
Foreword

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In this book Marc Schuilenburg offers a calm, critical and deeply considered analysis of hysteria and its sometimes hysterical history. Early in that history, as Schuilenburg shows, hysteria came to life as a thoroughly gendered phenomenon, allegedly the product of wombs wandering insatiably inside women's bodies and of witches working in league with the devil. By the late 19th century the prominent French physician Jean-Martin Charcot had resituated hysteria as a phenomenon of physiology and heredity – and by theatrically performing his findings before crowds that included the likes of William James and Sigmund Freud, he had popularised his analysis to the point that, not surprisingly, diagnoses of hysteria proliferated.¹ Freud himself next relocated hysteria, this time into the realm of the subconscious and the purview of psychoanalysis. Later, Foucault would move hysteria once again, via a critique that positioned it as a biosocial issue tied to discipline and regulation.

Freud's contribution, as Schuilenburg explains, was to understand hysteria as 'a medium for communicating a message that, for a host of reasons, could not be conveyed in any other way'. For Freud, this referred to an individual's repressed desires and the somatic translation of those desires into bodily misbehaviours – yet the history of hysteria suggests broader transmogrifications as well. What if hysterical behaviour has indeed been for some a sort of coded language, a language of desires made unattainable by the social conditions into which those desires were born? What if, historically, women had no words for their frustrations and their desires because no such words were allowed, and because their subordination was such that such words were not to be heard? This would begin to explain the misattribution of hysteria to wombs and witches; it would also confirm that the real issue was the mistranslation of women's emotional and bodily language – the misunderstanding of their 'hysterical' medium of communication – by male interpreters. More broadly, it would suggest that whatever its individual manifestations, the distortions of hysteria emerge in the fraught interplay of social structure, social relationships, and situated biography.

This is precisely the approach that Schuilenburg employs, and it forms the thematic core of his book. Hysteria, he writes, is 'above all a sociological issue',

and because of this, the aim of the book is ‘to bring to light previously hidden relationships in our society. As a result, reality is reordered in a way that leads to the emergence of new connections, and to a redefinition of hysteria and the way it affects our society today more than ever.’ For Schuilenburg, this sociology of hysteria becomes a sort of sociological mystery story, as he searches for these hidden relationships and emerging connections – and one of the real strengths of the book is the breadth and depth of his search. He conducts an ethnographic inquiry into a contemporary immigrant neighbourhood in Rotterdam, and excavates a Rotterdam race riot from the 1970s – but he also explores other places and other times in a way that makes the book soundly international and comparative. He thoughtfully revisits and reconsiders philosophical traditions from Hobbes to Hume to De Waal – but he also finds clues in the less august worlds of popular music, film, and science fiction. Time and again, he shows that to situate hysteria in social relations, we must consider long-standing traditions, contemporary popular culture, and emerging global dynamics. In doing so, he persuasively makes the case that, while hysteria may have been erased from psychiatry’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* and discarded as a legitimate medical diagnosis, it continues to circulate wildly in the world at large.

Hysteria also moves beyond individual pathology and into the realm of the social to the extent that it is performative. As Schuilenburg notes, hysteria can in many cases be understood as a ‘scream for recognition’ or a ‘cry for meaning’, a desperate demand that the pain and frustration of existence be acknowledged. In this sense hysteria is performed, with the hope that this performance will find a sympathetic audience. Here we see a fascinating example of the contemporary ‘will-to-representation’, in Majid Yar’s (2012) term – the deep yearning to be seen and acknowledged – and with this a ‘dramaturgy of social life’ (Goffman 1956) that implicates actor and audience alike. Understood in this way, hysteria fits all too comfortably with a contemporary world of cell phone selfies, personal YouTube channels, TikTok videos, and digital confessionals; its frantic staging defines it as less an aberration than yet another performance amidst a social life shaped by performance. Of course, like other performances, a hysterical performance may generate an empathic audience attuned to its cry for meaning, or it may produce an audience that judges it to be outlandish, overwrought, even threatening. In the theatre of the absurd that is hysteria, and that is contemporary social life, actor and audience form yet another fraught relationship.

The prevalence of hysterical performance in contemporary social life begins to reveal still other hidden relationships of the sort that Schuilenburg seeks to explain. Late modernity offers us an existence in which the certainty of stable work life and career, the security of a foundational belief system, and the clarity of truth versus falsehood have all but disappeared. As Jock Young (2007, p. 13) argues, some find in this anomic disorder the seeds of liberation and renewal, others the justification for punitive exclusion and fundamentalism – but almost all find in it a disconcerting dizziness, a ‘late modern vertigo’ brought on by ‘insecurities of status and of economic position’. This vertigo, and with it a fear

of falling through the cracks in the social order, in turn produce excesses of expressive emotion, desperate searches for self-identity, and hysterical displays of discomfort and despair. In this late modern world more and more people find themselves cast adrift not only from normative certainty but from geographic stability as well, living their lives as perpetual and unwelcome outsiders, and forced to invent what fragile forms of community they can. 'Intensities of ephemeral association' (Ferrell 2018, p. 18) result, with status negotiated in the moment, relationships found and lost, and emotions exacerbated by the brevity of their duration. In comparison to those privileged to retain a more sedentary existence, the lives of those adrift are animated by the heightened excitement of the moment and the frisson of ongoing uncertainty. From the perspective of the sedentary, the lived experiences of those adrift no doubt seem hysterical – and in many ways, they are. A social system of vertiginous doubt leaves many of its citizens little but hysteria in response.

