

Introduzione/Introduction

“DOCTORS AND POETS”
MUSIC, THEATER AND THE NEW PSYCHOPHYSIOLOGY
BETWEEN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

In the passage between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in reaction to the then dominant naturalist aesthetics, theater and music – which the eighteenth century had seen as the first laboratories of the soul and the emotions – began to question their essence and seek the particularity of their own status.

The path unfolded against the background of a new aesthetic of the arts, which influenced both the development of the technological media and – above all – the new human and medical sciences and so-called “unofficial” science. All these phenomena together contributed decisively to the cultural change that marked the turn of the century: the advent of “modernity” initiated by Nietzsche’s theories, whose blunt opposition to institutionalized aesthetics heralded and sustained the opposition of the Secession painters and the theater artists of Darmstadt, the new musical languages (culminating in the twelve-tone radicalization) and the inroads of the parasciences into the official medical establishment.

Drawn between the romantic legacy and the new positivism, in the last decades of the nineteenth century the “eminently” human arts, such as music and theater, were in a thrall of self-interrogation, participating in the scientific, aesthetic and artistic dialogues then in progress; a debate whose center of attraction lay in Nietzsche’s Germany and Freud’s Vienna, but that was enlivened as much by the France of Charles Féré and Benjamin Duchenne (whose experiments with the technical reproducibility of the spectrum of physiognomic expressions had been at the theoretical center of recitation

around 1800), as by the England of Elliotson and Braid, to whom we owe the introduction of the terms “hypnotism,” “neurohypnosis” and “hypnosis”: a technique destined to have great repercussions on how inspiration and artistic creation were conceived. Because it was precisely hypnotism that formulated an initial model of the human mind as a dual ego (the profound development of an early romantic intuition): a conscious but limited ego, and a subconscious ego, much larger, unknown, but endowed with mysterious perceptive and creative powers (see H. Ellenberger: *The Discovery of the Unconscious*). Here was discovered the key to at last begin clarifying the great enigma of artistic inspiration, which began to be explained as a “more or less intermittent surfacing in the conscious psyche of psychic material left stored in the subconscious mind.”

The exploration of the unconscious on the one hand – which would culminate in Freud’s psychoanalytic investigations – the new in-depth study of the physiological mechanisms on the other, and their interconnection, would profoundly redefine the processes of production, reception and interpretation of works of art. The investigation of some of the substantial aspects of this profound cultural transformation, focused on the theatrical and musical arts, is the common feature of the contributions that constitute the volume’s core, made not only by teatrologists and musicologists, but also by philosophers, historians of medicine, psychology, linguists and exponents of neurophysiology.

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