



DESCENDING WITH ANGELS

A film about jinn possession, Islamic healing, and psychiatry in Denmark

Directed by Christian Suhr, 75 min, Persona Film, 2013



The medicine helps you to control your own thoughts.



*There is no god but God,
the Ever Living who protects all that exists.*



I have no thoughts.



If someone is insane,
they just send him to a psychiatric hospital.



Synopsis

Islamic exorcism or psychotropic medication? "Descending with Angels" explores two highly different solutions to the same problem: namely Danish Muslims who are possessed by invisible spirits, called jinn.

A Palestinian refugee living in the city of Aarhus has been committed to psychiatric treatment after a severe case of jinn possession which caused him to destroy the interior of a mosque, crash several cars, and insult a number of people. He sees no point in psychotropic medication since his illness has already been treated with Quranic incantations. A psychiatrist and nurse try to understand his point of view but find that even further medication is needed.

In the meantime a local imam battles a stubborn jinn-spirit of Iraqi origin and tries to explain the Muslims of Aarhus that they should stop worrying so much about jinn, magic, and other mundane affairs since nothing can harm anyone except by the permission of God. The film compares two systems of treatment that despite vast differences both share a view of healing as operating through submission of faith to an external non-human agency—namely God or biomedicine.

About the filmmaker

Christian Suhr is a filmmaker and assistant professor at the Department of Culture and Society, Aarhus University. "Descending with Angels" is his first feature length film. The film is based on 18 months of fieldwork with patients and healers in the city of Aarhus, Denmark. It was produced as part of a PhD project including a 250 page text on experiences of illness and healing among Danish Muslims.

Christian Suhr is the editor of the book "Transcultural Montage" (2013) and the director of the award-winning films "Unity through Culture" (Papua New Guinea 2011), "Ngat is Dead" (Papua New Guinea 2009), as well as "Want a Camel, Yes?" (Egypt 2005). He is the author of a number of articles dealing with visual anthropology, spirit possession, and psychiatry. His current film and research project focuses on traditional forms of healing in Egypt.



Christian Suhr about the production of the film

“Descending with Angels” is an attempt to compare two forms of healing and provide a platform for starting a difficult dialogue. The film makes an intervention at a time when European societies are challenged by the presence of Muslim communities in their midst, when growing forms of racism and discrimination are accompanied by attempts to regulate, govern, and engage the foreign communities in the form of policing and care. When Muslim patients move between the local mosques and the psychiatric institutions of the Danish welfare system their bodies and souls are trans-formed into a battlefield between the moral demands of Islam and the Scandinavian brand of normative secularism—ideologies and religious doctrines that in the Danish context often are portrayed as mutually incompatible.

Both psychiatry and Islamic exorcism apply physical and mental force in treatment. Both exorcism and psychotropic medication are risky practices that may result in healing but may also result in trauma and additional illnesses. While psychiatrists often regard Islamic exorcism as dangerous, Islamic exorcists argue that psychotropic medications are more harmful than healing. For the patients healing becomes a matter of faith and of submitting themselves to biomedical or spiritual powers beyond their own control.

Overall, my project is about how humans encounter the unknown and the invisible. Suffering is in its essence invisible and irreducible. In Islamic forms of healing as well as in psychiatric treatment, it is, however, essential that the disorder is given a form or shape, so that action may become possible. Film production can also be understood as a means of giving a tangible shape to

the invisible. But sometimes cross-cultural and cross-religious dialogue becomes difficult if we think we know too well what is wrong within the other. In my work I explore how the expressive qualities of film, long observational takes, and montage can be used to evoke the invisible without reducing and objectifying it to new forms of static visibility.

The idea for the project came while studying sales strategies among camel drivers at the Giza Pyramids in 2004. I lived with a family of three brothers, their wives, and children when the wife of the newly wedded youngest brother became possessed by a jinn. Months proceeded with Quranic exorcisms, prayers, and ritual purifications with holy water and honey. I tried hard to convince the family to visit a psychiatrist as I was increasingly disturbed by the young woman’s outbreaks of transgressive behavior, severe fevers, and incomprehensible utterances. Driven by both disbelief and curiosity I later decided to explore the role that such invisible spirits played among Muslim immigrants in my hometown, Aarhus, Denmark. Here new challenges, complexities, and fields of invisibility started to open up. Many Muslim shaykhs and patients had strong opinions about Danish psychiatry. I decided to take a closer look at how Danish psychiatrists dealt with this group of patients. Encountering the psychiatric system became just as unsettling and exotic as my initial encounter with jinn possession years earlier in Egypt. Psychiatric diagnoses and methods of treatment that I had taken for granted as self-evident truths proven by science now appeared strange and unfamiliar. Jinn possession and paranoid schizophrenia had become equally effective ways of evoking the limits of the visible and knowable within my horizon of experience.

Awards



Best Documentary Feature, Berlin Independent Film Festival



Special Student Film Award, Göttingen International Ethnographic Film Festival

Festival screenings

- SIEF Zagreb (June 2015)
- Trento Film Festival, EURORAMA (May 2015)
- Ethnocineca (Vienna, May 2015)
- International Festival of Ethnographic Film (Sofia, May 2015)
- Ethnografilm (Paris, April 2015)
- World Film Festival (Tartu, March 2015)
- Days of Ethnographic Film (Ljubljana, March 2015)
- Berlin Independent Film Festival (February 2015)
- SVA Film and Media Festival (Washington, Dec 2014)
- American Academy of Religion (San Diego, November 2014)
- Athens Ethnographic Film Festival (November 2014)
- Munich International Ethnographic Film Festival (November 2014)
- Sardinia International Ethnographic Film Festival (September 2014)
- Göttingen International Ethnographic Film Festival (May 2014)
- Beeld voor Beeld (Amsterdam, Dec 2013)
- CPH:DOX (Copenhagen, Nov. 2013)
- NAFA Film Festival (Bilbao, October 2013, unfinished version)
- RAI International Ethnographic Film Festival (Edinburgh, June 2013)

Additional screenings

- University of California, Berkeley, USA
- University of California, Santa Cruz, USA
- University of Southern California, Los Angeles, USA
- Freie Universität Berlin, Germany
- University of Heidelberg, Germany
- James Cook University, Cairns, Australia
- University of Manchester, UK
- KU Leuven, Belgium
- Atlas Stad Antwerpen, Free Hands, Belgium
- University of Copenhagen, Denmark
- Aarhus University, Denmark
- Anatomisk Teater in Oslo, Norway
- A number of psychiatric hospitals and cultural centers in Europe

Credits, formats, language

Directed, filmed, and edited by: Christian Suhr

Produced by Persona Film (November 2013)

Running time: 75 min

Original format: XDCAM 1080p

Screening format: DCP / Blu-ray / ProRes / Mpeg4 / DVD / DV SP

Languages: Arabic, Danish, English

Subtitles: English

Contact and distribution

DOCUMENTARY EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES (DER)

101 Morse Street, Watertown, MA 02472, USA

Email: docued@der.org, Tel: +1 (617) 926-0491

PERSONA FILM

Filmbyen 21, 4. sal, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark

Email: suhr@cas.au.dk, Tel: +45 31600031



All people have problems.
No one can be happy all the time.