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Sacred Conventions: Stereotypical use of Typography for Devotional Films

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Abstract: Although Typography is relatively a Visual Communication tool, the use of typography act as a cultural code in the form of titles given to the vernacular films made in Telugu. These titles hold sacrality, when divine stories are incorporated in, and assert a conventional identity of genre films. Movie titling and posters, as curtain raiser, establish a pre-screening bond with viewers by providing anchorage and by demonstrating a specific variety. My paper shall discuss how the interface between title and the content of devotional/mythological films shape a distinct typography that appears on vernacular genre film posters. Since the sacred myths are being circulated through popular media show a specific typography as a convention, I will argue how genre films proclaim a distinct identity through use of Typographic conventions in Telugu film industry, which produced some of the greatest movies and are dubbed in all the languages in India.

Keywords: Sacrality, cultural code, typography, Telugu films, popular media

1.Introduction

Film is an incredibly influential and popular medium in India, resonating deeply with the masses and often serving as a reflection of popular culture. Similarly, Telugu cinema (also popularly known as Tollywood) holds immense cultural and historical importance as one of the oldest film industries in India. Indian cinema, particularly in vernacular languages like Telugu, wields immense influence over the population. Cinema is not just a form of entertainment but also a mirror that reflects and shapes popular culture. It has played a pivotal role in disseminating sacred stories and narratives to the masses through popular media. In this context, how a movie is presented through its title and poster becomes of

paramount importance. Among the many elements that contribute to a film's appeal, movie titling and posters play a pivotal role as they establish a preliminary connection with the audience even before the screening begins. In the context of Telugu vernacular cinema, I have chosen to delve into the fascinating world of movie titling and posters to explore how typographic conventions significantly differ among various film titles, effectively anchoring viewers' expectations about the film's content.

My study is situated within the context of Tollywood, one of the largest and most influential film industries in India. This industry has produced iconic films that have been dubbed and enjoyed across various languages, emphasizing the reach and impact of your media studies. My paper outlines a comprehensive study that delves into the various elements present in Telugu mythological film posters, with a specific focus on typography within mythological film posters. These elements include titles, design, typography, and color schemes. This comparative method allows for a holistic understanding of how these components work together to convey specific messages and aesthetics. The study is centered on Telugu-language films, which form a significant part of the Indian film industry. While my primary focus is on Telugu cinema, I acknowledge the diversity of the Indian film industry. This recognition is essential as it highlights the coexistence of various regional film industries, each with its own cultural norms and storytelling traditions. By analyzing elements such as titles, design, typography, and color schemes, and by considering the cultural and social contexts, my study aims to uncover the intricate visual language and messages embedded within these posters, enhancing our understanding of their significance in the world of Indian cinema. (Fig. 1)

My research broadly goes beyond visual analysis and delves into the cultural and social norms depicted in these films. This adds depth by considering the broader cultural context in which these films are created and received. One can recognize the subtleties of visual language, including the strategic use of color palettes and typography. This acknowledgment underscores the importance of these visual elements in conveying meaning and creating emotional resonance in film posters. By examining these elements, my research aims to decipher the subtle messages embedded within mythological film posters. The main objective of my paper is to shed light on the layers of meaning and symbolism that contribute to the effectiveness of these posters.

1.2 Aims and Objectives

My study is an exploration of the interplay between typography and sacrality in Telugu cinema, a rich and influential industry in India. By focusing on the typographical differences between sacred and non-sacred film titles in popular Telugu films, my research aims to shed light on how typography is used as a tool to enhance and shape the distinct identity of vernacular genre film posters.

My research examines how the interaction between a film's title and its content influences the choice of typography. This dynamic relationship reveals how filmmakers use typography to provide viewers with cues about the film's theme, genre, and narrative, enhancing the audience's understanding and expectations. The study emphasizes the role of typography in shaping the identity of vernacular genre film posters. Whether it's a mythological epic or a contemporary drama, the typography chosen for the film's title and poster is an integral part of genre identification and branding.

2. The Power of Film Titles in Indian Masses

In today's interconnected and globalized world, the role of films in people's lives is undeniably significant. Despite the increasing competition from various entertainment sources, films have not only maintained their popularity but have also continued to rise in prominence. One crucial element in the promotion and communication of a film's themes and narrative is the aesthetics of its movie title. Anusha.V.S, Gokul Balagopal,Vinod.L (2019) opined that these posters and titles serve as essential tools for marketing films to both audiences and film companies, functioning as catalysts for curiosity and drawing viewers to theaters. Films have transcended cultural and geographical boundaries, becoming a universal form of entertainment and storytelling. They offer a unique medium for people to connect with diverse narratives and experiences from around the world. Despite the proliferation of alternative entertainment options, such as streaming services and online content, films have maintained and even increased their popularity.

