

Eighth Biennial Graduate Student Conference Department of Germanic Studies Indiana
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**The Critical Blot: Opacity and Meaning in German
Language, Literature, and Culture**

Keynote Address: Benjamin Bennett (University of Virginia)

Plenary Address: Joe Salmons (University of Wisconsin)

„Diesem Willen zum Schein, zur Vereinfachung, zur Maske, zum Mantel, kurz zur Oberfläche – denn jede Oberfläche ist ein Mantel – wirkt jener sublimen Hang des Erkennenden *entgegen*, der die Dinge tief, vielfach, gründlich nimmt und nehmen *will*.“ Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*

Over the centuries, writers, philosophers, linguists, historians, artists, musicians, and filmmakers have attempted to wrestle with the façades that Nietzsche describes. Obscurity, indecipherability, pregnant silences, faulty light – these masks of opacity resist being known when they are all that can be known. Can the methods that begin by trying to punch through them in the end only caress them? While the surface, i.e., what we actually see and hear of language and art, is relatively easy to observe (as long as the observer is sensitive to its structure), that which lies *behind* (the surface) has driven analyses and entire theories and has led to the development of myriad scholastic methods and empirical instruments.

In the literary realm, obscurity may show up in the form of an unreliable narrator (as in Kleist's texts), nonsense (as in Christian Morgenstern), or esoterism (from Stefan George to Arno Schmidt), among others. But does the quest for meaning and sense in these texts and many others break down? Do figures become disfigured? Does narration fall apart? Does „Schein“ (as „splendor“, „apparentia“, and „illusio“) reign supreme, as pure fiction, or does it simply invite the construction of meaning? In other realms, different obstructions intrude: tantalizing gaps in historical or manuscript evidence, veiled references to what might be our world (as in Kiefer's art), the excess of the visual or of performance in film and theater, the meaning of voice as voice. Can insight be garnered through blindness, as in the original eye for an eye?

At the same time, modern linguistics has turned from mere etymologies to the search for the abstract laws of languages, beginning as early as August Wilhelm von Schlegel's 1815 condemnation of the philological irregularities in the Grimms' *Altdutsche Wälder*. Germanic linguists such as the German Jacob Grimm and the Dane Rasmus Christian Rask began to answer this call. This path arguably led to the advent of the Neogrammarian hypothesis at the University of Leipzig in the late 19th Century, which is associated with names such as Verner, Sievers, Braune, Behagel, Ostoff, Paul, Noreen, Brugmann, Delbrück and Leskien. Their theories have led to reconstructed historical forms, hypothesized underlying forms, and conspiracies of rules and constraints that suggest linguistic objects that never appear on the surface.

This conference wishes to open up avenues of investigation into the shadowy underworld of opacity: how has it been theorized and deployed within literature, linguistics, art, philosophy, history, and music – and how can we theorize it today? Potential topics may include, but are not limited to, the following areas of inquiry:

- Opaque regions in literature and film: Leerstelle, psychologically inaccessible characters, seemingly unmotivated actions
- Suturing of the camera/audience in film and the invisibility of the gaze
- Philosophy/Thing theory: Bill Brown, Luhmann's blind spot, Heidegger's art work – how are things made visible?
- Performance: interplay of text and staging, text and music, voice and music, possible disjunctions and counter-narratives
- Contrast of transparency and opacity in literature, i.e., in German Romantic texts from Tieck to Kleist
- Goethe: mirroring and mirroring of mirroring, Translation and *Weltliteratur* from the 18th century to Benjamin and beyond
- Syntax: Transformation/Movement (with and without traces); barriers to movement
- Second Language Acquisition: learnability problems; over/undergeneralization; positive & negative evidence
- Historical Linguistics: comparative method/reconstruction; limitations of manuscript/inscription evidence; gaps in the data and their implications; principles and models of historical change
- Phonology/Morphology: underlying representations; derivations; opacity phenomena (overapplication and underapplication); rules of (supposed) absolute neutralization

Deadline for Abstracts: November 15, 2010.

Please send a 1-2 page anonymous abstract, with a separate cover sheet indicating the author's name, affiliation, address, and e-mail address to: germconf@indiana.edu