# BLURRED SPIRITS. VHS-AESTHETICS AND NOSTALGIC EXPECTATIONS IN THE TRADING ZONE OF TRANCE

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Narratives of modernity tend to claim an unfolding of progressive events along technological developments. In this context, trance mediumship and spirit possession are often archaized as "survivals" and pre-modern practices. Since the 19th and early 20th centuries, trance mediation has been localized in the peripheries of "modernity" and attributed to women, children, and strangers. Despite the allochrony (Fabian 1983) continuously ascribed to spirit mediums, ethnography's archive amply demonstrates that trance mediumship has been part of spiritual modernization movements and has gained new ground in the trading zones of globalization. Debates about the "modernization" of technological media have triggered debates about the modernization of trance mediums and vice versa – debates that have characterized the introduction of new technologies in the 19th as much as in the 20th and 21st centuries (cf. Schüttpelz/Hahn 2009). As we have written elsewhere, spirit mediumship and audio-visual media share structural similarities: They produce an interface of different temporalities by presencing someone from the past or from another world, in the image and during the ritual; both create a certain uncanniness by bringing into the present something that belongs to the past, thus disturbing simultaneity through the interaction of two different temporalities; both bridge the spheres of life and death; and both, spirit mediums as well as the person photographed, filmed, or otherwise recorded, experience some sort of radical dispossession and radical self-estrangement by becoming an Other (cf. Behrend/Dreschke/Zillinger 2015: 18-19).

In Morocco since the early 1980s, ritual experts and their clients commissioned local video studios specialized in wedding videos to film their trance rituals. Many Sufi brotherhoods and their trance experts—dealing with spirit possession and various forms of spiritual crises—established what we suggest to call "trance media archives" in which these films were kept and contextualized in a variety of ways: to commit an event to memory and revisit it, to demonstrate ritual genealogies, to establish and document one's ritual prestige, and not least, to examine and further develop the ritual practices that, using this collection, could be adapted to differing needs and requests and help to open up new ritual networks and economic opportunities.

Rituals are "indexical occasions", as Richard Werbner once noted; they "provide an index, in effect a Who's Who, of people and relationships important to the sponsors" (Werbner 1977: XXV). Increasingly, the ritual space proves to be a transnational space, in that it is triadic in character, spanned between individuals who live scattered around the world but identify themselves as members of a ritual community of cooperation; the (ritual) contexts of the countries of origin; and the contexts of the respective sites of residence. In the extending networks of transnational migrations, the indexical occasion of ritual gatherings is mediatized. Trance adepts use technical media during the ritual to record the event or to integrate adepts over distance. After the ritual, they often circulate ritual film recordings. By exchanging CDs and DVDs, the brotherhoods and their followers send a ritual topography with their sign practices, social relationships, normative expectations, and holy places en route (Zillinger 2014). More recently, they upload video stills or small video clips on Facebook to situate themselves in the ritual networks of migrating acolytes of trance and to demonstrate ritual genealogies.

The "genealogical depth" of spiritual relationships plays an important part in this context. When Tami (name changed), a powerful seer and leader of an ʻIsāwa brotherhood, arrived as a clandestine migrant in Europe, he quickly posted a video still to announce himself (Skhykh Tami) as the "son" of Moussa (weld Moussa) and to commemorate his well-known spiritual master (rahima llah—may God have mercy on him).

For adepts of Moroccan trance cults, the video still is easily recognizable as an image of what is called "lion trance". The women, possessed by the spirits of lionesses, kneel down to confront the attack of male lion spirits and their mediums, the male trance dancers. The animal spirits of the ʻIsāwa take form in the body movements during trance. In the cosmologies of the brotherhoods, these spirits force their mediums into action—an action that generates resemblance in mimetic performance (Kramer 1993). This sequence of animal trance marks the ritual depicted as "gharbaoui", as part of the "western" rural traditions of the ʻIsāwa. By posting this film still, Tami claims his spiritual origin (*al-aṣl*) in the villages and homesteads of Morocco's western plain (*gharb*) and a legitimate place in the transnational ritual, social, and economic networks of the brotherhoods and their possessed clients. For migrating acolytes, the brotherhoods provide an important resource. On his way through Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France, Tami, too, headed for other trance adepts, who willingly helped him by providing a place to stay, helping him find his way around, or connecting him with other ʻIsāwa across Europe.

