

Essay

Girls on Film

In 19th-century Paris, the mesmerised patients of an eminent doctor became unwitting celebrities whose visual imagery continues to inspire art to this day. Laura Gonzales investigates

THE "HYSTERIA" PATIENTS of 19th-century Paris were the celebs of their day. They appeared in novels and plays, were painted and sculpted and put on show by the famous neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot at the Salpêtrière Hospital. His public lectures and demonstrations with these mesmerised patients drew huge crowds of socialites, politicians, artists and physicians, including Sigmund Freud. The photographs that doctors took of them there – now known as the *Photographie Iconographique de la Salpêtrière* – still inspire art and films, most recently and perhaps aptly Robert Eggers' *Nosferatu*.

Back then, hysteria was described as a medical condition of the unruly female and often dismissed as excess emotion. But the hysteric could be said to be the ultimate embodiment of the tension between all the personal desires and expectations of society heaped upon young women and girls. All those impossible demands: Be young! Be beautiful! Be chaste, sexy, intelligent, demure, witty, self-deprecating! Work hard, have the perfect home and look chic at all times! How long can all these contradictory imperatives be maintained?

There are three main traits that made the hysterics the unwitting celebrities of their age.

They copy. This mimetic ability has baffled doctors for many years. In the early diagnostic manuals, symptoms of hysteria covered 75 pages and were considered incomplete. For example, the hysterics at the Salpêtrière, feeling they were not taken seriously, started developing epilepsy-like episodes. Coincidentally, epileptics, who got more medical attention, were kept in a nearby ward.

