



Research Article

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Visual Aesthetics and Cultural Representation in the Set Designs of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Films

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ABSTRACT

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's films are known for their breathtaking set designs, which play a pivotal role in telling the story and capturing cultural essence. This study explores how the visual beauty of Bhansali's sets connects to deeper cultural meanings, focusing on how they shape the audience's perception. Through a survey, the study looks at how viewers, including film enthusiasts, design professionals, and scholars, perceive the historical accuracy, artistic brilliance, and emotional impact of his sets. The aim is to understand whether these stunning sets are just visually striking or if they also enrich the narrative and cultural themes of the films. The findings suggest that audiences see Bhansali's sets as more than just beautiful backdrops — they believe the sets deeply enhance the story and cultural representation. This research contributes to the wider conversation on how production design influences film and shapes cultural storytelling.

INTRODUCTION

Sanjay Leela Bhansali is a filmmaker whose visual style has left an indelible mark on Indian cinema. When you think of his films, you're instantly transported to grand, visually stunning worlds filled with rich colours and intricate details that seem to leap off the screen. Bhansali is more than just a storyteller; he's an artist who brings his narratives to life through every frame, crafting scenes that feel like moving works of art. Central to this artistic expression is his set design, which isn't just about creating beautiful spaces. For Bhansali, each set serves a deeper purpose to evoke emotion, reflect cultural heritage, and communicate complex historical narratives in ways that dialogue alone cannot. His sets are a vital part of the storytelling, making his films visually immersive experiences that resonate long after the credits roll.

Think about *Devdas* (2002) — a film that people remember not just for its tragic love story, but also for the breathtaking interiors that seem to speak as loudly as the characters. The sprawling ancestral mansion, with its towering ceilings and ornate details, doesn't just look impressive; it reflects the emotional weight carried by the characters. Those grand, echoing spaces mirror their loneliness, the weight of tradition, and the unspoken pain of unfulfilled desires (Creekmur, 2007). Jump ahead to *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022), and you'll find a very different but equally powerful use of visual symbolism. Here, Bhansali turns to the color white a bold and unconventional choice for a story about a brothel madam. Instead of the usual darker tones, he uses white to suggest strength, dignity, and defiance, challenging stereotypes and helping us see the lead character in a new light (Arivanantham & Radhakrishnan, 2023).

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Bhansali doesn't just create stunning backdrops, he builds entire cultural universes. His set designs feel like living, breathing spaces that draw deeply from India's artistic and architectural roots. Take *Padmaavat* (2018), for example. The film immerses us in the splendour of Rajasthani palaces, with every dome, carved window, and warm sandstone wall crafted to reflect centuries of heritage. These settings aren't just there to look pretty — they feel real, almost like characters themselves, telling us something about the pride, tradition, and resilience of the people who inhabit them (Parasuraman, 2024).

Bhansali doesn't just design sets, he brings entire cultural worlds to life. His attention to detail goes far beyond decoration; it's about storytelling through space. In *Padmaavat* (2018), for instance, the lavish Rajasthani palaces are more than just beautiful locations. With their ornate domes, delicate jharokhas (latticed windows), and rich sandstone textures, these spaces feel authentic and deeply rooted in India's history. They don't just serve the plot — they *enhance* it, adding layers of cultural meaning and emotional depth. Watching the film, you don't just observe the characters, you *feel* the world they live in, shaped by tradition, honour, and a deep sense of place (Sahu, 2018).

In *Ram-Leela* (2013), color becomes a powerful emotional device. Bhansali draws from the Indian aesthetic theory of *rasa*, using rich, vivid hues to heighten the emotional stakes of the story. The vibrant reds, lush blues, and glimmering golds aren't just chosen for their visual appeal; they're charged with meaning. Each shade is carefully selected to mirror the characters' inner worlds and intensify the romantic and dramatic tension on screen. Through this deliberate use of color, Bhansali doesn't just show us a love story, he immerses us in it, evoking emotions that linger long after the credits roll (Croteau, 2023b).

Bhansali's influence doesn't stop when the film ends; it spills out into real life, shaping how people see and celebrate Indian culture today. His signature visual style has left a clear mark on fashion, home décor, and even wedding aesthetics. Walk into a high-end boutique or a modern Indian home, and you might spot echoes of his films: antique mirrors, Mughal-style arches, rich brocades, and regal furniture that looks like it's been lifted straight from one of his sets. More than just a filmmaker, Bhansali has helped redefine how a generation visualizes the elegance and grandeur of India's past (Chakravarti, 2015).

