

Truck Art as Arena of Contest¹

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ABSTRACT The vastly decorated and painted trucks are a prominent feature of Pakistani culture. In this article I advocate an understanding of Pakistani truck art as a form of popular culture with a strong potential as arena of contest. This potential is exemplified in three different domains, namely the religious, the political and the cultural. Truck art is employed by various groups - truck painters, drivers, etc. - to resist dominant interpretations, to contest meanings and to produce open-ended discourses on signification.

INTRODUCTION

Visitors to Pakistan are overwhelmed by the lurid sight of the decorated vehicles - buses, trucks, *tongas* and sometimes even bicycles. The urban elite of Pakistan is bemused by this spectacle when their attention is drawn to the everyday life on the streets and highways; even Pakistanis face difficulties in apprehending this part of their culture: "Dressed to kill, rampaging and roaring like a mad elephant, decorated in a thousand shades of a hundred colours, with two huge eyes on the *matha* (forehead), here comes the most fearsome sight on our roads: a fully loaded truck, decked out to put a bride to shame" (Haider, 1994: 36). This expressive initial description suggests a recognition of the potential in the truck art and a strong reaction to it by parts of the audience.

Publications dealing with this or with a related phenomenon - e.g. decoration of *jeepneys* in the Philippines,² *rikshaws* in Bangladesh³ and India, or trucks in Afghanistan⁴ - often attempted to single out motifs or groups of motifs and decipher their iconographic meanings.⁵ This approach can neither account for the diversity of the decoration and its elements nor for their relevance in social and political contexts. Following Barnett's argument in her article on oriental carpets (1995), I advocate the abandonment of this approach, however tempting it may be. I shall try to consider truck art within its contexts in-

stead of decoding the motifs and symbols on a truck, hoping they would "reveal all." In Pakistani culture this might include the personal, functional, and cultural significance of the truck art, the social relations between people involved in its production, the status accorded to truck builders and drivers, their pride in expertise and personal innovation as well as in knowledge. Choosing this approach, I would like to locate truck art in the field of popular culture. According to Fiske (1989: 2).

"[p]opular culture is made from within and below, not imposed from without or above... There is always an element of popular culture that lies outside social control, that escapes or opposes hegemonic forces. Popular culture is always a culture of conflict, it always involves the struggle to make social meanings that are in the interest of the subordinate...."

Furthermore, any form of popular culture implies open-ended signification, it is always in the process of making and of producing meanings. Thus popular culture has the capacity to subvert dominant discourses, and to provide spaces for creativity and negotiation depending on a shared cultural understanding of the participants in the discourse (Storey, 1996: 79, 91). These complex processes of negotiation between cultural producers and consumers are at centre stage in popular culture studies, calling the long prevailing assumption of passive consumerism into question.

To approach truck art as a form of popular culture, I shall invoke interpretative devices drawn from statements of drivers, painters, and the wider Pakistani audience focusing on the art in the craft, on pleasure, protection, and suffering experienced by the drivers. Truck art is linked to many different contexts of society. The three most obvious realms in which contests through truck art take place are the religious, the political and the cultural. I will present one example in

each of these domains to illustrate my contention that truck art is a form of popular culture in which central societal assumptions and values are contested.

Before presenting these examples I will describe the processes of constructing and decorating of the truck which are an essential prerequisite to gain an insight into the contest. Each truck has to be considered as a unique specimen; thus, each truck might contribute differently to the significance and add new meanings to the contest.

CONSTRUCTION OF A TRUCK⁶

The chassis and engine are the only parts of the truck mass-produced in manufacturing plants.⁷ Contractors buy these and bring them to the workshops located in all big cities for completion, after which they are sold to truck companies. These workshops contain small retail shops rented by specialised craftsmen. The process is initiated by the blacksmith who attaches a steel skeleton to the chassis to hold the body and the driver's cabin. He is followed by the body maker, who creates the body, which consists of "wooden pine slats banded and bolted together by metal and wooden cross-pieces" (Khan, 1975: 185) and the wooden cabin with its superstructure, the forehead and the crown. Thereafter the lacquerer spray paints the body in the colour specified by the owner; the decorator works on the doors, the inside of the cabin and the superstructure applying tin and plastic cutouts or inlay; the upholsterer has to complete the seat for the cabin. Finally the painter applies motifs on the back and both sides, which are subdivided into panels by the steel bares. He also fills in any space on the front left untouched by the decorator. In addition, professionals such as the *hornwala* (the man who produces, repairs and sells horns), the electrician or the radiator specialist may be involved, although the mechanic may do this himself. Within this ensemble of professionals, the body maker is the acknowledged apex of the workshop hierarchy, for he provides the essential functional element: the basic structure of the truck. Nonetheless, the craftspeople stress that there is no hierarchical ordering: "All professions are equal."

