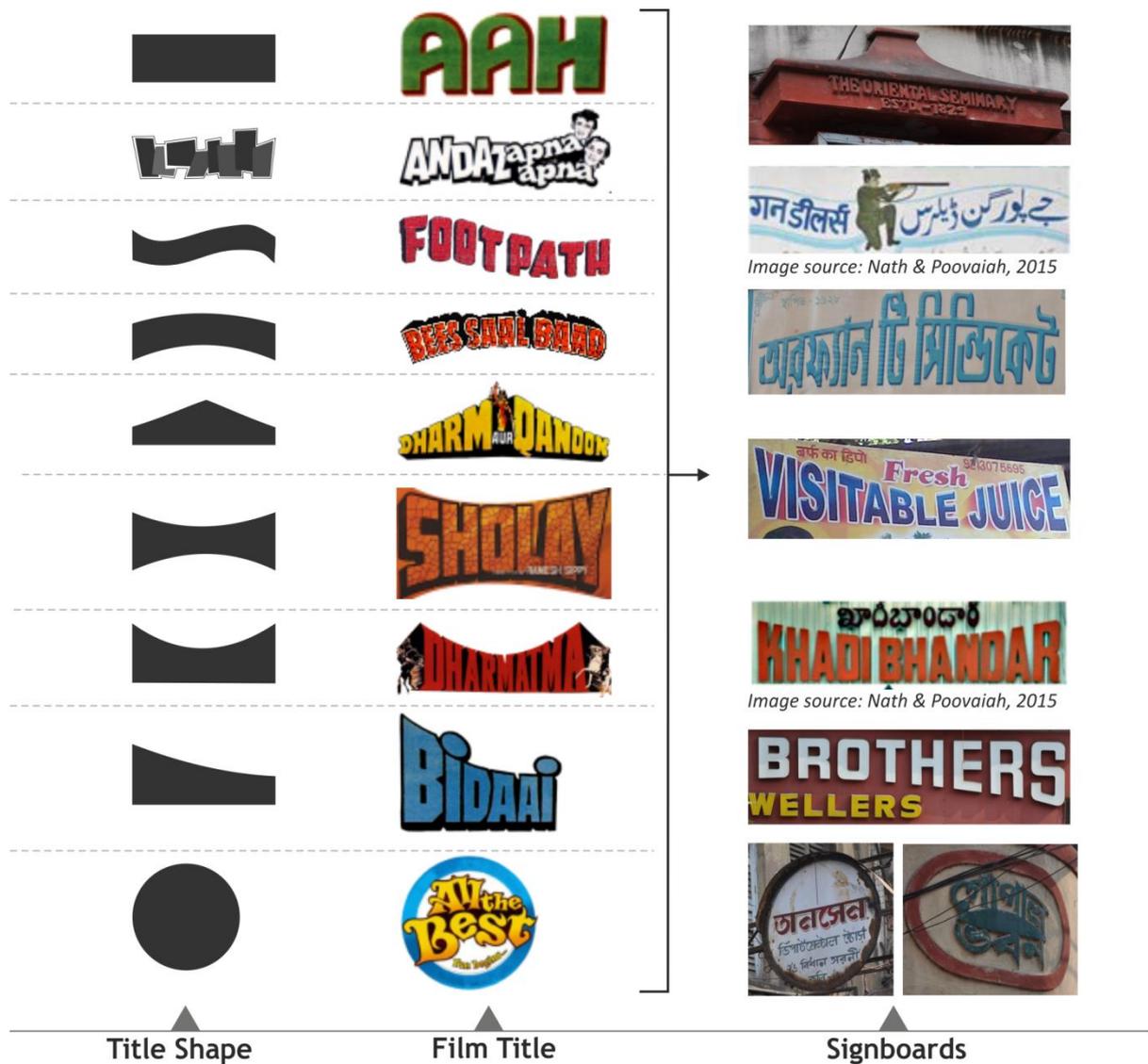


Figure. 7 Prominent title shapes with examples.

4.3. Letterform / Letter's Structure

Letterform structure have significant role in understanding both connotative and denotative meaning out of film's title. Different letterform attributes has been used to depict different mood. For example flat rectangular is more popular for art and social drama film, rounded shape for comedy films, decorative for historical films etc. When the title is long and casual, a calligraphic style is more prominent like in *Dil Hai Ki Manta Nahin* (1991), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) and *Dil Toh Pagal Hai* (1997). Figure 8 shows dominating letterform with examples and similar adaptation in signboards.

