

PHO360 Final Portfolio:

Critical Review



***Theatre of Hysteria***

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This Critical Review is my own unaided work and its length is 1530 words.

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Signed: 

Date: 25/04/2019

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## Theatre of Hysteria - Critical Review

*Theatre of Hysteria* is a body of work that seeks to explore the medical mistreatment and manipulation of the female psyche under 19th century psychiatry. Looking in particular at the diagnosis of hysteria and its relation to societal oppression, noting also the influence of gender on the “definition and, [consequent], treatment of mental disorder” (Showalter, 1987:5).

The work draws upon connections between neurologist Jean Martin-Charcot's transformation of patient into performer, particularly in the case of Augustine, with notions of the circus. *Theatre of Hysteria* examines how prescriptions to treat hysteria such as Silas Weir Mitchel's 'The Rest Cure', drove patients - who were typically female - further into insanity. Enforcing that they remain dependant on, and malleable under, patriarchal society.

The work aims to consider the illusive nature of hysteria; having been pinpointed to the womb, the brain, the intestines, and so on. A word that has been historically used to critique, silence and dismiss somebody's mental state; is now absent from the corridors of modern psychiatry.



Fig.1 (Emily Gardner, 2019, *Theatre of Hysteria: 1*)



Fig.2 (Emily Gardner, 2019, *Theatre of Hysteria: 3*)

Aesthetically, the portfolio presents both image and research as means to unveil forgotten narratives. Drawing from an eclectic range of literary sources, as well as dated medical journals, *Theatre of Hysteria* invites the viewer to consider the relationship between signifiers of authority Fig.3 and the abuse of power. The research files, printed on semi-transparent paper, mask the image beneath. Visibility is partially obscured until the viewer decides to remove the page/print. The act of revealing references back to a lack of awareness regarding atrocities against women – both past and present. Held within a purposefully tailored box, made in collaboration with product designer Charlotte Harman, tones of examination become further amplified. Theatre of Hysteria takes on and maintains a white-washed aesthetic, underlining the clinical and sterile environments in which healthcare occurs. The negative space detailed throughout seeks to push feelings of isolation and inspection.



Fig.3 (Joseph Parrish, 1850, *The Influence of the uterus on the female constitution*)

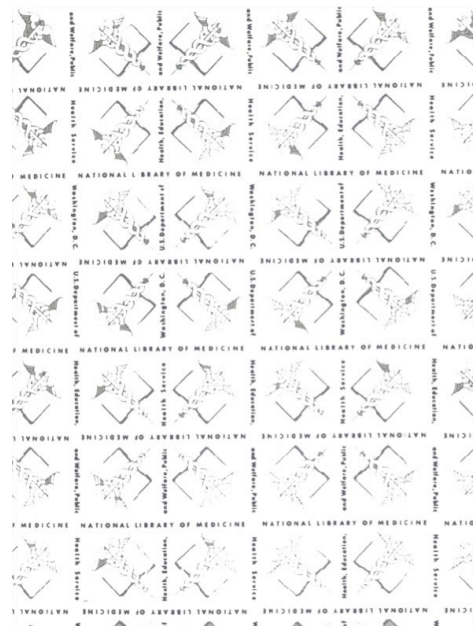


Fig.4 (Emily Gardner, 2019, *Theatre of Hysteria: edited end papers*)

Charcot’s “theatricalization of hysteria” (Stephenson, 2001:27) during his time at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris remains a key reference point. *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (Regnard et Bourneville, 1878), the collection of images documenting Charcot’s practice, prompted notions of control and conformity. Within each frame the female patient is painted as a spectacle, caught in the act of a ‘hysterical attack’, yet the methods of image-making available at the time of

production would disagree with this sense of spontaneity. The sitter would have had to hold the elaborate, and often erotic pose for an extended period of time.

Introducing a performative state in which the performer is directed and denied ownership of her own actions Fig.6. Consequently, the treatment and training of wild circus animals formed an unusual, but suitable connection to draw.

