**The Ghost in the Projector: New Pakistani Cinema and its Hauntings**

**Death and Hauntology**

The much announced revival of Pakistani cinema in recent years is presumably a recovery from some known condition of morbidity, sickness or despair. That we cannot yet agree which films or period exactly correspond to the notion of such a revival (or resuscitation, if we presume a death has taken place) leaves us open to speculate on both the politics and the poetics of the tropes of revival and death, the figures they summon and repeat, and the spaces which are infused with their imagery.

As a film-maker and an artist writing together, our speculation crosses between the mutually imbricated spaces of art and cinema in Pakistan; not to trace a debt between the two fields (although we do remark on a ghostly image that keeps turning up like the proverbial bad penny) but to indicate the range of the culture of Pakistani cinema, its enduring significance even as an absence, and its transmutations (which might include death scenes and miraculous recoveries in the best melodramatic tradition).

The defining paper on the theme of death in Pakistani cinema is Ali Nobil Ahmed’s

“ Film and Cinephilia in Pakistan: Beyond Life and Death” (Ahmed 2014). Here Ahmed surveys the (as yet limited) literature on Pakistani cinema to argue that the very notion of its death derives from a glossing over of the ethnic tensions that were played out in the so-called Golden Era of Urdu cinema, a blindness to the ways in which Urdu films were co-opted into a state narrative of hegemony over the claims of ‘regional’ cultures, and perhaps most seriously a fundamental misunderstanding of the very nature of cinema itself: if the term is to be seen as not just referring to a particular iteration of recording and exhibitionary techonologies and customs. In other words, cinema persists as something else (the *spirit* of cinema?) beyond any of its presumed deaths, at the hands of VHS, CD’s, DVD’s, the internet and so on.

While agreeing with the broad theses summarised hurriedly above, and indeed with the particular arguments Ahmed deploys to support his refutation of this concept (that of the death of Pakistani cinema at some point in the 1980’s or 1990’s), we propose to continue using the idea of death in relation to Pakistani visual culture in a particular way: through the use of a set of theoretical concepts associated with the word “hauntology”.

A note on this term: at its inception, hauntology emerged in the work of Jacques Derrida, specifically his book on Marx entitled “Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International” (Derrida 2011). Here, rebutting Fukuyama’s triumphalist thesis of the ‘End of History’ through a close reading of ‘spectrality’ in Marx, allied with Freudian theory, Derrida aims to demonstrate that the various usages of terms for ghostly apparitions (*Geist, Gespenst, Spuk* etc) across the Marxian corpus constitute a ‘hauntology’ (where the term is a near-homophone, in French, for ‘ontology’). In what is in many ways a recognizably Derridean gesture, he shows how the relations between death, life and haunting (the spectre haunting Europe, the spirit of the communes, Hegel’s Spirit and so on) cannot be neatly prioritised by Marx, as much as he might wish to contain and isolate each state from the other. Further, the idea of an end to history in its many forms is itself a recurring ghostly presence, one that has demonstrably recurred with various degrees of conviction throughout recorded history. It is not our remit here to discuss Derrida’s politics or the validity of his reading of Marx; what we take away instead is the idea that the relation between death, life and haunting in a historical field does not necessarily have to be ordered and made to produce a chronology or a life-line that guarantees ontological soundness. In other words, haunting can be seen as an ‘always-already’ structure in history, one that is not merely an aftereffect of life and death, but part of the condition in which histories are experienced. The uncanny, the ghostly cannot be put to rest easily or at all.

In the cultural sphere, hauntology has been utilised somewhat differently. Mark Fisher claims that the growing dominance of capitalist realities in music, cinema and art as elsewhere in everyday life has produced a radical diminishing of the possibility of the new (Fisher 2014). In its place, he argues, we must choose to reject nostalgia and commercially driven, increasingly frenzied recycling of fashions – acknowledging instead that the past signals its *lost futures* to us in the present. It is not then that the death of the new (in the 1970’s or 1980’s, when the last innovations in popular music took place according to Fisher) represented a flagging spirit of the West in the wake of its historical culmination. What we are witnessing is a foreclosure of possibilities, those that can indicate ways of being otherwise than the given norm of capitalist culture, that can only be resisted by accounting for the ghostly presences of the past in our present work (where every work is, as Derrida might say, essentially a work of mourning). Indeed an entire genre of hauntological music has emerged in recent years, which plays on the idea of the death of the new, echoing and sampling the old, relentlessly foregrounding the uncanniness of this process through an insistence on surface hiss, and the artefacts and noise of technology.

Cutting back to Pakistan and following these leads (Ahmed, Fisher, Derrida), we look at two cases of death and haunting in the cultural scene, to see how they can be re-narrated not as a choice between a history of death/revival and a history of continuity, but as a ghost story, one that produces its own *spectropoetic* understanding.

