

Traveling Canvases of Pakistan: Visual Storytelling of Truck Art through Documentary

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: Contemporary style of documentation incorporated with the non-fictional filming is adopted as a fresh and challenging way to promote the craft sector of Pakistan. To introduce the local crafts globally, Truck art-a local craft has been selected as a research practice for its narration in the form of documentary. This research paper analyses the subject of documentary to narrate an informative and authenticated investigation on Pakistani Truck art and its reinterpretation in consumer goods.

Methodology: A hybrid documentary style is designed to incorporate, combining explanatory written text based on extensive research, interviews of the artisans for first-hand knowledge and voice over narration to communicate with the audience through storytelling. A research-based documentary to generate knowledge and skill on traditional craft is devised, combining expository, interactive and observational modes of innovative tool.

Findings: The outcome of the research suggests that a research-based documentary on Truck art will provide a stable formal approach in transmitting a transparent and coherent information in a non-traditional way to broadcast on social media platforms for broader audience.

Conclusion: Thus, the promotion of the local craft through documentary will work as the driving force to forecast the cultural and aesthetic impact locally and globally, which in turn paves way to earn creative capital and contribute to global cultural diversity.

Keywords: Documentary, Observational, Culture, Craft Sector, Interactive, Hybrid, Promotion, Research Based.

1. INTRODUCTION

Documentary is described as “cinematic idiom” promoting the illusion of immediate reality. Documentaries are associated with “truth claim” to a category, creating a connection to history which surpasses the analogical status of its fictional counterpart (Bruzzi, 2006). The purpose of a documentary film is mainly to explore factual experiences and events through visually artistic storytelling while involving the narrative technique (University, 2024). Documentary is a “non-fictional-motion-picture” and the role of narrator is to organize the storyline to make sense to the audience (Otway, 2015).

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Previously, documentary making as a research tool was not a preferred medium because of high cost and unavailability of analogue technology; however low cost webcams and digital cameras attached to mobile phones make it possible (Bilal et al., 2025). For the reason, a narrational strategy has been selected to make a documentary on Truck art of Pakistan, providing an original framework where truck artisans will serve as the primary narrators.

An objective representation through filmmaking on Truck art provides a detailed account on this craft as it has an individual locally developed style of illustrating colourful and ornate iconography. By adopting the observational method in research, it is displayed that symbolic motifs are painted by the truck artisans to represent the varied beliefs that helps in creating a connection between individual and cultural identity. Truck art is an indigenous craft, and its iconography is frequently employed by the artisans originated from their visual knowledge, but the purpose is not to imitate natural motifs. Local and global audience are fascinated by these colourful images because of the simplification of form, unpretentiousness, and childlike expression (Zaidi, 2009).

The imagery of trucks can be categorized into various types, like religious, mythical, secular, cultural, and everyday life scenes. Iconography of Truck Art is known for its colourful imagery and floral and geometrical designs, inspired from nature but depict in stylized forms. Significant qualities include simplified and two-dimensional forms, use of bright and arbitrary colours along with dark outline, decorative quality and symbolism hidden behind visual reality. Mostly depicted imagery on trucks is representation of flora and fauna, contemplative landscape, fabled creatures, common life scenes, jets and aeroplanes, and popular personalities. The imagery like *Buraq*, pigeon and rose are repainted by several contemporary artists because of their emotive nature (Hashmi, 2009). Pigeon and rose are considered highly symbolic and are associated with feminine subject matter in visual art (Dalmia & Hashmi, 2007).

1.1 Problem Statement

A documentary using the magical template of verisimilitude will throw light on the fact that Truck art has risen as a craft that has been serving as a symbol of Pakistani cultural craft globally. From the streets of Pakistan to fashion weeks in Paris, Truck art motifs have created a unique and individual character and established themselves as a cultural identity of Pakistan. However, the craft sector of Pakistan hasn't been explored with all its intricacies, making it high time that media is employed to showcase these crafts in terms of all aspects.

1.2 Significance of the Study

A short documentary based on hybrid style is under-designing to perform as a research practice along with a specific production process including explanatory written text, interviews and voice over narration. Key information is collected through field trips, interviews of the artisans, truck art entrepreneurs and government officials engage with craft sector. This documentary will serve as a research-based digital source of information, promotional material on web pages and social media and an effective tool to grab global attention.

