



DEEPLY IMPRESSED
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Having spent twenty-five years in Amsterdam, despite intensive contacts with family and friends I had more or less lost track of cultural and intellectual life in Germany. Berlin, a city I barely knew in its present state, as most of my earlier visits took place before 1990, proved to be a wonderful place to catch up on or, for my husband Jojada Verrips and our son Sybren, to get more familiar with Germany. My switch from Bremen to Amsterdam in 1985 was motivated by my wish to study in a more open intellectual environment, and now I was curious about the German academic field. I am much impressed by the buzz-

ing Berlin academic landscape, which I encountered by attending as well as giving lectures at universities and research institutions. My stay allowed me to reacquaint myself with academic life here, yielding plans for future collaborations and conversations. Having been immersed in Anglophone scholarship, in this year I read a lot of work published in German. Struck by the depth, scope, and creative imagination of many of the texts I read, especially in the field of *Bildwissenschaften*, I keep wondering why so few are being translated into English (the global academic lingua franca, whether you like it or not). Doing so, in my view, would contribute as importantly to “internationalizing” German academia as does bringing in foreign scholars as visiting fellows.

Before arriving, I found it difficult to imagine how it would be to take part in the “temporary community of learners” envisioned by the Wissenschaftskolleg. Reading the preparatory materials about the other Fellows, I noted how diverse our cohort was, regarding disciplines, cultural backgrounds, and academic settings. Buzzwords such as “internationalization”, “interdisciplinarity”, “networking”, “innovation”, or even “excellence” and “global competence” abound in our university settings, yet usually remain shallow terms. It takes more to bring a bunch of smart scholars from different cultural backgrounds, disciplinary expertise, and experience into meaningful conversations. During my stay I realized that what is needed is a true *vision* about scholarship and knowledge, devotion to the task set, practical know-how, and style. This is what the Wissenschaftskolleg provides in a well-orchestrated tour de force. Being plunged into a stimulating environment, our cohort of Fellows and partners developed a thick social texture. Next to the Tuesday and occasional Thursday colloquia, conferences, and evening seminars, I enjoyed the possibility to take part in more casual discussions during lunches and Thursday evening dinners. The monthly family dinners were also much appreciated by our son Sybren. Aged sixteen years, he was the oldest among fifteen children in the Villa Walther, who all got along well despite considerable differences in age.

Never before have I been part of – and in ongoing conversation with – such a diverse group of scholars, ranging from fellow anthropologists, the focus group on medicine in Africa, art historians and *Bildwissenschaftler*, philosophers, historians, scholars of law and literature, and even writers. What I found most rewarding was the possibility to approach colleagues whenever I needed to venture into other fields of expertise. While I regard it as one of the assets of cultural anthropology that it opens up towards virtually any aspect of culture, the flip side of this holistic orientation is a nagging awareness of one’s own limitations. Discussions with Petra Gehring, in particular, were most helpful to clarify philo-

sophical issues such as materiality, life and death, or aesthetics/aisthesis. Generously sharing his work (published and in progress) with me, Niklaus Largier opened up new perspectives on the question of religion and the senses, making me realize salient convergences between medieval mystics and contemporary Pentecostals in tuning the body so as to open up to the divine. Thanks to François Lissarrague, I detected similarities in the representational strategies through which classical Greek vases and contemporary Christian-oriented video-movies in Ghana (my book project, see below) mediate the invisible. With Albrecht Koschorke I had stimulating exchanges concerning media, religion, and the body, identifying themes that cut across the settings of our respective research. Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus, relentlessly championing the importance of the voice, stimulated me to question the visual bias that hampers much work in the study of pictures. I was excited to discover that Beatrice Gruendler, working on 9th-century Arabic manuscripts, employed a media perspective that resonated with mine. Barbara Piatti and Karl Schlögel sharpened my sense of the spatial dimension of both “fact” and “fiction”, which was important to my work on film and the city in Ghana. Anne van Aaken alerted me to the relevance of “law” to settings in contemporary privatized public arenas. Talking about fictional characters and “autofiction” with Claire Messud, Ilma Rakusa, and Elias Khoury made me realize the affinity between writing literature and my urge as an ethnographer to “thickly” describe (as Clifford Geertz put it) my interlocutors’ world of lived experience. Launching their magisterial book “Empires in World History”, Fred Cooper and Jane Burbank offered fresh ways for thinking about power and diversity outside the framework of the nation-state. With Steve Feierman, Sandra Barnes, Julie Livingston, Nancy Hunt, Herbert Muyinda, David Kyaddondo, and Bahru Zewde, I had ongoing talks about the art of survival in everyday life in Africa, interrogating critically our own approaches and modes of analysis.

