The concept of silence, whether it is examined in a linguistic or a literary context, has a tradition of being defined negatively, as the absence of speech or sound in general, as a breakdown of communication or a conversation coming to an end. When it comes to everyday life, being very quiet is often regarded as a sign of shyness, reservation and detachment. In literature, silence is often lurking between the lines or hiding behind punctuation marks, such as ellipses or the famous Kleistian “Gedankenstrich”, leaving a space to be filled.

However, a lot can be said when nothing is being said, and the goal of our conference is to treat the notion of silence as a presence rather than an absence. It quietly opens up a space for interpretation in literary works, speaks to us in the form of a work of art or through a performance and draws attention to gesture, mimicry and body language in the medium of film, as well as everyday communication. Moreover, it can gain a powerful presence in the form of prayer, meditation, or moments of silence to mourn, remember and honor those we have lost.

Where do we find pauses and breaks in literature and how do we fill them with our interpretations? How is silence both represented as well as representative in literary works? In which way do the performing and fine arts employ silence as a mode of expression? How do we express ourselves when we are not speaking? Which channels are activated in nonverbal and nonvocal communication? How is silence perceived and valued in different cultures, faiths and political and social systems?

Due to the nature of this conference topic, we encourage scholarship from all areas concerned with the phenomena of silence and speechlessness, such as German as well as other Modern Languages and Comparative Literature, Jewish Studies, Theological Studies, Philosophy, Psychology, Art History, Film Studies, Gender Studies, Linguistics, and History.

Topics could include but are not limited to:

- silences, breaks and pauses in literary texts
- gesture, body language and sign language
- silence as an expression of trauma
- use of interior monologues and free indirect speech in literary works
- visual connotations of silence in film and visual arts
- nonverbal and nonvocal communication
- silent protest vs. silent consent
- social conventions prescribing silence vs. those prescribing verbal and vocal communication
- written communication
- the role of miscommunication in modern society

Please send your 250-300 word abstracts to Veronika Jeltsch and Sascha Hosters at ru.german.grad.conference@gmail.com by January 8th, 2012. Include your text as an attachment and in the body of the e-mail. Please feel free to address any other questions to the e-mail address mentioned above.