**Apparitions:The Ghost of Maula Jutt and Other Stories**

If the cliché ‘cinema is the mirror to our society’ were to be considered for a moment, it begets a counter question: what happens to a society when its cinema dies?

The theme of death holds a great significance in conversations about cinema technology but also in theoretical explorations on cinema itself. Technologically, there is an overlapping cycle of birth and death - death of silent and the birth of talkies, black and white to colour, and more recently from celluloid to digital. The growing popularity of video on demand, torrents, social media has meant that cinema is struggling to survive in the face of its own imminent demise. Not a year passes without yet another announcement about the death of cinema. Even if these pronouncements seem unrealistic or exaggerated, the recent work of the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey (2015) lays bare the conclusive ways in which film spectatorship has changed with the proliferation of new media technologies.

But beyond technological shifts, photography and consequently cinema, according to Bazin essentially embalms the dead (Bazin and Gray, 1960:4) and for Barthes is an asymbolic death (1982:92). Whether cinema is an act of preservation in the face of death or the indication of a foretold death, undoubtedly the spectre of death haunts cinema.

However, far from an immortalising or preservation instinct, Pakistani cinema’s relationship with death is one of (violent) erasures. As recently as 2012 a series of attacks by rioters resulted in six cinemas being burnt in Karachi and Peshawar (Dawn, 2012). Cinema’s survival in Pakistan has at all times been a doggedly difficult battle with the state, but the middle classes and elites have also turned their backs and noses up at it, viewing it as essentially immoral, tacky and tasteless.

Calling Pakistan ‘one of most cinephobic nations on earth’, Ali Nobil Ahmad sees the problem as not merely that of a class based notion of value and taste, but being symptomatic of a deeper malaise. Using the classic text *Pakistani Cinema 1947-1997* by Mushtaq Gazdar (1997), he argues that this disowning of ‘Lollywood’ and its culture by the state and society is not a result of the Islamization of the Zia years, but was in fact the official position of the early Pakistani state which viewed cinema as ‘sinful’ (2016). This view is borne out by several film personnel who speak of the delegitimisation of film, its industry and personnel by both the society and state as the biggest cause for the stunting of the film industry.

Our biggest misfortune is that we Pakistanis are making films in a country in which watching films is seen as a crime. People ask us why our industry is not prospering and I always say to them that this industry cannot prosper up until film and those who work in film are not given their due respect. A nation that addresses its musicians as *marasi* (low caste), film personnel as k*anjar* (pimps) and film heroines as *gashti* (prostitutes);how can the industry of that country prosper*?* (N Adeeb 2010, personal interview, 21 November).[[1]](#footnote-1)

While the relationship between cinema and the state and society in Pakistan has at all times been arduous, the films of the actor Sultan Rahi, of which *Maula Jatt* (Malik, 1979) is the most iconic, is the most contested moment in its history. Seen as a vernaculization of Pakistan cinema (Ayres, 2008), most commentators lament that with it came the decline of bourgeois national Urdu cinema’s golden age which was eclipsed by the dark age of bawdy and violent Punjabi cinema (Ahmad, 2016). This shift in audiences from urban middle classes to working classes and a consequent rift about the question of taste (high/low) is the key to understanding the paradox of how one and its actor are perceived as marking both the zenith and the nadir of the Pakistani film industry.

On January 9, 1996 Pakistan’s biggest superstar Sultan Rahi was shot dead on a highway by unknown assailants. His murder remains a mystery with official news reports claiming it was a robbery while some others believe the cause to be a land dispute and yet others believe he was killed by religious bigots because of his imminent plans to reconvert to his religion of birth i.e. Christianity (Paracha, 2014). This sudden death also more or less coincided with another untimely death, that of the Pakistani film industry itself. While several factors were responsible for the decline of the industry including the creation of Bangladesh and the consequent loss of film personnel and market territory, the military dictatorship of General Zia and its oppressive censorship policies, and the proliferation of video home system (VHS); but with Sultan Rahi’s passing most definitely heralded the end of an era after which the Lahore based film industry or Lollywood more or less struggled with its own extinction.

This is probably because as many commentators and film personnel have recounted that with Rahi came one of Lollywood’s most profitable eras (Awan, 2017) and that he ‘single-handedly kept the industry rolling’ (Paracha, 2014). Yet paradoxically many others would squarely lay the blame on Sultan Rahi for ushering in an era of trashy, bawdy, violent and lowbrow Punjabi cinema. A news report on Rahi’s murder and subsequent funeral describes him thus, ‘for his fans, Rahi was the boorish, far from handsome rural character’, and his murder itself is described as some kind of divine justice: “[h]e brought so much violence into the movies, almost glorified it [that] [h]e had to meet a violent end” (Sarwar, 1996). This tone of near distaste while writing about the death of Pakistan’s biggest film star is confounding and yet symptomatic of the disavowal of Lollywood’s popular cinema culture by the middle and elite classes of Pakistan.

