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Hysteria as an Aesthetic Expression

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Hysteria as an Aesthetic Expression

Fernanda Pereira Medina[1]

Abstract- **This article introduces a new look at hysteria by examining hysterical phenomena from the perspective of Freudian-inspired aesthetics. [1]We will discuss a new femininity brought about by the discovery of hysteria and celebrated by the surrealists as a means of artistic expression, and lastly, we will approach hysteria from the relational standpoint, that is, from the relationships that the hysterical subject establishes with the alterity.**

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Introduction

Within the perspective of Freudian-inspired aesthetics – which I have discussed earlier in an article entitled *Freud e a estética da estranheza* (*Freud and the aesthetics of strangeness*)[2] –, I propose an analysis of hysteria from the viewpoint of creation. It must be clear, first of all, that Freudian aesthetics does not relate to the sensitive representation of art – this is the object of consciousness. Freud's investigation in the realm of aesthetics concerns, first and foremost, the affective effect of the artwork on the viewer. And such affective effect refers to the mobilization of instinctual forces that are, by definition, unconscious.

The article *Das Unheimliche* (*The Uncanny*, in English), published in 1919 – a text in which the psychoanalyst looks into the short story *The Sandman* and the novel *The Devil's Elixirs*, both by writer E. T. A. Hoffmann –, served as a guiding thread to the development of all aesthetics inspired on psychoanalysis.

In the article, Freud discusses a specific genre of representation, capable of awakening in the reader a particular feeling of anguish, defined in German by the word *Unheimliche*. It must be stressed that *The Uncanny* is not merely a reflection on aesthetics. It announces the great theoretical revision of the 1920s that leads to a new theory of drives. At this time, Freud begins to reconsider the boundaries of the pleasure principle, until then deemed to be the dominant tendency of the psyche. Here, he recognizes the existence of an even more primitive type of pleasure, subjected to the repetition compulsion. From this point of view, it may be said that the uncanny reveals the instinctual dimension of the experience of art. The aesthetics that emerges from such theoretical revolution represents, thus, a perspective of creation stripped of the illusion of beauty, harmony and goodness. It is from such standpoint that hysteria may be regarded as a creation, as a representation of a passion whose "pathography" (in the sense of writing a *pathos*) and iconography (in the sense of a formal representation of passion) explicitly refer back to the painful and to the appalling, as explained by Freud in his 1919 article. This tragic character of hysteria was well explored by Charcot. The neurologist provided new meaning to quasi-religious ecstasy and demonic possession. But he also exhibited the hysteric, through a theatrical and surprising mise-en-scène, through hypnosis and exhibitions of the diseased – the famous *"Leçons du Mardi"* ("*Tuesday Lessons*"). The world discovered, with Charcot, what a hysterical body was capable of.

The discovery of hysteria opened up a world of possibilities for physicians such as Charcot and Freud, but for poets, writers and painters as well. "Beauty will be convulsive or it won't be at all[3]" was André Breton's tribute to Salpêtrière's hysterical women, with which he ended his narrative *Nadja*, published in 1928. In this work, Breton recounts the events involving himself and an "alienated" young woman he met in Paris on October 4, 1926, Léona Delcourt, alias "Nadja". It is a text – somewhat autobiographical – in which the author, identified with the insane woman, manages to fulfill his desire to write and to act out the convulsive beauty he had dreamed of while contemplating the iconography of the Salpetrière[4].

Convulsive, passionate and chaotic beauty, hysteria is claimed by the surrealists as an emblem of a new art. In the same year as that of the publication of *Nadja,* Louis Aragon and André Breton commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of hysteria, which they consider the great "poetic discovery" of the late 19th century,

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[2] MEDINA, F. P. Freud e a estética da estranheza. Literartes, *[S. l.]*, v. 1, no. 7, p. 285-297, 2017. Available at: https://www.revistas.usp.br/literartes/article/view/ 124456.

