



Volume 3, Issue 1 (Spring/Summer 2020)

**[Review] *Descending with Angels: Islamic exorcism and psychiatry. A film monograph.*
By Christian Suhr.**

Juliet Davies-Horn

Keywords: Jinn, agency, perception, healing, ontology

Recommended Citation:

Davies-Horn, J. (2020). '[Review] 'Descending with angels: Islamic exorcism and psychiatry. A film monologue' by Christian Suhr', *entanglements*, 3(1):88-90



Licensing

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

**[Review] *Descending with
Angels: Islamic exorcism and
psychiatry. A film monograph.*
By Christian Suhr.**

Juliet Davies-Horn

Abstract

A compelling filmography of therapeutic encounters with the invisible of interest to those pursuing comparative approaches to thinking through agency and perception in the face of suffering. Here we follow residents of a housing estate in Denmark who seek healing for anguish and aberrant behaviours through supplication to the Islamic practice of ruqya alongside psychiatric treatment with psychotropic medication.

Anyone who sees religion and science as worlds apart, or medicine curing the follies of belief, might be pressed to look again. Christian Suhr's *Descending with Angels* eloquently probes the dividing lines between the sacred and the medical by comparing the Islamic practice of *ruqya* with psychiatric care. This film monograph takes place in Denmark's largest housing estate in Gellerup, on the outskirts of Århus, from where we follow residents' encounters with healing in their homes, a local mosque and a psychiatric clinic. Healing is two-fold as the exorcism of *jinn* possession through Quranic supplication meets the dampening of psychiatric symptoms through psychotropic medication. Suhr succeeds in delivering a compelling reframing of the suffering subject that does not stumble into familiar theoretical impasses. There are no Cartesian minds split from bodies here and medical classifications of mental illness are not taken for granted. Together, the film and accompanying monograph not only present a novel account of agency and anguish but provide the reader-viewer with a chance to practice some analytic gymnastics. Suhr's argument takes the form of an oscillation after all.

From his struggles with ethnographic fieldwork as a liminal experience, Suhr elaborates a subtle theoretical position. This position questions the interventions of the psychiatrists, nurses and Muslim shaykhs through portraying residents who mediate submissions to these various authorities. Healing, everyone seems to agree, is invisible whether affected by the exorcism of *jinn* possession, a psychotropic medication or a placebo. The cause of suffering is just as invisible; *jinn*, an imbalance in the brain, the status of being an immigrant, isolation within housing that Danish authorities call ghettos. By thinking through healing in the interlocutor's terms of the invisible, Suhr elaborates the project's central thesis from which other commonalities derive and are taken up in each chapter. The sufferer's agency is presented as an obstacle that needs to be overcome, regardless of whether God or psychotropic medicine is considered responsible for healing. Submission to healing in either encounter entails buying into a healer's ability to conjure the sense of an all-encompassing world of knowledge and total vision to which the sufferers' limited and partial perspective must be subjected.

Comparing two opposed epistemes of suffering is a bold endeavour given, in his own words, psychiatrists and Muslims would see the sacred and the medical as thoroughly separate. Suhr, though, is not naïve or nonchalant about the risks this comparison presents for anthropology's classic concern to take seriously the views and lived realities of interlocutors. One early chapter takes this theme to heart by exploring what it means to take seriously the invisible in the form of *jinn* possession. We are pulled onto ontological turf but not without the trepidation that Suhr's sensitively liminal style encourages. Ontology – of the Viveiros de Castro variant – might be good to think with, but it is rather discouraging to work with when dyads of Us/Them, West/Rest fail to neatly line up before the ethnographic gaze. Suhr provides a lovely description that mirrors some of the theoretical pitfalls of thinking ontologically against the explicit ambiguities of his own interlocutors. We are invited to take seriously the shaykh's convictions that the Danish welfare society obstructs proper Muslim practice by tying Muslims into dependency relations through incapacity benefits. These benefits are given on the condition recipients obey psychiatric regimes and take medications that, shaykhs explain, make Muslims vulnerable to *jinn* possession. Yet in keeping with a style that carries on throughout, Suhr pots this narrative with an occasional comment by shaykhs who also describe occasions when residents suffer *jinn* possession so strong as to require psychiatric care before they can return to life as a practicing Muslim. Through these narrative oscillations, Suhr channels Rane Willerslev's more recent reflections

on whether taking seriously the invisible is also always an invitation to not take it all too seriously. This is a theoretical position which disrupts some dominant notions of perception by promulgating perception as the enactment of multiple, changing, reflexive stances.

The vertiginously-inclined might find all these oscillations unsettling. Suhr recruits a broad philosophical repertoire that includes Hegel, Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty, Kierkegaard and even Nietzsche to make his compelling points, but when homo economicus is singled out as a common figure of success by ideals of Islamic piety and psychiatric treatment, the theoretical work starts to feel a little weighed down by the very same Western imaginary of psychiatry he considers problematic. What do Islamic philosophers make of the distinctions between Islamic exorcism and Western psychiatric care that Suhr takes issue with? Similarly, the decision to exclude sociological or historical analysis - although allowing the film scenes to better portray the invisible – had less purchase in the written narrative. Former lives and homes haunted the Gellerup residents but received little consideration from Suhr despite the putative continuity of these residents' anguish. The return of Nadia's *jinn*, and her mother's depression following a visit to Bosnia, Aziz's relapses after festivities of Ramadan, Feisal's transmission of *jinn* to his wife, reduced questions of kinship and haunting memory to a horizon cut from view.

Nonetheless *Descending with Angels* is well worth your time. It would be of interest to those who find perception and agency, ontology and spirit possession, ritual and sacrifice good to think with, as well those interested in medical and religious appreciations of what notions of freedom are at stake when thought and consciousness appear to go awry. For medical and visual anthropologists one particularly appealing aspect of Suhr's approach is its clarity on what multimodal ethnographies can bring to explicating the contrasting aesthetics and ethics of healing encounters. Being a patient whose mind is at stake becomes, in Suhr's hands, a visible and moving project of agentic supplication.

Juliet Davies-Horn is a PhD candidate in Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge with an undergraduate degree in Neuroscience and Neuropsychology. She is writing up research based on 18 months exploring scientific knowledge practices for understanding and treating consciousness disorders within research hospitals in Scandinavia. Prior to this, she worked in research, reporting and coordination with the United Nations Peacekeeping Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and with the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Haiti. In both roles she was responsible for expanding institutional knowledge practices for reflective assessment of, and response to, reports of physical and sexual violence among aid beneficiaries in IDP camps and remote, rural communities.

Web: <https://www.socanth.cam.ac.uk/directory/juliet-davies-horn>