Beyond India, Bhansali's films have played a huge role in shaping how the world sees Indian culture. For international audiences, who might not be familiar with the subtleties of Indian traditions or architecture, his films offer a rich, immersive experience that's both visually stunning and culturally enlightening. Movies like *Padmaavat* and *Bajirao Mastani* have captivated global viewers, not just with their gripping narratives, but with their portrayal of India's vast history and cultural

diversity. Through Bhansali's lens, audiences everywhere get a taste of the grandeur, complexity, and beauty of Indian heritage (Balabantaray, 2022).

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's films demonstrate that set design is far more than just a beautiful backdrop — it's a powerful storytelling tool. Through his work, Bhansali shows how carefully crafted aesthetics, architecture, and symbolism can elevate a film, drawing viewers into an experience that goes beyond passive viewing. His sets don't just look striking; they allow audiences to feel the world of the film, deepening their emotional and cultural connection. This paper explores how Bhansali's visual techniques, from his vivid color choices to the authenticity of his architectural designs, enrich the narrative. The aim is to understand whether his elaborate set designs are simply eye-catching or whether they offer new insights into history, identity, and tradition, enhancing the story in meaningful ways.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's films stand as a testament to the power of visual storytelling, where every frame speaks volumes. Known for their intricate set designs and rich cultural symbolism, his movies are more than just a visual feast — they are immersive experiences. The sets in his films aren't just for show; they serve as integral parts of the narrative, expressing emotions and reflecting the cultural history of the story. Bhansali uses architecture, colors, and textures not merely to decorate but to define the world in which his characters live and breathe. This paper delves into how Bhansali's expert use of set design and visual aesthetics elevates the storytelling, deepening emotional connections and bringing cultural identity to the forefront in a way that pulls the audience into his cinematic world.

The Role of Colour in Set Design

Colour isn't just decoration in Bhansali's films—it's emotion, culture, and storytelling all rolled into one. He uses colour with such intention that it often feels like its own character on screen. Take *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, for example. The recurring use of white isn't accidental—it's carefully chosen to represent purity, spirituality, and strength. At the same time, it stands in stark contrast to the harsh realities of Gangubai's life, creating a powerful visual tension (Matkar & Ghodake, 2024). This thoughtful use of colour captures the essence of Bhansali's style, where every hue has a purpose and every frame speaks volumes.

You see a similar richness in *Ram-Leela*, where colour is inspired by *rasa theory*—an ancient Indian concept that focuses on evoking emotions through sensory experiences (Croteau, 2023a). The film bursts with vibrant reds, deep blues, and delicate pastels, painting a world that's emotionally charged and visually unforgettable. It's not just about making the movie look beautiful; it's about pulling the audience into a world where they can *feel* the passion, conflict, and culture in every scene.

Cultural Motifs and Symbolism in Set Design

Bhansali's films don't just tell stories—they celebrate India's rich and diverse cultural heritage through every frame. His attention to traditional motifs and architectural influences gives his sets a soul of their own. In *Padmavat*, for instance, the grandeur of Rajasthani architecture takes centre stage. The elaborate carvings, majestic arches, and ornate patterns aren't just for show—they help ground the characters in their cultural context, making the setting feel both authentic and emotionally powerful (Kumari, 2024). These visual elements speak volumes about the pride, tradition, and strength of the world his characters inhabit.

Guzaarish, on the other hand, takes a more understated but equally thoughtful approach. Here, Bhansali weaves together Gothic and Indian styles, creating a unique aesthetic that mirrors the main character's internal struggle and search for meaning (Pachouri, 2024). The result is a deeply personal, introspective world that blends East and West in a way that feels both intimate and expansive. This ability to mix cultural elements so seamlessly shows Bhansali's gift for crafting a visual language that feels deeply Indian yet universally resonant.

The Representation of Landscape in Bollywood Cinema

In many Bollywood films, landscapes often serve as beautiful backdrops—but in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's work, they go far beyond that. In his storytelling, the landscape becomes a living, breathing part of the narrative (Rashmi & Jain, 2024). It's not just about where the story takes place; it's about how that setting makes the audience *feel*. Whether it's the dusty streets of Gujarat or the regal forts of Rajasthan, these places stir up emotions and help convey the deeper meaning behind the story (Mishra, 2018).