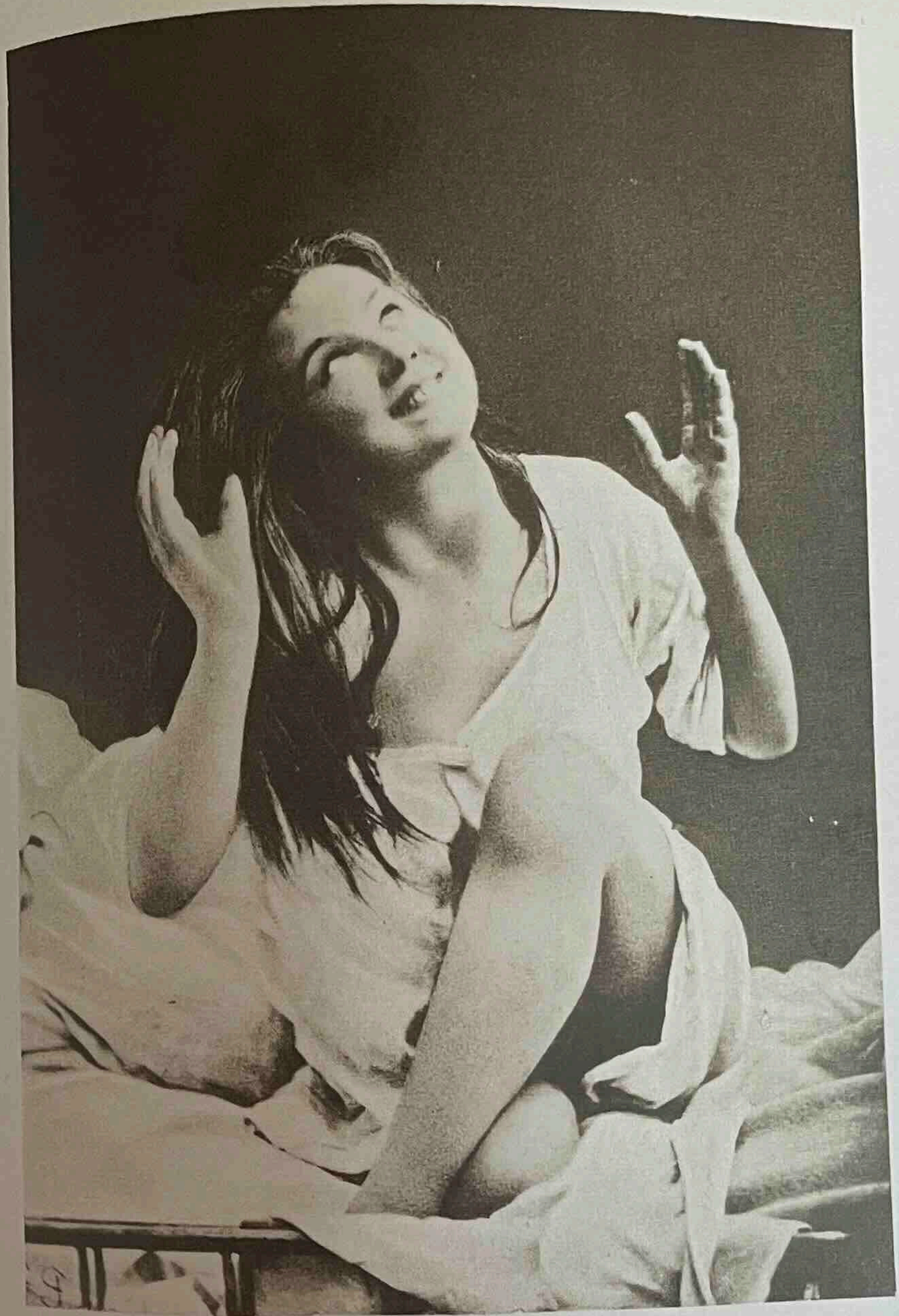
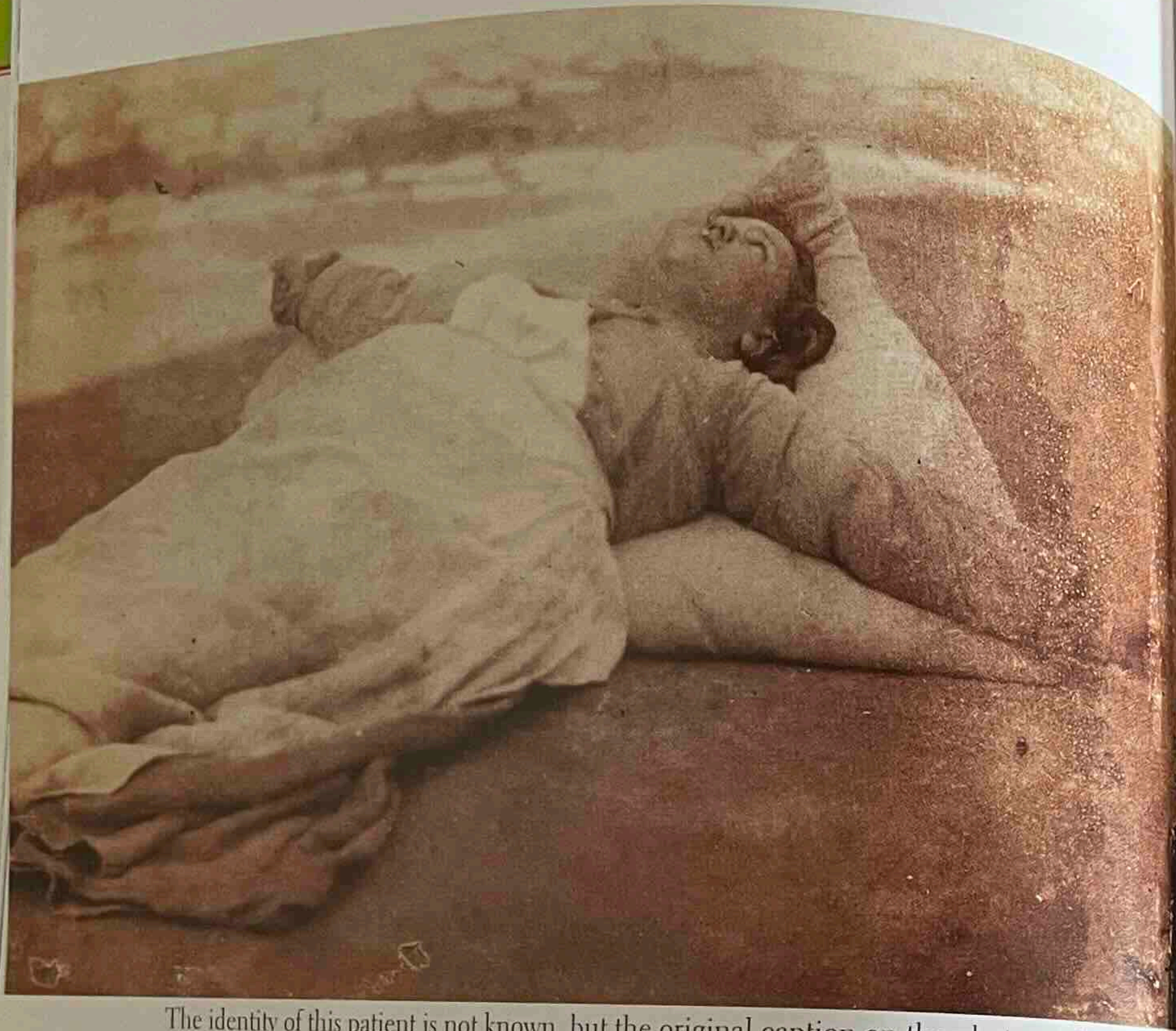


Planche XXIII.

