
Salpêtrière's Male Gaze and the Pathologization of the Female Face

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Abstract

During the study of hysteria, psychiatrists of the Salpêtrière made extensive use of photographs to depict the allegedly female phenomena. It is because photographs have, apart from their explicit subject matter, strong suggestive power and can easily be instrumentalized in debates of society and politics. Since Jean-Martin Charcot's *Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière* has come into focus of research, the question of truth in its documentation method was under constant debate. Georges Didi-Hubermann argues in *Invention de l'hystérie* that the portrayed photographs presuppose decisions of creating a specific 'reality'. Not referring to Salpêtrière, Roland Barthes explains in his essay *The Reality Effect* that documentation, in general, suffers from relating only to the concept of realism. It raises the question, which concept of reality relates to the photography of Salpêtrière. Interestingly, within this debate, entanglements occur between postmodern thinkers and their intellectual opponents, the New Realists. In his book *Fields of Sense*, Markus Gabriel posits that being and therefore truth is not a quality of things themselves but of the fields of sense in which things manifest. Whereas Gabriel acknowledges the reality of every field of sense, Didi-Huberman debunks it as a social construct. Nevertheless, if we understand Salpêtrière's photography as a second-order of signification, in the sense of Barthes' term *mythos*, then construction, what Judith Butler, similar to Didi-Huberman, calls i.a. *Framing* is not distorting truth but manifesting truth of a specific field of sense. In this paper, we exercise our approach exemplary by focusing only on the facial expressions depicted in Salpêtrière's photographs.

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