



INCLUSIONS, EXCLUSIONS AND ANGELIC
(IM)PERFECTION
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Der Himmel über Berlin – such was the title of that wonderfully poetic film by Wim Wenders featuring an angel who descends over Berlin and dreams of leaving behind his state of perfection and becoming a vulnerable human being. I'm not so sure why this story occurred to me right now while writing these lines in an attempt to recapture the experience of my one-year stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg.

The first association is of course the angel, for an angel was our constant companion this year, appearing on all of Wiko's official printed matter (its pictorial and historical origins were explored in the yearbook previous, with little to add here). Another factor was doubtless my intense feeling of being surrounded and protected by a number of real-life angels. For someone who has always been reluctant to join any kind of institution whatsoever, this was a unique experience. Always I found my occasional unease soothed by visible and invisible Wiko employees who molded our stay into what it was, namely an opportunity not

only to live in a great city but also to have at our disposal any and all means of pursuing our academic (and in my case also artistic) endeavors.

Hence I really meant what I said in the introduction to my Tuesday Colloquium: rarely have I been so spoiled as during my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg. I had a spacious office with all necessary gadgets and devices, tasty meals always ready on time (relieving me of odious kitchen duties for my child) and much more importantly, no written or audio-visual research material was unobtainable and no technical problem (such as unusual DVD formats or complicated multi-media Power-Point shows) left unsolved. Thus, the swiftness with which I could finish a study, an article or the preparation of a talk broke all my prior records. And every text I needed for the footnotes of my book project appeared with miraculous speed, allowing the book to be published in May.

Of course the Wiko-angel(s) could not shield me from everything, particularly from my own history, for instance the eternal “you speak German well but you don’t look German” (something however – and this is so special about Berlin – that seemed of greater concern to the academicians than to my neighbors in Schöneberg). Thus was I sometimes sadly reminded of that long history of mine, which made me turn my back on Germany in the mid-1990s after a national reunification that was accompanied by the torching of foreigners in Hoyerswerda and elsewhere as well as an omnipresent and never-ending debate on the so-called *Ausländerproblem* (foreigner problem). Even if only slightly familiar with the power of the discourse and its effects, it is not hard to imagine how the constant mass-mediated public concern and debate would burden a semi-*Ausländer* (genetically speaking) like myself and not only heighten my sense of alienation and exclusion but turn it into such a yoke that over the course of time it would eventually demand some sort of action – in my case emigration.

On the other hand, this period was one of the numerous times in my life when my interest in matters of cultural representation and the xenophobic process of Othering was revived. I started to investigate it in relation to the Middle East and in particular regarding the cinematic representation of religious minorities (to which the *Ausländer* part of my family belongs) and whose results, among others, were published in my new book on popular Egyptian cinema as well as in an earlier documentary. I did the same in the German context with an idea that had long plagued me and which again seemed to reflect the recurrent and evidently unavoidable politics of exclusion. Three years ago I investigated the issue of German colonialism and archeology in a documentary that retold the story of the crooked path taken by a famous ancient Egyptian artifact – the wooden head of Queen Teje – on

its way to the Berlin museums (allowing me to rediscover Berlin from a very specific angle), and afterward I began researching the biography of a North African actor, El-Hedi Ben Salem, who had the lead role in the prizewinning German film *Angst essen Seele auf* (*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, 1973) of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, whose film was one of the few works of the time to deal with local xenophobia, or *Ausländerfeindlichkeit*.

Having met the dark muscular North African in a Parisian gay bar, Fassbinder brought him to Germany and had a three-year love affair with him, which he ended in 1973, something that caused Ben Salem to lose control and attack innocent people with a knife. He was even said to have committed suicide in a French prison four years later. Interestingly, all publications (newspapers and Fassbinder biographies) as well as friends and colleagues of the filmmaker provided contradictory information regarding Ben Salem's nationality and origins (Turkish, Moroccan, Berber, etc.) and even his date of death (ranging from 1977 to 1982). Inspired by this fact and the dramatic fate of this man as well as the stark contrast it created with the "politically correct" content of the film he had starred in, I decided to shape this story into a documentary in which topics of homosexuality in North Africa, Western sex tourism, and the power of the gaze would play prominent roles.