Bhansali uses landscapes almost like an extension of his characters. He seems to understand their inner worlds so well that the surroundings begin to mirror their emotions, desires, and conflicts. The visuals of mountains, palaces, deserts, or city lanes aren't just there for visual appeal—they act as metaphors, helping to build the narrative and enrich the emotional layers of the film (Mishra, 2018). Through this thoughtful use of space, Bhansali invites the viewer into a world where every corner, colour, and texture say something about the people who inhabit it.

Critical Approaches to TV and Film Set Design

Scenic design in film and television often doesn't get the attention it deserves. It's usually treated as part of the overall mise-en-scène or dismissed as mere decoration—especially in TV, where it's sometimes seen as just “wallpaper.” But in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's films, set design plays a far more important role. His sets aren't just about creating a beautiful scene; they help tell the story. They shape how we feel as viewers and add emotional and thematic layers to the narrative (D'Arcy, 2018).

Bhansali brings together elements from history, symbolism, and storytelling theory to craft sets that do more than look good—they *mean* something. Every detail, from the architecture to the props, carries significance. His use of visual metaphors and cultural symbols not only enriches the narrative but also helps us understand the characters on a deeper level. Watching a Bhansali film isn't just about following a plot; it's about being drawn into a world where the surroundings speak as powerfully as the dialogue (D'Arcy, 2018).

Research Objectives

1. To identify how the stunning visuals in Bhansali's films shape the way audiences perceive his stories.
2. To understand the cultural depth and historical accuracy reflected in his elaborate set designs.
3. To explore how Bhansali's signature visual storytelling has influenced contemporary filmmaking.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To gain insight into how audiences connect with the visual world of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's films, this study adopted a quantitative, survey-based approach. A total of 150 participants were surveyed, including both casual moviegoers and professionals from fields like media, design, and film studies. By gathering diverse perspectives, the goal was to capture a comprehensive understanding of how Bhansali's set designs resonate with both the general public and those with a more trained, critical eye.

Participants completed a structured questionnaire that aimed to capture their emotional reactions, cultural interpretations, and thoughts on the aesthetic choices in Bhansali's films. The data gathered was analysed using

Table 1: Demographic Table

Category	Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age Group	Below 18	25	16.7
	18–25	34	22.7
	26–35	23	15.3
	36–45	38	25.3
	46 and above	30	20
Gender	Male	80	30
	Female	70	33.3
Occupation	Student	29	12.7
	Film Enthusiast	21	14
	Media Professional	31	20.7
	Art/Design Professional	37	18
	Academic/Researcher	32	14

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Audience Perception

	<i>N</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
6. Visual Aesthetics	150	1	4	2.53	1.109
7. Importance of Set Design	150	1	5	2.80	1.438
8. Historical Accuracy of Sets	150	1	4	2.59	1.106
9. Most Striking Element	150	1	4	2.57	1.161
10. Sets as Benchmark	150	1	5	3.10	1.403
Valid N (listwise)	150				

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Cultural Representation

	<i>N</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
11. Cultural Representation	150	1	4	2.40	1.153
12. Influence of Traditional Art	150	1	4	2.65	1.148
13. Impact on Global Perception	150	1	4	2.37	1.138
14. Reinforcement or Challenge of Stereotypes	150	1	3	2.01	.839
Valid N (listwise)	150				

SPSS software, where we explored frequencies and descriptive statistics to identify any recurring patterns in the responses. To ensure the reliability of our findings, we conducted a reliability test to confirm the consistency of the questionnaire. Additionally, we used the KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) test to evaluate whether the sample was appropriate for more in-depth analysis. Lastly, correlation analysis was used to examine how different viewer responses were linked, allowing us to gain a better understanding of the emotional and cultural impact of Bhansali's set designs.

Data Analysis

The survey attracted a diverse mix of people, which really helps in getting a well-rounded view. Most respondents were in the 36–45 age group, followed closely by young adults between 18–25 and those above 46 — so we heard from both seasoned viewers and younger voices. Gender distribution was quite balanced, with a near-equal split between men and women. When it came to professions, we had a rich blend — from students and film lovers to media and design professionals, and even researchers. This variety in age, background, and expertise gave us a strong and balanced foundation to explore how different kinds of audiences experience Bhansali's visually rich films (Table 1).

The audience responses revealed some interesting insights into how people engage with Bhansali's visual storytelling. On average, viewers showed a moderate appreciation for the visual aesthetics of his films (mean = 2.53), suggesting they notice the beauty but might not always see it as central. The importance of set design scored slightly higher (mean = 2.80), indicating that audiences do recognize its role in shaping the film's impact.