Yet, far from a definitive death, the image of Sultan Rahi as Maula Jatt continues to haunt the public culture of Pakistan, showing up in all kinds of places- on T-shirts, music videos, memes, advertising, films and art galleries.[[2]](#footnote-2) But, to what does the image of Sultan Rahi’s *gandasa* (farm implement used as weapon) wielding bloodthirsty renegade hero owe its long afterlife? *Maula Jatt* heralded a truly revolutionary and pioneering moment in creating a hero who was in essence the anti-thesis of the law (Khan and Rashid, 2017) or of the ‘system’ that had failed the people of Pakistan. Released in 1979, the film ran for approximately two years despite the continuous attempts by the authorities in the Zia-ul-Haq military regime to have it removed from cinemas and their eventual success in doing so after more than two years of exhibition.

In a personal interview, both the writer and producer of *Maula Jatt*, share the belief that the stupendous success of the film stemmed from the fact that it gave voice to the anger that the masses felt about General Zia’s tyrannical military regime. Writers during the martial law period, according to Nasir Adeeb, the writer of the film, were censored to the point that there were no subjects that they were allowed to write on, whether it be issues of economic and social justice, the army and governmental agencies, political subjects like Palestine, Bangladesh, Kashmir, even simple love stories were out of bound. Therefore, Adeeb decided to write about the lowly *goonda* (thug), a Robin Hood-esque figure providing speedy justice to the underprivileged and oppressed. Thus was born the figure of the vigilante renegade personified by one actor Sultan Rahi. Nasir Adeeb recounts how in earlier films the hero went to the police station addressing the police official as ‘*sahab bahadur*’ (a title usually affixed to British officers of the empire, loosely meaning ‘your lordship’) and pleaded his innocence- ‘*mei bekasoor aan*’ (I am innocent) but in its prequel *Wehshi Jatt* (1975) and following it *Maula Jatt*, the hero addressed the police officer as ‘*thanedaara*’ (in-charge/manager of the station) and declared ‘*write in your report that I am going to kill this man and then kill his progeny*’, ‘this is my *faisla* (judgement)’ (*Wehsi Jatt*, 1975). The hero was now the police, jury and judge and also the deliverer of the sentence. Adeeb believes that watching the film was a cathartic experience for the audiences living under ‘martial law’ and mentions that every time Sultan Rahi delivered this dialogue, the audience roared and clapped, representing the rage they felt about the state and its authorities which had continually failed to deliver justice to them (N Adeeb 2010, personal interview, 21 November).

While Sarwar Bhatti the producer of *Maula Jatt*, engaged in what he calls a two year long ‘cat and mouse game’ with the then censor board of Pakistan, not all other filmmakers were able to take on the unprecedented forms of censorship and their films and consequently the industry suffered immeasurably. Bhatti’s maverick methods meant that when his film was banned by the board, he took his case to the ‘Appeals Committee’, and showed them a cut comprised of reels of extra footage, that were not part of the final film, which he promptly replaced with the real film once the board passed the film without cuts.The popularity of the film alarmed the military regime but Bhatti used stay orders, bribery, and other kinds of unorthodox methods to bypass the martial law authorities and keep his film in the cinema. However, according to him the language of the film was so irreverential that the authorities were not willing to relent and succeeded in having the film removed from exhibition. Bhatti believes that he finally backed down after a two year run because he would prefer to go ‘not out’ (using cricket terminology) (S Bhatti 2010, personal interview, 7 November).[[3]](#footnote-3)

Sultan Rahi’s heroic thug gained immense popularity in cinema, about whom Mushtaq Gazdar, the go-to source for Pakistani film history comments, ‘his gestures and facial expressions were more what you would expect of the villain’ (Sarwar, 1996). This is probably, one of the few examples in the history of cinema worldwide, where a public were divided on whether a film’s main protagonist was in fact a hero or a villain. *Maula Jatt* spurredmany films based on the same formula and eventually heralded an era of films on the lives of real criminals financed by their families in an attempt to memorialise them and provide a counter-narrative to the events surrounding their lives.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The alienation and lack of faith in the ‘system’ by the working classes and the expression of the same in cinema, and its disavowal in turn by the state and the middle-upper classes represents what is at stake in the public life and culture of Pakistan. The ghost of *Maula Jatt* continues to appear at this very crossing of fault lines of class, culture and the state, so as to disallow the silencing of this moment and memory, even though Sultan Rahi and Lollywood have been long murdered.