The first institution I addressed was of course the Fassbinder Foundation in Berlin, where I was shocked to find an almost hostile response to my synopsis. They denied my project any assistance. With no explanation given for their disapproval, I could only speculate as to whether the reputation of a German star director or their monopoly on his portrayal was more important to them than finding out the truth about a dead and socially marginal figure. But being at Wiko now, I hoped my new address would facilitate matters. I asked the library for assistance but there are situations where even angels are helpless. The Foundation insisted on its standpoint and did not give away any information to the Wiko-employees. Eventually French prison archives responded (my Wiko aureola certainly had a positive effect here) and were at least able to communicate Ben Salem's basic dates (and the application for the complete files to be opened eventually granted these days); little surprise that they contradicted all that has hitherto been published and circulated on this person. For me this was a real breakthrough after many months in which I was on the verge of discarding the whole project. Now I was able finally to write a film treatment and send it off to interested producers, this doubtless owing to my stay at Wiko; and the support given me in particular by Gesine Bottomley and other library employees furnished me with the strength necessary to continue my long and seemingly futile efforts.

Yet to me Wiko itself – as well as the German intellectual scene around me, or at least that small segment of it which I had a chance to encounter – seemed marked by a tension between inclusion and exclusion. One aspect was the very limited number of women Fellows present this year as well as the small number of non-Western scholars; another was the image-science study group which displayed, I guess, a slight problem of orientation, maybe due to the fact that most of us were ignorant beforehand of its existence, or perhaps also because of the evidently great disparity between continental image science (or more precisely put, German *Bildwissenschaft* – a notion I have never encountered in Anglophone cultural studies, as English image science is rather used for advertising technical devices and inventions in the field) and the much more inclusive, because highly interdisciplinary, Anglophone media and film studies. Notwithstanding this gap, some challenging discussions took place. Photography proved to be a particularly fertile middle-ground that informed two or three very fruitful sessions. Thus, via my subsequent private debates with first of all Ulrich Keller, an absolute specialist in the field, and Lisa Parks, who enriched my vision with her ideas of orbital mappings and film morphology (their thus becoming two of my favorite intellectual angels that year) I moved on to some new aspects of cultural representation that I had actually scheduled for the coming winter; that is, with regard to a much neglected Egyptian photographer from the southern town of Luxor, researching the methodological and early twentieth-century historical context as well as I could along with the Ben-Salem project.

In my encounters with Fellows and German colleagues and audiences I was amazed at how little engagement there was with gender and post-colonial studies, two fields which have become like oxygen to current Anglophone cultural studies – just as has been the project to end the politics of difference and become as inclusive as possible. It was first in a discussion with students at the Rosa Luxemburg Center that I found any real trace of these ideas. They cited among others the Berlin historian Sebastian Conrad (whom I have still yet to meet) who in his *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus* (2002) translated and published pivotal post-colonial studies by scholars such as Stuart Hall and Timothy Mitchell – whom I had to read again myself for my investigation into the cultural modalities of looking and the history of the imperial gaze. I discovered that the young Conrad had been a “Baby-Fellow” at Wiko himself only a few years ago. How come so few of these past individual efforts have left any discernible trace at Wiko? On its intellectual life and daily intercourse? And how come I felt so lonely in this respect?

Is it because – as one probably malicious visitor suspected – Wiko has attained the air of a weary nineteenth-century classical scholarly institution that, despite all efforts to the contrary, tends to foster individual genius (which comes and goes) rather than any collective intellectual schools and challenging avant-gardist trends? It thus risks becoming a sort of neutral vessel, a safe haven of brilliant yet coincidental scholarly presence and exchange, to the extent that creative dissonance (lauded by composer Helmut Lachenmann in his colloquium as a sign of real art), productive dissent, irregularity and the breaking of the rules – or shall we just say imperfection and vulnerability? – is either excluded or kept nicely sheltered and guarded within the circle that hermetically seals the beautiful Wiko-angel.