One of the best things was the monthly Picture-image seminar, convened by art historian Christiane Kruse and myself, which served as a forum for all those working with, or interested in, pictures. With the competent guidance of Christiane, I ventured into the field of German *Bildwissenschaften*, noting so many points of contact between her ideas and mine, especially regarding the pictorial strategies of revelation and concealment enshrined in pictures. As I see it, the study of pictures – and more broadly aesthetics – is no longer confined to a particular discipline, but matters to a far broader scholarly field, including religious studies, anthropology, and social and political sciences. The point is to develop approaches that grasp how and why pictures are perceived as powerful, impress

themselves on beholders, and thus matter in the making and unmaking of the social. I could not have imagined a better way to broaden my approach into the study of (audio-) visual culture, which I had so far conducted from an anthropological angle. The seminar also was a breeding ground for additional initiatives, including a one-day seminar on *The Question of Global Art* (with former Fellows Hans Belting and Johannes Fabian as main speakers), a Thursday Colloquium with former Fellow W. J. T. Mitchell, and a seminar on art and politics in the GDR and India (with Sigrid Hofer and Maruška Svašek). In the future, Christiane and I, and other members of our group, will continue our collaboration by further exploring issues of simulation and deception, animation, and figuration.

I happily made use of the possibilities offered by the Wissenschaftskolleg to invite guests from outside. Particularly memorable was the visit of my colleague and friend Kodjo Senah (Department of Sociology, Ghana), who read and commented upon my upcoming manuscript with devotion and detail. I also was able to organize meetings with (junior) scholars in research projects that I co-directed in the Netherlands, including “Heritage Dynamics: Aesthetics of Persuasion and Politics of Authentication” and “Christian Imagery in Ghana and Brazil”. It was fine to witness how the serene and all the same arousing Wiko environment yielded special results. Also, I much appreciated several exchanges with my Wiko colleagues and Fellows in the Europe in the Middle East – the Middle East in Europe (EUME) Program – Elias Khoury, Kamran Ali, Georges Khalil, and Toufoul Abou-Goreih in particular, especially on the “Arab Spring”, that greatly enhanced my understanding. Both with regard to relations among the Fellows and partners, and guests from outside, a convivial atmosphere prevailed that I found inspiring and productive. The challenge I have set for myself for the time to come is to bring at least part of this spirit into normal academia.

My own writing flourished in this environment. Despite all possibilities of being distracted – many of which I succumbed to – I still devoted a lot of time to my project on religion and materiality in Africa (and beyond). Understanding religion as a practice of mediation between the levels of humans and the divine or transcendental, I place media – taken in a broad sense, as material, human-made forms – at the center of the study of religion. Opposing a view of the transcendental – or the “spiritual” – as being self-revealing, I take media as taking part in effecting the “beyond” towards which humans reach out, with which they seek to communicate, and which they strive to manipulate. Along with finishing a number of articles in progress and preparing some lectures for venues in Berlin and outside, I deployed this project in three directions. One, I worked on

my book on the interface of video, religion, and popular culture in Ghana, which is based on fifteen years of historical and ethnographic research. Though initially I had thought about putting together a number of revised pieces that had been published previously, I decided to write a new book more or less from scratch. The working title is “Your World is About to Change! Video, Spirits and the Popular Imagination in Ghana”. With five of the seven chapters and the introduction written, my book manuscript is near completion. Second, I laid last hand on contributions to an edited volume, titled “Things – Religion and the Question of Materiality” (fc 2012), and, together with my colleague Dick Houtman, wrote an extensive introduction. Identifying the legacy of Protestantism in approaches of religion that privilege meaning at the expense of things and bodies, we argue for “re-materializing” the study of religion by taking things, the body, and pictures as entry points. Third, I read extensively about the nexus of religion and pictures/images, dabbling in art history, media theory, anthropology, and religious studies. Based on these readings, I prepared a presentation for a conference on “Aura and Effect” at the Internationales Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften (IFK) in Vienna. Issues around the representation and presence of pictures, the logic of animation in which they function, and interfaces between religion and the political imagination will occupy me in the upcoming years. The inspiration I received from fellow Fellows to develop these issues is obvious.

In retrospect, my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg turned out to be liminal – betwixt and between – in a number of respects. Instead of being distracted and frustrated by administrative duties and devastating higher education policies, I had the time and ease of mind to concentrate on my academic work, doing what had attracted me to achieving a university position in the first place. I became part of a living (albeit temporary) community, learning new things and developing fresh ideas and plans. I relocated myself in the context of German scholarship in social-cultural sciences. I left my professorship in Cultural Anthropology at VU University for one in Religious Studies at Utrecht University. And I realized what really matters in academia: convivial sharing of time and space – the sine qua non for critical, constructive debate. As many anthropological works on liminal spaces have shown, one does not walk out the same as one stepped in. Moving here implied a clear break, but I hope that this does not hold for moving out. I sense that my stay here leaves a marked imprint on my work and personality – I am, literally, deeply impressed and grateful to the staff, Fellows, partners, and Berlin colleagues for making this possible.

