

## Bloodsongs: Pulse-Taking, Synesthesia, and Epistemic Shifts

Arguably one of the most noteworthy transfigurations in western medicine occurred when the lifting of the ban on dissection in Hellenistic Alexandria opened the black bag of humors that the human body had been for Hippocratic thought and revealed a new world ripe for colonization by metaphor. Among the rich fields of medical metaphor cultivated over two millennia by Praxagoras, Herophilus, Galen, Rufus of Ephesus and the later West was that of sphygmology, as the pulse (virtually ignored in Hippocratic writings) gradually assumed pride of place in medical semiology. Despite its new status, however, the undeniable intimacy of the pulse — the fact that it lay just beneath the fingertips — paradoxically presented its own kind of opacity, a darkness that medicine groped to illuminate in increasingly synesthetic terms. What was felt by Herophilus as haptic rhythms of verse and dance, measured by Galen and his contemporaries as an uneasy blend of metaphor and metrics, and heard by the medieval West as a kind of muffled subcutaneous music, became for Enlightenment physicians a strictly quantitative event, in a shift coincident with the perfection of mechanical clocks. Motivated by and also embodying the 19<sup>th</sup> century development of the sphygmograph and sphygmomanometer, the premodern synesthesia of the pulse increasingly became a detached, “scopic” experience. The spectral music of Korotkoff Sounds at the turn of the last century marked a final stage in the passage of the pulse from incarnate rhythms of dance to disembodied LED sine-wave. This talk will map that epistemic shift as a model of how science models its objects.

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