



MORE THAN TWO CULTURES
MIRIAM HANSEN

Born and raised in Germany; studied English Literature, American Studies, and History at Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt (Dr. phil. 1975); taught American Literature at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität, Erlangen (1976–77); postdoctoral fellowship of the American Council for Learned Societies at Yale University (1977–79); taught Film and Literature at Yale (1979–82) and Rutgers University (1982–89); since 1989, Professor of English at the University of Chicago; founding chair of the Ph.D. and undergraduate program in Cinema and Media Studies. Publications include *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (1991, 1994); *Ezra Pounds frühe Poetik und Kulturkritik zwischen Aufklärung und Avantgarde* (1979); and, forthcoming from University of California Press, *The Other Frankfurt School: Kracauer, Benjamin, Adorno on Cinema, Mass Culture, and Modernity*. – Address: Department of Cinema and Media Studies, The University of Chicago, 5845 S. Ellis Avenue, Chicago, IL 60637, USA. E-Mail: mhansen@uchicago.edu

As an academic exile who has lived and taught in the United States for over three decades, I was occasionally asked whether my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg had felt like a “homecoming”. For some basic parameters of everyday experience – language, flora and fauna, food, especially bread – that was certainly the case. As far as the academic-intellectual context was concerned, it was *not* – and that was not such a bad thing. What makes Wiko unique is that it is, among other things, an extraterritorial, heterotopic space: a space apart from German academia, from Berlin universities and research institutions whose scholars and library holdings are nonetheless within reach, a space defined by the international and multidisciplinary profile of its community of Fellows.

But that heterotopic quality was not a given; it only developed in the course of the year. When we arrived, there were divisions and blind spots of various kinds – not just the infamous opposition between the sciences and the humanities that C. P. Snow once dubbed the “two cultures”. In terms of the disciplines represented, the legal scholars and political scientists in the transnational constitutions group did their best to diversify that opposition; in addition, historians of science, humanities scholars fascinated with neuro-science, and scientists with artistic penchants further chipped away at it. But there were also fault lines of another kind. There was the language problem: should German scholars deliver their talks in German at the risk of being only vaguely understood by non-German speakers even after the most intensive language course offered by Wiko, or should they forego the subtleties and sophistication of speaking in their native tongue to get their arguments across to the greater number, including Fellows from countries outside the Western European-US American sphere? These Fellows, while a diverse group among themselves, constituted a sizable minority, though they hopefully felt less like one by the end of the year; getting to know them and their work was part of what made Wiko an interesting and exciting place.

The other cultural fault line that I perceived as a productive challenge had to do with my work on cinema and theories of modernity and mass culture. To call this fault line a version of the high/popular culture split would probably be too strong. But it is one thing to love movies; it is another to accept commercial cinema as an object of serious scholarship. One site for engaging this disjunction – in pleasurable acts of viewing and casual conversation – was the year-long Fellows’ Film Series that I organized together with Alex Nagel.

The more challenging site was the Tuesday colloquium, not least with regard to my own contribution. The heterogeneous composition of the group forced me to overcome the considerable degree of specialization governing academic cinema studies and present a complex argument in a manner accessible to highly educated non-specialists. Through detailed analysis of a particular film, I wanted to suggest some of the more general issues at stake in considering cinema a vernacular form of modernism, which was one of the two projects I had been working on during my fellowship. The example in this case was *Artists and Models* (1955), a film directed by Frank Tashlin and starring Jerry Lewis. The question was what it means to say that a Hollywood film reflects on the problems and procedures of its own medium, and does so concurrently with Clement Greenberg’s famous theorization of modernism in the visual arts. If for Greenberg the artist’s practical examination of the medium entailed a quest for “purity” and a rejection of the blending of the arts (“Toward a

Newer Laokoon”), *Artists and Models* celebrates the inevitably impure and mixed nature of cinema as a medium and art form through, among other things, its systematic transposition of the principles of cartoon aesthetics into photographic, live-action film and the implied challenge to classical concepts of the cinematic body.

For the most part of my Wiko year, however, I was working on the final revision of a book manuscript on Kracauer, Benjamin, and Adorno that puts them in conversation on questions of cinema, mass culture, and modernity. Seven out of nine chapters are done and have been read by reviewers; chapter eight (on Adorno) is still troubling me, whereas chapter nine does not require more than editorial changes. For this project I benefited from discussions with the art historians, philosophers, literary scholars, and the composer at Wiko; I was also fortunate to resume conversations with film scholar Gertrud Koch at the Freie Universität as well as Albrecht Wellmer, professor emeritus of philosophy, who have been inspiring my work on Critical Theory and cinema for many years. In addition, thanks to the hospitality of Wiko, I was able to spend a week in January working with Michael Jennings (Princeton) on a joint introduction to Benjamin’s *One-Way Street*, which will be published as a spin-off volume by Harvard University Press.

Like my Co-Fellows, I enjoyed the various luxuries and opportunities Wiko had to offer: the incredible library service; the kitchen staff’s high spirits and their attentiveness to my dietary problems; performances by the Artemis and Amaryllis quartets (to say nothing of the amazing program put on for the staff/Fellows farewell party); excursions to Heiner Goebbels’s *Surrogate Cities* and Strauss’s *Elektra*; the presence of creative artists, writers, and temporary visitors like Willibald Sauerländer and Walter Levin; and last, and perhaps most important, the invigorating company of a strong group of women scholars.

To conclude, I want to return to the question of homecoming. The ambivalence that question revived in me is not unrelated to the physical location of Wiko. Grunewald is an idyllic neighborhood, bordering on the venerable forest that gave it its name. To get from here to there you have to pass through the long, narrow underpass of the S-Bahn. It would inspire dread even if you didn’t know its history – its having been the path to Track 17 from which Berlin Jews were deported to concentration and extermination camps in the East. The memorial along that track is moving by its very soberness: a seemingly endless series of plaques with the date, number of deported, and destination of each train. My grandparents left from Prague to Terezín and on to Auschwitz. That is another kind of homecoming to this complicated home that is Germany.