

Pagal Pagal Pagal Pagal Filmy Duniya

ALTHEA THAUBERGER

CURATED BY KIMBERLY PHILLIPS AND ZARMEENE SHAH

Althea Thauberger and Zarmeene Shah will be giving a talk as part of the Capture Speaker Series on Tue. April 14 at 6 pm at Inform Contract (p. 110).

APRIL 17–JULY 5

CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY
555 NELSON ST, VANCOUVER
TUE–SU: 12–6 PM; M: CLOSED

OPENING RECEPTION
THURSDAY, APRIL 16, 6–9 PM



Althea Thauberger, *Pagal Pagal Pagal Pagal Filmy Duniya (Mad Mad Mad Mad Filmy World)* video still, 2017, single channel video projection. Courtesy of the artist.

A Simultaneity of Stories-So-Far: Althea Thauberger's *Pagal Pagal Pagal Pagal Filmy Duniya*

TEXT BY KIMBERLY PHILLIPS
CURATOR, CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY

Situated along Muhammad Ali Jinnah Road in the centre of Karachi, Pakistan, the Capri Theatre is itself the stuff of movies. It is the last remaining historic single-screen cinema house in the city that welcomes general audiences, designed and built in 1968 by Pakistani architects Rizki & Co. under the guidance of the theatre's owner, Chaudry Abdul Razaque. Its open-plan, modernist architecture, and advanced screening technology—the auditorium was outfitted with a curved screen and zero-angle projection—embodied Pakistan's "golden age" of cinema and the cultural liberalism that had earned Karachi its nickname as the City of Lights. During the country's religious and political shifts of the late 1970s and 1980s, which decried the "deviance" of the movies, the Capri survived numerous violent attacks by bunkering itself behind heavy fortifications. But it continues to thrive, and with 200Rs ticket prices in the lower seats, the Capri remains accessible to almost anyone who desires to see a film.

The Capri is the site and subject of Althea Thauberger's most recent single-channel video work, *Pagal Pagal Pagal Pagal Filmy Duniya [Mad Mad Mad Mad Filmy World]* (2017). As in so many of the artist's large-scale projects, the artist recognized in the Capri Theatre a complex knot of histories, social relations, and power dynamics that she desired to imaginatively document. As she frequently approaches her subjects as an outsider, Thauberger's methodology involves developing projects through a process of extended engagement with the communities of her chosen sites. She works collaboratively and experimentally with a large and often intergenerational group of participant-actors who shape the project for themselves. Throughout this process, Thauberger understands her role to be that of a producer/instigator, rather than a singular author, and the success of her projects is entirely dependent upon the relationships she is able to forge with her co-creators.

Pagal describes a world in the cinema—not any of the worlds presented on screen, but rather one built by the unruly, heterogenous group of people that constitutes its audience. As we view the video, we learn a number of things about the Capri, its history, and the rapidly changing city in

which it stands. But the film's documentary framework is repeatedly interrupted as the Capri's spaces—its expansive stairwells, broad, open concourses, and double-height auditorium—are overtaken by a teeming crowd of actors. They fill its container with their bodies and voices and, as if testing the limits of its capacity, transform the movie house into an exploratory stage. They perform acting exercises, rehearse invented scenes, and improvise choreographies. While fully aware of the camera's presence, they perform as much for one another as for us (in only one brief clip are the participants actually seated and regarding the theatre screen, and we realize they are not watching the latest blockbuster but rough cuts of their own prior performances). These participants are not always in harmony: they sometimes mishear and speak over one another, and they express confusion over the purpose of the project. There are moments of camaraderie and levity, of giggly self-consciousness, pensive reflection, and grief. *Pagal* is a profoundly intimate document of a singularly unique configuration of agents in time and space.