[3] "La beauté sera CONVULSIVE ou ne sera pas". (Breton, A. *Nadja,* Paris, Gallimard, 1963, p. 190).

[4] Roudinesco, E. *Histoire de la psychanalyse en France. 2, 1925-1985,* Paris, Fayard, 1994, p. 43.

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whose perfect type would be represented by Augustine[5]. Inspired by the Freudian discovery, the surrealists celebrate hysteria as a means of artistic expression – expression of pain and ecstasy that, gaining form and visibility, fascinates and frightens the viewer. Such horrible beauty is what seduces the surrealists.

We must insist on the word *visibility.* Let us note that the physical conversion of affects often arises as a response to an insufficiency of language. Through paralysis, anesthesia, convulsions, that is, through the symptoms, the affect that does not find expression in words becomes seeable in the body. Hysteria points, in a way, to a flaw in language as well as an insufficiency of scientific discourse, which mutes in the face of hysterical phenomena. No one can deny that before Charcot, modern science did not have much to say about hysteria. We may say that it is a type of Sphinx, of an object that raises questions – as the ready-made was to modern art. "Who am I?" – asks the hysteric to the wise, like the bicycle wheel to critics and art lovers. This question baffled the 20th century, as Gérard Wajcman points out in *L'Objet du Siècle* (*The Object of the Century*): "to say of this bicycle wheel that it is the Sphinx of art may encourage us to say that it is to the art of the century what hysteria was to Freud and psychoanalysis, the original and inexhaustible mystery, from which both drew the secret and splendor of their practice. The *Bicycle Wheel,* Anna O. or Dora of Modern Art[6]".

The surrealists inaugurate a new representation of the feminine: the woman who rebels, the criminal, paranoid, homosexual woman who is no longer the miserable and slave of her symptoms to become the heroine of a new modernity. Paying homage to Violette Nozière[7], prostitute, mythomaniac and parricide, the surrealists celebrate death, suicide, sex, the murderous drive and the passionate madness. The young Lacan feeds on this new look at femininity for his narrative of the case "Aimée", alias Marguerite Anzieu[8]. A failed criminal, Aimée joins Augustine of the Salpetrière, Violette, Nadja and all these passionate, disturbed and demonic women from mythology.

Let us call demonic the femininity around which we recognize, for example, the myth of Lilith, Satan's accursed wife – according to Jewish tradition, a somber and nocturnal creature who, seducing men in their sleep, conceived with them devilish children, and then devoured them. Almost absent from Christian texts, Lilith appears in Jewish texts and exegesis as the first wife of Adam, created, according to the Alphabet of Ben Sirah (11th century), from the same material as the latter and equally in the image and likeness of God[9]. Lilith refused to submit to the usual sexual position, that is, underneath the man. Or, in other words, she refused male supremacy. Without giving in to Adam, she fled the Garden of Eden. Lilith would be cursed by the Father and all her offspring would die at birth. Her fate should be to wander endlessly, devouring other women's newborns. In some versions, Lilith is represented by the serpent that tempts Eve.

From ancient times, it is to this diabolic or possessed woman that the image of the hysteric is identified. The term hysteria comes from the Greek word *hystera* (matrix). According to Plato, the matrix or uterus is an animal whose aptitude is to make children; when it remains for a long period without bearing fruit, this animal becomes impatient and withstands this state badly; it then proceeds to wander erratically all over the body, obstructing the air passages, restricting breathing, and causing extreme anguish and diseases of all sorts[10].

In the Middle Ages, the convulsions, the spasms, the screams, the paralysis, in short, all expressions and postures immortalized by the famous Salpetrière iconography were construed as an expression of sexual pleasure and, thus, of a sin. These manifestations were attributed to the intervention of the manipulative devil, able to deceive, simulate illnesses and enter women's bodies to possess them[11]. And the woman possessed would become the witch, cast out by the Church in the 15th and 16th centuries.