The craftspeople involved in truck construc-

tion take pride in their skills and also emphasise the value-loaded aspects of the truck: beauty, pleasure for the driver, music for the road.⁸ Yet the painter is the only one who refers to his work as a form of art. Mostly the painters, occasionally a driver decide on the design; the painters choose most of the motifs and transform current issues into their artistic language, be it related to religion, politics, culture or economics.⁹ The location of motifs on the truck more or less follow a pattern: Islamic motifs have to be placed on the front above the driver's cabin;¹⁰ portraits, landscapes, animals, famous buildings, and flowers are distributed on both sides in smaller pictures; and one large motif is portrayed on the back. Once in a while a driver may instruct the painter to paint his preferred image on the back. Most motifs are further decorated with several frames and borders of floral and geometric ornaments. Both sides carry the name of the forwarding agency - one side in English, the other in Urdu. Moreover, every space of the truck's surface can be inscribed with couplets, poems or philosophical aphorisms, pertaining to the specific way of life and the moods of the driver, to his cultural and social relations to his family or the society in general. Thus the surface is an expression not only of "popular tastes" as Lent (1995: 175) calls it, but also of discourses within society.

THE RELIGIOUS DOMAIN

One of these discourses relates to pictorial representation within an Islamic society. In the early 1980s a religious group launched a campaign against truck painting in general. The argument put forward by the orthodox mullahs maintained that pictorial representation was not in accordance with Islamic tenets and practices. Moreover, the ostentatious decoration was declared to be totally out of place, distracting attention from the truly worthwhile aspects of life and from the devotion to God. The members of this group succeeded in putting this issue on the agenda of the National Assembly of Pakistan. The Government even "... decreed truck painting as un-Islamic and called for its removal from the vehicles" (Anonymous, 1982: 20). But the painters and decorators in the workshops ignored the decree and carried on with their work. One painter from Rawalpindi commented on this futile attempt:

"It [the truck painting] is art; God was an artist himself. God has the ultimate power. He has given us the strength to paint. Nowadays even these religious people join ranks and ask for decorations of their vehicles."

Another more specified objection was put forward against the painting of human beings; again it was the *mullahs* who objected and threatened the painters vociferously: "You have to put these portraits alive on the day of judgement. It is a sin to make these pictures" (Interview with the painter Nur Hussein citing a *mullah* in July, 1995). Another painter described the behaviour of "so-called religious people" when encountering a truck in the streets: "When a *Mullah* saw a portrait of a woman on the truck he used to turn his face in the other direction or he put a handkerchief on his face and on his eyes in embarrassment." Female figures are often portrayed on the side of the truck - the Arabian beauty, the veiled innocent female, western women - or specific actresses and singers in a large portrait on the back side.

These religiously motivated attacks contest the expression of *any* popular taste on the truck. But the cultural producers - the painters in solidarity with the other professions in the workshop - countered these attacks on their art and on their means of livelihood and declared a misinterpretation at the end of the cultural consumer - in this case one specific group with a very special, orthodox religious perspective. The public space - the surface of the truck - was retained against a governmental decree and against debatable religious interpretations.

Another level of the religious discourse is expressed through the paintings of stereotyped religious figures, e.g. a *sufi* or a *malang*. A *malang* is a folk religious mendicant found at popular shrines all over Pakistan. According to Ewing (1984: 359) the "... *malangs* are seen in an extremely unflattering light by ordinary people and by ... those who follow the Islamic law." Most importantly, the *malang's* "... relationship to God need not be mediated by external rules" and he places himself "... totally outside the social world" (ibid.: 361, 363). Therefore he may be seen as a threat to the religious and implicitly to the social order. The representation of a full size *malang* on the back of a truck, often accompanied by the

warning couplet "Don't tease the *malang*!" in Punjabi is a clear sign, easily to decode by all other participants of the traffic: The *malang* wishes goodwill to the world, but becomes very violent when teased, the power of the truck and its driver is not to be tested, since his resistance to social norms and values might be as forceful as the one of the *malang*. Thus, this image on the truck with religious content interconnect the truck's and its crew's power with the social relations in the specific field of the traffic system. This the drivers consider all the more important as the volume of traffic increases persistently and they encounter problems with other drivers, who "don't know how to drive. They just make our lives miserable!."