People also moderately agreed that Bhansali's sets reflect historical accuracy (mean = 2.59) and found the set designs to be among the more striking elements (mean = 2.57). Notably, the highest average score was for the idea that Bhansali's sets have become a benchmark in Indian cinema (mean = 3.10), showing that audiences see his work as influential and trendsetting. Overall, these numbers point to a general appreciation for his craftsmanship, with set design clearly leaving a strong impression (Table 2).

The data reveals that audiences generally recognize the presence of cultural representation in Bhansali's films, though their agreement isn't overwhelmingly strong (mean = 2.40). Viewers slightly leaned toward acknowledging the influence of traditional Indian art in his set designs (mean = 2.65), showing that many notice the blend of aesthetics and heritage. When it comes to the impact of his films on global perceptions of Indian culture, responses were a bit more reserved (mean = 2.37), suggesting that while audiences see potential for global influence, they may not feel it's fully realized. Interestingly, when asked whether Bhansali's films reinforce or challenge cultural stereotypes, the mean score was the lowest (2.01), hinting that many feel his work tends to stay within traditional narratives rather than challenging them outright (Table 3).

The responses from professionals and informed audiences suggest a strong appreciation for Bhansali's contribution to visual storytelling, with the highest average rating (mean = 3.11). This shows that many experts believe his set designs significantly enhance the cinematic narrative. However, when asked about his influence on modern productions, the average response was notably lower (mean = 1.98), indicating that while his style is admired, it may not be widely adopted or replicated in the

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Professional Opinions

	<i>N</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
15. Contribution to Visual Storytelling	150	1	5	3.11	1.436
17. Influence on Modern Productions	150	1	3	1.98	.798
16. Techniques make Bhansali's set design unique	150	1	3	2.00	.811
18. What aspects of Bhansali's set designs can be improved for better historical and cultural accuracy?	150	1	3	2.08	.848
Valid N (listwise)	150				

broader industry. Similarly, opinions about the uniqueness of his techniques (mean = 2.00) were moderately positive, showing recognition but also suggesting that not all see his approach as groundbreaking. Interestingly, when it comes to improving historical and cultural accuracy in his designs, the mean (2.08) points to a gentle critique — professionals seem to value his work but also see room for more authenticity and refinement in representing history and culture (Table 4).

The reliability of the survey was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, and the results indicate a high level of internal consistency across all three sections. The audience perception section scored .827, suggesting strong reliability in how participants evaluated visual and narrative elements. Cultural representation showed even higher consistency with a score of .855, indicating dependable responses regarding traditional and global cultural impressions. The professional opinions section also showed acceptable reliability at .787, supporting the validity of expert feedback collected (Table 5).

Table 5: Cronbach's Alpha Test

	<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>	<i>No. of Items</i>
Audience Perception	.827	5
Cultural Representation	.855	4
Professional Opinions	.787	4

Table 6: KMO and Bartlett's Test

<i>KMO</i>	<i>Variables</i>	<i>Bartlett test Chi-Square:</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig</i>
.761	Audience Perception	142.200	10	.000
.706	Cultural Representation	215.912	6	.000
.517	Professional Opinions	51.246	3	.000

Table 7: Correlations of Audience Perception

		<i>6. Visual Aesthetics</i>	<i>7. Importance of Set Design</i>	<i>8. Historical Accuracy of Sets</i>	<i>9. Most Striking Element</i>	<i>10. Sets as Benchmark</i>
6. Visual Aesthetics	Pearson Correlation	1	.055	.137	.006	.030
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.506	.094	.943	.714
	N	150	150	150	150	150
7. Importance of Set Design	Pearson Correlation	.055	1	-.040	.005	.196*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.506		.630	.953	.016
	N	150	150	150	150	150
8. Historical Accuracy of Sets	Pearson Correlation	.137	-.040	1	-.112	-.051
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.094	.630		.172	.535
	N	150	150	150	150	150
9. Most Striking Element	Pearson Correlation	.006	.005	-.112	1	-.093
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.943	.953	.172		.257
	N	150	150	150	150	150
10. Sets as Benchmark	Pearson Correlation	.030	.196*	-.051	-.093	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.714	.016	.535	.257	
	N	150	150	150	150	150