1.3 Research Objectives

This research examines a non-traditional method of promotion such as documentary film for the benefit of craft sector of Pakistan in diverse societies by transmitting Truck art on social media platforms. Visual research method is under scrutiny as an innovative technique based on extensive investigation to provide comprehensive scholarly work on Truck art for global promotion in digital era.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The documentary genre has evolved in the recent years and is used as a broader term to describe the non-fictional films that relay on some documents or facts to capture reality (Documentaries, accessed 31.08.2025.). The father of documentary filmmaking John Grierson claimed that documentary is an art form and not news bulletin and considered it a "new and vital art form." Its purpose is not to transfer

information, not reportage and nor creating newsreel but “A creative treatment of actuality (Minh-Ha, 1990).” In 1929, he directed a documentary film on British fishing industry, which laid the foundation of documentary filmmaking in Britain (Magee, 2012).

Documentary can be anti-aesthetic, but an art form bound within the limits of factuality. Alexander Kluge¹ described that three cameras are used for the shooting of a documentary, and these include the ‘camera in the true sense,’ ‘the mind of filmmaker’ and the ‘generic patterns of the documentary films,’ created to match the expectations of patronisers. This use of third camera suggests that documentary does not simply depict facts, but it photographs “isolated facts and an assemblage is created from these coherent facts according to three divergent schemes, excluding the remaining facts and factual contexts”(Minh-Ha, 1990).

The display of reality is more fabulous and manipulative than fiction and it give rise to the development of cinematic technology that encourages direct and immediate contact to reality. Bill Nichols, an American documentary theorist in his book *Introduction to Documentary* describes six modes of documentary film which includes “Expository, Observational, Participatory (later renamed as Interactive mode), Reflexive and Performative.” These modes throw light on diverse styles and types of documentaries describing different qualities and formal characteristics. Similarly, these six modes are helpful in creating a framework and setting up conventions for a documentary and usually different modes are combined in a film, although one mode will be dominant (Bruzzi, 2006).

The diverse forms of documentary employing varying techniques are helpful in creating diverse experiences for the spectators. Nicholes considers that a documentary encompasses many modes and these modes are helpful in analysing and creating documentaries. Expository mode in documentary making can be seen as the direct presentation of the argument while involving extensive research, focusing on facts rather than emotions. The research includes the interviews, visuals and narration in the support of argument. The expository documentary practises the ‘voice of God’ narration, in which a scripted commentary is used by the author along with the illustrated visuals to explain the subject to the audience. The aim of this style of documentary is to provide information objectively with the support of evidence (Selway, 2017).

Similarly, Observational documentaries are also called the ‘direct cinema or fly-on-the-wall’ documentary, aiming the direct experience of a phenomenon. Events are observed by the filmmaker in a free environment, without being intrusive to the subject. Filmmaker is not supposed to intervene in the shooting and there are no questions and narration, leaving the interpretation on the viewer. Whereas interactive mode, formerly called participatory highlights the sharing relationship between participant and documentarist in form of interviewing and capturing reactions. This mode explores a controversial subject by the film producer to represent the process to the spectators (Selway, 2017).

Reflexive mode presents commentary on documentary making while creating a relationship between the audience, filmmaker and the process of filmmaking. Instead of presenting facts, it offers questions for reflection and preconceived ideas of the filmmaker are challenged. This mode of documentary provokes “the audience to enquire the authenticity of documented facts in general(Cagle, 2012)”. Poetic mode stresses on the expression and feeling and focus is on the cinematography over content. The purpose of these documentaries is to trigger emotional response or target a specific mood, providing audience an opportunity to explore the reality from another perspective. This mode often neglects the objective reality of the situation or people and focuses on the inner reality, capture through poetic manipulation. Performative mode focuses on the involvement of the filmmaker with the subject and provides opportunity to the filmmakers to share their views and experiences. This mode tends to be more emotionally driven and can represent political or historical motivation. Because of the involvement of the

¹ Alexander Kluge is a German author, philosopher, academic and film director.

filmmaker, performative documentary is subjective in its approach, showing the perspective of the filmmaker (Aldredge, 2022).

Craft is a form of artistic expression, representing the cultural, traditional, communal, environmental, and artistic backgrounds of the society. It includes a wider range of handmade or artisanal objects which are created by using traditional techniques and materials. The crafts of any area are significant because of the involvement of unique process of creation and the cultural context within which it develops. These cultural products are representative of the history, belief, society, traditions, and ethnic values of any region. Pakistan is an ancient territory, having heritage of Mehargarh, Indus Valley Civilization and Gandhara. Pakistani society represents a long history in social and cultural trends and the development of various arts and crafts which are passed from generation to generation. These crafts with their traditional and innovative role are playing a significant role in the contemporary Pakistan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016).