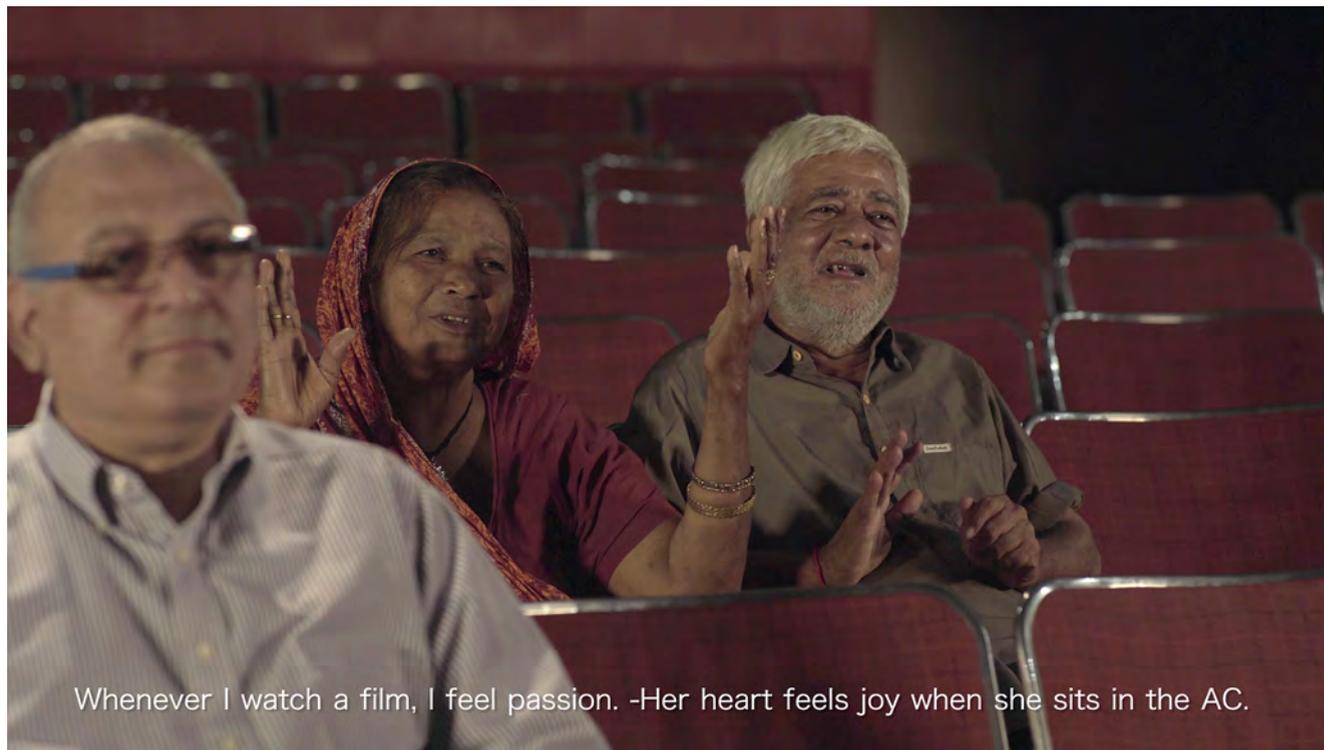
The sociality of cinema-going has been largely overlooked in film theory, but several recent studies have worked to

re-situate the focus from the content on the screen to the bodies in the space of the theatre.¹ The work of British Marxist-feminist geographer Doreen Massey has been instrumental in this shift. She reminds us that space is neither static nor neutral; it is relational. It is the product of a multiplicity of interrelationships and interactions extending from the intimate to the global, and as such, is always in process. It is not the structure against which agency or history can be counter-posed. Space is uniquely and unpredictably eventful: never finished and never closed. In fact, we might describe space, as Massey suggests, as a “simultaneity of stories-so-far.”² Before the video camera, Thauberger’s participants perform the inherent eventfulness of the social space that is the Capri. Despite the fact that, save for the briefest moment at the outset of the film, we never glimpse a view of the streets outside the cloistered interiors of the theatre, the Capri’s actors invoke the teeming, ever-evolving openness of the city itself. But the artist’s work points to something more elusive and nuanced than simply celebrating a community that is, because the crowd that performs together in *Pagal* was brought into being expressly for the purpose of creating the work. And this fact points towards an important element of Thauberger’s projects, which is her conviction that not all socially engaged work needs to have long-term impact of a community as its goal: *Pagal* is transformative for the brief moment of the togetherness that the project creates, in the momentary intersection of all its components; the simultaneity of the stories-so-far.³

In its lyrical meditation on light and darkness, survival and tenacity, togetherness and aloneness, conviction and doubt, Thauberger—together with her participants—creates an imaginative structure that asks us to think differently about the complexity of space and its profound role in the way political questions can be formulated. She asks this of us, perhaps, because as Massey stresses:

The way we think about space matters. It inflects our understandings of the world, our attitudes to others, our politics. It affects, for instance, the way we understand globalization, the way we approach cities, the way we develop, and practice, a sense of place. If time is the dimension of change then space is the dimension of the social: the contemporaneous co-existence of others. That is its challenge, and one that has been persistently evaded.⁴

The opening frames of *Pagal* linger on a young Capri patron who offers a poem about his city to his fellow participants. His words remain present throughout the film: “Come, let’s go to the cinema in Karachi,” he recites, “but this time, don’t forget, never leave each other’s side in Karachi.” Through its momentary, collectively imagined interpretation of an alive and complex space, *Pagal* invites us to consider the sheer tenuousness of any community, which exists only as long as we continue to demonstrate a shared commitment to being together.



Althea Thauberger, *Pagal Pagal Pagal Pagal Filmy Duniya (Mad Mad Mad Mad Filmy World)* video still, 2017, single channel video projection. Courtesy of the artist.



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¹ See for example Lies Van de Vijver, “The cinema is dead, long live the cinema!: Understanding the social experience of cinema-going today,” *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 14, no. 1 (May 2017): 129-144; Robert C. Allan, “The Place of Space in Film Historiography,” *TMG* 9, no. 2 (2006): 15-27. For a good discussion on film and social change in Pakistan, see Ali Khan and Ali Nobil Ahmad, eds., *Cinema and Society: Film and Social Change in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2016).

² See Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2005), 26-28.

³ See Althea Thauberger’s response to the question of impact in the case of her 2005 project Murphy Canyon Choir in “An Interview with Althea Thauberger,” by Noni Brynjolson, *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism* 1 (Spring 2015), 211-12.

⁴ Doreen Massey, *Ibid.*, back cover.