**Revival, Resuscitation or Possession?**

During our research in the decrepit Bari and Evernew studios in Lahore in 2010 and 2011, we chanced upon Sultan Billa, the body double of the film star Sultan Rahi. It was the sheer poignancy of finding a dead superstar’s ageing body double in the midst of the ruins of a decrepit film studio that led to the making of a video by one of the authors along with filmmaker Farjad Nabi, titled 'The ghost will leave if you ask nicely’. A second video titled ‘Manifesto for the dead’ was the result of another chance encounter. Having failed to trace the film star Chakori, who plays the vampish Daro Nathni in *Maula Jatt*, we finally reached her house one afternoon in the winter of 2010 only to find her funeral underway. As we joined the mourners, we spotted a man dressed as a clown holding a protest placard about the sad state of the dying and destitute film personnel of Lollywood, those who had once entertained generations of cine-goers. The video follows this man Sajjad Charlie as he walks around Hall Road, Abbot Road and Laxmi Chowk, the once busy but now forlorn spaces inhabited by the film industry. Through the figure of the restless ghost of Sultan Rahi haunting the studios, and the ghostly clown bearing witness to a history of loss and neglect of an entire cinema culture, the videos were an attempt to address the recent ‘revival’ of the Pakistani film industry, which neither acknowledges its ancestry nor claims as its heritage the now ‘dead’ Lollywood film industry.

The irony of Lollywood’s film personnel reduced to destitution, dying ignominious deaths in Lahore on one hand, and a simultaneous ‘revival’ of the film industry being celebrated in Karachi on the other, makes is evident that it is not Lollywood but something else which is the object of this revival.

‘The revival of Pakistani cinema’ is an ongoing claim of the past decade or more. Many commentators believe that such a hope was misplaced and the revival never happened (Zaidi, 2016 & Zaidi, 2018), while others will argue that a new generation of Pakistani films and filmmakers have come to the forefront in the last decade suggesting a kind of a ‘new wave’ of Pakistani cinema (Shah, 2014). But while the word ‘revival’ suggests a relationship with the previous film industry, but the new industry has little to no relationship with its predecessor. Based in Karachi and not Lahore, those at the forefront of it belong mostly to the TV and advertising industries and not to the erstwhile Lollywood film industry.The revival being spoken of then seems to be of the middle class Urdu cinema, which supposedly died at the hands of Sultan Rahi, *Maula Jatt* and Punjabi cinema.

The term ‘revival’ was used most successfully in 2007 with Shoaib Mansoor’s *Khuda Kay Liye* and later of *Bol* (2011). What was greatly celebrated with *Khuda Kay Liye* was the return of the middle class family as cinema audiences as opposed to the working class male audiences of Punjabi cinema. The film itself would definitely be celebrated as a pinnacle of Urdu cinema with its erudite, poetic and beautifully crafted Urdu dialogues. Even thematically, *Khuda Kay Liye* is addressed to the project of nation building, and in particular the struggle of a nation’s survival against bigotry. The story is about two brothers from an upper middle class background who are successful musicians. One of the brothers is drawn into the dogmatic hypocrisy of the religious fundamentalists and abandons music because it is considered forbidden in Islam. The rest of the film stages a progressive and nuanced debate about the true teachings of Islam. This deliberate address to the ‘nation’ as opposed to the individual, family or ‘*biradari*’ *(*fraternity*)* of the the Sultan Rahi films illustrates yet another distancing of the present revival from the Punjabi cinema of Lollywood.[[5]](#footnote-5)

A remake or adaptation of the film *Maula Jatt* has been announced by the director Bilal Lashari, and the role will be played by Fawad Khan, a big star amongst the middle and upper classes, known for his image as a urban, sophisticated romantic hero in Pakistan and Bollywood (Sarym, 2017). Given the star cast, scale and budget, the filmography and previous successes of the director (*Waar*, 2013), of the film, no doubt this film will rehabilitate *Maula Jatt* amongst the very class that despised it.

Whether it will do this or not at the cost of other erasures will determine whether the ghost of *Maula Jatt* can finally be laid to rest.

**The Spectral Public: Art and Pakistani Cinema**

Where can we see this image haunting the scene of contemporary Pakistani culture, given the well-known death of Lollywood (which is not at all the same thing as the death of Pakistani cinema of course)? Where else can we find the scenes of this haunting, and its effects? We contend that contemporary Pakistani visual art provides us with one of these scenes, allowing us to collect certain repeated motifs into a pattern that we are describing as a ‘hauntology’.