Movie titles are not merely labels; they are powerful communicators. They encapsulate the essence of a film, offering a glimpse into its themes, genre, and tone. A well-crafted title can pique the audience's interest and create anticipation. Movie titles are indispensable marketing tools. They are the first point of contact between a film and its potential audience. An intriguing or thought-provoking title can spark curiosity and prompt people to learn more about the film. Effective movie titles act as catalysts for curiosity. According to FeyrouzBouzida (2014), quoted in Anusha.V.S, Gokul Balagopal,Vinod.L (2019), these "non-

verbal communication or the visual image as a sign system" leave a memorable impression and invite viewers to explore the film further. A compelling title can generate buzz and discussions even before the film is released. In an era of digital streaming, movie titles still play a crucial role in driving viewers to theaters. They create a sense of event and anticipation, making the cinematic experience unique and enticing (Anusha V.L at all 2019). Therefore films remain a powerful and beloved form of entertainment in our globalized world. Movie titles, with their ability to encapsulate the essence of a film and generate interest, are vital tools for both marketing and storytelling. They serve as bridges between filmmakers and audiences, drawing viewers into the world of cinema and enriching our lives with diverse narratives and experiences.

Movie titling and posters serve as curtain raisers, introducing the film to the audience before they even enter the cinema hall. These visual elements are the first point of contact and, therefore, are instrumental in piquing the viewers' curiosity and generating interest. The evolution of Telugu cinema posters over the years has been marked by distinct stylistic shifts. In the 1950s, hand-drawn vintage posters primarily employed black and white imagery, featuring lead actors and titles. However, as we entered the 1970s, a bold use of typography and action-packed scenes became prominent features. This era witnessed the rise of colorful and visually captivating posters, with artists experimenting with various styles and typography. The 1990s ushered in the era of digital poster design, as computer-generated graphics and advanced printing techniques became more accessible. This technological leap allowed for intricate designs, special effects, and Photoshop-enhanced images, resulting in visually striking and dynamic posters. In the realm of Telugu script typography, serif fonts, characterized by small decorative strokes or "serifs" at the ends of characters, are less common compared to sans-serif fonts. They are often reserved for stylistic or decorative purposes and can give a more formal and traditional appearance to printed materials, books, and formal documents. (Fig,2)

The choice of typography and design in movie titles and posters establishes a pre-screening bond with the viewers. It is akin to a handshake that sets the tone and expectations for what the film has to offer. This initial impression can significantly impact the audience's decision to watch the movie. These titles are designed using existing fonts and most of the times hand-written by painters and graphic designers. Goswami (2017) remarks that "The vintage hand painted posters remained in vogue until the 1980s and later glossy digital print

replaced them." Although, this style and appearance of design is known Typography, well-known publicity designer, Eaashwar (2011) considers that the titles of the movies are like logos for companies. (Fig.3)

Understanding the role of typography in this context is crucial for comprehending its cultural impact. Thus, my study delves into the typographical disparities between sacred and non-sacred film titles. This investigation can uncover patterns, conventions, and design choices that are distinct to each category, showcasing how typography is used as a visual language to convey the sacredness or secular nature of the content.

2.1 Anchoring Viewer Expectations

Ultimately, the typographic choices in movie titling and posters serve as anchors, offering viewers a glimpse into what they can anticipate from the film. It's a form of communication that helps the audience align their expectations with the content, genre, and mood of the movie. The movie titling and posters in Telugu vernacular cinema are not just visual aesthetics; they are powerful tools of communication. They introduce the film to the audience, shaping their expectations and building a preliminary bond. Typographic conventions in these elements are carefully curated to resonate with the film's genre and theme, showcasing the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of Indian cinema.

2.2 Typography as a cultural code in Telugu Films

Typography, in the context of Telugu vernacular films, serves as a cultural code. It transcends mere visual aesthetics and becomes a carrier of cultural and emotional significance. The choice of fonts, styles, and visual elements in film titles reflects the essence and themes of the movie. For instance, bold, ornate, and majestic fonts are often used for mythological or devotional films to convey a sense of grandeur and reverence. In contrast, playful and vibrant typography may be employed in titles for comedies or light-hearted genres.

Titles that incorporate elements of divinity or depict sacred narratives are treated with utmost reverence. For instance, Ramayanam, a devotional film poster shows a specific decorative typography, in which the title is not just a visual representation but also a spiritual invocation. The careful selection of fonts and design elements is done to evoke a sense of awe and devotion in the audience. This sacrality extends beyond the visual realm

and influences how viewers perceive the film, instilling a sense of respect and reverence for the subject matter. Whereas, sociological and family entertainer genres, made with similar titles or based on structure of myths have modern stylized typography.(Fig.4)

The use of standardized typography in vernacular films has the potential to give rise to stereotypical representations. When certain fonts, styles, or design elements become associated with specific genres, there is a risk of perpetuating clichés. However, this standardization can also be viewed as a form of tradition and a means of maintaining cultural continuity. It ensures that viewers can readily identify the genre and themes of a film by looking at its title, which can be particularly useful in a diverse and multilingual cinema landscape like that of Telugu cinema.