THE POLITICAL DOMAIN

Among the huge variety of motifs several other groups can be distinguished. One group comments on political issues in a stereotyped fashion: among these the F-16 fighter planes imported - or better: partly imported - from the United States figure prominently on most of the trucks. The depiction of this aircraft has to be seen in the context of the Pressler amendment issued in 1985. The amendment was laid before the House in order to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons. It defined altered conditions for the delivery of the already paid military aircraft to Pakistan, but its consequences became relevant for Pakistan only in 1990.¹¹ From 1985 onwards the F-16 has been an omnipresent issue in any public discussion as well as in the print media - a discourse in which the painters joined in, thereby enlarging and enriching the platform of the debate.

Pictures of a stereotyped soldier, portraits of military personnel - especially the two former heads of the state Ayub Khan and Zia-ul Haq¹² - entail political statements enforcing the positive attitude towards the military in national politics.¹³ This interpretation prevails among some participants in the painting discourse - some truck drivers ask for the depiction of these portraits thus expressing their political views. Other drivers take a more pragmatic stance on their national politicians:

"The paintings on the back of the truck are out of anger. For example the portrait of Sadar

Ayub [General Ayub Khan, chief of the military government from 1958 to 1969] is painted on the trucks so that nobody stops the truck. If the People's Party is in power the portrait of Benazir is painted on the trucks."

In consequence, having the portrait of a national politician does not necessarily hint at a political preference either of the painter or the driver. But it certainly conveys a message to the spectators, who draw their own conclusions. Most Pakistanis I talked with about truck art interpreted the display of martial themes — either weaponry or personnel — as a symbol of strength and power for which the drivers have a strong desire. But "painting propaganda, picturing power," as MacClancy (1997: 10) called it, does not necessarily imply an unequivocal political statement neither for the producer nor for the consumer. Rather, it invites for interpretation which could be connected to one's own situation. These possible interpretations indicate a complex relation between citizens and politics, which is as multilayered in the pictorial discourse on the truck.

A more critical and subtle attitude towards politics is exhibited in the depiction of the national poet Allama Muhammad Iqbal supplemented with a line of one of his famous poems: "Your place is not on the dome of the king's palace/ You are an eagle you should live on the top of the mountains." The message clearly conveyed by this couplet is, that instead of flattering powerful people, instead of behaving like their slave, everybody is free and should act like a free person. Domination is not to be accepted, but to be fought. Truck drivers interpret this as a reminder and encouragement when confronted with the daily hardships their profession holds in stock for them. The drivers consider their life on the road to be demanding and full of privations: "We live on small time dreams, but have bigger set backs of depression and sadness. One of our wishes is to live in a big furnished house, having attached bathrooms to the bedrooms." Further complains bear on road conditions, for which the drivers hold the government and its officials responsible:

"The system is made by people sitting in their drawing rooms while the person who is on the road suffers a lot. We [the drivers] know

every part of the highway from Islamabad to Lahore, from Lahore to Karachi, from Pindi to Peshawar. We know each and every detail: The jumps, the crossings, the broken parts of the roads - everything is to our knowledge. Still we will not complain to the government. They won't take any action anyway, even if an accident takes place killing people due to road conditions. Every day and every moment is dangerous for us."¹⁴

In addition to this drivers accuse the security forces of hampering their work, taking bribes and being ineffective in their actual work, e.g. preventing smuggling.¹⁵

The motifs related to the political sphere are depicted in a fairly stereotyped way, allowing for little variation. It is no exaggeration to say that every Pakistani is familiar with these images, by which different implicit messages are communicated, allowing everybody to select the preferred interpretation. Thus the discourse of truck art within the political realm is open-ended; it is an invitation to participate in the discourse — although it has to be continued on a different level and with a different medium.