In confronting this swirling late modern world and its hysterical currents, we might well wish to take measures that would introduce a modicum of calm and security; we might even hope to knit back the social fabric so as to restore a sense of Durkheimian social cohesion. But it is here that Schuilenburg drops an anomic bomb, delivering with it one of his most important insights: In the contemporary world, attempts to confront and calm hysteria generally have the effect of exacerbating it. Schuilenburg's Rotterdam neighbourhood ethnography, for example, focuses on a governmental Neighbourhood Takes Charge (NTC) initiative designed to strengthen neighbourhood solidarity and promote participation in local governance. As the programme progresses, though, neighbourhood frustration only increases, with building anger at the city government's lack of response to local NTC recommendations and ever more hysterical NTC meetings. More broadly, contemporary 'wars on crime' and 'wars on drugs' constitute hysterical, alarmist publicity campaigns rather than careful policy programmes; not surprisingly, they in turn promote panic over crime and fantastic, fearful caricatures of criminals and drug users. All of this, Schuilenburg argues, creates a sort of 'security hysteria' where security policies based on manufactured fear and political expediency create a downward spiral whereby 'phantom security' spawns only greater fear and hysteria. In this dynamic we see yet again 'the ironies of social control' (Marx 1981), and yet again the process that labelling theorists have long understood, whereby 'social control leads to deviance' (Lemert 1967: v). Assuming we wish to occupy a relatively non-hysterical world, this endless amplification of hysteria would be sufficient cause for concern – but then Schuilenburg exposes a further irony: The 'success paradox', whereby 'the wealthier, healthier and safer our lives become, the more hysterical the last residue of lack makes us feel'.

Hysteria, it seems, is a permanent and pervasive social phenomenon, at least for those occupying what's left of the first world. Still other features of that world only reinforce late modernity's rampant hysteria. Digital media not only

promote mediated performance; they also promote self-reinforcing intensities of shared emotion, and they profit from algorithmically-enhanced irrationality. In this sense social media function to spread the infection of hysteria, creating an ongoing collectivity of misinformation and emotional volatility. More traditional forms of media do their part as well, promoting the over-the-top drama of 'reality' television shows, constructing news programming around the sorts of sensationalist stories that will maximise ratings and profit, and fostering a culture in which transgression and punishment are consumed for their illicit titillations (Binik 2020; Brown 2009). Consumer culture itself operates on the endless manufacture of need and desire, with the false promise of fulfilment by this product and the next, until the consumer's material insatiability grows into an insatiability of being. Politically, the recent emergence of right-wing populism runs on organised resentment, and with it a penchant for aggressive irrationality and overblown violence – the result being a deathly cult of authoritarian personality that denies not only science but the very possibility of inclusive sociality.

So, with a certain tremble in our voice, we might well ask: What is to become of us? Two trajectories would seem plausible, both grounded in social dynamics. In the first, hysteria accelerates to the point that it emerges as the new template for normality. Perhaps hysteria has in fact already become the lingua franca of the late modern world, the common and expected medium for politics, entertainment, and communication. After all, emotions can only be judged over-the-top, behaviours only condemned as excessively attention-seeking, political arguments only dismissed as irrational in comparison to some baseline of calm consideration. But if that baseline has been obliterated by pervasive contemporary hysteria, can the alleged deviance of individual hysteria still exist? In conditions of pervasive bedlam, after all, the chaos can hardly be traced to any one voice. Or, to paraphrase Durkheim, while a saintly society may still harbour deviance, it's not at all clear that a hysterical society will continue to harbour hysterics.

But there's a second tantalising possibility, one with which Schuilenburg ends the book: the possibility that hysteria might hold a bit of revolutionary spark, and with it a portent of change in the contemporary social order. If hysteria can operate as a coded language of repressed desire, perhaps it can also operate as an inchoate language of social distress; perhaps those we deem hysterics are those left to twist, shout, and sputter against a social system made increasingly unbearable. As that system continues to spin out of control, widespread hysteria would suggest that the horrors of that system transcend the ability to speak fully of them – and that a coherent language of a new world is yet to be coined. To paraphrase Gramsci, as the old world dies and the new world waits to emerge, hysteria may be one of the 'morbid symptoms' that flourishes in the interregnum. If so, hysteria may hold a tellingly interstitial position, emerging from the contemporary crisis but not fully conversant with it, and like Simmel's (1971) 'stranger', part of the present world but anticipating alternatives to it. If this is the case, then as Schuilenburg says, perhaps 'certain issues should be treated with a little less hysteria, while others could do with some more'.

Note

- 1 At around this same time Cesare Lombroso was likewise performatively exhibiting the new “science” of criminology in Italy; see Morrison (2004).

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