

ANNUAL LECTURE 2021

October 26, 2021
18:00

Holy Doubts: Language Scepticism in German-Jewish Modernism

Vivian Liska (Universiteit Antwerpen)

German-Jewish thinkers played a central role in the linguistic turn that marked philosophical and literary innovations in the early twentieth century. In this period, a renewed attention to language coincided with an intensified awareness of its insufficiencies as a medium of communication, as a tool for apprehending reality, and as a path to truth. This lecture explores the Jewish dimension of language scepticism among German-Jewish thinkers and authors associated with "critical modernity," particularly Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, and Paul Celan. Tracing their respective approaches to language back to the Jewish textual tradition and forward to the contemporary reception of their thought, this lecture will demonstrate how their scepticism about language articulated the tension between continuity and rupture at the heart of their modernist interpretation of that tradition. Close readings of their often ambivalent and even heretical references to Jewish scriptures and motifs will reveal how these thinkers' doubts about language uphold fundamental premises of Judaism, such as the ineffability of God's name, the linguistic dimension of messianic longing, the power of lament, and the holiness of the word.

Vivian Liska is a professor of German literature and the director of the Institute of Jewish Studies at Universiteit Antwerpen, Belgium.

HYBRID: IN-PERSON/ZOOM

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