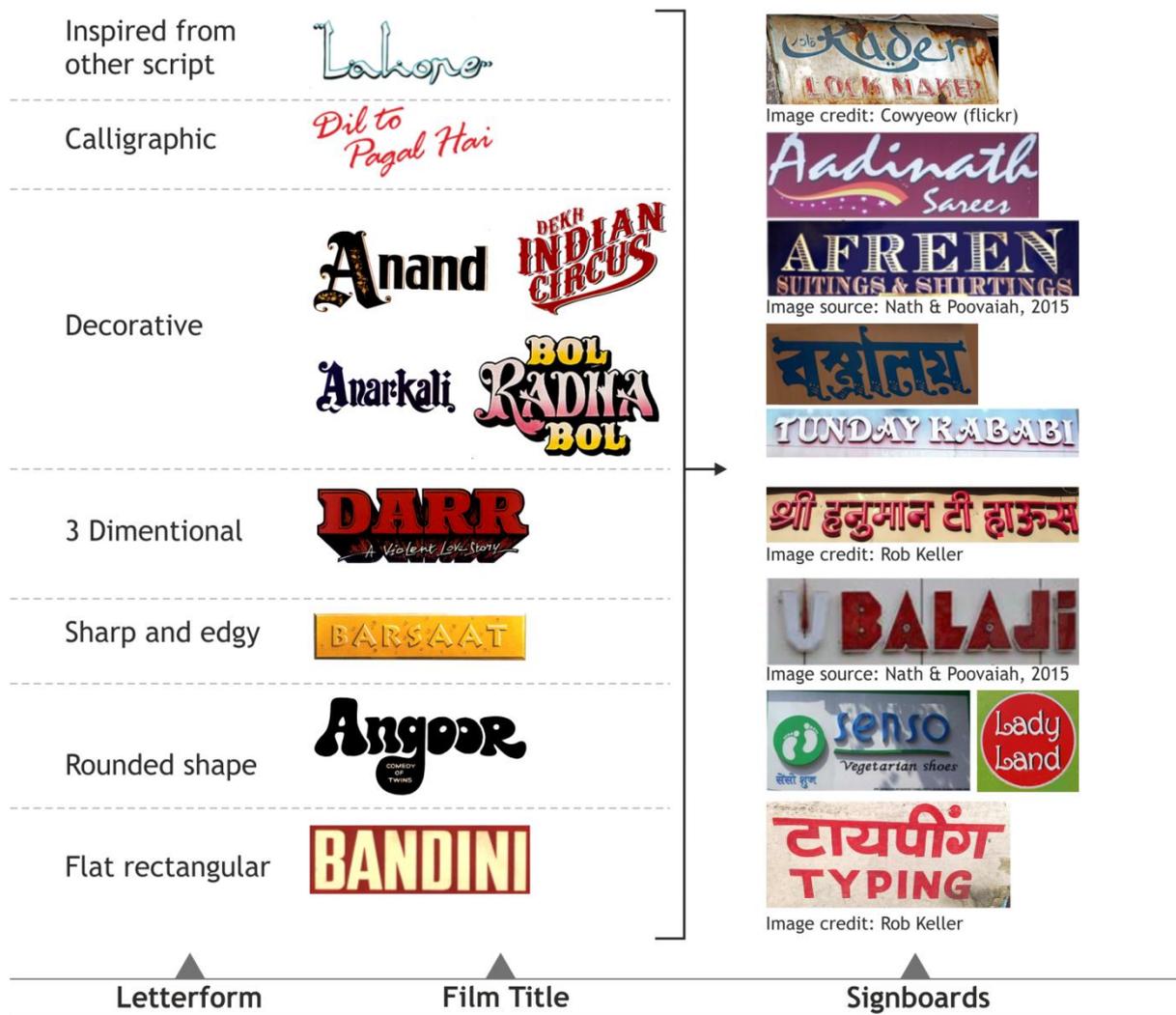


Figure. 8 Dominating letterform with examples.

4.4. Visual Texture

Like colour, visual texture is another most significant attribute used to convey the theme of the film. It helps in depicting connotative meaning of film's title. Uses of visual texture become popular after 1960s when majority of films were in rebellion nature based on social issues. Films based on Masala themes in late 70s and 80s also witnessed lot of exploration with visual texture in title design to convey multi genre nature. Majorly seven type of visual texture have dominated in title design. These are flat, embossed, grunge, broken or sliced, fire, stone, and metallic. Figure 9 shows the list of dominating visual textures with examples in both title design and signboards.



Figure. 9 Dominating visual texture in film titles and signboards.

4.5. Background Panel

In many cases background panels have been used as a part of title design like signboards. It is hard to say that which of them have influenced the design, but looking at the majority, it seems that in this case signboards have significant influence on title design. Films like *Awara* (1951), *Barsaat* (1955), *Baadshah* (1999), *Chalte Chalte* (2003), *Dhoom* (2004), *Bunty Aur Babli* (2005), *Golmaal* (2006), *Chak De India* (2007), *Band Baaja Baaraat* (2010), *Bol Bachchan* (2012) and many more have utilized background panel in their title design. Figure 10 shows examples in this category.