Expanding on this, Alfred Court's personal account *Wild Circus Animals* (1954), details his involvement with the circus and subsequent training of the animals Fig.5. Methods of enforcement included regular beatings, whereby the animal was often "chased with forks, ropes, and nets" (:177). Mentions also of regulating the subjects "fury" (:89) through direct violence – both on and off-stage. Augustine, recognised as Charcot's "muse" (Hustvedt, 2011) although not necessarily beaten, became the victim of intensive emotional abuse. Through fear and manipulation, the young patient - who was repeatedly paraded in front of a male-dominated audience - remained under the jurisdiction of Charcot and his "hysterical circus" (Scull, 2009).



Fig.5 (Alfred Court, 1954, *Wild Circus Animals*)

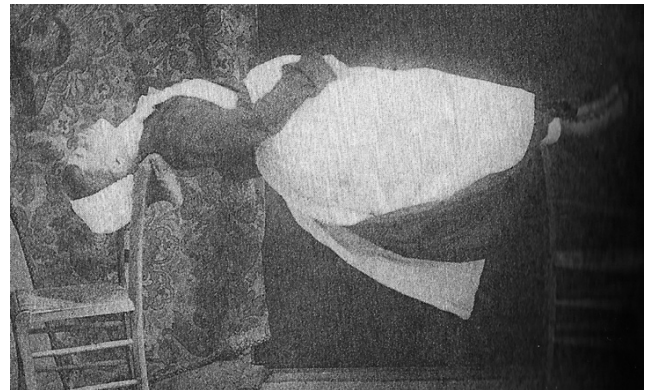


Fig.6 (Paul Regnard, 1879, *Lethargy: Muscular Hyper-excitability – Photograph of Augustine Gleizes*)

In many ways we live in an era that is far more progressive than that of Charcot's, yet the understanding that the female body remains "more vulnerable to hormones" (Hustvedt, 2011) than the male body, is a persistent attitude within many cultures. The recognition of natural reproductive occurrences, such as menopause and menstruation, as "medical issues" (Hustvedt, 2011) resides also in modern-thinking. Through advances in psychiatry, a development in language is noted. Symptoms previously assigned to hysteria are now categorised under the umbrella of mental health (post-natal depression, PTSD, etc). Subsequently, a greater understanding of

the sufferer's behaviour is expected. Although hospitals no longer seek to "house the sick" and "entertain the healthy" (Seymour, 2011), in the same way the rights of many women - at least within western culture - have advanced, identifying the journey in which it has taken (and continues to take) acts as the principle motivation for my practice.

Writings around Silas Weir Mitchel's *'The Rest Cure'* also provided appropriate ques. The over-feeding of patients detailed in Mitchel's 'treatment' induced feelings of suffocation, becoming visually translated in the inclusion of tubing Fig.7. Upon refusal of Mitchel's prescribed diet of bread and butter, and "three or four pints of milk" (Stiles, 2012) a day, patients could be force-fed "through the nose or rectum, or, in rare cases, whipped to ensure obedience" (Stiles, 2012). Under the guise of concern and care, nineteenth century physicians continued to abuse and manipulate the female body. Suffragette Mary Richardson's account of being forcibly fed in 1914 offered further significance. Richardson recalls the pressing down of her tongue and pinching of her nose in order to weaken "the natural, and also the purposeful, resistance of [her] throat" (Purvis, 2018) while on hunger strike in 1914.



Fig.7 (Unknown, 1905-1910,  
A suffragette on hunger strike in the UK  
being force-fed with a nasal tube.)



Fig.8 (Emily Gardner, 2019,  
*Theatre of Hysteria: 4*)



Literary critic, Elaine Showalter notes that it is possible to regard hysteria, within “the historical framework of the nineteenth century”, as “an unconscious form of feminist protest” (1987:5). Showalter suggests the hysterical female body as a form of rebellion against patriarchal society – a way of ‘acting up’ and taking back, if only by a little, ownership of one’s body. A resistance perhaps unbeknown to even the ‘patient’ themselves.

