

# Resounding Silence: Learning to Hear the Hysteric's Voice

## Sounding Out! Authors

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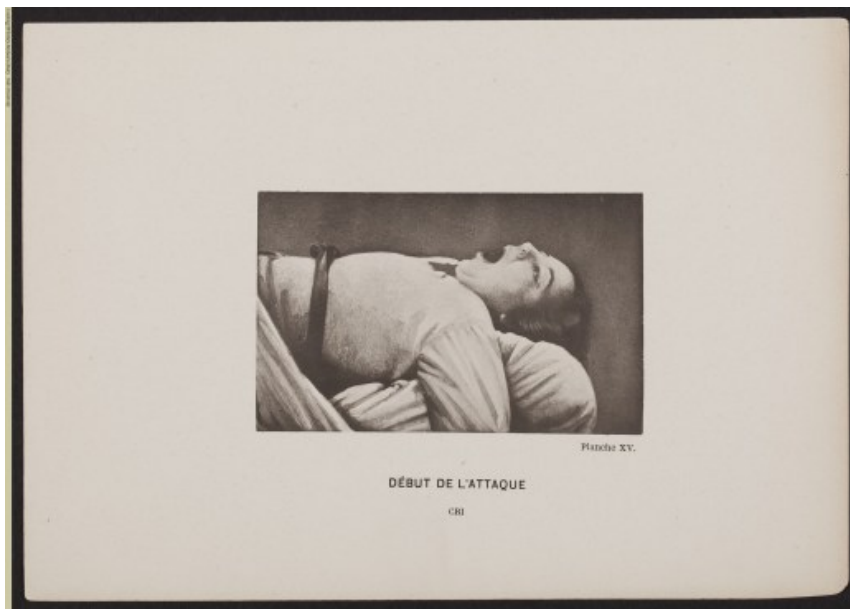
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## Abstract

This week we are pleased to welcome Guest Editor **Karly-Lynne Scott** kick off the last Thursday Series that ***Sounding Out!*** is running in 2015. Over the last ten months, this stream has reconsidered historical figures from radio preacher Elder Michaux to folklorist Alan Lomax, found new ways to tune in the weird voices in literature from Joseph Conrad to H.P.

## Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Cultural Studies, Gender, History, Hysterical Sound



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This week we are pleased to welcome Guest Editor **Karly-Lynne Scott** kick off the last Thursday Series that ***Sounding Out!*** is running in 2015. Over the last ten months, this stream has reconsidered historical figures from radio preacher [Elder Michaux](#) to folklorist [Alan Lomax](#), found new ways to tune in the weird voices in literature from [Joseph Conrad](#) to [H.P. Lovecraft](#), and featured unsettled soundscapes from [Vancouver](#) to [Havana](#).

All year, our Thursday authors have been challenging sonic archives and remaking historical and contemporary problems. That trend continues with Scott's exciting work and that of her authors in **Hysterical Sound**.

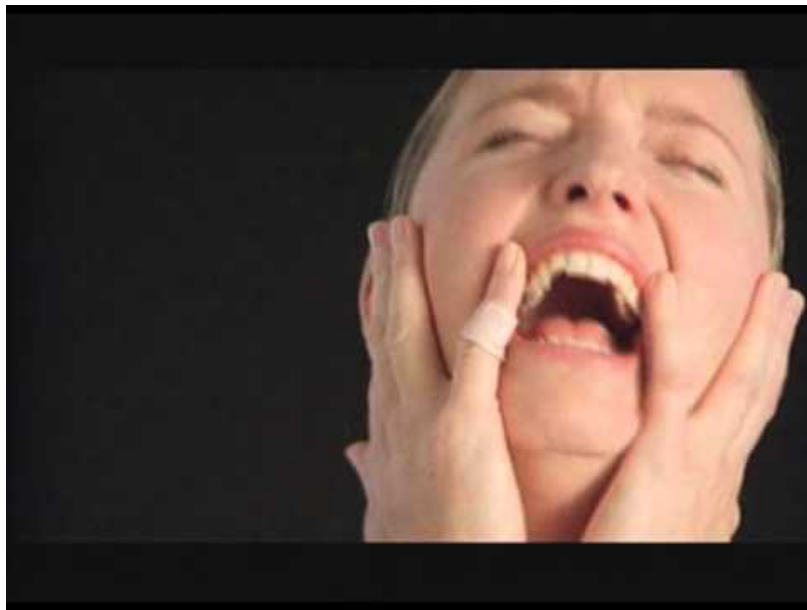
— **Special Editor Neil Verma.**

*Hysteria, the infamous and now-discredited psychological disorder that was a common diagnosis for women during the 19th century, has important sonic dimensions that have often been overlooked. Indeed, sound holds a prominent place in both the symptoms and treatment of hysteria: from the silence of hysterical aphonia to the hysteric's vocal ejaculations, from fits triggered by sound to auditory hallucinations, from the hysteric giving up speech to the implementation of the talking cure.*

*Our four part series **Hysterical Sound** brings together writers and artists to explore hysteria's sonic dimensions, as well as its continued legacy and importance for sound studies. In the coming weeks, **Gordon Sullivan** will consider the video art series Hysterical Literature in relation to a long history of women's vocalizations serving as aural fetishes of female sexuality for the pleasure of male listeners. **Veronica Fitzpatrick** will explore the hysterical quality of the horror film soundtrack in its rejection of verbocentrism—the privileging of language and meaning. Finally, **John Corbett, Terri Kapsalis and Danny Thompson** share an excerpt from their performance art project The Hysterical Alphabet.*

*Today, I kick off this series with a discussion of what it means to listen to the silence of the hysteric. Looking at Sam Taylor-Johnson's silent film Hysteria I argue that the hysteric is not mute, rather her vocalizations go unheard because we have tuned them out.*

— **Guest Editor Karly-Lynne Scott**



<https://youtu.be/33PZhpay8gM>

The silence of [Sam Taylor-Johnson's eight-minute film \*Hysteria\*](#) announces itself loudly. As the film holds in close-up the face of a woman as she cries and laughs indiscriminately, and with abandon, it is difficult to ignore that the woman's voice is missing.

