

'Augustine'

Dramatic film directed by Alice Winocour with Vincent Lindon (Charcot), Stéphanie Sokolinski (Augustine), Chiara Mastroianni (Mme Charcot) and Olivier Rabourdin (Bourneville).

Olivier Walusinski^a Jacques Poirier^b Hubert Déchy^c

^aBrou, ^bParis, and ^cVersailles, France

Artistic creation is, by its essence, the image of liberty and imagination. Does this liberty give the license to betray historical facts concerning hysteria research conducted by Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893) at La Salpêtrière Hospital, in order to implicitly defend the feminist cause? This is the option chosen by Alice Winocour for her first film 'Augustine', which was released in Paris on the 7th of November 2012. In reality, Augustine was Louise Augustine Gleizes, born 21 August 1861, and one of the hysterics at La Salpêtrière, where she was admitted on 21 October 1875 at age 14 (and not age 19 as in the film) (figure). Augustine was less well known than Blanche Wittmann (1859–1913), who was immortalized in the painting by André Brouillet (1867–1942), 'Une leçon clinique à La Salpêtrière'. Nonetheless, due to her youth, fair skin, expressive face and theatrical attacks, she was the hysteric who Paul Regnard (1850–1927) took the most photos of. As Paul Richer (1849–1933) explained in the introduction to his thesis: 'When in 1878, I had the honour to complete my *internat* under his direction, Charcot was finalizing his conception of the *grande hystérie*, divided into four periods. His ideas were so simple one could hardly believe they had not been discovered

long ago, and so rich that they shed light on the entire history of neurosis.' Describing the third period, Richer indicated that Augustine 'Gl... is our patient whose poses or passionate attitudes have the most regularity. They correspond mainly to two events of her existence. She was a victim of the first when she was 10 years old. It was terrible for her and marked her entry into life. The second event, on the contrary, was the source of much pleasure, which she did not try to conceal' [1–3].

Désiré-Magloire Bourneville (1840–1909) relates the tragic clinical history of this unfortunate woman in volume 2 of the *Iconographie Photographique de La Salpêtrière*, published in 1878. Poor Augustine was placed in a nurse's care early on, then in a religious boarding school where from a very young age, she was subject to corporeal punishment. At 10 years of age, she was molested, and at age 13 she was raped by her mother's lover. The film never alludes to this horribly traumatic past, nor mentions the years during which it occurred. It now seems obvious that Augustine was replaying this first scene, symbolising it in

1 h 41 min.

Released in France on November 7, 2012



Planche XIV.

HYSTÉRO-ÉPILEPSIE

ÉTAT NORMAL

Fig. Augustine Gleizes.

order to ‘convert’ the sexual violation. Charcot seems to have been insensitive, in public, to her cries and her pain, only paying attention to her symptoms, as was his custom [4, 5]. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) recounted an anecdote he witnessed that demonstrates Charcot’s perfect perspicacity as to the triggering mechanisms and their specificity. Charcot whispered to his colleague Paul Brouardel (1837–1906): ‘But in such cases, it is always genital, always... always... always...’ And Freud noted: ‘Having said this, he crossed his arms on his chest and began to hop about with his habitual vivacity. I remember being stupefied for a few instants and, regaining my composure, asked myself this question: if he knows this, how come he never says so?’ [6]. Charcot never spoke of this, because his de-

sire to know called for directly observing definitive ‘physical regularities’, and this desire to know was perhaps also a desire for avoidance, as proposed by Georges Didi-Huberman [7]. It is clear that the highly observant Charcot was interested in the body and its images whereas Freud was interested in speech.

For Augustine, it was Bourneville who listened with empathy and affection, over several long sessions, and transcribed her hallucinations with precision, not to mention her dreams, describing in detail all her psychic trauma. His benevolence was surely not unrelated to his interest in childhood in general and his progressive political ideas, which the film does not bear witness to. Although he did not write a detailed explanation, his words, ‘Hysterical delirium is definitively tied to the different events that marked the life of L...’ show that he understood perfectly that childhood trauma explains the ‘conversion’ that is hysteria. Charcot began to take an interest in hysteria in 1870, when he took over the hystero-epileptic department from Louis Delasiauve (1804–1893). In 1875, Charcot was still looking for an organic, anatomo-pathological cause for epilepsy, which he distinguished from hysteria. The psychogenic model of hysteria only came to him 10 years later, 20 years before the writings of Freud [8].

The film completely overlooks the great credit Charcot deserves for taking an interest in a pathology neglected by alienists as well as other physicians, at a time when profound social and political changes, not to mention various wars, were generating a number of cases. Relentless in his work, Charcot was methodical, meticulous and cultivated. He was despotic with his students, each selected for qualities that could help in his research projects. He was also ambitious, hungry for recognition and reward. One of his Swedish students, Axel Munthe (1857–1949), left us this precise account: ‘He had few friends among his colleagues, and he was feared by his patients and his assistants, for whom he rarely had a kind word of encouragement in exchange for the superhuman work he imposed on them. He was indifferent to the suffering of his patients. He took little interest in them once he had made his diagnosis, awaiting the day of the post-mortem examination. Among his assistants, he had his favourites whom he often raised to privileged positions well beyond their merits. A word of recommendation from Charcot was enough to decide the outcome of any exam; in fact, he reigned over all in the medical school. Sharing the same fate as all neurologists, he was surrounded by a gallery of neurotic women, who were totally devoted to him. Fortunately for him, he was absolutely indifferent to women’ [9]. Vincent Lindon (the right actor for this role?) seems to take the image

of an introverted and timid character to the extreme. As for Stéphanie Sokolinski, known as Soko, her acting is admirable and impressively realistic in the *grande hystérie* scenes, where her character often has a male audience. She is sometimes nude, which demonstrates a blatant disregard for patients' sense of modesty at the time. And why pretend that Charcot and Augustine went out walking alone together, in a small garden that in no way resembles La Salpêtrière? Why give the impression that Augustine was granted special favours, with her own room and services, when in fact she shared a vast hall with other patients? Why pretend that Charcot came to her secretly, in the night, to feed her like a baby bird? Why end this evocation with a bestial coupling between the physician and his patient, an unlikely consummation that never took place? Undoubtedly to illustrate the words of Jacques Lacan (1901–1981): 'The hysteric is a slave looking for a master to reign over'; whereas in truth, 'hysteria is not a pathological phenomenon and may, in all respects be seen

as a supreme means of expression', as stated by Louis Aragon (1897–1982) and André Breton (1896–1966) in 1928 in their manifesto entitled *Le cinquantenaire de l'hystérie* (for the 50-year anniversary of hysteria) [10, 11].

We will be accused of an excessively ardent zeal for Charcot, of being a man defending other men from a man's point of view, whereas Alice Winocour draws on her feminine sensitivity to portray a suffocating male chauvinism in medical circles at the end of the 19th century. We should give her credit for evoking a small part of the monumental work accomplished for neurology by Jean-Martin Charcot, often confused by the general public with his son Jean-Baptiste, a famous explorer. Nonetheless, the *mise-en-scène* is flat and monotonous, as illustrated in numerous scenes of people walking down endless hallways. The cause defended would have been better served by an original and truly inventive narrative, rather than this misleading and poor reconstitution.

References

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