THE CULTURAL REALM

A third domain of contested claims is placed in the culture of the road itself. The communication between the participants in the traffic is stimulated through the, partly funny, partly serious, inscriptions of couplets, poems or philosophical phrases on the trucks. Through these inscriptions the truck drivers situate themselves in a relation to other participants. It may be a warning against quick friendships: "Not everyone who shakes your hand is your friend"; or a reminder of maternal warmth: "A mother's blessing is the breeze of paradise"; or a declaration of local patriotism: "Peshawar is my city." The relation might be a hierarchical one having its base in physical strength like in "Out of my way, I am stronger." Or: "A person living in anger and jealousy will be punished" hints at the attitude of other road users vis-à-vis the truck drivers — being angry at having their way blocked by a slow-moving truck or just being envious of such a fabulous vehicle. In contrast, "We drivers are like you people" assumes an equal status for all road users and denies a relation of fear and danger.

Another category pertains to the experienced practitioner on the roads, implying that a professional like the truck driver has significant wisdom to impart: "Before you start your journey, make sure your sins are forgiven. It might be your last journey." Revealing the plight to all drivers on the road, the following line tells of the difficulties and hardships of the trucker's profession: "The life of a driver is difficult, if he [luckily] escapes death, he ends up in prison."

This aspect of the popular culture in the truck art is the one most acknowledged by drivers of cars. In my conversations about truck art, most Pakistani interlocutors proceeded quickly to the couplets. They found those most interesting, witty and stimulating. Most of the pictorial representations were all too familiar to comment on, whereas inscriptions often contain innovative and intriguing thoughts.

In contrast to this attitude, new developments concerning the recognition of truck art on a different level started, when in 1994 a class from the Karachi School of Art under the guidance of artist Durriya Kazi appropriated features of truck art for their own work. The students "decided to create a travelling art caravan" (Rucha, 1994: 101) by painting a truck themselves. They divided the panels and worked on them individually or in groups, thus taking up the natural structure of the medium as do the truck painters as well. Interestingly truck artists participated in the experiment and worked on some of the panels. The major difference were the topics chosen by the art students. Instead of the idealised depiction of the motifs in truck art they wanted to make *explicit* social and political statements conceiving of art as a form of cultural critique. "Many of the panels express the pressures and choices faced by young people in Karachi, the difficulties of avoiding being caught up in the subculture of drugs, violence and corruption" comments Culshaw in his article on the experiment.¹⁶ As the experiment went on, the students discovered patronising attitudes towards indigenous art forms from agents of the high culture and learned to appreciate its originality. They also learned to alter their perception: "The students initially took an academic approach to their paintings on the truck, but subsequently discovered that in order to communicate ... with their ... audience,¹⁷ they

had to emulate the truck artist's style of bright colour and idealised images" (Bucha, 1994: 101). The students had to realise that truck art is already a form of cultural critique, an arena of contest. The patronising gaze of high culture agents prevented them from noticing this fact. Only the resistance against appropriation of this specific art form into the mainstream led them to an altered understanding.

CONCLUSION

The most fascinating feature of truck art is its permanent progress: experimentation with and innovation of motifs and couplets is constantly going on. Lent (1995: 175) described the appearance of the trucks "as a reflection and manifestation of foreign and national popular cultures." The painters are in permanent search of innovative designs, integrating everything they decide worthwhile for a transformation on their specific medium. For them it is not important, if motifs come from a foreign or from the national context. The sole requirement for the success of a motif is the possibility of its adaptation into the national frame: landscapes from Switzerland copied from postcards, colourful birds from all over the world transferred from school books and charts, film characters like Tarzan or Rambo, but also national figures like the folk singer Attaullah Isa Khelvi famous among truck drivers meet this requirement. Some of these are fashionable for a certain time-span, others are thought to be evergreens. It all depends on the potential of expressiveness without being too explicit, thus leaving room for different interpretation.

Truck art has the ability of seismographic reaction to changes in the religious, political or cultural field. To represent these changes the painters use a conventional iconography, but what is activated in which part of the audience by this representation bears its nature as area of contest. Truck art entails elements outside political and social control as we have seen in the examples of the different domains: this does not mean contesting through explicit, obvious statements; rather, the contest takes place through allusions, hints and ephemeral comments very well understood by all participants. Thus truck painting represents a tradition and a culture with

its own dynamic. The involved actors — the craftspeople, the painters, the drivers, other road users, the union workers, etc. — have to be placed in their respective social contexts, in their families, communities, ethnic and religious groups, idea-generating environments, daily information and communication networks and so on in order to encourage the perception of truck art as “produced and facilitated within structures of mediation, which directly and indirectly affect both their production and reception” (Barnett, 1995: 25). An open-ended process of signification in which consumers as producer of meanings are equally involved as the producers of the commodity.

