



A PARADISE OUTSIDE OF CALIFORNIA
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My half-year (January–July) fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg will undoubtedly go down as one of the most positive experiences in my life. Arriving from California in the middle of winter, I felt as though I had been transported to another world, away from busy freeways and screeching subways of the Bay Area, and most importantly, away from the bureaucratic administrivia of my home institution (UC Berkeley). Welcome to Wiko world! Besides the calm serenity of Grunewald and the beautiful surroundings, I was blown away by the staff who run and manage the Wiko. This is worthy of praise in its own right and should be the subject of a case study: how to manage and run such an organization, with staff who are motivated, understand the mission, and take pride in their work whether it be fixing bicycles or running seminars. If one day I run a research institute, I will model it after the Wiko.

I was part of the Scene Analysis group with Cindy Moss, Annemarie Surlykke, and Mike Lewicki. We gathered on a weekly basis to discuss and write a critical review article on the scene analysis problem, which is the problem of how the brain makes sense of incoming sensory information to form a unified representation of the surrounding environment. It is a work that is still in progress and which has kept us working together beyond our time at the Wiko. I shared an office and had the most frequent interaction with Mike Lewicki, and we spent the bulk of our time working together on a book on “computational perception”. The working environment of the Wissenschaftskolleg played a key role in getting us started on this project, as it provided the kind of atmosphere that allows one to step back and reflect and contemplate about the big picture. This is not a book that writes itself – indeed much of the science we seek to describe has not even been done yet (!) – and so it demanded long blocks of discussion devoted to strategizing and planning. The book project is still in progress; we will continue to develop it over the coming year.

I also enjoyed the interdisciplinary environment of the Wissenschaftskolleg. We were a group that got along well and learned from each other, and I felt, as those in every year undoubtedly do, that we were a special crew. Still though, I feel like there was a lost opportunity here for interchanging ideas and ways of thinking from different disciplines. I came in looking forward to the Tuesday seminars, as they presented a rare opportunity to learn about work in history, literature, and the arts that I am not normally exposed to. But I came away disappointed. I feel that more could and should have been done to push people out of their comfort zone, to get them to actually talk to one another. Letting a speaker drone on for an hour, followed by another hour of didactic questions that are lined up through a queuing system, is not the way to promote dialogue and challenge people to think differently. There needs to be more spontaneity and an impromptu, informal style to these seminars if one really wants to create a melting pot of the disciplines.

Besides academic life, I enjoyed running through the Grunewald on Saturdays with the Berlin Fronrunners, going to the Philharmonie often, taking visitors to the German History Museum, and having the opportunity to improve my German. I did not expect to enjoy Berlin that much as I am more the outdoors type, but I have to say that Berlin is truly a wonderful city and it is now one of the few places outside of California I would consider living.

Thanks to Wiko and all who make it possible for a wonderful experience!