

Call for Papers

Beyond Strength: Imaginaria of Weak Forces in Art, Literature, and Science

Conference of the DFG-Centre for Advanced Studies »Imaginaria of Force«
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Concepts of weakness (French: *faiblesse*, Italian: *debolezza*, Latin: *infirmetas*, etc.) are often associated with a pathological or degenerative condition—especially in post-pandemic times: a deficient state that deviates from the norm or ideal, evoking notions of asthenia, exhaustion, fatigue or enervation, vulnerability or fragility, inertia, softness or impressionability. In an artistic context, these terms can also conjure the withering of creative energies.

Conversely, references to weakness have always offered opportunities to reflect on subtle forces beyond dominance, control, or overwhelming power. This includes matters of intensity; considerations of the small and the miniscule; the potentiality inherent of what is deemed small or weak; as well as of the unfolding, (re)emergence or (re)invigoration of potency. Thus, weakness should not be understood merely as the opposite of strength, but as constituting its own forms of agency, which complicate any simple binary opposition of strong and weak.

The interdisciplinary conference **Beyond Strength: Imaginaria of Weak Forces in Art, Literature, and Science** takes this observation as a starting point to examine the connections and productive ambivalences of weak forces and their aesthetic articulations.

Historically, the decline or dissipation of forces was considered an axiom of natural philosophy until the seventeenth century. Forces responsible for movement, for instance, were believed to inevitably exhaust themselves, either due to a resistant medium or through their own expenditure. Leonardo da Vinci gives poetic form to this idea when, in his reflections on impetus and movement, he attributes to it a kind of suicidal longing for rest, ultimately for its own extinction. It was only with Galileo's concept of inertia—later developed by Newton and Descartes—that exhaustion and fatigue were gradually externalised, seen as the effect of extrinsic resistance rather than as an inherent property of force itself. At the same time, modern physics demonstrates through the weak interaction that weakness still manifests as an irreducible fundamental force alongside gravity, electromagnetism, and the strong interaction.

All this suggests that weakness and its conceptual derivatives can be understood both as a state and as a quality: as a counter-concept to strength and as a low intensity force occupying one end of an imagined scale of forces. This reframing directs our attention to conceptualisations that focus on particularly small-scale, minute, delicate, or subtle forces—both spatially and temporally. Seneca, for instance, speaks of ‘things that can develop enormous powers in secret,’ and of seeds which, ‘although small,’ realize their greatest strength and growth from the very smallest beginnings. Goethe’s reference to ‘imperceptible forces,’ Stifter’s fascination with the small effects of natural forces, and Benjamin’s idea of the ‘weak messianic power’ (‘Schwache Kraft des Messianischen’) all offer conceptual touchstones from which the notion of a latent power of weak forces can be further developed. These examples also raise the question of boundaries—where and how the line between strength and weakness is drawn and crossed. It is precisely their openness and indeterminacy that, contrary to their attributions, make weak forces a potent metaphor. In the European context, one might think of the ‘Achilles’ heel,’ which, following the mythological narrative, has become synonymous with a physical or systemic point of vulnerability—an idea that persists in popular culture, for example, Superman’s kryptonite.

A paradoxical revaluation of weakness—understood not simply as a mere deficit but rather as a prerequisite for a higher form of strength—can be found in Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians: ‘Power is made perfect in weakness’ and ‘when I am weak, then I am strong.’ Such a theology of weakness ultimately finds practical expression in the Christian ascetic tradition, where conscious physical weakening—through fasting or night vigils, for example—is elevated to a principle of spiritual empowerment. Henry of Seuse succinctly expresses this connection, describing the ‘vanishing of strength’ as a necessary prerequisite for his contact with God.

Plato’s *Ion* and the doctrine of *enthousiasmos* articulated therein provided a decisive and formative impetus for art. According to Plato, poets are able to inspire and move their audience not through their own power, but through a weakness that renders them receptive to divine enthusiasm (*theia dynamis*), thus enabling them to practise their art. In this way, weakness becomes a central—albeit ambivalent—criterion of creative work: exhaustion, *acedia* and (not always productive) phases of stagnation are constant companions of artistic genius. Dürer’s *Melancholia I* (1514) is considered an iconic representation of this ambivalence, as personified melancholy sits among the attributes of art and science without utilising their potential. In Romantic art theory, Novalis and Schelling no longer saw creative exhaustion merely as an obstacle, but as a necessary counterpoint to creative ecstasy, a prerequisite for reflection and imagination. In the aesthetics of Chinese brush painting as well, weakness is understood not as a deficit, but as a condition for strength (*qi/ki*): it enables movements that are based not on immediate assertion, but on finely tuned resonance.

In Nietzsche, finally, exhaustion becomes a symptom of an entire epoch, transforming the exhausted subject into a seismograph of cultural decline. In modernity, weakness and exhaustion mark the limits of the mythologised promise of progress, autonomy, productivity, and self-improvement and themselves increasingly become the subject of philosophical and cultural reflection. Counter-narratives to heroic modernity argue for an epistemology that understands provisionality and incompleteness not as deficiency, but as ethical and aesthetic quality.

The weak forces outlined here—which have only been explored to a limited extent in research to date—raise a number of questions we intend to address at the conference from diverse historical, disciplinary, and cultural perspectives, going beyond a simple binary of weakness and strength: What specific qualities characterise weak forces? What aesthetics do they bring to the forefront in their respective

fields of discourse and contexts? How are resistance, thresholds, and boundaries towards strength negotiated?

Contributions to the interdisciplinary conference may address these questions by exploring, among others, the following themes:

- (1) Paradoxes or inversions of weak forces that, by virtue of their scale, consistency, flexibility, or fragility, prove to be powerful. Examples include the proverbial drop of water that hollows out a stone and breaks chains, or elastic and brittle materials that, through changes in form, either resist external forces or, in their dissolving, lead to new compounds.
- (2) Aesthetic processes that manifest as deceleration or slowness, hesitation, indeterminacy, the unfinished and fleeting, as well as the ephemeral, withdrawal, seriality, and repetition—understood not as mere deviations from the productive ideal, but as independent aesthetic processes. These may be expressed, for example, in *non finito* or in literary or cinematic gaps.
- (3) Forms of aesthetic articulation of weak forces that contour the small, the quiet, the temporally and spatially extended, the distant, or the delicate, expressed figuratively in fading colours, shaky lines, fragile structures, minute details, or the provisional and sketch-like. In sound or language, such weak forces might be articulated through motifs of whispering, breathing, or trickling.

Papers may be submitted in German or English. A passive understanding of both languages is expected. Contributions offering non-European perspectives on weak forces and their aesthetic articulations are especially welcome. A publication of selected conference papers is planned in the series »Imaginarien der Kraft« (De Gruyter).

Please send your proposals with a **1–2-page abstract**, with the keyword ‘weak forces’ in the subject line, **by 30 September 2025** to: imaginarien.der.kraft@uni-hamburg.de

The cost of travel and accommodation will be covered by the organisers.

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