Visual Art in Pakistan has had an often uneasy history of involvement with cinema. The separation of these two fields, ‘Fine Art’ and cinema has been more marked and sustained than in many contemporary instances elsewehere. reflecting both an entrenchment of certain modernist values in the Pakistani art world at large and the inertia of art academies in particular. The moving image only really came to be accepted in the exhibitionary and pedagogic institutions of Karachi and Lahore in the late 1990’s and early 2000,s with video work by artists such as Bani Abidi leading the way. But immediately preceding this contemporary moment of fluidity between the fields of cinema and art (as then understood in terms of sculpture, painting and their offshoots in the gallery space) was a moment of *recognition*: where artists such as David Alesworth, Durriya Kazi, and Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi mined the language of popular cinema and film hoardings , creating both a body of research and ways of producing work that defied considerations of value such as signature, individual expression, formal correctness etc. that were integral to the work of their predecessors in Pakistani art.

An initial example will serve here to illustrate the nature of this complex engagement. The 1996 project, *Heart Mahal*, conceived and produced by the Dadis, Kazi and Alesworth in collaboration with teams of urban craftsmen, technicians and artisans consisted of the interior of a shipping container decorated with beaten metal panels depicting images from popular and topical urban culture, leading to a pulsing heart of electric lights on the end wall. The installation in its entirety “ evokes a shrine-like space that evokes decorated trucks and rickshaws, weddings, religious rituals, and Bollywood film sets”, in the words of Hammad Nasar, who gathers work made by the various members of this group and their subsequent collaborators, students and others influenced by their example under the rubric of “vernacular visualities” (Nasar 2013). What is immediately evident is that an installation such as this was not an attempt at some utopian democratisation of the art world (as Nasar remarks astutely), but a process of recognition and movement between hitherto contained *categories* of visual practice: the high and the low of course, but also the cerebral vs the affective, the intellectual vs the kitsch, the local vs the universal, and the modern vs the premodern/non-modern/altermodern. One of the authors of the present essay, who was a student of Alesworth at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture in Karachi, in the late 1990’s, experienced directly the provocation of this move towards the vernacular, and indeed the weaponisation of the vernacular: not against class as understood in a classical Marxist or sociological way, but against what one might call class-*ification*, or the persistence of colonial and class schema in the practices and conceptual apparatuses of contemporary art. Local cinema, and its populist culture were widely understood by those of us who studied with these artists or followed their work, to be the richest source of not only new and exciting cultural formations, but also of models for collaborative practice in general, where the individual artist’s role devolves from that of sole creator and bearer of a signature mark, to that of an agent amongst others negotiating the flux of ontological uncertainty that is the hallmark of what Peter Osborne characterises as ‘transcategorial’ art.

Iftikhar Dadi himself characterises the work of this period:

“Along with Elizabeth Dadi and others, as founders of the so-called Karachi Pop, my own work during the early 1990s began to engage with the “popular,” as it was a realm in which struggles that were foreclosed in formal public spheres reemerged. We attempted to articulate a postconceptual practice in dialogue with the vitality of popular urban visualities to create photography, sculpture, and installations commenting on the visual theatrics of violence and urban identity and serving as an oblique critique of official nationalism.”

(Dadi, 222-223)

What is particularly important in what we are calling this moment of recognition is the fact that as artists turned towards a film industry as representing something like a popular language that escaped or at least showed a way out of the strictures of modernist elitism, this film industry *was already on the decline*. The cinema hoarding and poster painters in the 1990’s were already throwbacks, leftovers from an industry that was in its death throes. Indeed the strangely unnoticed absence of cinema imagery from the current Pakistani urban landscape is remarkable, especially for anyone who grew up surrounded by these oversized, often outlandish representations of scenes from films: nor has sufficient attention been paid as yet to the significance of a vanished language of advertising in Pakistan, connected aesthetically and technically to the manual craft of cinema hoarding painting. Indeed, one of the accomplishments of the art we are discussing, which afterwards was gathered under the broad and somewhat inaccurate term “Karachi Pop”, was to make visible a an entire aesthetic regime that flourished apart from academic modernism, and included not just advertising and cinema hoardings, but the decoration of public transport (often referred to since this time as ‘truck art’), the design and manufacture of ornamental household objects (often repurposed or recycled from found or salvaged materials), and the erratic architectural styles of Karachi’s unruly sprawl. What united this regime was not a philosophical program such as modernism or the International Style, or an academic or professional elite of artists and designers that might produce something like a uniform tendency corresponding to a ‘period’, as conventionally understood in Western Art History from the 18th century onwards. Such uniform tendencies inasmuch as they proliferated in Pakistan or undivided India represented as well an attempt to reconcile the theoretical universalism of a fading or withdrawn Empire with the as yet unaccounted for desires, aspirations and modes of living of a public that had only ever had a pragmatic accommodation with the values of modernism.