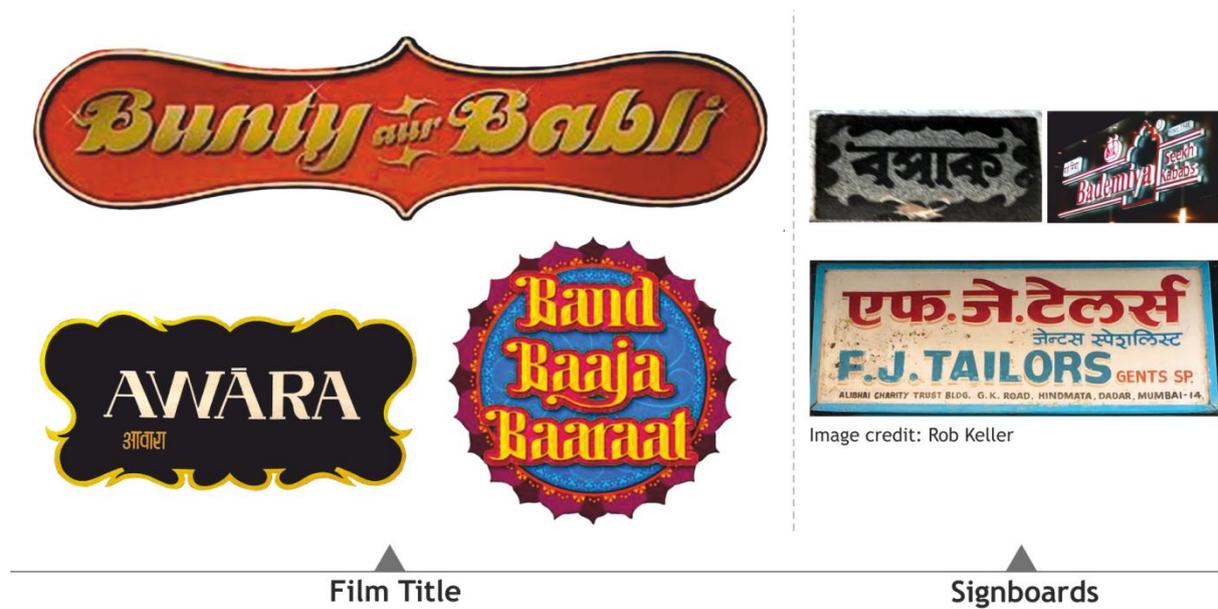


Figure. 10 Use of background panel in title design and signboards.

4.6. Use of External Design variables

External design variables play a significant role in conveying the theme of the film directly to the viewers. This has been explored a lot in case of title design in Bollywood films. It has been done in two ways, 1) juxtaposition of type and image and 2) fusion of type and image. Again fusion of type and image has been done in three ways; 1) letter as an image, 2) Image as a letter, and 3) word as an image. These approaches of using external variables have helped in exaggerating the meaning of a film title. Whenever we do a combination of type and image, it helps to increase communicative powers of letter as well as image. According to Philip B. Meggs, when image and words are used objectively, they show a very strong denotative property and generally free from the personal bias or connotative qualities (Meggs, 1992). This property has been used creatively to enhance the visual likeness and to some extent, address the illiterate section of cinema audience in effective manner. Conversion of whole shop sign into an image is very rare but other attributes can be easily found in the Indian streetscape. Figure 11 shows such examples in this category.