For his Facebook site, Tami chose a video still from a recording that has been kept in high esteem among the ʻIsāwa diel gharb and their followers in Morocco. Circulated on VHS tapes, copied by repeated filming from a TV screen and subsequent digitalization and digital copying from visual CDs to visual CDs, the video recording has gained a peculiar aesthetic imbued with an aura of pastness.

Michael Gilsenan has aptly characterized Moroccan trance rituals of the *gharb* as "shot through … [with a] nostalgic expectation, a dream or fantasy of grace that has before and may again suddenly strike" (Gilsenan 1990: 113). The ritual techniques of individual and communal trance are strongly connected with a longing for a (social) place of origin, *al aṣl*, a term comprising a sense of roots and emotional attachment. The term "nostalgic expectation", the longing for an experience of "ritual intimacy" during a night-long ritual, is epitomized by the very pastness that the aesthetic of the trance video conveys. The elders (*al nass al-kbār*), the ones who celebrated the rituals before, stand in for the way "things have to be done" properly and for perfect devotion to the founding saint and the spiritual path of the brotherhood. While the trance adepts can identify each and every one of the ritual community depicted in the video and can thus prove their intimate knowledge of spiritual kinship and ritual sociality, the blurred aesthetic brings the formal features of trance practice to the fore—the festive garments, the culminating body movements, and the ritual choreography, during which the trancer gets "lost from his [or her] socially constructed self" (Crapanzano 1977: 9). The individual expertise of elderly trance dancers and musicians is cherished among the recipients of the videos. But the blurred aesthetics of the videos draw attention to the de-individualized devotion of those who follow the calling to trance—manifest in the tunes of the oboes that

mark the festive soundscape of the ritual. To follow the elders from the *gharb* is to follow the *ḥāl ḥlū,* the sweet trance of the countryside that dissociates those *ma mtebtinš* who willingly succumb to the ritually invoked powers and possessing spirits. The videotaped ritual that took place in a village in the western plain of Morocco is vividly remembered by the elderly trance adepts. Their spiritual masters and artful examples of musicians, dancers, and singers were still alive, but they, too, were already young *mu'allimīn*, experts of trance, while their children were participating, watching, and learning.

*Baraka,* is what a trance ritual is about, it is ritually operationalized and materializes in the body techniques of the trance dancers. The video-recording makes the manifestation of ritually evoked baraka, the goodness (*al-khayir)* brought about by the ritual gathering, picturable and reportable. People from all over the *gharb* were drawn together for the ritual festivities and commemorated their deads. The spheres of life and death are inverted, first in the ritual that brings other-worldly-beings to life, and then in the video, in which deceased mediums and mourned family members appear and move in time with the music and *ḥāl* of the ritual. Commonly translated as "blessing", *baraka* describes a whole complex of forces constituting, governing, and affecting the world in mostly positive ways, inhering in persons, places, actions, or things (cf. Gilsenan 1973:33f, Crapanzano 1973: 18ff). Since it needs to circulate in order to become effective it gains force through its being mediated through time and space. Technical media are part of this mediation work and enhance the ritual efficacy of trance: the longer the chains of mediation – the more effective trance mediumship becomes – and the further the "trading zone" of trance expands to include diverse audiences and actor-networks (cf. Zillinger 2015).

Watching the video, one follows the cameraman who accompanies the entranced leaving the village.[26] All night long, they have celebrated the *līla*—the ritual—organized as a *ṣadaqa,* an offering to God and the public in order to share some of the good one has received. Religious passion has been on the rise throughout the night, brought about by the common dancing in time with the music of the brotherhood. Together, they mourned over those who died and about the hardship and sorrow they have endured during the last year. Time and again, the *muḥibbīn*—the followers of this particular Sufi path—fell into trance, dancing in ecstasies, enchanted by *baraka*, the divine blessing and power of the ritual.