At this point we should point out that two separate deaths and hauntings can be seen to inform the present development of Pakistani visual culture: one the death of colonial India and its presumption of creating an organic link between the universal Enlightenment values of Europe and those of India (a mission in which art education played a certain defined role through the Mayo School in Lahore for example, and in the wake of which modernism offered a promise of emancipation from marginalization on the peripheries), and second, the death of the film industry which had, more directly than the art world, enacted the tensions between classes and values which seemed to come to a head in the 1970’s. This moment corresponds as well to the populism of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and the Pakistan People’s Party, and the emerging rhetoric of emancipation from the ruling classes, stereotypically understood as urban, Urdu speaking and Westernised in both morals and attire. It is this second death and its subsequent ‘hauntology’ that we propose to indicate here, while maintaining that it follows a series of such absences which give shape to the peculiarly ruptured and eruptive genesis of contemporary Pakistani visual culture.

The preceding description of a certain moment in the history of visual culture in Pakistan sets the scene for our subsequent analysis, but before proceeding we will repeat and sharpen some observations:

1. Pakistani cinema provided a rich source for imagery to artists associated with Karachi Pop in the 1990’s
2. At a deeper level, the popular reach of Pakistani ‘vernacular’ cinema and its resistance – or perhaps its mere obliviousness – to the value systems of ‘cinema’ as theorized and produced in the dominant Anglosphere, was an attractive site from which to target the moribund and compulsory modernity of the art academy in Pakistan.
3. This vernacular cinema, at the time of its take-up in the art world was already staggering to an expected death, with the closure of cinemas, the availability of Bollywood cinema on VHS, and eventually the ubiquity of pirated media on the internet. In light of this significant belatedness, we can see these art practices as not an attempt to revalue or revive a living tradition, but as a process of conjuring the *ghost* of a dead one: of indicating its lost possibilities certainly, but also of tracing its continuing influences or apparitions in phenomena as various as architecture, design, decoration and so on.

But deeper still, we can speculate that popular cinema (rather than art or parallel cinema, which never really flourished in Pakistan in the same way as in neighbouring India, for various reasons but mostly because of an absence of state patronage), was the site of something like a ‘popular imaginary’, that was seen as hitherto having been kept at a distance from the elite practices of painting and sculpture. This popular imaginary was invited into the world of High Culture not through translation into accepted aesthetic forms, but by bringing its bearers (the craftsmen, the artisans, the film technicians) into collaboration with artists who were keen to learn from them, to transmit (rather than translate) their desires, their lifeworld even to the space of knowledge and global circulation which art has access to. A complete equation would perhaps show the transformation of this ‘popular imaginary’ into an ‘imaginary popular’ with all the problems attendant on such a gesture. Put yet another way, the attempt was to give a perhaps temporary, provisionally fleshy form to the spectre of a public that had been triply barred from the threshold of art, by a colonial imposition of aesthetics and intellectual standards, by an inertial modernity often (though not always) at the service of conservative power structures inherited from the colonial era, and finally by the relegation of vernacular or regional languages and cultures from the realm of cultural activity in favour of Urdu and English (the two dominant languages of government and of education in Pakistan).