Documenting Pakistani craft through filmmaking is innovative and productive in terms of introducing and promoting local culture and its valuable cultural crafts globally to a wider audience. Pakistani culture represents rich heritage and traditions and produce a variety of crafts, belonging to varied provinces and used in traditional activities locally (Munir Malik, 2013). Truck art is a significant and vibrant craft of Pakistan, used to decorate the local trucks running on the highways or streets of various cities carrying heavy luggage. This craft is popular in all the regions of Pakistan. Trucks are decorated with paintings done in bright colours, patterns carved from reflective tapes and written catchy phrases, prevalent nationwide. Truck art is known as the prevalent art form of Pakistan because of its original and creative imagery and techniques. Colourful painted vehicles moving on the roads and highways of Pakistan served as the canvas for the local artisans (Masood & Bilal, 2024). Truck art is not exclusive to Pakistan; it also enjoys popularity in several other countries such as 'Japan, India, Haiti, and the Philippines'. However, it is particularly remarkable and widely recognized in Pakistan. This craft with its exceptional qualities is turning into cultural identity of Pakistan (Wala, 2012).

The historical study of the Truck art describes the evolutionary phases of this locally developed craft along with the knowledge of the varied influence of diverse cultures and civilizations on it. Studies show that the exaggeration of the visual imagery is due to the intermingling of the distinct elements in the images from the various cultures and influences brought by the invaders in the Sub-continent. The history of vehicle decoration can be seen in the Indus Valley Civilization where minimal adornment on boats and animal carts was observed (Kenoyer, 2004). Later the concept of decorating vehicles was seen in South Asia in the form of palanquins from Medieval India and horse-drawn carriages, especially during the Mughal era. During the British rule, hand pulled rickshaws were earlier examples of ornate transportation (Hyrapiet & Greiner, 2012). This practice of decorating public transportation has persisted despite technological advancements. A modest beginning of truck painting during British rule continued post-partition, evolving into a distinctive art form with enhancements. Simply painted trucks were first introduced in Karachi in the early twentieth century advertising the details and address of the truck enterprise for trade purpose and transportation of goods. With the increasing demand of the trucks for transportation to all the regions of Pakistan, the decoration on the trucks started, simple in the beginning but became elaborate and colourful with the time (Zaidi, 2009).

Truck painting workshop was first developed in the area called Garden, Karachi. In the workshop, artisans used to gather from all provinces as portrait painting was done by the artisans of Lahore, wood and mirror artisans from Peshawar and Quetta and metal workers from Rawalpindi. Although this area is not in its original state now but is considered the earliest institute of Truck art (F. Ali, 2021). From here, this tradition of painting and decorating trucks goes on and now every region has truck painting workshops. Now, one can observe the evolution of truck decoration in a popular art form representing local culture and myth.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The collected data from literature review, field surveys and conducted interviews and photography provide scholarly research on Truck art to convert in a documentary, simplifying the complex information to engage broader audience. Content analysis is the focus as the theoretical framework, and a relationship has been created between Truck art as selected craft and established canon of the documentary. Extensive research is done to collect accurate data, useful for another scholarly research to utilize.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

Methodology employed is based on qualitative research and few books, and various articles on contemporary documentary making and Pakistani crafts have been consulted. Further, a hybrid documentary style amalgamating the explanatory written text, interviews and voice over narration, combining expository and interactive modes and observational is designed to employed for the documentary on Truck art.

3.2 Participants

Limited published data is available on the Pakistani craft sector, and primary data is collected through semi-formal interviews with the truck artisans working in the truck stations, shopkeepers and government officials.

3.3 Data Collection

Visual research data comprising photographs and recorded interviews were simplify the multi-layered information and enhances engagement.

3.4 Data Analysis

Documentary on Truck art was helpful in providing improved comprehension and better processing to the audiences and researchers.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Narrating Significance of Truck Art through Expository, Interactive and Observational Modes

Following the extensive research and direct presentation of the argument in a documentary, it is narrated that Pakistani trucks, although extremely ornamental but their main function is to transport goods from one place to another. At the same time, these decorative trucks are seen as cultural vehicles as their embellishment represents the local visual culture and messages (Bashir & Crews, 2012). Documentary will cover a brief introduction about the conceptual thought of the truck artists and owners regarding the decoration of trucks and eye-catching appearance. Trucks display various themes and designs on each part which is the reflection of the imagination of the truck's painters and represent their aesthetic, religious, social, and emotional views (Elias, 2003).

