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**[Review] *Descending with Angels:*
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Abstract

This review discusses the film monograph *Descending with Angels* by Christian Suhr, a study of the invisible in the contexts of Islamic exorcism and Danish psychiatry in Arhus, Denmark. The author explores notions, experiences and epistemologies of the invisible, and its role in participants' afflictions and capacity for healing.

Christian Suhr's film monograph *Descending with Angels* is a remarkable contribution to medical anthropology studies of mental health and ritual healing. It adds to discussions on the role of images (Cohn 2010; Porath 2011; Bonelli 2015) and on 'internal dynamics' of therapeutic encounters (Kapferer 2004; Hsu 2017). It provides a case study in 'ontological' anthropology through its reflective, experimental and perspectival engagements (De Castro 1998; Willerslev 2007, 2010; Mol 2002; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). Suhr's adoption of film as ethnographic method, and of montage as an analytical and narrative device contributes to a multimodal medical anthropology (Cartwright and Crowder 2017).

The film monograph explores notions, experiences and practices surrounding the relationship with the invisible in the mosques and psychiatric institutions of Arhus, Denmark. It chronicles Muslim patients' narratives of affliction and their striving towards recovery

and reintegration, while engaging with healers' interpretations of their patients' suffering as either *jinn* intrusion or psychosis. Suhr's core argument is that Islamic exorcism and Danish psychotropic treatments are 'essentially about the same thing, namely the dissolution, sacrifice, and submission of the human subject to an all-encompassing external [agency]' (168). This argument takes shape in a comparative fashion, which highlights similarities between the two healing systems while also accounting for important differences.

The overarching theme of the book and the film is the invisible in its partial materialisations as either *jinn* possession or mental illnesses. The seven chapters of the book mobilise theories of the image, montage, self, agency and sacrifice to examine these partial materialisations and the practices that are put in place to counteract them. Crucially, for Suhr, psychiatric and Islamic healing both work through the 'disruptive' principle of montage, which subverts the pre-established order or perception of reality through novel combinations of images, objects or perspectives, while also attempting to return the patient to some form of stability through their reassemblage (185).

Chapter 1 reviews the invisible in the social sciences, Islamic theology, and Western philosophy, and reflects on the simultaneously invisible and hypervisible status of Muslims in Danish society. Chapter 2 introduces the research's participants and asks, in full ontological mode, 'How [...] is it possible to take other people's realities seriously?' (35). Suhr's 'oscillations' between his participants' alternative epistemologies complicate and enrich the analysis, as when he refers to his own encounters with the *jinn* or declares that '[n]ot to believe while participating in prayer seem[s] almost impossible' (39). As some participants express reservations over their own epistemological stances, Suhr asks whether 'such partial visions, fluctuating degrees of belief, and even existential doubt' (50) can become integral to the anthropological method.

Doubt is another key theme of the book. Chapter 3 examines the ethnographic role of 'failed images' as pointing towards that which cannot be represented, destabilising the 'real' by amplifying and opening a channel of communication with the invisible. Chapter 4 discusses the production of uncertainty and ambiguity in Muslim exorcisms and Danish psychiatry, to argue that doubt is key to becoming a patient, in order to overcome doubt through submission in faith to an external healing agent – be it God or biomedicine.

Chapters 5 grounds the discussion of the healing dynamic in a review of self, agency, and sacrifice in Islamic and Western traditions, while Chapter 6 details the practices by which both Islamic and Danish systems lead the patient towards the 'sacrifice' of their individual agencies through the evoking of an all-encompassing seeing agent. Suhr draws primarily on Merleau-Ponty's 'view from everywhere' and Deleuze's 'time image' (as also seen in Kapferer 2013) to refer to the capacity of ritual to 'explod[e] the perspectives of the ritual participants' (145). But here are also echoes of Willerslev's (2007) 'optical oscillations', or partial embodiments of alternative point of views. Finally, in Chapter 7, Suhr disrupts the overall coherence of his argument to consider alternative interpretations or 'assemblages'.

Suhr's language of the image is ethnographically vivid and theoretically potent. His

writing seemingly adopts cinematic techniques such as 'flashbacks' of prior conversations (51-2), and 'breaking the fourth wall' through the use of humour (83) and the intimate confiding to the reader his own doubts (104). He thus employs 'disruptive montage' not only as an analytical category but as an ethnographic strategy to conjure up saturated images of the field.

Yet the cinematic angle applied to the analysis of ritual healing at times feels restrictive. Suhr himself acknowledges these limitations towards the end of the book, where he admits that the 'recorded quality' of cinema makes it less powerful than 'real time' live ritual (180). Suhr's discussion of the invisible *via negativa* through failed images and disruptive montage is compelling, yet the ethnographic material also points to the value of a sensory perspective. While Suhr establishes early in the book that the invisible is 'that which entirely exceeds our human faculties of perception and knowledge' (8), the filmic and textual depictions of possession rituals would justify a sensory approach. For instance, if 'abnormal eyes staring out' (82) index *jinn*'s presence, why not take this aspect into consideration when discussing the 'authenticity' of a YouTube possession ritual where the eyes of the 'patient' are disguised by sunglasses? Although the body is referred to as the battlefield where the struggle for power between humans and *jinn* is consumed (e.g. 138; 158), and despite the rich sensory and performative fabric of the healing rituals, the corporeal framework remains strangely removed from the analysis.

Ultimately, the power of Suhr's work lies in its use of montage as an analytic paradigm for ritual healing which, in turn, points to a fascinating correspondence between cinematic and psychic processes. To the same extent, *Descending with Angels* will be a highly relevant and most engaging read (and watch) to medical anthropologists, visual anthropologists, and those working on possession rituals.

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