

# INTENSITÄT | INTENSITY IN WALTER BENJAMIN'S PHILOSOPHY

FORSCHUNGSINSTITUT FÜR PHILOSOPHIE HANNOVER  
13.4–14.4.2018

## WORKSHOP THEME

*intendere*—to tighten, to bring into a state of tension, to direct toward

The concept of 'intensity' (*Intensität*) plays a decisive—albeit often almost imperceptible—role in Walter Benjamin's writings. This is perhaps most evident in his early writings on language, where Benjamin speaks of the 'intensive totality' of language and of the 'intensive, that is, anticipating, intimating realisation' which characterises the relation between languages. But the significance of the concept is not limited to these famous references in *On Language as Such* and *The Task of the Translator*. In the notes for the *Habilitationsschrift* that Benjamin planned in the early 1920s, the concept of *intentio* returns again and again in Benjamin's epistemological reflections and their confrontation with phenomenology. These notes pivot around the concept of 'objective intention' and a doctrine of different 'stages of intention' (*Intentionsstufen*) that provide the basis for his famous definition of truth as the 'death of intention'.

The preoccupation with intensity and intentionality that recurs throughout these fragments marks a critical contestation of the traditional philosophical concepts of perception (*Wahrnehmung*), appearance (*Erscheinung*) and reality (*Realität*) as much as it points to an attempt to formulate a theory of experience—one that complicates dichotomies of subject and object, empiricism and rationalism, or the intensive and the extensive. Most importantly, however, in the concept of intensity we can detect a nexus between Benjamin's theories of language and experience on the one hand, and his reflections on historical time on the other. During the same period in which he drafted the notes for his *Habilitationsschrift*, references to intention and intensity also occur in his writings on history and politics. The locus classicus in this context is undoubtedly the *Theologico-Political Fragment*, where the concept of a 'messianic intensity'—or what is later described as an 'immediate messianic intensity of the heart'—plays an important role in Benjamin's account of the relation between the historical world and the messianic. But how is this 'messianic intensity' to be understood? What is the relation of this 'intensity of the heart' to the 'intensive, anticipating, intimating realisation' that Benjamin describes in his writings on language? And how does this intensity structure the time of history?

During our two-day workshop—the fifth in a series of events that deal directly or indirectly with Benjamin's concept of *Aktualität*—we will draw on these questions in our discussion of the concept of intensity in Benjamin's work. The workshop will be organised around a close reading of small passages that touch on the concept of intensity in one way or another and allow to draw connections between Benjamin's reflections on language, perception, history and the political. Since the workshop revolves around intensive reading sessions, a precise knowledge of the relevant texts is expected. In order to facilitate the discussion, the number of participants for this workshop is limited.

If you are interested to participate, please send a message and a brief biographical note to the organisers before **25 February 2018**.

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Workshop venue: *Leibnizhaus Hannover, Holzmarkt 4-6, D-30159 Hannover*