[26] The text oft he following paragraph is taken in parts from Zillinger (2010), see also our video-installation *Trance/Media. The 'Isāwa in Morocco 1992-2012,* (Dreschke/Zillinger 2012).

Their passion culminates in the *ḥāl* (trance state) of the camels. Heat rises inside them; they "depart from the world as it exists," and their spiritual master, *sheikh and muqaddim* Moussa leads them out of the village. The trance "strikes them" and so they run frantically, shouting, growling and bellowing as camels do, in search of the *hindīa*, the savaged cactus pear (Opuntia ficus-indica) which can be found in many Mediterranean landscapes, and which covers wide areas of the Moroccan countryside. We see men mounting the cactus, numb to the pain of the thick, long thorns, some of which drive into their feet, their hands, their bodies. The "sheik" of the camels stands on the cactus bush and agitates the musicians and the dancers; and, in turn, he is empowered by the music and the crowd. Some fellow ʿIsāwa try to calm him, to prevent him from being hurt, but the *ḥāl* asks for its tribute and the dancers reject any attempts to interfere. The *baraka* of the founding saint and therefore of God, the Beneficent and the Compassionate, protects and empowers those who are enchanted.

In time with the drums and the oboes, the women, too, perform the trance-dance, clinging to the pieces of the *hindīa,* pressing them close to their bodies while the spirits drive them deeper and deeper into trance. In order to "cool down," they have to find their way into the course of the ritual.

The crowd moves on, and the spectator of the film is immersed in what the camera shows, now among the men and women on their way out of and then back to the village. The procession stops, and we watch male and female camels in need of "playing with each other." Playing cools them down, and eases the tension between them. The women kneel down, encircled by the men, who walk, or rather stalk, around them, bouncing up and down, their arms folded behind their backs, snapping at the women, who snatch back at them. The music stops and the air is filled with the howling and shrieking of the animal-spirits.

The men challenge each other, dancing in line with a choreography that has been handed down to them by their fathers and forefathers, driven by the forces of the wilderness. They rub shoulders and let each other go again, they snap at the women and pause time and again: They kiss each other’s cheeks and ask for forgiveness; they are exasperated in trance, acting and moving beyond the ordinary social norms of everyday life. At the same time, they are grateful for the mutual assistance to act out their *ḥāl* of divine possession, “cooling down” the “heat” that “rose” in them along with the spirit of the camel.

The congregation, however, is divided—whereas some adepts adhere to the *ḥāl* of the camels, others enact the *ḥāl* of the lions. When the heat rises, they do not go for the *hindīa,* but for a sheep, slaughtered and immediately torn apart by the lions and lionesses. Even though both engage in this *frīsa* (literally tearing apart), it is the male lion who enters the body of the sheep first with his fingers, breaking through the skin and tearing it apart. He then rips out the liver, where the power resides, and hands it over to the women.

Often, however, the sight of blood and the slaughtered animal escalates the trance-states of the attending lionesses, and some women try to get away with its body, the heat inside them becoming paramount, driving them away from the ritual assembly and into a fight for the prey and its innards.

Other members of the congregation take care of the ecstaticized women and try to calm them, and their ḥāl. Returning to the general crowd, their tension is declining through contact with the sheep, the taste of its blood, liver, and the common trancing in time.

Upon return, male and female counterparts engage in a common trance choreography. The women, their clothes still stained with blood, kneel down, hiss, and bawl at the men, their hands crossed and their arms ready to strike the approaching male counterparts.

The lions line up and approach the women with swaying steps. Suddenly, a jackal approaches and kneels down in between them. The lions encircle him, and tension rises. They have to get him down, but if they are not masters of their *ḥāl,* the jackal will bite them and will not let them go without a violent battle. Therefore, one of the experienced dancers needs to grasp his nose and bend him down. Now it is the jackal who fears the confrontation. He lies down and feigns death. The lions pull back his shirt and check if there is any "life" in him—if they feel his abdomen move or any respiration, they will tear him apart as they tore apart the sheep, or so it is said. Fitfully roaring and howling, they dance around the jackal, who dares not to move.