It is this last bar to access that Alyssa Ayres) has connected with the Punjabiyat movement, which grew to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s with the work of writers and intellectuals such as Najm Hosain Syed and Hanif Ramey amongst others, and by the 1990s had developed into a recognized movement for recognition of the literary and cultural status of the Punjabi language (Ayres 2008). Ayres characterizes this movement as one that is engaged in a ‘struggle for recognition’ in Bourdieu’s terms, ranged across the battlefield of symbolic capital. As already mentioned, Urdu’s status as a prestige language second only to English, produced a complex hierarchy within which exclusionary practices of symbolic violence thrived and continue to thrive. The relationship between High Modernism in visual art and popular visual culture can be seen in these terms as paralleling that between Urdu cinema and its refined urban heroes and heroines, its dramas of social mores, and the Punjabi cinema that emerged in the late 1970’s and 1980’s and was led by the figure of Maula Jat or the actor Sultan Rahi, who came to embody a composite hero drawn perhaps from folklore and traditions of resistance to colonization. For Ayres, the Punjabi “masses” (broadly equating to what we have called a “public”) pledged allegiance to this ultraviolent hero, as evidenced by the numbers in which they thronged to the cinema, eclipsing the dominance of Urdu cinema and cementing the visibility of Punjabi as the most spoken language of Pakistan (if not the most widely spoken). We have already remarked in a previous section that the shift to Punjabi cinema was (at least initially) profoundly political and anti-establishment, where the establishment was figured as the leftovers of Empire, where the policeman addressed by the peasant as ‘*thanedaraa’* produced a violent shock in the order of symbolic recognition, that was cheered repeatedly by rural audiences across the Punjab. It is important to note that such a detail, significant as it is, would make be near invisible outside the specific cultural formation of Punjab and its postcolonial history, signaling the importance of this struggle for recognition for the construction of any adequate knowledge. So while Maula Jat as a vigilante figure is by no means isolated from global tendencies – the emerging reactionary right exemplified by the gun toting cop or disillusioned soldier in American films of the period comes to mind, as does the Indian working class hero often portrayed by Amitabh Bachchan in the same period – the “masses” he looks to mobilise are vastly different from those in these other examples elsewhere. The divide he bridges, or rather tears through with his bloody *gandasa,* is not simply between an oppressed minority and a ruling class, but between an entire system of rule as exemplified by not just apparatuses of power, but by their corollary mechanisms such as good taste, civilized speech and so on. Until 1996, when Sultan Rahi died in the unexplained and seemingly senseless assassination on a highway where he had stopped to change a car tire, this figure in the many sequels, prequels and knock offs of the original film, cleared the debris of urban upper middle class dominance in cinematic representation. It was this same year, 1996, that marks the birth of Karachi Pop with the exhibition of *Heart Mahal.* We will note this coincidence as underlining yet again the series of births, rebirths and reappearances of a certain idea of the public-as-marginalized, as spectral (otherwise why protest or attempt to rectify its absence?) that punctuates the interlinked histories of Pakistani art and cinema.

Fast forward exactly 30 years, and we are in Karachi assembling a small collection of works by prominent Pakistani artists for a show entitled “Art Kis Ka?” (October 2016 , FOMMA) asking the contributors to engage with cinema in some form. The works included historical or well known ones, and some produced specifically for the exhibition. Our curatorial aim, in addition to simply demonstrating the presence of a strong local tradition of engagement between two-dimensional art practices and cinema history, was to explore the different kinds of spectatorship exemplified by the artworks on display. Broadly, we categorized works as *critical* or *cinephilic*; that is, some artists seemed to engage with cinema as a political, historical or social fact while others approached the cinematic image as fans, immersively and subjectively. This is not to suggest that there is not a substantial overlap between these two positions – our proposed ordering however, arranged certain tendencies that we observed in the relationship to local cinema, and either tendency in turn points to a political or politicized subjectivity. This claim informed our general inquiry as well as the practical considerations of curatorship such as placement and juxtaposition.

On reflection, we were also struck by the peculiar and cumulative effect of the frozen image, the film ‘still’ in various forms: from the digital prints of Iftikhar Dadi, to Ahmed Ali Manganhar’s painterly but faithful recreations of frames from *Maula Jat*. Much has been written about the strange signifying power of the film still, and Barthes’ idea of the ‘third meaning’ might help to understand the hold of cinema on painters and artists generally: a certain a-signifying gesture in the freeze-frame, by erasing the narrative reveals the specifically ‘filmic’ (where ‘filmic’ is to ‘film’ as ‘novelistic’ is to ‘novel’). This stripping away of the diegetic level produces a kind of image that has had a certain abiding fascination for Pakistani art, and finds a parallel in the use of cinema images on buses and lorries. It intensifies as well what Geeta Kapur calls the ‘frontality’ and ‘iconicity’ of Indian cinema, as noted elsewhere by Iftikhar Dadi and by Ali Nobil Ahmed (Ahmed 2014).