Today, Taylor-Johnson is famous for directing feature films like *Nowhere Boy* (2009) and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015), but she first rose to prominence in 1990s as a fine art photographer, film and video artist creating works like *Hysteria*. In the film, the image and absent soundtrack function together to conflate the two sonic extremes symptomatic of hysteria: the loss of voice (including dysphonia, aphonia and aphasia), and the sound of hysterical fits, irrepressible yet inarticulate vocal ejaculations—moans, cries, murmurs and screams— that we might call hysterical vocalizations. The resulting silent scream recalls Jean-Martin Charcot's [Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière](#), in particular Plate XV "Onset of the Attack—Scream."

In this post, I want to consider these two works together, asking not only how they figure the silent hysteric each in its own way, but also how we can 'learn to listen' to this silence in both cases.



Plate XV "Début de l'attaque—Cri" (Onset of the Attack—Scream) from *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*, public domain

Jean-Martin Charcot was a celebrated nineteenth century French neurologist and professor of pathological anatomy, best known today for his work with hysteria at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. Describing himself as a *visuel*, or a "man who sees," Charcot demonstrated little concern for the sounds of hysteria (11). "You see how hysterics shout," Charcot said, "Much ado about nothing" (53). Focusing on the visual dimensions of hysteric's symptoms at the expense of her voice, Charcot photographed the physical symptoms of hysteria, creating an archive of still, silent women. Martha Noel Evans tells that Charcot "would have the patients brought into his office and stripped naked; he would observe them, ask them to perform certain movements, stare, meditate, and then have them led out. ... he rarely exchanged words with the patients" (20).

As Janet Beizer explains in *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth Century France*, because the hysteric's vocalizations were nonverbal they were considered meaningless in themselves. It was deemed necessary for someone to speak for her in order to make sense of her incoherence, to interpret and translate her nonverbal communication into meaningful speech. Medical professionals exhibited a verbocentrism—a bias privileging language and meaning over other types of vocalizations—that not only caused the voice of the hysteric to go unheard, but also led to her being ventriloquized by others, particularly male doctors.

To rectify this history Beizer asserts, "I cannot hope to reintegrate the nineteenth-century hysterical body with its voice; I can only mouth the voicelessness and strive to expose the discourse that spoke in its place" (12). This is precisely the approach taken by Taylor-Johnson's film. It does not attempt to reintegrate the hysterical body with its voice, a gesture that might function only to further ventriloquize the hysteric. Instead, in removing the soundtrack, it mouths

the hysteric's voicelessness, emphasizing it to the point that it can be heard.

In *Iconographie*, the stillness of the photographs allows their silence to be easily ignored, not only because we are accustomed to still photography's absence of sound, but because silence, stillness, and death go hand-in-hand. The living body, however, is never truly silent. For that reason, the uncanniness of the silent, moving body in Taylor-Johnson's film draws attention to not only the film's absence of sound, but the silencing of the hysteric.



Although *Hysteria* is without a soundtrack, to say that it is silent misses something crucial. As Michel Chion asserts in *The Voice in Cinema* what we call silent cinema, films without soundtracks, might be better termed “deaf cinema” (7). “It’s not that the film’s characters were mute,” Chion explains, “but rather that the film was deaf to them” (8). As he explains, spectators watching a film without a soundtrack know that the characters are speaking, even in the absence of sound, because they see them speak. We not only see the woman of *Hysteria* shout and laugh, scream and cry, but close-ups of her mouth agape make visible the movement of her tongue and pharynx. Thus, although we cannot hear the noise she is making, we see that she is making it. Chion quotes filmmaker Robert Bresson, who speaking to this idea said, “For the characters did in fact talk, only they spoke in a vacuum, no one could hear what they were saying” (8). It is not that the hysterical woman is silent, but that we, like Charcot, have tuned her out.

Reframing the hysteric's silence this way, it is no longer she that is deficient for being unable to speak in a meaningful way. Rather, it is we who lack the ability, or willingness, to listen. She screams and shouts, moans and laughs, but her vocalizations are lost on us. What *Hysteria* makes perceptible through its image-track is that the hysteric *is* speaking—we cannot hear her because she has been stripped of her voice, as the film has been stripped of its soundtrack, but she is not silent. The film encourages us to learn to perceive vocalizations that have been silenced with our other senses, to recognize and acknowledge their existence even when we cannot hear them. In

bringing our attention to the hysteric's silence *Hysteria* helps us learn to listen her and, in doing so, reveals that this silence in fact speaks volumes.

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**Karly-Lynne Scott** is a Ph.D. candidate in Screen Cultures at Northwestern University. Her dissertation considers pornography in relation to philosophical conceptualizations of the body and the history of sexology. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Porn Studies*, *In Media Res*, and *World Picture*, where she is an assistant editor.

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