Influenced by Laia Abril’s approach to speaking the unspoken, *Theatre of Hysteria* similarly looks to incite conversation through the use of visual storytelling. Although Abril’s works, such as *A History of Misogyny, Chapter One: On Abortion*, act more as physical “documentation” (Elephant, 2019), the inclusion of written/visual data offers great relevance. Abril’s expanse knowledge of, and commitment to, the subjects and situations in which she documents allows for a trust to be built. In terms of installation, Abril incorporates both image and artefact – the text panels act not only as supportive evidence but play a fundamental role in the viewing of the work. Similarly, by overlaying research material within this portfolio I hope to reveal, page by page, a history that has been muted within modern conversation.



Fig.9 (Emily Gardner, 2019, *Overlay*)



Fig.10 (Emily Gardner, 2019, *Overlay detail*)

Speaking with artist, Sam Laughlin (2019), we discussed the accessibility of the work. The issue was raised that despite the portfolio offering aesthetic appeal, the



significance, to someone who has limited knowledge of the subject, may go unnoticed. It quickly became apparent that the overlays could act as a way into the work – almost as a reading guide. Yet, after discussing this with Clare Bottomley (2019), I decided that in attempting to accommodate a wider audience I was undermining the purpose of the work – which doesn't set out to fully educate the viewer, but rather encourage a desire to learn.

Jesse Jones notes that with some of her pieces the audience “might have to do a bit of work” (2017) in order to separate the layers. Continuing on to express how “if you were a man who has no knowledge of institutional violence against women” then you'd likely need to “do a bit of work” (2017) to be able to engage. Comparably, the abstract semiotics presented within *Theatre of Hysteria* sit in response to a wealth of information - regarding mistreatments of the female body under psychiatric ‘care’. The overlays offering contextual insight without explaining the subject in full – rousing further investigation and allowing a plethora of connections to be formed.

Given the “pervasive cultural association of women and madness” (Showalter, 1987:4), it is not surprising that the “emblematic figure” (1987) of the madwomen remains a frequent reference within contemporary feminism. The hypnosis of hysterical patients under Charcot's time at the Salpêtrière, and the “physicians, journalists, and other members of the public” (Rodgers, 2014) that came to watch, indicate the exploitation of mental illness as a form of entertainment. *Theatre of Hysteria*, in a historical context, reflects upon the mistreatment of women within trusted spaces. Considering the aggressive behaviours applied by physicians and supported by patriarchal society.

Of course, given the turn-around of the portfolio it seems possible to only begin to comprehend the histories outlined in this text. Consequently, *Theatre of Hysteria* stands as an open investigation. Although I believe the work acts effectively as a gateway into conversation, I feel as though there are a number of unexplored directions that the portfolio could follow/take the form of. Despite this I am confident that *Theatre of Hysteria* proves successful in bringing forward and scrutinising histories of gendered mistreatment - disguised under psychiatric care.

## **Figure References**

**Fig.1** GARDNER, Emily. 2019. *Theatre of Hysteria: 1.*

**Fig.2** GARDNER, Emily. 2019. *Theatre of Hysteria: 3.*

**Fig.3** PARRISH, Joseph. 1850. *The Influence of the uterus on the female constitution.* Available

at: <https://archive.org/details/67110610R.nlm.nih.gov/page/n1> [accessed 02/04/2019].

**Fig.4** GARDNER, Emily. 2019. *Theatre of Hysteria: edited end papers.*

**Fig.5** COURT, Alfred. 1954a. *Wild Circus Animals.*

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**Fig.7** Unknown. 1910. *A suffragette on hunger strike in the UK being force-fed with a nasal tube.* Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-42943816/suffragettes-the-truth-about-force-feeding> [accessed 10/04/2019].

**Fig.8** GARDNER, Emily. 2019. *Theatre of Hysteria: 4.*

**Fig.9** GARDNER, Emily. 2019. *Overlay.*

**Fig.10** GARDNER, Emily. 2019. *Overlay detail.*

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