Focusing on the expository and interactive modes of documentary, various facts are collected through interviews with the truck artisans. Research for the script reveals that the main motif behind the depiction of various motifs on trucks is to bring good fortune for the truck owners and safety for the drivers. Narrating the art of storytelling, the documentary will highlight the depiction of imagery such as partridges and female eyes to omit bad omen from the trucks and bring good luck to their owners. Mostly trucks are painted to add elegance and beauty to the vehicles, but few drivers believe that decoration plays a major role in attracting customers and companies (Painters, 2024). In contemporary times, truck art is considered Pakistan's most culturally celebrated art form, primarily due to its vibrant and expressive imagery.

4.2 Informative and Persuasive Content on Truck Art

This expository documentary with voice over narration concentrates on the traditional setup to paint and decorate trucks in local workshops (see figure 1). This craft is deeply rooted in the artisans and their expertise is passed from generation to generation (Sökefeld, 2008). Gilani Cargo *Adda*² Band Road, Lahore is selected for field survey, and interactive method is adopted as interviews are conducted with the artisans about the process of truck painting. This documentary provide information on the artistic intricacies of Truck art as the smoothed surface of the truck is flatly painted in three coats. Once the paint is dried, the portions are divided with the help of inches of tape (Painters, 2024). Now, on the flat divided area, images are drawn free hand with locally prepared brushes of different sizes. Mostly primary and secondary colours are used in pure forms along with the application of black and white. Crude oil or petrol are mixed in the white colour before application (Arzār, 2024).

The documentary also stress on the legacy of other ornamental styles and techniques for the truck decoration. The examination and photographic documentation on the spot suggest that the interior portion



Figure 1: Painted imagery of Peacocks on truck. Source: Photograph taken by the author.

of the driving cabin is adorned with silks, satins, mirror work, artificial roses and pompoms. Mohd. Ali, another artisan highlights that decoration with reflective tape, also known as “*Chamak Patti*”³ on the front and back of the trucks are also a vital segment of truck embellishment that helps the trucks to shine in the dark nights, a way to avoid accidents (see figure 2). Popular designs in reflective tape include border designs, floral patterns and animal and bird imagery (M. Ali, 2024). Manzoor Hussain, shop owner near the Bund Road Truck station informed that although material for the decoration of the trucks is locally made, but lately ready-made material is also imported from China. The shop displays a variety of reflective tape stickers in the usual Truck art imagery to paste on the trucks, highlighting a created market for truck decoration in China (Hussain, 2024).

² Area where trucks stand for loading and unloading.

³ Geometrical designs made with colourful reflective tapes and used for decoration of the truck are called work of *chamak patti* in local terminology.



Figure 2: *Fish in Reflective Tape Decoration Style. Source: Photograph taken by the author.*

Another popular method to decorate trucks is the hammered metalwork (see figure 3) engraved in a variety of designs and shapes, giving an embossed effect. Mostly, floral and geometrical patterns are created in hammered metalwork, often combined with reflective tape decoration to give colourful impression. Hanging chains with metal balls on the front and back fenders is also an important segment in the truck decoration that creates jingling sounds to keep the driver awake when these trucks move on the road (M. Ali, 2024).



Figure 3: *Decorative Motifs on Trucks with Metal Hammered Work and Reflective Tape Decoration. Source: Photograph taken by the Author.*

4.3 Narration of Storytelling Regarding Cultural Imagery

Like high art expression in Pakistan, Truck art highlights the art of visual storytelling inspired from religion, Sufism, local beliefs and myth, relating to the idea of spirituality that has always influenced this region. Concentrating on the rules of observational mode, standing trucks on the truck stations are carefully observed to gain direct and first-hand knowledge regarding the displayed imagery. Documentary will highlight the historical contribution of Truck art in creating an original and pure art form of this region. The enormously prominent fragment of the truck is the crown, a large projected compartment

adorned with religious imagery such as Kabah, Masjid e- Nabvi and Islamic calligraphy. Another symbolic style of decorating crowns is the depiction of red roses, a pious flower paired with the partridges and fish, as these creatures hold a significant position in Islamic symbolism and local myth. The windscreens of the trucks also represent Sufi figures along with mystic fish and partridge. Occasionally, fish imagery is also painted along the edges of the bonnet, a metaphorical representation to seek blissful and safe journey from Allah and for the fulfilment of desires (Badshah, 2024). In a way, trucks are not only a vehicle and the imagery depicted on it isn't merely representation of art, but it is also an ode to the roots of Pakistani culture and beliefs.



Figure 4: *Religious Band.* Source: Photograph taken by the Author.

The side portions of the frontal cabin of the truck comprising the entrance doors are adorned with designs made of metal hammered work and reflective tapes (see figure 4). Mostly geometrical and floral patterns are carved in this style of works. But doorways are also adorned with painted images like single partridge, female hand holding a flower and landscape. The side portions of the truck are divided into small segments, creating the longest surface for painting. Mostly painted imagery includes fantastic green lands, animals, birds, floral patterns, and modern transports. The information about the transport company for advertisement purpose is written in both languages, Urdu and English (Arzār, 2024).