These images, however laden with beliefs and superstitions, clearly signals the plasticity expressed in the hysterical phenomena and the sexual fantasy that resides at the origin of the illness. In a way, we may say that the hysterical symptom is the substitutive expression of orgasm. However, this pleasure proves to be infantile and incomplete, since the sexuality of the hysterical subject is always paradoxical: a wholly eroticized body that contrasts with an anesthetized erogenous zone, in the same way as a tendency to eroticize any social relationship opposes an aversion to the sexual intercourse itself.

[5] Didi-Huberman, *in Invention de l'hysterie. Charcot et l'iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière,* Paris, Macula, 1982, p. 147.

[6] Wajcman, *L'objet du siècle,* Lagrasse, Éditions Verdier, 1998, p. 89.

[7] Eighteen-year-old French young woman who, on the night of August 21, 1933, poisons her parents.

[8] Aimée is the pseudonym under which Jacques Lacan presents, in his doctoral thesis, the case of Marguerite Anzieu, a paranoid woman who, on April 18, 1931, unsuccessfully tries to stab actress Huguette Duflosse.

[9] Laraia, R. de B. (1997). Jardim do Éden revisitado. *Revista De Antropologia*, *40*(1), 149-164. Avaiable at https://doi.org/10.1590/S0034-77011997000100005.

[10] Nasio, *L'hystérie ou l'enfant magnifique de la psychanalyse,* Paris, Éditions Payot et Rivages, 1995, p.85.

[11] Roudinesco et Plon, *Dictionaire de la psychanalyse,* Paris, Fayard, 2006, p. 487.

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When Freud, in his 1919 article *Das Unheimliche*, asks himself about people, things and situations capable of awakening in us this feeling of strangeness – which we agree to associate with the aesthetic experience –, he evokes a series of examples such as the intellectual uncertainty facing an automaton, that is, whether a character is alive or dead (definition proposed by E. Jentsch); the astonishment caused by fits of madness or epilepsy; the belief in superstitions – which meets the magical thinking of children and certain neurotics –; situations connected to the universe of animism, magic, witchcraft and death; and several situations in which the barrier separating reality from fantasy has faded[12].

The image of witchcraft and demonic possession that surrounds hysteria thus accounts in large part for the disquieting feeling of strangeness that relates, on the one hand, to the recognition of insanity in the deepest SELF and, on the other, to what there is of primitive and childish in every neurotic. Freud emphasizes, in 1919, that "the infantile elements in this, which also dominates the minds of neurotics, is the over-accentuation of psychic reality in comparison with material reality – a feature closely allied to the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts."[13] The infantile and the primitive resist in the depths of our souls, and the feeling of strangeness linked to the superstitions, the magical thoughts, the intuitions, the hidden forces, and the beliefs in the return of the dead – conditions assumed by our ancestors as real and indisputable – continue to live within us, in what remains of primitive in us.

The discovery of hysteria allowed the construction of a new look at the feminine. Yet, one must not assume that hysteria is a disease of women. However, the hysterical subject–male or female – always wonders what it is to be a woman. "Who am I?" is the question with which Breton's narrative, *Nadja,* begins. It is also the question of Dora, alias Ida Bauer[14]. What is a woman? How to become a desirable woman in a man's eyes (in the father's eyes)? At the same time, the hysterical man wonders what a woman wants – a question that makes the feminine always obscure and frightening.

This harrowing experience of the man before the woman appears constantly in analytical work and also in literature. In Hoffman's tale *The Sandman,* as well as in Jensen's novel *Gradiva* – the latter, analyzed by Freud in 1906 –, we see how protagonists Nathanaël and Norbert abdicate the real woman in favor of an amorous relationship with the idealized, "fantasized" woman. In Norbert's spirit, "'the female gender had until then been [...] nothing but a concept made of marble or bronze, and he had never given the slightest attention to those who were, to him, the contemporary representatives of such gender'"[15]. Norbert, fully immersed in his science and away from mundane pleasures, had transferred his interest in the living woman to the stone woman. The love of his youth had turned into a bas-relief – a beautiful example of the sublimation of desire. His dream, which shows the transformation of the walking Gradiva into a stone image, is the metaphor, Freud emphasizes, of this process of repression through which erotic love becomes "forgotten". The oneiric contents, which should remain unconscious, try, however, to bring this stone image back into a living woman. Dreams thus become harrowing and frightening, since they touch on the issue of a carefully repressed libidinal fantasy. The young man, whose keen interest in science contrasts with a sexual inhibition, flees as soon as he notices, even unknowingly of why, the threatening signs of Zoé's proximity.

