
#MASSHysteria

#HYSTERIA #FEMINISM #FEMINISTRAGE #RISINGINREVOLT

SYNONYMS _____rage, uproar, fury, protest, rising in revolt

We seem to be living in hysterical times. More specifically, hysteria is apparently spreading contagiously: Countless reports – especially in the United States, but also beyond – attest the recent viral nature of hysteria, and a simple Google search reveals a seemingly bottomless well of media coverage on “mass hysteria”.

_____ These discussions build on representations of the hysterical girl, a poster child of European artistic and scientific studies during the fin de siècle. The figure of the hysteric in our current imagery echoes medical, artistic, and religious representations of the hysteric evidently established during this period (e.g. Jean-Martin Charcot’s studies on the “hysterical attack”, Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud’s “Studies on Hysteria”, and Freud’s theories on hysteria and group neurosis) but extends well beyond the European studies conducted in the nineteenth century (see: Braun 2020 and 2021). Recently it has become evident that visual media are building on tropes and representations of the hysteric body such as what Charcot termed “attitudes passionnelles” (e.g. erratic behavior, uncontrollable laughing and dancing, twisting limbs behind and across the body, disturbance of vision, hearing and language, and even the iconic hysterical pose of the arc-en-circle – the excessive movement of “grande hystérie”). But most interestingly, there has been a shift in attention from the individual to a collective hysterical body – implying a connection between hysteria and the political body or the body politic in general.

_____ A characteristic of these “hysterical discussions” is the use of a series of stereotypes in the representation of “the masses”, such as the idea that large groups of people are dangerous, possessed, “mad” or driven by evil forces, which tie in with historical ideologies of “moral epidemics” and “the pathology of crowds” (e.g. Mackey 1841; Le Bon 1895; Freud 1921). At the same time, this discourse is facilitating debate, as witnessed by the intense media coverage on “mass hysteria” of various political and social movements connected with feminism, climate change, migration, Black Lives Matter and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, to name only a few. In utilizing (mass) hysteria, these discussions continue the centuries-old pathologization of protesting groups in general, and women* in

particular. For example, numerous men in politics and the entertainment industry have warned against the “hysteria” generated by the so-called #metoo movement, with figures such as Michael Haneke and Roman Polanski specifically warning against the epidemic and contagious nature of “mass hysteria” within the movement. The first two decades of the twenty-first century have displayed an ever-increasing interest in hysteria, from recent literature, film, and television programs to the return of an academic interest in this apparent “hysterical revival”. At the same time, the term (mass) hysteria has been “reclaimed” by feminist thinkers, artists, and activists. These current theoretical and artistic attempts to re-introduce the term hysteria builds on several feminist impulses emerging in the late twentieth century that considered hysteria as a form of feminist response to unjust conditions. The many contemporary attempts to reclaim hysteria draw heavily on this school of thought and its rich discussions of hysteria as a language of feminist protest, as found in the writings of Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément and Luce Irigaray and the artwork by Anna Furse, Dianne Hunter and many others. “Reclaiming” hysteria, and the political, cultural and artistic implications of doing so, seem very much to be in keeping with our hysterical times.

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