

## Film

### Tumbling down

It is becoming increasingly hard to avoid talk of psychiatry and mental illness. Politicians outbid each other in their promises to fund treatment, phone-ins discuss it, more and more people are willing to describe their own experiences, and book prizes are won by novels about it. Escaping by a visit to the cinema is risky—films about psychosis, autism, depression, and dementia are all the rage, and often a fast ticket to the Oscars' red carpet. And now mass hysteria joins the list.

*The Falling* premiered at the BFI London Film Festival and now has gone on general release. It is written and directed by Carol Morley, who achieved critical approval with *Dreams of a Life*, a documentary about Joyce Carol Vincent, who died in her London bedsit in 2003, but whose body was not discovered for 3 years. And now, say the critics, Carol has produced her first piece of fictional film making, on the subject of mass hysteria. Except that she has done no such thing.

Yes, the film does make numerous references to other works of cinema, art, and fiction. Few will miss the debt to Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (young sexuality, a girls' boarding school, an atmosphere of tension and mystery, even watches that stop for no reason). Add a Pre-Raphaelite setting of green moss-covered ponds in which any moment Ophelia might come floating past, a gnarled oak around which not the Merry Wives of Windsor but disturbed Oxford school girls dance, and, for the occasional comic turn, headmistresses from Ronald Searle's fictional St Trinian's.

But there is little that is fictional about the plot. When Ian McEwan wrote *Enduring Love* he concluded the novel with an appendix containing an apparently genuine but actually skilfully written pastiche of a scientific paper on "De Clérambault's Syndrome", in which he was aided by psychiatrist and neuroscientist Ray Dolan. But the writer and director of *The Falling* needs no such artifice, because her script is a remarkably accurate adaptation of an authentic paper, published in 1973 in the newly formed *Psychological Medicine*, describing an epidemic of fainting in a north London girls' school.

I played some part in this myself, because 10 years ago Carol Morley came to see me to talk about mass hysteria. We discussed my own theories of mass hysteria—the subject of my medical school dissertation and my first "proper" paper. She spent a couple of days in my office rummaging through my collection of accounts about episodes of mass hysteria; I had stopped my previous practice of letting journalists borrow my files since an investigative journalist took home a large box of original documents about the early years of ME, and lost them. It was then that Carol found the account of events at a north

London girls' school, written by psychiatrist Silvio Benaim and the distinguished general practitioner John Horder.

Reading the paper for the first time in over a decade I am struck by the amount of detail that the authors provide. The current ethical test for publishing confidential information remains whether any of the protagonists can recognise themselves; if so, then publication can only be with consent. One suspects that everyone involved in the 1973 paper would recognise themselves within a few lines, and any attempt to successfully disguise them would have made the subsequent paper useless from any academic perspective, which may account for the disappearance of the case report from contemporary psychiatric literature.

I soon forgot about the encounter. But Carol didn't, and spent the next 10 years developing what would be *The Falling*. In a lengthy and impressive essay on mass hysteria and her film in the *Observer*, she remembers our meeting—describing me as having "wispy hair standing on end" (which might be true now but I hope wasn't then) to convey the impression of the mad professor. I forgive her.

And so 10 years later we met again at the gala opening of *The Falling*. The screenplay has stayed close to what we know about mass hysteria in general, and the 1973 description in particular—starting with the death of a classmate (Abigail in the film, echoes of the Salem witch trials?) after a teenage pregnancy and the increasingly disturbed behaviour of Lydia (Louise in the paper), whose mother (played by an almost mute Maxine Peake) would have furnished enough material for several films. In both paper and film, Lydia embarks on incestuous relationships. Equally faithful both to the original and to subsequent work on mass hysteria, in the film the epidemic spreads along social friendship groups, excluding the one Indian member of the class (in the paper it is not just the "coloured" girl who is unaffected, but also the Jewish and Greek members of the class).

Richard Kanaan and I have been preoccupied with the distinctions between hysteria, Munchausen's syndrome, and malingering. For many years it has been argued that in hysteria the person has no conscious knowledge that their symptoms are not explicable by organic illness, in Munchausen's they do know they are faking but their motives for so doing remain unconscious, and finally in malingering both behaviour and motivation is conscious. Carol Morley has one member of the "in crowd" accusing Lydia of faking it—the paper quotes at length a "confession" made by the Lydia character in which she admits to conscious simulation. Kanaan and I argue that it is rarely so simple, and often we make this judgement on our own hidden biases, being more likely to assume hysteria in those



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**The Falling**

Directed by Carol Morley

Running time: 102 min

For more about the **fainting epidemic** see *Psychol Med* 1973; **3**: 366–73 and *Psychol Med* 1987; **17**: 109–20

For **Carol Morley's**

**Observer article** see

<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/mar/29/carol-morley-the-falling-mass-hysteria-is-a-powerful-group-activity>

For more about **hysteria, Munchausen's syndrome, and malingering** see *Brain* 2009; **132**: 2889–96

For more about **the events in Leroy** see [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/magazine/teenage-girls-twitching-le-roy.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/magazine/teenage-girls-twitching-le-roy.html?_r=0) and *J Royal Soc Med* 2012; **105**: 509–12

we like or feel sympathy for, keeping concepts of deliberate deception for either rather obvious cases (prisoners on death row, soldiers trying to avoid highly dangerous missions) or those we feel less sympathy and affinity with. *The Falling* maintains these ambiguities; we feel irritated by Lydia's behaviour, and secretly applaud when the headmistress calmly ends one hysterical seizure by pricking Lydia with her brooch, but at the same time empathising with her hideously dysfunctional background, and her feelings when her best but prettier and more sexually successful friend Abigail (a wonderful debut by Florence Pugh) gets pregnant, and then dies in circumstances not shared with the audience (the original source notes that this was the result of a post-partum cerebral haemorrhage). One does not need much knowledge of psychiatry to accept that Abigail's illicit sexual experimentation which led directly to her death (neither of which can be acknowledged, let alone discussed) would have a dramatic effect on her coterie of friends. Carol Morley also expertly lays a few false

trails (a few hints at a hidden organic causation, and some flirtation with an occult explanation), but the former should always be considered in any episode of mass hysteria, and the latter was part of the preoccupations of the teenagers in the original episode. In the end, the film leaves no room for ambiguity that the phenomena described must reflect powerful psychological and social forces, but considerable ambiguity as to why these events unfolded as they did.

It is more than 40 years since the events described in *The Falling* took place. But the phenomena so beautifully captured in the film remain with us. The rise of social media meant that perhaps millions followed recent events at Leroy High School in New York State, which has many similarities with *The Falling*. I doubt it will take another 40 years before another film director becomes as fascinated with that story as Carol Morley did when she first opened my copy of *Psychological Medicine* 10 years ago in my office.

*Simon Wessely*