

Tracing Absence

Zār is the complex of healing rituals connected to belief in spirit winds that afflict the body with physical and psychic pain. Linked, by anthropologists, to the movement of enslaved Africans from East Africa to Southwest Asia, zār is sometimes considered a trace of Indian Ocean slavery—a history for which archival evidence is scattered, imprecise, at times hardly available. Zār thus calls into being an alternative archive, one predicated on kinesis, self-disintegration, and the active use of the senses. (Rapture through scent is integral to the zār ceremony and is why those associated with the ritual are sometimes called *ibn* or *bint bukhūr*, “born into incense”).¹

The archive, as a repository of information, documentation, and evidence, is the dominant mode through which scholars produce knowledge about the past. What does it mean to consider a practice like zār a historical trace? What does it mean to approach healing rituals through the lens of the archive? In my writings on fascination with zār in Iranian cinema, I have been interested in how the phenomenon of zār defies anthropological, historical, and even political desire: the desire to record it, contextualize it, to capture its referent, to formulate its proper meaning. For inasmuch as zār registers a history of enslavement that has been blotted out of traditional, nation-based historiography, zār’s resistances to recording and inscription seem just as significant as its empirical, anthropological “content.” Zār’s resistances reflect the intransigent facticity—the ambivalent structure of our facts—regarding African

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1. Hager El Hadidi, *Zar: Spirit Possession, Music, and Healing Rituals in Egypt* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2016), 43.

enslavement in the Indian Ocean and point us toward models of historical memory that are more challenging than familiar oppositions like commemoration and denial, truth and nontruth.

Forgetting, absence, loss, dissolution, emptiness. These are different ways one might describe what I take to be the most significant aspect of the *zār* ritual: loosely translatable as an entry into trance. Every component of the ceremony (the loud, thumping drums, the strong burning gums, the inscrutable cantations) directs the *zāri* toward her own self-dissolution. Participants sometimes describe a feeling of being emptied, of amnesia. Incomprehensible in their “speech and acts,” they are “no longer themselves.”² At the climax of *zār*, consciousness lapses. A white cloth is thrown upon this disappearing person, protecting the dissolving self from the gaze of others. The cloth shield is tautological. Something of *zār*—its most curious and impenetrable facet—resists empirical observation. A discontinuity in the subject troubles the continuity of the observer who wants-to-know.

In film and media studies, the “archival turn” of the nineteenth century has been compellingly linked to theories of technology.³ The proliferation of archives, as well as the proliferation of the archive’s “processes of subjectification,” can be read alongside an increasing precision of registration, the technoscientific evolution of which film is one of modernity’s most exemplary achievements.⁴ Both the growth of archives and the orthographic rectitude of audiovisual recording supports and supplements modernity’s increasing demand for and obsession with facts, facticity, and objectivity. This is as true in the human sciences as in the natural sciences, as well as in everything that falls between, including modern historiography, which is modeled upon, and views itself—despite its own, sometimes critical, caveats—as a science of the past.

Film is a technology with the potential to supply us with reality, to attest to the *being-there* of the *having-been-there*.⁵ (This is why continuity filming has been equally central to the production of scientific knowledge, as to the

2. Kaveh Safa, “Reading Saedi’s *Ahl-e Hava*: Pattern and Significance in Spirit Possession Beliefs on the Southern Coasts of Iran,” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 12 (1988), 92; El Hadidi, 16 (n. 1).

3. Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, and the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 69–107.

4. Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 2: Disorientation*, translated by Stephen Barker (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008). For “processes of subjectification,” see Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 3.

5. Roland Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” in *Image-Music-Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 45.

political realism of counter-cinema aesthetics.⁶) But in *zār*, the certitude of the *having-been-there* flickers. Trance is a “being away,” a going absent; *yghīb*; a suspension.⁷ If *zār* is a trace of slavery, filmed *zār* is a trace of a trace. But attenuation, erosion of reality, is less the cause for the disappointments of *zār*’s cinematic recordings than the protrusion of an absence that undermines the goals of epistemological orientation. In place of information, what the phenomenology of *zār* offers is an absence at the heart of experience.

How does one reconcile the demands of knowledge accumulation (the drive for facticity) with an absence that is not merely incurable but that *is* itself the cure? The force of this question continues to shape the way I think about African enslavement in the Indian Ocean. Which is to say, there is a power internal to this absence that stalls, diverts, and transforms how we might produce knowledge about it.

6. Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine’s Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995). For correspondences between early film technologies and the scientific disciplines, see Scott Curtis, *The Shape of Spectatorship: Art, Science, and Early Cinema in Germany* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

7. Tamara Turner, “Music and Trance as Methods for Engaging with Suffering,” *Ethos* 48, no. 1, (2020) 84; Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 145.