



TWICE PRIVILEGED  
DAVID FREEDBERG

---

Born and brought up in Cape Town, David Freedberg took his BA in Classics at Yale and his D.Phil. in Art History in Oxford. He soon left to study with Michael Baxandall, Ernst Gombrich and Frances Yates at the Warburg Institute. After eleven years of teaching at the University of London, he moved to Columbia University in 1984. After his initial work on the censorship of books and pictures, he wrote about iconoclasm but also produced more conventional art history on Rubens and Bruegel. Always concerned with psychological responses to art and the relations between high and low images, he published *The Power of Images* in 1989. During the 1980s he discovered – first in Windsor Castle and then the Institut de France – a major cache of natural history drawings produced in the circle of Galileo and his earliest supporters. The fruits of this discovery were brought together in *The Eye of the Lynx: Galileo, his Friends, and the Beginnings of Modern Natural History* (2003). Since 1987 he has been advocating the relevance of the cognitive neurosciences for the understanding of the history of art. – Address: Director, The Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America, Columbia University, 1161 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, NY 10027, USA. E-mail: daf5@columbia.edu

It has become conventional for writers of these reports to comment on how their stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg changed their lives. Since I had the unusual privilege of being a guest of the Wissenschaftskolleg for portions of two separate academic years (2008–09 and 2009–10), it would not be a surprise if I reported that my life changed twice. Whether or not it did is too early to tell; but the effects, perhaps because of the very brevity and intensity of each immersion, were strong. In the first case I arrived in May, towards the

end of the Fellows' stay; in the second, I arrived in August, at its very beginning. In the first, the group was in its maturity; in the second, it was in formation. For the director of another institute for advanced study, the differences could not have been more instructive. The kind of solidarity that I saw in the 2008–09 group at the end was only a distant dream in the first months of the new group in autumn 2009–10. But in both cases what was most striking was the devotion of the entire staff of the Wissenschaftskolleg to creating a happy and cohesive group. Their tolerance of individual foibles was high and their patience greater than Job's. If there is any aspect of life at the Kolleg that merits first mention, it is precisely the generosity of spirit and action that was bestowed so unstintingly – and so constructively – on all its spoiled visitors.

I arrived sceptically. How could it not be a hothouse atmosphere? Of course the remains of the past, and the abundance of *Mahnmale* – that austere word for which no equivalent in English exists – soon put paid to such fears. You only had to walk to Gleis 17 to be invested with much deeper apprehensions, about yourself as much as about others. In fact, nothing at the Wissenschaftskolleg prepared one as much for learning as getting out of it – preferably on one's bike and into the city – before returning to the comforts and friendships of Wallotstraße and Koenigsallee. The greater lessons came from observing how both self and others negotiated the frequent transactions between personal and public memory that Berlin so insistently demands.

It is perhaps not surprising that I should have been so moved by ex-Rector Dieter Grimm's lecture, a few weeks after I arrived, on the development of the post-war German constitution and the significance of *Verfassungspatriotismus* in modern German society; or that the few conversations I had with him and Wolfgang Hoffmann-Riem on freedom of speech, freedom of artistic expression and freedom of assembly should have been the most critical moral moments of both my stays at the Wiko.

I came to work on what I hoped would be the last stages of my book on the relations between art and neuroscience, or rather, on the importance of understanding the neural substrate of emotional and motoric responses to visual images. Berlin, I realized, would be a good place to do so, partly because of the ways my old friend Horst Bredekamp had developed his own projects, closely related to my own, on *Bildwissenschaft* and *Bildakt* – two typically untranslatable German words, alas for the English-speaking art-historical world. But what I could not have imagined, in my wildest dreams, was the environment I would encounter when I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg in May. The warmth extended to someone who must, at so late a stage in the year, have seemed an interloper was ex-