In Hoffman's tale, things happen similarly. Nathanaël believed having found in the eyes of the doll Olympia the flame of an eternal love: "– Sensitive and profound soul!" cried Nathanaël as he entered his room, "You alone, you alone in the world know how to understand me!" He shivered with happiness, dreaming of the intellectual exchanges that existed between Olympia and him and that grew each day."[16]

The young man had completely forgotten about his bride, whom he had once loved. Clara, in her serenity and her silent, lucid nature, seemed now, in Nathanaël's eyes, cold and indifferent. He thus let the real woman, the erotic love, escape for the benefit of the idealized woman – the fate of which is an inescapably unsatisfactory relationship –, just like the neurotic's childish attitude towards the impasses of sexual difference and the enigma of the feminine.

These diabolical, possessed and passionate women of the past have become the emblematic figures of psychoanalysis. It is true that the neuroses of our

[12] Freud, *The Uncanny*, in. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Translated from the german by James Strachey. Volume XVII (1917 – 1919). London: The Hogarth Press. P. 226 – 245.

[13] Freud, *The Uncanny, op. cit.* p. 244

[14] A young woman affected by hysterical symptoms who became the emblematic case of hysteria in Freudian teaching, the famous case of Dora.

[15] Freud, *Le délire et les rêves dans la "Gradiva" de W. Jensen, in The Oeuvres complètes de psychanalyse,* vol. VIII, translated from German by Janine Altounian, Pascale Haller and Daniel Hartmann, Paris, PUF, 2007, p. 47.

[16] Hoffmann, *L'homme au sable, in Contes fantastiques II,* translation by Loève-Veimars, Paris, Flammarion, 1980, p. 248.

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times no longer show themselves with the same spectacular face as that of the hysteria of yesteryear. Convulsive beauty, expression of an overflowing affect, takes on other more discreet, less explicit, less visible forms. Actually, we analyze modern hysteria less for its observable symptoms than for the bonds that the subject establishes with the alterity. The hysterical subject eroticizes the relationships, the human expressions, the words and the silences of the other; he projects his desire onto the other; he turns objective reality into "fantasized" reality. We may say that the hysterical subject – male or female – "hysterizes" reality. He addresses to the other his limitless demand for love, expecting not satisfaction but the no response – because the hysterical subject can only live dissatisfied and frustrated. Its permanent and painful position is one of dissatisfaction and complaint.

In order to fantasize or "hysterize" reality, the subject gets lost in a game of imaginary identifications with different characters. In her infinite malleability, the hysteric is capable of expanding from the deepest to the most external of herself, blurring the edges, in a semi-real, semi-fantastic reality – a phenomenon that blurs the boundary between the familiar and the alien, understandably unsettling, to be faithful to the Freudian thinking that has conducted this whole analysis of the aesthetic feeling present in hysteria.

If the 19th-century hysteric and the modern-day hysteric live their suffering differently, the disquieting feeling described by Freud in his 1919 article, *Das Unheimlich*, is still there, in the heart of the neurotic's fantasy – because this fantasy is closely linked to the threat of castration, to the childhood anxiety of castration, which is at the origin of all neurosis. It is the seat of the conflict between desire – whose possibility of fulfillment becomes unbearable for the subject – and repression. So, the neurotic has to create, create fantasies, create doubles, create hysterical symptoms, which have the effect of a work of art, in the sense of giving dramatic form and figure to the desiring tension.

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