



Book Review

Marc Schuilenburg (2021) *Hysteria: Crime, Media, and Politics* (Vivien D Glass, trans). London: Routledge

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In *About Time* (Curtis, 2013), a British film written and directed by Richard Curtis, Tim Lake (Domhnall Gleeson), on the occasion of his twenty-first birthday, learns from his father (Bill Nighy) that the men in his family have the ability to travel back in time to moments they have lived in the past. They cannot alter history, but they can change what happens and has happened in their own lives. When Tim asks his father how he has used his capacity to travel back in time, the elder Lake replies, “For me it’s books, books, books. I’ve read everything a man could hope to. Twice. Dickens three times.”

Marc Schuilenburg’s *Hysteria: Crime, Media, and Politics*¹ is a book that one should read during one’s first pass through or iteration of life. It is also a book that inspires us or leads us to read—not just (to continue reading) *his own book*, but others. In a quick 140 pages (the book as a whole is 170 pages, including a “Foreword” by Jeff Ferrell and, at the end, the “Acknowledgements,” “Movies and series,” “References,” and “Index”), we are encouraged to explore—or revisit, as the case may be—the work of Nachman Ben-Yehuda, William S. Burroughs, Jean-Martin Charcot, Stanley Cohen, Frans de Waal, Gilles Deleuze, Norbert Elias, Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, Johan Galtung, Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Nietzsche, John Rawls, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, and Max Weber, among many others (which might require some of the Lakes’ time traveling talents!).

Schuilenburg’s *Hysteria: Crime, Media, and Politics* also prompts us to embrace—and perhaps *adopt*—*hysteria* as an analytical tool to examine contemporary society. While hysteria might once have been a “catchall diagnosis for people, especially women, who might have been suffering from symptoms like depression, anxiety, shortness of breath, insomnia and even something called sexual forwardness,” as Ramtin Arablouie (Arablouie and Rund 2022), co-host and co-producer of National Public Radio’s (NPR) podcast, *Throughline*, has explained, for Schuilenburg (2021: 8), “hysteria is ... above all a *sociological* issue” (emphasis added). “The problem of hysteria is sociologically relevant,” Schuilenburg (2021: 8) contends, “because it raises the question of why our lives, which seem to run so smoothly for many people, are nevertheless hysterical.” Thus, Schuilenburg (2021: 8) undertakes a sociological analysis of hysteria “to understand why this illness crops up so often and in such diverging fields, ranging from the issue of safety and security to the arrival of immigrants and asylum seekers,” although by the end of the book, Schuilenburg has backtracked considerably from the description of *hysteria* as an *illness*.



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I read Marc Schuilenburg's *Hysteria: Crime, Media, and Politics* because he asked me to participate in his "Author Meets Critics: Hysteria: Crime, Media and Politics" session at the 77th Annual Meeting of the American Society of Criminology in Atlanta, Georgia, in November 2022.² I probably would have read his book anyway, however, and my purpose in this review is twofold: first, to make a case for why others should read it, and second, to articulate why I am *glad* I did—although, as I think about it now, *glad* is the wrong word; *glad* reminds me of trash bags (<https://www.glad.com/>), and while both the words *litter* and *rubbish* appear in Schuilenburg's book, *Hysteria: Crime, Media, and Politics* is certainly not that.

To accomplish these two tasks, I want to use the space I have here to convey what Schuilenburg's book *does* because, increasingly, I am finding that books *act*. They need a reader, of course—they are not like Edwardus Lima's ferocious, animate textbook, *The Monster Book of Monsters*—but they *act upon us*—or, should I say, they catalyze something in us when we read them. Books can do for us something more than they can in Harold Bloom's (2000) limited view (for a discussion, see Brisman 2021).

So, what does *Hysteria: Crime, Media, and Politics* do? I want to focus on three things.

First, for those who have attempted to keep up with Schuilenburg's prolific career, *hysteria*, as a concept or idea, serves as a sort of organizing trope. Much like the way *drift* functions for Jeff Ferrell (2018), I think *hysteria* operates in the same mode for Schuilenburg. One gains a renewed appreciation and deeper understanding of Schuilenburg's earlier works, such as *The Securitization of Society: Crime, Risk, and Social Order* (2015) and *The Algorithmic Society: Technology, Power, and Knowledge* (co-edited with Rik Peeters 2021) when one contemplates them with *hysteria* and *Hysteria: Crime, Media, and Politics* in mind.

Second, I think one way to judge a book (at least, one of nonfiction) is to do so by examining one's reading—and watching list—after one has read it. If one's list has grown, well, that is a positive sign. *Hysteria: Crime, Media, and Politics* prompts literary and cinematic exploration—not just of the authors that I mentioned above, but so much more. Such is Schuilenburg's range. I have now watched more 1970s science fiction/dystopian movies and John Carpenter films (*The Thing* [Lancaster 1982], *Prince of Darkness* [Carpenter 1987], and *In the Mouth of Madness* [De Luca 1995]) in the last month than I would have predicted when I first cracked open *Hysteria: Crime, Media, and Politics*.