The entire village seems to be on its feet watching the social drama unfold, and the viewers of the film, family members in places far away from their village in Morocco, the adepts of the brotherhood who could not take part in the ritual, or strangers encountering these ritual techniques and the unfamiliar experience of estrangement for the first time, join in via the camera.

Time and again, the women bystanders chant and praise the Prophet, the forefather of all Muslims, in whose sign they assemble and enact their social relations, taken over by spirits and forced into the heat of the trance. The sheik of the lions takes care of his followers, releases exhausted men and women from the course of the choreography, kissing his or her forehead, and entrusts them in the care of the assembly. Time and again, the men line up, stamping the earth, and rushing towards the women, jumping, slapping the ground and trying to unveil them. The women, in turn, protect their respectability and defend themselves, trying to strike the lions, who, moreover, engage in mock-fighting among themselves. Once every spirit is tamed and the heat of the trance cooled, the assembly returns to the homestead of the host.

**Haptic Visuality**

The blurry VHS video images are so distorted and pixelated because they have repeatedly been remediated in new media formats that they are almost unrecognizable. They show the characteristic flickering effects of VHS materials interrupted by the white noise known from TV screens. What do people recognize in these pictures? And how do they relate to them? Obviously their value is not determined by visibility in the general sense; rather, they seem to have certain inherent affective capacities that can be designated as haptic visibility. We borrow this term from film scholar Laura Marks (2000), who introduced it to describe a special kind of multisensory image in what she calls intercultural cinema, an image characterized by the need "to

appeal to embodied knowledge and memory in the absence of other sources” (ibid. xiii). In Marks’ view, intercultural cinema addresses a new film aesthetic that developed along with the global mobility of people and images in the metropolitan centers of the global North. It differs from commercial mainstream media as well as from Western avant-garde cinema basically in two ways: on the one hand, it is not grounded in the supremacy of optical visuality, and on the other, it “stresses the *social* character of embodied experience: the body is source not only of individual but of cultural memory” (ibid., emphasis in original). The videos of the ‘Isāwa brotherhoods are made significant not only through the people, places and objects they depict, but also through the modes these CDs and DVDs travel in the transnational networks of the acolytes (who has brought me this video?), the layers of their re-mediation, referring to its continuous social use and high esteem, and through the situations of its reception (with whom shall I view these recordings?). The haptic visuality of this trance-video-culture emerges from the specific history of this socio-technical assemblage and is conveyed by the pixelized aesthetics of these videos. Drawing on phenomenologically inspired theories of embodiment and the sensory perception of moving images, Marks suggests that we conceptualize the specific materiality of film and video and their various modes of reception as being similar to the properties of skin. Both share skin-like tactile and contagious qualities that appeal to embodied knowledge and memory in the absence of other resources. From this perspective, the stains and marks on the video images are like cutaneous scratches and scars, a metaphor that also can be extended to the old VHS tapes with handwritten inscriptions or the self-burned DVDs circulated among the trance brotherhoods showing various kinds of traces of usage—and the way the videos are constantly remediated in other media formats, with each generation adding a new layer of pixelation. The cinematic intelligibility of these blurry video images lies neither in their visibility nor in their documentary character alone, it is linked to the kinaesthetic effects these videos have on the trance adepts. The circulating images of these videos trigger inner images of ritual experience, which connect the recipients to the ritual topographies of trance through time and space. The memory of collectively experienced rituals is mediated by the bodily sensations these videos convey for those who have already succumbed to the possessing spirits during trance. As the ‘Isāwa sing during the rituals: *[If] you have not tasted from the glasses of the ḥāl, you have not experienced what has happened to me*.


## Acknowledgements

We thank Muqaddim Hāmid Buhlāl and Muqaddim Muḥammad Ṭawīl, with all ‘Isāwa diel ġarb from Meknes, Morocco, for their help and friendship, and for opening their trance-media-archives for us.

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