traordinary. So was the intensity of discussion of themes with which I had long been grappling, inexpertly. My time was so short that I never got to talk enough to all the members of the focus group attempting to unite language production, reasoning and motor control. I myself was less interested in unification than in the specificities of motor response, but here was a well-formed group that could answer almost any question I posed them on the subject of the neuroscience of movement – or, better yet, offer typically succinct critiques of where I was misguided. Srinu Narayanan and Rafael Núñez were not slow to offer corrections, while the two vision experts, Bruno Olshausen and Michael Lewicki, were even more stupefied, I think, by my temerity in worrying about high-level perception without better understanding its lower level. It took two weeks after a rough and rather general presentation of my own work for Holk Cruse to come to me with a carefully prepared proposal for how I might improve my book. He will find out that I did not, in the end, adopt all his proposals, but the methodological thoughtfulness of that conversation made clear not just the abyss that still remains between science and the humanities in our time, but also unforgettably proposed a remedy: the clear statement of a hypothesis and a presentation of its falsification. Despite my education by Karl Popper's best friend, Ernst Gombrich, I decided, perhaps foolhardily, not to adopt the approach (because I could not). This particular exchange characterized the best of the *Wissenschaftskolleg*: frank criticism, tolerance of rejection, the gradual seeping in of ideas that may seem rebarbative or even unwelcome, and the slow awareness of their benefit. Sometimes the insights from conversation were sudden, the contributions brilliantly illuminating; but just as often it was the methodological grumbles of others that slowly revised the very concepts with which I thought.

And then there were the even more startling challenges. Luca Giuliani's preparation for our one long conversation (during my second stay) was just as carefully meditated as Holk Cruse's; and yet it did not seem so at the outset. He and I had earlier spoken about the interest we shared in the *Gemma Augustea*, I because of its importance for Rubens, he because of its iconography; but one day he asked whether we might talk about the neuroscience of visuomotor responses to sculpture (and in particular of issues of the felt imitation of movement that had arisen from my work on mirror neurons). He told me of his discoveries about the exact movement of the Discobolos in hurling the discus; but in doing so, asked me whether I was able to enact that action myself. I could not (because it seemed counterintuitive); he could. The same for the Doryphoros. It was an unforgettable exchange, not simply because of the vivid illustration it offered of the instructiveness of

freeing oneself from the usual discursive parameters, but also because of the way it suggested the rehabilitative possibilities not just of seeing an effective work of art, but also of imagining it. And more: for it opened, paradoxically enough, a further avenue of exploration of just what I had been working on: the activation of the motor cortex even in the absence of actual muscular possibility.

And so it was throughout my two stays at the Wiko: new material, irritating critiques, gentle revisions and, at the best of times, a rare patience in listening.

It would be hard, in Berlin, to remain entirely in one's Anglo-American shell. No one did more to extract me from this danger than Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus. Indeed, had it not been for him, my negotiation of that interaction between family history and German history – a familiar enough negotiation after all – would have been fruitless. For it was he who constantly made me review the elements of my own thought that so feebly reflected the work of the four figures who were the constant ghosts by my side throughout my second stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg: Lessing, Kleist, Novalis and, as always, Walter Benjamin. After I found an old copy of the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* in one of the many glorious bookshops of Berlin, it was Reinhart who helped me find in Lessing (or rather, via Lessing) a resolution of some of my own cruxes in the relations between movement and emotion. But it was in all of these writers that one could find, in addition to whatever is poetic in their work, the combination of the difficult with the productive, the succinct and unsaid, with the search to articulate the unsayable that in so many ways marked my time at the Wissenschaftskolleg.

We academics live for words and by words. Too often we forget the full possibilities of other forms of communication (even at the Wissenschaftskolleg, where by leaving before the year was out, I missed the best of the lessons to be derived from animal communication as set out by Vincent Janik, Klaus Zuberbühler and Harald Wolf). Even art historians remain slow to acknowledge the possible primacy of visual over linguistic communication. But of course there is another form too. As if to remind us of the power of music to convey some of the deepest things we feel and yet cannot say, the powers that be at the Wissenschaftskolleg invite musicians to live, play and practise amongst its fortunate Fellows. And so it was that after a reception at which words never emerged from their institutional casings that I became friends with Andrés Schiff and Yuuko Shiokawa, whose music I had only heard distantly as I crossed Wallotstraße to the library. Their friendship, renewed frequently since, has served not only to remind me of the warmth of Wiko, but also of the possibilities of human communication beyond the countries of language.