Typography in Telugu vernacular films not only serves as a tool for suggesting a story title but also asserts a conventional identity for different genres. It helps filmmakers and audiences alike navigate the tradition of Telugu cinema, allowing for a better understanding of what to expect from a particular film. This, in turn, fosters a sense of belonging and familiarity for viewers who have a deep-rooted connection with these genres.(Fig.5)

2.3 Sacred Typography: Mythological and Devotional Films

Posters and Typography plays an especially pivotal role in mythological and devotional films, where narratives about gods and religious stories are depicted. These titles are often characterized by intricate calligraphy, divine symbols, and a sense of timelessness. The typography in such titles goes beyond aesthetics; it becomes a channel through which the film pays homage to the divine and invites viewers to immerse themselves in spiritual narratives. Consequently, the typography, along with the elements in the poster gets imagined sacred position. Thus it is naturalized as a dynamic and culturally rich aspect of visual communication. At times, the visuality goes beyond its conventional role, acting as a cultural code that conveys emotions, identities, and themes. While standardization may risk stereotyping, it also serves as a means of preserving tradition and aiding audience understanding. Typography's sacrality in titles, particularly in mythological and devotional films, underscores its significance in shaping the spiritual and emotional experience of cinema. (Fig.6), (Fig.6a), (Fig.6b), (Fig.6c) (Fig.6d)

3.Observations:

Telugu cinema showcases a rich aesthetics of typographic conventions. These conventions are not arbitrary but carefully selected to align with the genre, theme, and mood of the film. They act as a visual shorthand, conveying vital information about the film to potential viewers. Consider mythological and devotional films, for instance, the typography in their titles is often characterized by a sense of sobriety and reverence. Fonts are chosen with care, leaning toward embellishment and tradition. This visuality is deliberate, as it sets the tone for narratives steeped in mythology and spirituality. In contrast, contemporary Telugu cinema displays a wide range of typographic experimentation. Titles of modern films showcase diversity in fonts, styles, and design elements. This reflects the ever-evolving nature of cinema, where innovation and freshness are highly valued.

My argument centered around how genre films in Telugu cinema proclaim their distinct identities through typographic conventions. By analyzing how typography is employed, one can illustrate how filmmakers and designers strategically use fonts, styles, and design elements to align the film with its intended genre, fostering recognition and resonance among the audience.

I believe that the study offered valuable insights into the world of Telugu cinema by examining the intricate relationship between typography and sacrality. By analyzing the typographical differences in sacred and non-sacred film titles, it contributes to our understanding of how visual elements in cinema contribute to cultural expression and genre identification in this vibrant industry.

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Fig.1

Fig. 2

Telugu Regular style font

Hand drawn font

Fig. 3

తోడికోడళ్ళు
బాటసారి
రోజులు మారాయి
మల్లీశ్వరి
పల్లెటూరిపిల్ల
ద్రోహ
పాతాళ భైరవి
తోడుదొంగలు