Third, *hysteria* in *Hysteria: Crime, Media, and Politics* provides a lens or paradigm. It is good to think *with* or *through*. But herein lies my concern about the book.

Schuilenburg (2021: 120) defines *panic* as "a form of sudden, overwhelming fear, triggered by a specific, concrete cause." As an example, he states that some people panic when they see a spider: "they might think the spider [is] about to climb up their trouser leg, and the thought makes their body's stress system kick in," resulting in panic.

Conversely, *hysteria* is a form of "existential anxiety—an unconscious anxiety constantly present in our daily lives, which comes to the fore when we experience the feeling of losing control and which is very hard to conquer" (Schuilenburg 2021: 120). "As a result," Schuilenburg (2021: 120) continues, "hysteria often masks a larger conflict that leads to powerful emotions and uncontrolled behaviour in individuals."

I am not so sure about this distinction. It appears as if, on the one hand, Schuilenburg views "hysteria" as more habitual or quotidian than "panic." But on the other hand, Schuilenburg seems to be suggesting that "hysteria" can *lead to* panic—"uncontrolled behaviour in individuals."

Fourteen pages later, Schuilenburg (2021: 134) writes, "hysterical people scream for recognition, desperate for their situation to be acknowledged, and demand attention in the hope that people around them will take them seriously." This description seems to reflect the definition of *hysteria* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (O.E.D.): "Overwhelming, uncontrollable emotion or agitation, esp. as a collective reaction to an event of (perceived) importance or significance; behaviour characterized by such emotion or agitation."

I tend to think of *panic* as short-lived and, thus, agree with Schuilenburg (2021: 120): panic is "a form of sudden, overwhelming fear, triggered by a specific, concrete cause." Slightly longer fear and screaming—triggered by a specific, concrete cause or causes—would strike me as *hysteria*. Thus, I agree with Schuilenburg that the term *moral panic* may be a misnomer—that what Stanley Cohen (1972) described in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* is more akin to *hysteria* and that the term should be *moral hysteria*, not *moral panic*.

What I do not agree with, however, is Schuilenburg's conceptualization of *hysteria* as "existential anxiety." The *O.E.D.* defines *existential* as "of, relating to, or concerned with individual existence . . . ; having, or prompted by, a keen awareness of individual freedom and responsibility," and *anxiety* as "worry over the future or about something with an uncertain outcome; uneasy concern about a person, situation, etc.; a troubled state of mind arising from such worry or concern." Combining the two definitions results in something qualitatively quite different from "overwhelming, uncontrollable emotion or agitation."

To offer a personal example, I suffer from climate change *anxiety*—a specific worry about the future due to, if we are going to stick with *O.E.D.* definitions, "the change in global climate patterns increasingly apparent from the mid to late 20th century onwards and linked largely with increased emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases caused by human activity." I do not think I suffer from climate change *hysteria*.

I might suggest that we *should* be *hysterical* about climate change—in the sense that we should "scream for recognition, desperate for the situation to be acknowledged, and demand attention in the hope that people around [us] will take [it] seriously" (Schuilenburg 2021: 134). But *hysterical* has pejorative connotations—in part because, as Shaw (2007: A27) has observed, "perspective and proportion are the first casualties of hysteria." In this sense, I do not believe that any sane person thinks that concerns about climate change are *hysterical*. (Remember, I said *sane*.)

This leads me to my final thought.

Debating the distinctions between *panic* and *hysteria* or between *hysteria* and *anxiety* is not a mere exercise in pedantry. Rather, what it accomplishes—and this is why I think Schuilenburg's book is so valuable to *think with*—is that it compels us to ask: Is *hysteria* ever appropriate (or an appropriate reaction)? And, if so, when? Or is this a contradiction in terms? More importantly, contemplating the nature and bounds of *hysteria*—and we have Schuilenburg to thank for this—forces us to ask: "how do we know when to sound the alarm?" (Joshua Cohen, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, quoted in Paul 2022). "It's easy to slam someone for overreacting," Paul (2022) wrote, summarizing Cohen, "but we would do well to remember the instances in which a strong reaction is justified"—and to remember instances, such as with the Holocaust (or, I would argue, with climate change), when a strong reaction came (or is coming) too late.

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¹ *Hysteria: Crime, Media, and Politics* was originally published in 2019 in Dutch as *Hysterie: Een Cultuurdiagnose* (Amsterdam: Boom Uitgevers). The subtitle literally means "a cultural diagnosis," which is a more accurate reflection of Schuilenburg's Nietzschean-inspired approach in the book. My guess is that the more prosaic, "crime, media, and politics," came at the insistence of Routledge for marketing purposes.

² This review is adapted from my comments delivered at that session.

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