ATTITUDES PASSIONNELLES

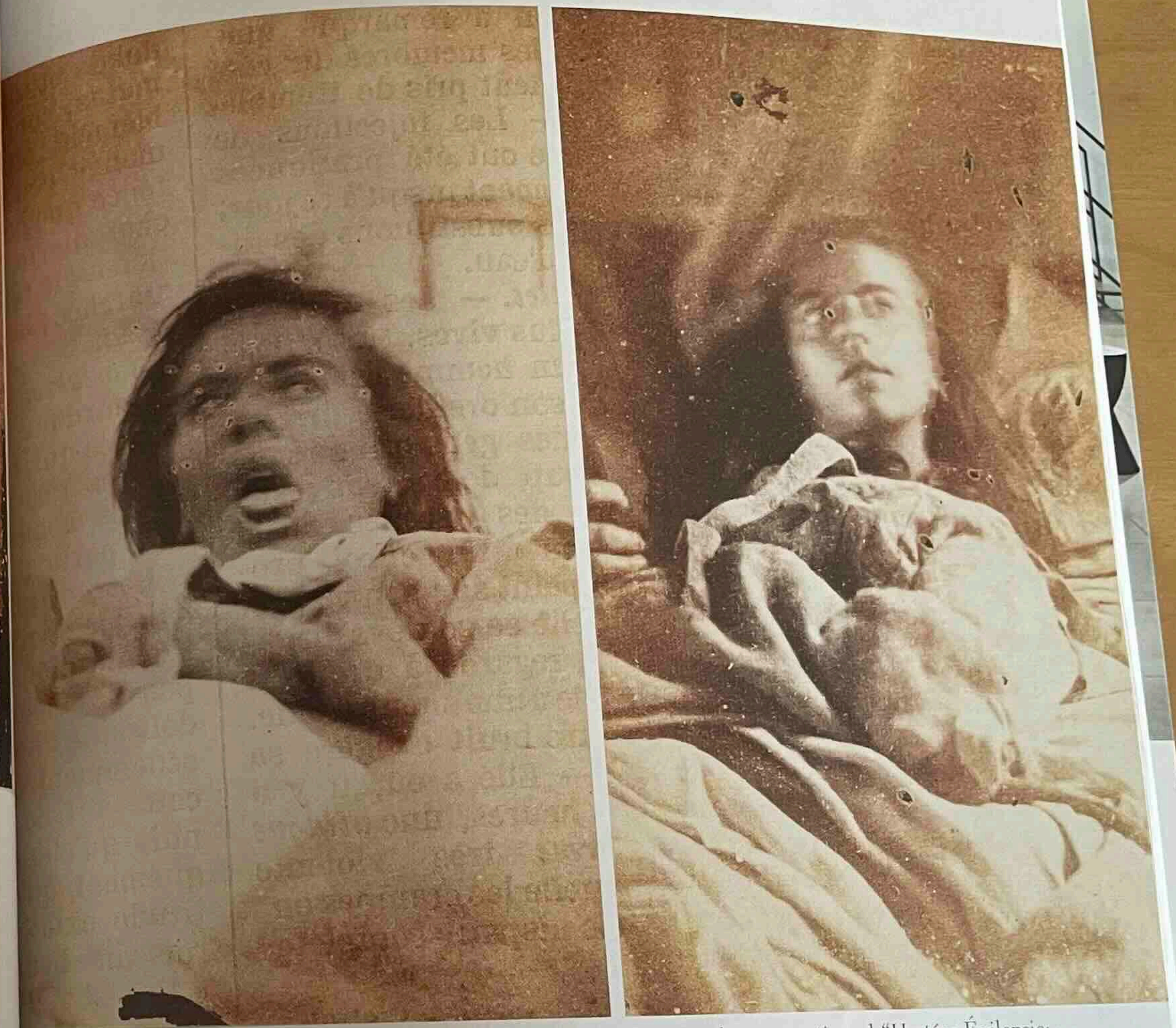
EXTASE (1878).

Salpêtrière inmate Augustine, 1878



The identity of this patient is not known, but the original caption on the photo reads, "Attaque Crucifiement", or crucifixion attack

They pose. Charcot's most famous patient was Blanche Wittman, the so-called Queen of the Hysterics. Admitted to Salpêtrière at the age of 18, her arrival coincided with the new technology of photography and so the beautiful Blanche, along with her fellow inmates Augustine and Geneviève, became the first of a new type of celebrity. Treated with experimental hypnotism, they would run through Charcot's phases of hysteria for the edification of their audiences without being fully conscious of their exploitation. Episodes would start with *auratic prodrome*, an early warning signal of melancholia, over-excitement, vomiting or lack of appetite. This could be followed by four phases: the epileptic-like stage mentioned above, which manifested as convulsions and noisy or laboured movement. Then *clownisme* – bigger contortions, with the sufferer striking passionate attitudes. Thirdly, hallucinations, including images of fires, war, revolutions, assassinations, religious tableaux and the eroticism so important to Freud. Finally, the patient was overcome with delirium. Sex, death and madness – what more could their audience ask for?



These two women are also unidentified. Both photographs are captioned "Hystéro-Épilepsie: Hallucination", meaning they depict the hystero-epileptic phase, a hallucination resulting in anxiety. However the modern understanding is that these attacks are not related to epilepsy. Today, these seizures are recognised as "psychogenic non-epileptic seizures" or "functional neurological disorder"

They ask a specific question addressed to the authority who put in place the impossible demands they rebelled against. This was best articulated by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan: *che vuoi?* meaning *what do you want from me?* It is urgent, ambiguous and impossible to answer, even today. The hysteric's gaze is frozen in time, challenging authority and awaiting a response. She is enigmatic, unresolved, unfulfilled – and because of that, she keeps us looking.👁️