NOTES

1. I carried out field research on truck art and highway culture over a period of 6 months in 1995 and 1996. A former version of this paper was presented at the Conference “Maker and Meaning: Craft and Society” in Madras 1999 and at a Seminar in the Free University Berlin, at the Institute of Ethnology, 1999. I would like to thank the participants in the Conference and in the Seminar for their comments and suggestions.
2. Cf. Nofuente, 1993; Torres, 1979.
3. Cf. the publication of Glassie, 1997: 420ff; cf. also Kirkpatrick, 1994, 1997; Sindermann, 1999.
4. Cf. Blanc, 1976a, 1976b; Centlivres-Demont, 1976a, 1976b.
5. For Pakistan cf. the publications of cf. Grothues, 1990, 1993a, 1993b; Oppen, 1992.
6. For descriptions of truck-construction cf. Grothues, 1990: 6f.; Khan, 1995: 185; Schmid, 1995: 30-43.
7. With the import of new truck brands mostly from Japan the cabin is also produced in manufacturing plants and delivered along with chassis and engine. Nonetheless, the superstructure (forehead and crown) is still added while building the bodies.
8. Although horns with several notes are not allowed, most trucks are equipped with these “musical instruments.”
9. Contrary to the statements of my interlocutors Rich & Khan (1980: 264) mention, that mostly the drivers — and only exceptionally the painters — decide on the motifs for their truck. One driver stated, that he made up his mind for a specific workshop, because he liked the design and the motifs carried out by the painter in this workshop. He knew about this place, because the address of the workshop and the painter's name is always written above both wheels of the back axle.
10. Major differences exist in the style of painting, namely the style in the North-West-Frontier-Province is marked by smaller motifs on both sides of the truck. Often, Islamic motifs - e.g. *kaaba* and mosque of Medina - are also placed on the sides, whereas in the style of the Southern Provinces of Sindh and Punjab these motifs will only be placed above the driver's cabin and the side panels will be completely filled with motifs and ornaments.
11. For further information on the Pressler Amendment cf. the homepage of the Carnegie Endowment <http://www.ceip.org/files/Publications/TrackingPakistan.asp>? from = pubauthor p.3f. “The Pressler Amendment specified that U.S. aid and government-to-government military sales to Pakistan would be cut off unless the President certified at the beginning of each U.S. fiscal year (which begins on October 1) that Pakistan did “not possess a nuclear explosive device and that the proposed U.S. assistance program will significantly reduce the risk that Pakistan will possess a nuclear explosive device.” ..., in October 1990, the Bush Administration declined to make the certification required by the Pressler Amendment and terminated all aid and government-to-government military sales to Pakistan. At the time, Pakistan had twenty-eight additional F-16 aircraft and certain other military hardware on order, to be acquired on a government-to-government ... basis, and which were therefore unquestionably subject to the Pressler Amendment embargo. Islamabad continued making payments on these purchases after October 1990 so that it could receive the armaments at issue in the event that the prohibition against such U.S. military sales was rescinded.”
12. In his article Rasheed (1985: 56) declared, “[t]here are no portraits of President Zia-ul Haq.” This is certainly true for the time of martial law under Zia-ul Haq. After his death in an air crash August 1988 he became a prominent figure depicted on the trucks. In what way this change has to do with his political program of Islamization or the mysterious circumstances of his death leading to his adoration as a martyr or both has to left unresolved. Furthermore Rasheed (ibid.) predicted an enormous proliferation of images of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto on the trucks, which did not occur.
13. If the present Chief Executive, General Pervez Musharraf, will be absorbed into the painter's repertoire of military personal portraits remains to be seen.
14. Titus (1996: 281) mentions similar remarks and complains by drivers from Balochistan.

15. Cf. Titus (1996: 282).
16. Unfortunately I don't have the details of the one page article titled "Exhibitions Truck Art."
17. The truck was taken on a tour through all major cities in Pakistan.

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