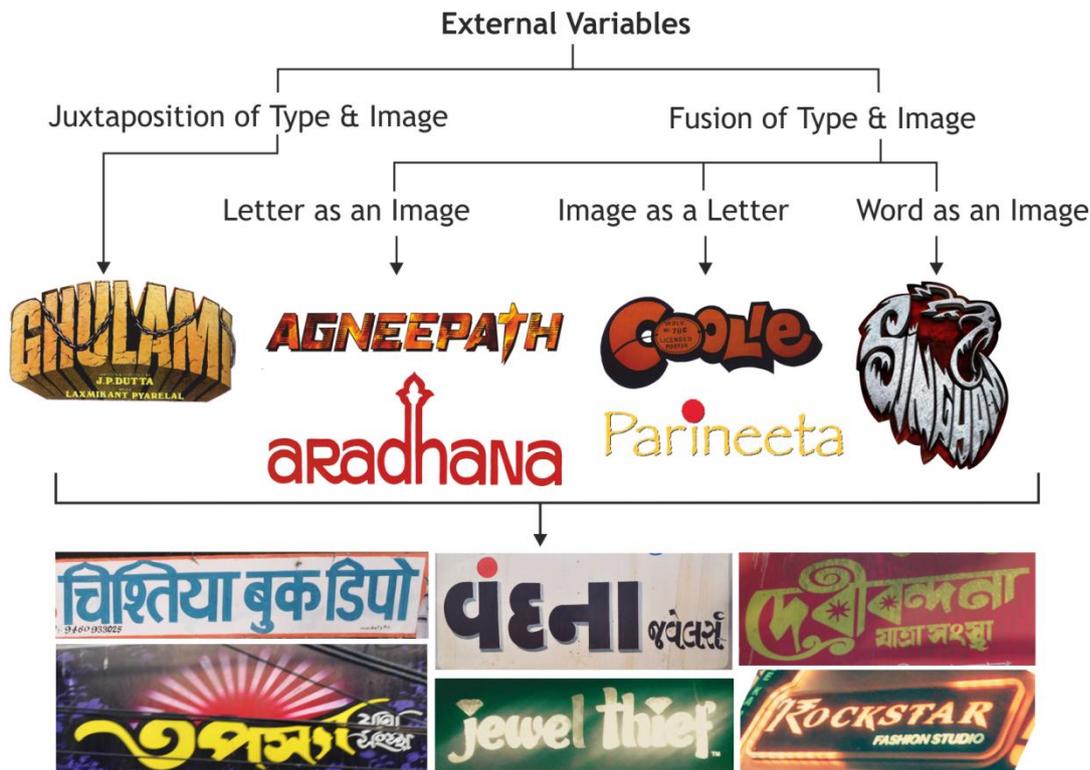
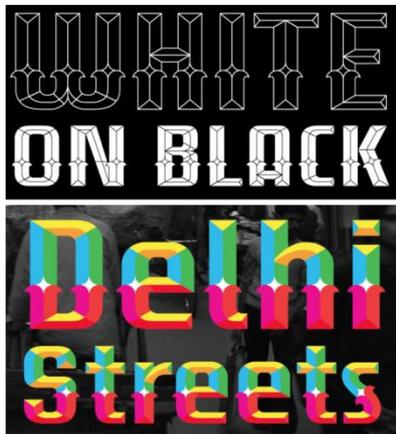


Figure. 11 External design variables and their use in title as well as signboard design.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

Finding reveals that lettering in Bollywood film titles shows significant influence on signboards design in term of adaptation of typeface style, layout, colour, visual texture and composition. Examples throughout the paper illustrate the richness of Indian flavor in terms of decorative typeface, use of rich colours and sophisticated designs. Examples also shows how culturally enriched designers and artist have used their individual styles to produce huge variations across the titles and signboards. Digital revolution has brought an end to this diverse visual culture. Many artists have choice to switch over the old technique to new technique but most of them have refused because of their passion and love for the hand-painted style. But when we look from other perspective, introduction of digital technology in film publicity have resulted into migration of skilled poster / lettering artist from film industry to the others sectors like signboard design. This resulted into lots of influence from lettering in Bollywood to the street graphics. Now what? What to do next? Is this finding suggesting something? Is it possible to digitalize few unique letters to preserve it and use it for the future? There are many more such questions looking forward to be addressed. Kareena Gianani has written on DNA (Daily News & Analysis) page that in this digital era hand painted lettering has almost disappeared from the commercial signboards, but few people like Hanif Kureshi and Sarang Kulkarni are making an effort to digitalize this vintage typography (Gianani, 2011). These people have

taken a pain to preserve unique lettering style used by street artist by transforming it into digital typefaces. The result is whimsical. One can visit the website *handpaintedtype.com* and find digital typefaces like *Painter Kafeel* and *Painter Umesh* showing Indian richness in terms of intricacy, decoration and colourfulness (see figure 12).



Painter Kafeel



Painter Umesh

Figure. 12 Digital typeface *Kafeel* and *Umesh*. Image source: www.handpaintedtype.com

This suggest towards the possibilities of digitalizing unique hand drawn letters used in film titles and created an opportunity to develop digital typefaces having profound connection with Indian culture. See figure 13, which illustrate few letters with unique characteristics features across the timeline having potential to get digitalized for future reference and use.

As across the timeline technology and techniques have changed drastically influencing the letterform and colour, in the future study, it would be interesting to evaluate the distinctive features of letters in chronological order to see the variations across the timeline.



Figure. 13 Letters having potential to be converted into digital typeface (these are few examples; there are more in the list).

Acknowledgement

We express our deepest gratitude to Dr. Nanki Nath, Assistant Professor, Department of Design, IIT Guwahati, and Subhajit Chandra, PhD scholar, Department of Design IIT Guwahati for sharing images of signboards taken from different state across the India.

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