The image that cropped up repeatedly, hauntingly, in these works is unsurprisingly that of Sultan Rahi, particularly as one of the many incarnations of *Maula Jat*. The late actor, like the film industry he worked in, has vanished from the living cinema of Pakistan but taken up residence elsewhere. He survives as a totemic figure in popular consciousness but one whose films are rarely seen now, if they are screened at all. It might even seem that the image of the late Sultan Rahi is today more familiar in art galleries than in the few surviving cinema halls of the country: it haunts Pakistani art-making in a way no other figure has, except for perhaps Jinnah and Iqbal (these latter two are permanently frozen in stern frontality and dreaming semi-profile respectively: they have their own hauntologies). Here the upward thrust of Rahi’s jaw, his firmly planted feet, his eyes meeting a bloody fate in the middle distance, are rid of extraneous distractions of plot, dialogue and motion; boiled down to an essential, memorable and portable masculinity that will not be denied visibility or submitted to the order of the *thanedar*. The gulf between the absent, semi-fictitious and therefore spectral public that he represents and the audience in the gallery is remarkable, but no less provocative for being awkward. If anything the ease with which his image slips into the appreciation of a hip, urban audience used to ironic kitsch saturating their cultural field, broadens and marks the gulf across which this image is travelling. Manganhar’s paintings carry no irony or remove, in faded washes of colour, resisting the temptation to mirror the hues of the original cinematic print or to amplify its gruesomeness. This is not nostalgia, but the past reopened in the sense claimed for some musical genres by Mark Fisher, a revisiting of a moment pregnant with the possibility of change. Mohammad Ali Talpur’s work, manipulating cheap prints of Punjabi film posters, evinces no such nostalgia either: erasing the figures of the women next to the men in these images, leaving only a blank outline, he seems to demonstrate that it would be unwise to receive the idea of popular cinema as a revolutionary space uncritically, harbouring as it does deeply violent patriarchal or religious codes of retribution, honour and masculine normativity. Talpur thus shows that it is in fact Pakistani women who are spectral, deprived of even symbolic agency and relying on the brute strength of the male protector to confront evil and the systems that shelter it (it is no coincidence that *Maula Jat* is a film about the rape of a woman that turns into a confrontation between men).

**Conclusion: The End…or is it?**

If we think of Pakistani cinema as a haunted landscape rather than as a deathly one, we can begin to see possibilities for new kinds of work in the situation on the ground, by thinking of new publics that are as yet spectral, by bringing in new ghosts rather than attempting to make a ‘local’ cinema conform to an essence or definition. The question of what constitutes Pakistani cinema or its revival can then be replaced with descriptions and interventions in a contaminated spectroscape, that is perhaps richer in absences than in the presence of a full or unbroken tradition.

At this point in time, issues of representation, taste and the popular imagination remain as relevant as ever – even as the ways of speaking about them continue to proliferate. Ahmed Ali Manganhar and Mohammad Ali Talpur’s reworkings of old Punjabi film images are seemingly only distantly related to Bani Abidi’s video meditation on the destruction of an iconic cinema by an enraged mob protesting yet another video on the internet; but this distance conceals a shared attempt to come to terms with what art and cinema can mean to a nation and its people, and the power of images in these particular circumstances to both facilitate contemplation and incite deadly violence. As contemporary film-makers enter this scene of simultaneous loss and possibility, perhaps the melancholic images of a vanished cinema might be exorcised through a sustained collaboration of cinematic and ‘fine’ art practices. Our aim is to start to think of these two traditions together in an evolving project, placing attempts to imagine – and re-imagine – itself.

1. These interviews were conducted in 2010 and 2011 by one the authors along with the filmmaker Farjad Nabi as part of a research project and documentary film about Lollywood. Several film personnel, particularly from the film *Maula Jatt* (1979) were interviewed. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Maula Jatt* is raised to the status of myth and lore, where the dialogues of the film like ‘*maula nu maula na mare tay maula nai marda’* (*Maula’s death will be at the hands of Maula.* Maula, while the name of the protagonist of the film also means ‘God’)form part of everyday conversations, parliamentary debates, revered by cinephiles and fans alike. For example, the dialogue was famously used by the Chief Justice’s counsel Aitzaz Ahsan in court. See:https://tribune.com.pk/story/80270/lollywoods-language-connection/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The battle between cinema and the censor board of Pakistan is far from over and as recently as 2016, the momentary surge that the Pakistani film industry and cinemas were experiencing came to an abrupt halt due to decisions taken by the Islamabad Censor Board of Pakistan. For more, see: <https://herald.dawn.com/news/1153991/what-makes-the-revival-of-pakistani-cinema-an-uphill-task> and <https://www.dawn.com/news/1302494> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A fantastic article on this history in Pakistan by Sher Khan and Hashim Bin Rashid (2017) narrates the ways in which the state had both used and disposed (killed in police encounters) several criminals through the enactment of the *Gooda Act* of 1968 and later in the 1990s. The families of these criminals used cinema to glorify them. These films then served as hagiographies which became a part of local folklore and collective memory about these individuals. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Zinda Bhaag (2013), an off-beat punjabi film, co-directed by one of the authors of this essay, also considered part of the revival of Pakistani cinema, self-consciously pays a tribute the Punjabi films of Lollywood (Shah, 2014). However, made by an Indian-Pakistani writer-director duo, the filmmakers do not as such ‘belong’ to the Lollywood film industry either. The film attempts to critically engage the films of Sultan Rahi in a dialogue about masculinity. If the mainstream Punjabi hero of Lollywood was a man of action, fighting for honour and winning, the hero of Zinda Bhaag were the exact opposite — struggling with failure, wanting to live a life of dignity but grappling with everyday humiliation and dishonour (Gupta, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)