Table 8: Correlations of Cultural Representation

		11. Cultural Representation	12. Influence of Traditional Art	13. Impact on Global Perception	14. Reinforcement or Challenge of Stereotypes
11. Cultural Representation	Pearson Correlation	1	-.014	.049	.025
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.863	.551	.762
	N	150	150	150	150
12. Influence of Traditional Art	Pearson Correlation	-.014	1	-.052	.135
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.863		.524	.100
	N	150	150	150	150
13. Impact on Global Perception	Pearson Correlation	.049	-.052	1	-.199*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.551	.524		.014
	N	150	150	150	150
14. Reinforcement or Challenge of Stereotypes	Pearson Correlation	.025	.135	-.199*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.762	.100	.014	
	N	150	150	150	150

Table 9: Correlations of Professional Opinions

		15. Contribution to Visual Storytelling	17. Influence on Modern Productions	16. Techniques make Bhansali's set design unique	18. What aspects of Bhansali's set designs can be improved for better historical and cultural accuracy?
15. Contribution to Visual Storytelling	Pearson Correlation	1	.020	-.017	.004
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.812	.834	.966
	N	150	150	150	150
17. Influence on Modern Productions	Pearson Correlation	.020	1	-.052	.072
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.812		.529	.382
	N	150	150	150	150
16. Techniques make Bhansali's set design unique	Pearson Correlation	-.017	-.052	1	-.176*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.834	.529		.031
	N	150	150	150	150
18. What aspects of Bhansali's set designs can be improved for better historical and cultural accuracy?	Pearson Correlation	.004	.072	-.176*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.966	.382	.031	
	N	150	150	150	

The KMO and Bartlett's Test results suggest that the data is suitable for factor analysis. The KMO values for Audience Perception (.761) and Cultural Representation (.706) indicate a good level of sampling adequacy. While the KMO for Professional Opinions is lower at .517, it is still within an acceptable range for preliminary analysis. The Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is significant ($p < .001$) across all three variables, confirming that the correlations between items are strong enough to proceed with further statistical examination (Table 6).

The correlation analysis of audience perception reveals generally weak relationships among most variables. A notable exception is a modest but statistically significant positive correlation between the perceived *Importance of Set Design* and *Sets as Benchmark* ($r = .196$, $p = .016$), suggesting that respondents who value set design also tend to see Bhansali's sets as industry benchmarks. Other correlations, such as between *Visual Aesthetics* and *Historical Accuracy* ($r = .137$), were weak and not statistically significant, indicating limited overlap in how

these attributes are perceived. Overall, this suggests that audience perceptions are nuanced and not uniformly aligned across dimensions (Table 7).

The correlation analysis of cultural representation shows mostly weak and statistically insignificant relationships among the variables. However, a notable finding is the significant negative correlation between *Impact on Global Perception* and *Reinforcement or Challenge of Stereotypes* ($r = -.199$, $p = .014$). This suggests that respondents who view Bhansali's work as impactful globally are slightly less likely to see it as reinforcing stereotypes. Other variables, like *Cultural Representation* and *Influence of Traditional Art*, showed no meaningful correlation, indicating diverse and independent audience interpretations of these aspects (Table 8).

When looking at the professional opinions about Bhansali's set designs, there are a few key takeaways. One important point is the negative relationship between the uniqueness of Bhansali's techniques and the perceived need for improvement in historical and cultural accuracy. Professionals who appreciate his creative techniques tend to feel there's less room for improvement in these areas. However, other aspects, like his contribution to visual storytelling or influence on modern productions, didn't show strong connections with the other factors. Essentially, it seems like opinions on Bhansali's set designs are quite varied and don't always overlap (Table 9).

CONCLUSION

This research offers some insightful perspectives on how Sanjay Leela Bhansali's elaborate set designs are perceived by both everyday viewers and industry professionals. The results show that while audiences admire his stunning visuals and the role of set design, it's not always seen as the key element in his films. However, Bhansali's sets are widely regarded as setting a high bar in Indian cinema. When it comes to cultural representation, viewers acknowledge his influence of traditional art, but there's a sense that his films don't always push boundaries or challenge cultural stereotypes. Professionals, on the other hand, recognize Bhansali's strength in visual storytelling but feel that his impact on modern filmmaking isn't as strong. They also point out the need for more historical and cultural accuracy in his designs. Overall, while Bhansali's work

is highly respected and influential, there's an underlying sense that there's room for even more authenticity and depth in representing India's rich heritage on screen.

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