Figure 5: *Floral Patterns on Truck.* Source: Photograph taken by the Author.

Whereas, a solo, large sized image is depicted on the rear plank of the cargo such as a rose, partridges in pair as a symbol of good omen, eagle with spread wings symbolizing flight and strength of the vehicle (see figure 5). Similarly, imagery with religious significance includes saddleless horse representing Hazrat Hussain's horse, the mythical creature *Buraq* (see figure 6) with wings and female goddess head as a cultural symbol inspired from the history. Haji Rangsaaz narrates *buraq* as a fairy image who took the prophet to heavens, symbolically celebrating the feminine grace, gorgeousness and an unusual status of women through history combined with sacred devotion (Rangsaaz, 2024). Another important presentation on the rear plank is the display of portraits of significant personalities. Portraits painted on the rear planks of trucks include holy figures in a broader sense, but mostly celebrated as the famous personalities of popular culture (Bashir & Crews, 2012).



Figure 6: Image of Buraq on Rear Side of Truck. Source: Photograph taken by the Author.

Catchy phrases on various parts of trucks are another significant segment of the truck decoration. The catchy phrases are words of wisdom wrapped in light humour, conveying ideas and concepts related to common philosophies and myths. The most prominent phrases are related to avoid evil eye combined with the portrayal of painted female eyes (see figure 7). The use of writing in the Truck art is a source of communication with the local spectators even in the remote areas, thus helps in transferring information and beneficial ideas to common men (Arzār, 2024).



Figure 7: Catchy Phrase in Urdu on Truck. Source: Courtesy Dr. Ahmad Bilal.

4.4 Interaction with the Revival of Truck Art Imagery on Consumer Goods

In the last quarter of twentieth century, the fame of Truck art crossed the boundaries in the western world. Few tourists captured the photographs of local trucks and introduced this local craft among the foreigners (D. S. A. Ali, 2021). Now Truck art is becoming famous day by day in the outside world and its imagery is not only confined to the trucks but transforming into other forms of art and craft objects also. According to Dr. Zobia Sultana, Deputy Director at *Lok Virsa*, Islamabad, Truck art has become famous among the international communities because of its cultural significance and vibrant eye pleasing imagery (Sultana, 2024).

The beginning of the twenty first century marks the transformation of the Truck art imagery in the consumer goods as the expansion of the traditional skill. Observational research explores that traditional methods of truck decoration are applied to various goods made of diverse materials and these products are competing in local and global markets. This revival of imagery is seen in fashion garments, accessories and artistic items including jewellery, handbags and footwear. Similarly wooden furniture, household items, gifts, crockery, cutlery, home and commercial decor are other items displaying the use of all the prevailing Truck art mediums including painting, reflective tape decoration and metal hammered work. Ali, owner of Handicraft Shop explains that artisans follow a similar procedure while reinterpreting imagery on other products. In his shop, mostly displayed items are hand painted using similar local materials as used on trucks (Ali, 2025). In another interactive session with the salesperson of Craft Ghar WCLA (Walled City Lahore Authority), it is revealed that mostly Truck art products buyers are foreigners (see figure 8), tourists and young generation, who are interested in Truck art gift souvenirs such as mugs with written catchy phrase, brightly coloured pencil holders and stationery as the representative of our culture (Masood, 2025).



Figure 8: Hand Painted Truck Art Souvenirs. Source: Al Habib Truck Art and Craft, accessed on 20 September 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/alhabibtruckart/>

5. CONCLUSION

Filming documentary on Truck art will help in advertising, promoting and marketing the vibrant local culture, traditions and consumer goods to a wider range of audience. The art of visual storytelling through symbolic imagery and catchy phrases, representing regional beliefs and myths, will forecast the fascinating and interesting cultural information for a documentary to be released on OTT (Over the top) platform. This research paper will serve as an authentic script to convert into documentary, based on

research meeting the ethical standards. The impact of colorful folk culture and Truck art aesthetics will contribute to global cultural diversity. It will pave way to reintroduce Truck art in latest and innovative cultural goods, fashion designs and in grand projects like Truck art amusement indoor and outdoor theme parks and resorts. The documentary will connect the local artisans to the exclusive networking of the event management and industry leaders to earn creative capital. Thus, a documentary on Truck art will be an innovative source to provide valuable education sessions designed to inspire and inform. Research based data combined with the art of storytelling will enhance sustainable credibility of the provided information and will create a lasting impression on the audience in the digital age.

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