

Julia Barbara Köhne, Kriegshysteriker. Strategische Bilder und mediale Techniken militärpsychiatrischen Wissens (1914–1920), Husum (Matthiesen Verlag) 2009, 344 S. (Abhandlungen zur Geschichte der Medizin und der Naturwissenschaften, 106), ISBN 978-3-7868-4106-7, EUR 49,00.

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In recent years the subject of the psychological wounds suffered by the soldiers of the Great War has become a topic of intense interest among historians. Various known by the terms shell-shock, war-neurosis, or – in the usage preferred here by Julia Barbara Köhne – war hysteria, scholars such as Eric Leed, Paul Lerner, Joanna Bourke, Hans-Georg Hofer, and others have been drawn to this topic as a kind of primal scene of 20th century history. The war-related neuroses of that disastrous conflict have in many ways become the template for understanding how the subsequent catastrophes of this »age of extremes« (Hobsbawm) have inscribed themselves into body, mind, and public memory.

To the existing literature on this topic, Köhne has added a new study grounded in the methodologies of media studies and the history of science. Köhne's concern here is to trace the construction of *Kriegshysterie* as a new »epistemic object«, one that had many precursors but that emerged in the course of the war as a distinctively new clinical entity. Very early in this conflict, psychiatrists and neurologists were confronted by the phenomenon of psychological breakdown on a mass scale, and by the revelation of the almost complete inadequacy of existing methods of diagnosis and treatment. Just as medicine was earlier transformed by its encounter with the figure of the female hysteric, so too now – in the context of wartime emergency – psychiatric knowledge and practice were revolutionized by the encounter with the figure of the psychologically-disabled soldier, whose reaction to war manifested itself in a wild profusion of symptoms: debilitating anxiety, mutism, paralyzes, trembling, and so forth.

In their search for a response to the phenomenon, military doctors experimented widely with methods of treatment, employing hypnosis, electrotherapy, work therapy and even psychoanalysis. Doctors showed similar resourcefulness in devising methods of diagnosis that would help stabilize the ever-shifting panoply of symptoms confronting them. Köhne traces in great detail the strategies of textual and visual representation – from the written case history to the psychiatric motion picture – by means of which practitioners sought to impose terminological and conceptual uniformity on the complaints of their soldier-patients.

While she has interesting things to say about the role played in this process by the medium of writing, the heart of her book lies in her analysis of the visual techniques, including scientific photography and cinematography, embraced by wartime doctors. Claims for the objectivity and evidentiary value of visual

media assumed significance in relation to the highly visual, even theatrical way in which the war hysteric's symptoms manifested themselves. Film in particular, with its ability to represent motion, seemed especially well-suited for capturing the disordered gait, bodily spasms and twitches, and other symptoms that defined the war-hysteric. Though her main focus throughout is on German psychiatry, Köhne's discussion of two German films is amplified by drawing comparisons to one British and one French film. In each of these national contexts, military-psychiatric perceptions of war neuroses, she argues, were themselves mediated by the discourses of mass and female psychology in ways that conditioned doctors to be skeptical of the reality of their patients' disorders; hence the designation »war hysteria«.

Drawing on recent work in the history of relations between science and visual media, Köhne's central premise here rests on a claim for the heightened agency of these media: their role not just in the representation and transmission but in the production of psychiatric knowledge. This emerges perhaps most clearly in her discussion of the reliance psychiatrists placed on visual media with respect to the central problem of simulation (or malingering). Film offered itself as ideal medium for fixing or stabilizing, and thus generating, a disease picture defined by its protean qualities. In so doing it served a crucial role in either verifying the authenticity of the soldier-patient's complaint, or conversely – and, she suggests, far more frequently – denying its reality.

But what was at stake in the debate over simulation? This was not a purely medical question, an opportunity to demonstrate the advancement and efficacy of psychiatric knowledge and practice. It was closely bound up with questions of manpower and fighting strength as well as the key problem of pensions; in short it was an issue deeply embedded in the history of what Greg Eghigian has called »the political epistemology of disability.« It is this wider dimension of the problem of simulation – a problem that preoccupied government, military, and welfare officials, as well as patients and their representatives – that is missing in Köhne's account. She skims over the so-called »pension question« with the assertion that the existing literature has covered this topic (p. 78). But it is precisely here that her analysis could have paid dividends, by examining how the medial production of *Kriegshysterie* as object of psychiatric knowledge remained a deeply contested process, not simply within the profession, but in the interactions between doctors and patients, and eventually also within the public realm, as political representatives, journalists, and others took up the patients' cause. In a curious way her text, in its concentration on the potency of the medical gaze, reproduces the myopic focus of the doctors on symptoms, while leaving the patients themselves largely out of the discussion, and thus depriving them of agency.

Yet psychiatric decisions concerning the authenticity of symptoms and diagnoses, and the claims made around them, didn't occur in a vacuum. Nor were the intense medical, legal, and political debates that developed around war neurosis resolved by the end of the war. In Germany in particular, they remained stubbornly persistent features of a society deeply divided over the memory of the war and how to treat its victims. Rather than explore – as she does in a somewhat awkward analysis of recent British television

programs – the resonances of shellshock in late 20th century representations of the Great War, Köhne might better have examined its resonances in the immediate postwar era, by examining how in Weimar Germany ongoing contests of psychiatric knowledge became caught up in wider debates fought out in courts, in the political arena, the press, and in popular culture.

Indeed, given the attention she pays to the influence of the discourse of mass psychology on the construction of war hysteria, it is somewhat surprising that she chooses not to analyze film's contemporaneous emergence as a medium of mass entertainment, and its links to her topic. It would have been interesting, for instance, to explore the possible resonances of the wartime hypnosis film made by the German neurologist Max Nonne within the postwar genre of hypnosis films exemplified by »The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari«. »Caligari« (written by two war veterans with their own experience of military psychiatry) is just one of several films that reflect back in significant ways on Köhne's topic. It does so by registering a protest against the figure of the authoritarian psychiatrist, and the problematic claims of psychiatric science, but also by reflecting on the unreliability of the cinematic medium itself. However powerful the medical gaze that Köhne traces in her study, it did not meet without resistance, and this too is part of the history of »war hysteria«.

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