Fig. 4

"Ramaynam" Sacred Title   "Ramaynam" Modern Title

Fig. 5

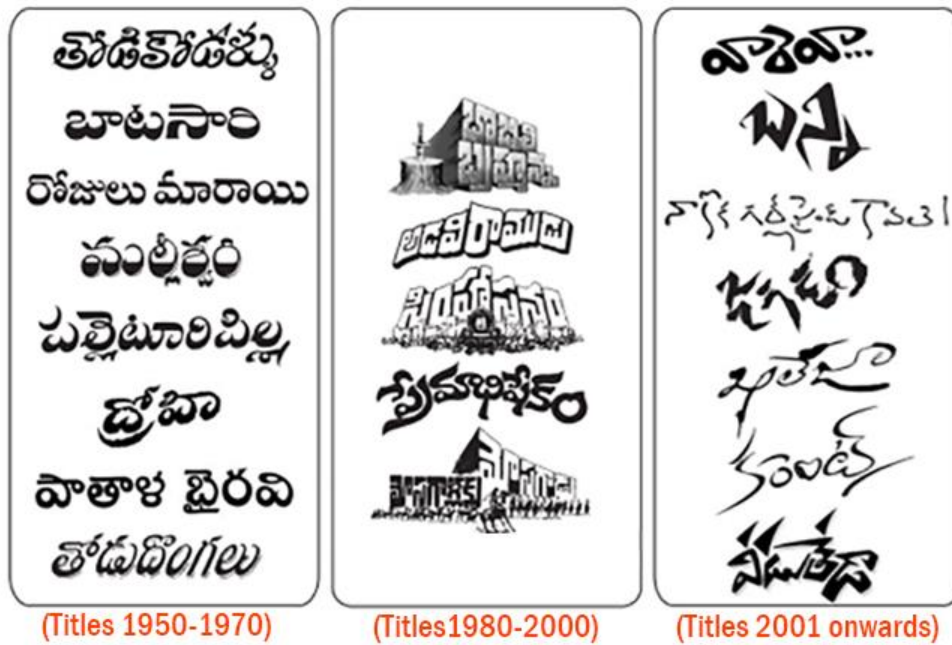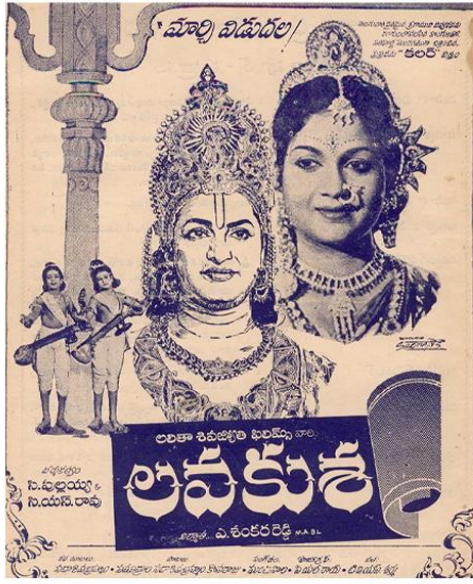(Titles 1950-1970)   (Titles1980-2000)   (Titles 2001 onwards)

Fig. 6

Lavakusa (1963) Director : C. Pullai & C.S.Rao
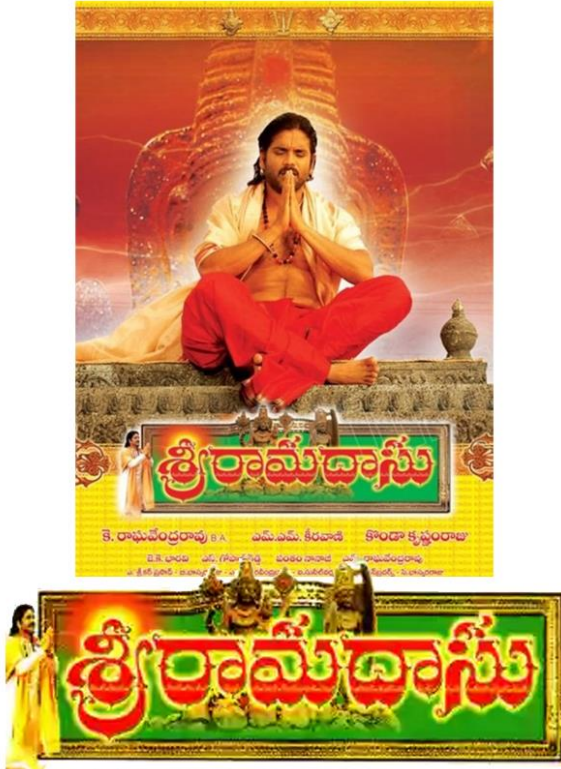
Fig.6a

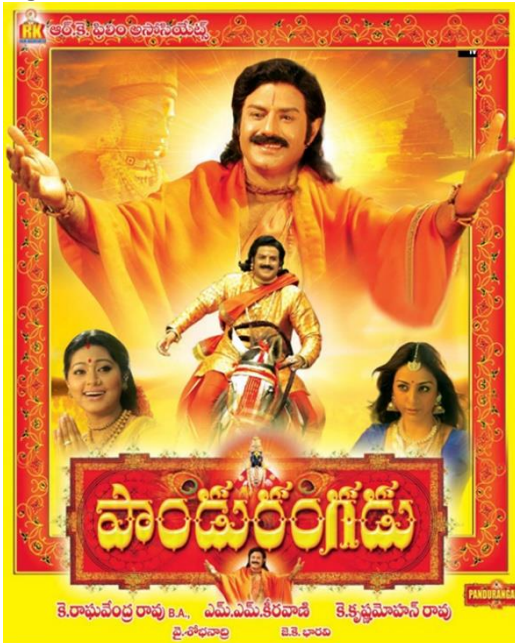Pandava Vanavasam (1965) Director : K. Kameshwara Rao

Fig.6b

Sri Ramanjaneya Youdham (1975) Director: Bapu

Fig.6c

Sri Ramadasu (2006) Director : K. Raghavendra Rao

Fig. 6d

Pandurangadu (2008) Director : K. Raghavendra Rao