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The Mad Women's Ball

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The Mad Women's Ball

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Mad Women's Ball* (2021), directed by Mélanie Laurent.

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Photo from *The Mad Women's Ball* depicting Charcot demonstrating a hypnotic technique for his male peers

Content warning: gendered violence, physical restraint

The Mad Women's Ball (2021), dir. Mélanie Laurent

The Mad Women's Ball follows the story of Eugénie Cléry (Lou de Laâge), a young woman from a wealthy family who begins to see spirits of the deceased. The only person she tells is her brother, Théophile. Eugénie and her brother know that if their parents discover her spiritual experiences, she may be sent into an asylum. Ultimately, when Eugénie finds a pair of earrings her mother lost years ago with the help of a dead relative, she is quickly volunteered by her family to become the newest patient in Jean-Martin Charcot's Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital.

Within the hospital walls, Eugénie is accompanied by other women who have been diagnosed as "mad." While the doctors are the ones who diagnose them as such, these "mad" women rarely interact with the doctors of the asylum following their diagnosis. Throughout the film Charcot and his doctors show very little interest in the patient's well-being and only use the psychiatrized women for their personal gains. Charcot is seen providing demonstrations of one of

his hypnotic techniques as a “cure” for hysteria. In another scene, he is working on creating photographs of his patients in hysteric moods and hypnotic trances. Charcot’s primary goal is to show how effective his work is, pushing his name forwards in the field of neurology. When it comes to discussions about the patient’s well-being or improvement, he only cares insofar as he can create a demonstration out of their ailments.

The film ensures that we understand one thing about 19th century asylums. Men like Charcot are in charge and developed an awfully oppressive system to govern the bodies of those they don’t see as belonging in society, but these men are not the everyday enforcers of oppression. While it is obvious throughout the film that the oppressive structures are created by men like Charcot, their disinterest in the daily lives of patients leaves the role of enforcing their oppressive misogyny to the women who are employed by Salpêtrière Hospital, such as Geneviève Gleizes (played by the director, Mélanie Laurent). Geneviève works directly with the women in the asylum and reports to Charcot and the other doctors, enforcing the doctor’s “cures” onto the bodies of incarcerated women. Isolation, ice baths, and hypnosis are all treatments prescribed by male doctors and carried out by women such as Geneviève.

In examining the employment of women in asylums, *The Mad Women’s Ball* begins to explore a shift in the lives of 19th century women where it becomes possible for women to gain some power through employment, not just through their economic status. Geneviève, Jeanne, and other nurses and aids within the asylum are depicted as following the orders of men and enforcing the oppressive structures onto the incarcerated women’s bodies. In some sense, these women may be doing this under duress and fear for their own wellbeing. However, most of the time the nurses and aids are depicted as enforcing horrific treatments because they *believe* that they work. Geneviève *believes* that Eugénie suffers from hysteria until Eugénie tells Geneviève a message

from her long-deceased sister and warns her that her father has just collapsed on the kitchen floor. Geneviève runs home to find her recently ill father and begins to believe that Eugénie may really be able to talk to the dead and isn't hysteric. It is only after having her beliefs in the psychiatric system shaken that Geneviève begins to help Eugénie. Jeanne continues to participate and enforce the regulations of Charcot even after Eugénie tells her about a message from her dead mother and the film makes it clear that it isn't because nurses and aids feel pressured by doctors but because they believe in the cures and work to maintain their own power.

We never discover if Eugénie is really talking to the dead, but that isn't the point of the film. During the 19th century, the ability for women to talk to spirits became one of the methods where women could find authority in a highly patriarchal society. First, director Mélanie Laurent is using this trope as a way to demonstrate shifts in power from class authority to the possibility of authority through economic stability (such as the women who work in the asylum). Eugénie's class privilege didn't protect her from the reaches of the asylum. What the film tends to overlook in focusing on Eugénie as someone from a wealthy family, is how class was very much still a part of the picture in the oppression of women. Women of lower classes or who were not self-sufficient were more likely to end up in asylums. Second, Eugénie's ability to talk to the dead provides a pathway to a knowledge that is unattainable within the psychiatric institution. This comes in part from her ability to talk to the dead, but this is combined with her positionality in how she experiences the asylum. For instance, when Eugénie is taken for a series of tests and sees her friend Louise, now partly paralyzed due to Charcot's experiments, she yells at the doctors that it is because of them that the women are mad. Talking to the dead allows for a new position from which alternative experiences that are not those of the dominant (in this case psychiatric) society are able

to be clearly seen. As these experiences are seen in the film, the psychiatric doctors see it as a threat to their own institutional power and therefore place Eugénie in isolation.

Using ambiguity around Eugénie's ability to talk to the dead helps us see the cracks in how psychiatry depicts the body. We may not know whether Eugénie is really talking to spirits, but what we do know is that she doesn't fit within the frameworks instituted by the Salpêtrière Hospital. Like Eugénie, many of the other patients know that they are not hysteric or ill. If they are showing symptoms of hysteria, they are doing so in the hopes of escaping. For example, when we first meet Louise (Lomane de Dietrich) who quickly becomes Eugénie's best friend, she tells Eugénie that she is engaged to one of the doctors. We later find that Jules (Christophe Montenez) has been encouraging her to participate in Charcot's hypnosis experiments and tells her that he will propose to her on the night of the Ball. The idea of hysteria is not internalized by women incarcerated in asylum but by the women and men enforcing the asylum as an institution.

The film builds towards the yearly Ball held in the Salpêtrière Hospital where Jules claims he will propose to Louise. This Ball, a historical element of Charcot's asylum practices, was a voyeuristic event displaying the women of the asylum for the entertainment and amusement of those who attended the Ball. At the ball, Louise still believes that Jules will propose but instead, he assaults her. The film depicts the voyeuristic nature of this ball to demonstrate how such events propelled the popularity and "validity" of the practices of Charcot and those like him. The actual patients within the asylum walls were a means for popularity and privilege.

The Mad Women's Ball provides an insightful and horrific vision of what life as an asylum patient would have been like in the mid-to-late 19th century. Patients were there to prop up the privilege and power of the doctors and women employed by the asylum at the expense of their bodies.