



TOPICS OF POSSIBILITY  
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In September 2010, I started my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg with the project to write a book about notions of possibility. Starting with the “sense of possibility”, an expression used by Robert Musil in his novel *The Man Without Qualities*, I had planned to trace the history of his very idea of possibility. In my view it was an idea that differed substantially from Aristotelian, teleological, but also from utopian, messianic, and eschatological notions of possibility – notions that dominated a broad range of other early twentieth-century discussions about possibility, especially in the works of Lukács and Bloch. Stations

on my plan to reconstruct the idea of a “sense of possibility” were to include texts by the medieval mystic and philosopher Meister Eckhart – an author Musil and other early 20th-century authors discussed with great interest and enthusiasm – as well as by Nicolaus Cusanus; reflections on the soul in the Pietist movement; theories of aesthetic experience in Baumgarten and Herder; and finally a range of authors who were discussing possibility in the context of Musil’s work, for example Lukács and Balázs. Indeed, I had planned to strongly focus on this project, to follow the outline I had prepared, and to lead my preliminary research of the last years to a conclusion.

Then came the stay at the Wiko, the conversations, the lunches, evenings, and events, and a joy of exploring that was rekindled by these very conversations. I discovered, to name just a few inspiring moments, that intersections of imagination and the evocation of possibility – in other words, a “sense of possibility” – played as strongly a role in the scientists’ work on the evolution of viruses as it did in the humanities and arts; that it played a role in the anthropologists’ analysis of new religious formations in Africa and South America; that the historical understanding of the art of figuration on ancient Greek vases implied questions of a similar kind; and that the very art of writing was concerned with the issues Musil’s texts raise for me.

In other words, many of the working days in my Wiko office with its large window front and its pleasant view of a range of trees turned into days of being sidetracked in thoughts and explorations that were entirely unexpected. I started to make use of the exquisite library services, to order a wide range of books, and – free from the workload of a regular academic year – I rediscovered the pleasures of reading, browsing, and just looking up stuff. Over the course of the year, notions of figure and figuration started to play an increasingly important role in my thoughts: figures and figuration as intellectual constructs that support scientific experiments and innovation; figures and figuration as religious practices; figures and figuration in ancient, medieval, and baroque rhetoric; and figures and figuration in aesthetic practices that are meant to stimulate senses, emotions, and cognition. Most importantly, I discovered that for Musil, the starting point of my explorations, but also for my entire project the cultural practice and art of figuration was the very key to the notion of a “sense of possibility”.

Thrown off the path I had meant to go, I discovered, better, I rediscovered Erich Auerbach, the concept of *figura* he outlined in an essay and his notions of realism and mimesis. Thus, Auerbach turned into an other, silent interlocutor who helped me to re-frame a project that now was starting to take shape in a different way. The historical

project – a history of a specific notion of possibility – increasingly turned into something new. Encouraged mainly by my conversations with anthropologists and historians of art, both within the Wiko and in the larger context of Berlin, the systematic focus became more prominent. Thus, I started to explore connections between figuration and possibility, ways in which figures are used to make possibilities emerge, and the deployment of figures in the context of religious and artistic practices. What I wrote about during these months focused on Auerbach's concept of *figure*; on Tertullian, one of Auerbach's main sources; on the use of rhetorical figures and images in prayer; on the use of such figures in the early modern pornography of Aretino, as well as in Bataille's return to Angela of Foligno; and on the meaning of figuration in Herder's understanding of aesthetic experience.

All this resonated with our daily Wiko conversations. Most importantly and surprisingly, however, these conversations started to matter in a different way. A way that I now understand as the Wiko way. We didn't have to refer explicitly to the projects and to the particular questions we were laboring on – although that happened as well, and it did so often in very productive fashion. The most intellectually animated and animating side, at least for me, was – maybe somewhat paradoxically – the silent conversations that accompanied all other conversations. The implied conversations that – in my perception as a matrix of possibilities – were keenly aware of each other's projects even when we talked about other things, about the revolution in Egypt, about Dominique Strauss-Kahn's arrest, about Roberto Bolaño whom I was discovering during these months, about Lachenmann's and Toshio's music, about German universities, about the children's play, or about the sound of a stone thrown on the frozen lake in front of Villa Walther. It is in these conversations that a community emerged, a community not only of the scholars but of all the many people who are part of the Wiko and that, for the while of a year, was truly unique and inspiring in its intellectual scope and humanity.