THE WIKO: A WORLD APART

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Already a year or more before we left for Berlin to stay at the Wiko I worried a bit about what my role as a spouse of Fellow Birgit Meyer might be. When I thought about it, I saw myself sitting somewhere in an apartment trying to start with a small project I had been talking about for years, but never managed to engage in after my retirement in 2007 as a full professor of cultural anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. It concerned the writing of a concise history of the programmatic development of my discipline in the Netherlands on the basis of all the printed inaugural lectures presented by colleagues ever since the first official chair was established in 1877 at the University of Leiden. To realize my long-cherished plan, I put my whole collection of lectures in two boxes to bring them at the end of August 2010 with a lot of other belongings in a small van to Berlin. Alas, in vain, for the boxes remained untouched during our stay in one of the fine apartments in Villa Walther. Not that I forgot all about my project, but it was something else that kept me from implementing it.

Of course, the fascinating city of Berlin with its international population, thrilling bookshops, titillating flea markets, enchanting theatres, marvellous opera houses, magnificent museums, a surprising public transport system, diversity of neighbourhoods, parks, avenues, squares, cinemas and restaurants and last but not least impressive bike-friendliness played an important, though not the main role in a lasting postponement. No, I fell under the spell of what, week in week out, the Wiko had to offer in an intellectual sense, especially in the form of the (obligatory) presentations of the Fellows on a wide range of themes and topics and the often sharp but always enlightening discussions and debates they triggered.

Right after the first captivating lecture by archaeologist François Lissarrague on lascivious satyrs and pugnacious centaurs, mythical creatures that had intrigued me ever since I heard about them, I decided to yield to the longing it generated to immediately find out more about them instead of opening up my boxes and slowly working my way through a pile of inaugural lectures. This being carried away by a Fellow's lecture happened again and again.

Another example of an intellectually enchanting and stimulating event was the presentation on the meaning of masks and masquerades by art historian Christiane Kruse, in which she dealt with the tendency of certain painters to put people on wrong tracks. I will never forget how her talk set in motion an amateurish but feverish quest for the deciphering or decoding of some intriguing paintings she dealt with then and came up with somewhat later in the informal image workshop, such as the enigmatic self-portrait of Jan van Wijckersloot (1669) in the possession of the Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig.

A last example of a stirring and thought-provoking lecture was the one by economic historian Bruce Campbell on the question of what might have caused the cattle plague in the Middle Ages. He impressed me by his mastery of an exceptionally great array of quantitative data concerning a host of phenomena, such as death rates, climatic changes and differences in tree growth on different continents, to mention only a few, further by the original ways he combined these data and, last but not least, by his representation of striking and intriguing correlations in quite a few colourful graphs. Campbell's lecture brought home to me that there are number crunchers and number crunchers and that his daring way of using quantitative data was seminal, because it forces one to leave trodden paths and exploit new fields in order to develop refreshing perspectives on the riddles of old ones.

At the Wiko something happened I had been looking for in vain when I was still active as a cultural anthropologist at the University of Amsterdam, i.e. the systematic crossing of borders between disciplines nearby and far away. Oh yes, there were also presentations within the faculty of social sciences, as a matter of fact so many that one could spend all one's working time attending them, but they were almost never given by representatives of disciplines beyond the faculty. Moreover, the faculty staff inclined to be present only at lectures regarding its own turf. Of course, there were and still are several "good" reasons for this rather myopic and narrow-minded trend, but I have always regretted the fact that the gusto for getting rid of it at "my" university was so small.

Against this background it was a great relief to be the guest of the Wiko as a spouse, for it offered me the opportunity to get acquainted with an impressive series of scholarly language games and to be able to not only observe some striking differences but also great family resemblances between them. It struck me, for instance, how the law specialists systematically tried to express themselves in a crystal clear and therefore convincing language. Also striking was the (rather anthropomorphic) manner in which the biologists

spoke about the positive or negative evolution of the plants, water fleas, microorganisms etcetera they studied. In this respect I found it a bit of a pity that the balance between the number of representatives of the alpha and beta sciences in the Fellow cohort 2010/11 was rather uneven, for the former really outnumbered the latter. If one takes into consideration the presence of novelists, composers and an actor, this unevenness was all the more striking.

As a matter of fact, I would have liked it if there had been some more Fellows from the so-called hard sciences (provided they had an open mind), so that I would have had the chance to also familiarize myself with their discourses or language games and to learn more about their possible struggle to find (more) adequate and precise linguistic ways (e.g. specific metaphors) to express their scientific findings. I sometimes even dreamt of a meeting (e.g. in a workshop) of the evocative novelists Claire Messud, Elias Khoury and Ilma Rakusa and other artists with a couple of neuroscientists, a meeting devoted to the question how the former might inspire the latter in finding or designing and developing such linguistic ways. In this connection I deem it remarkable that the diversity of (scientific) discourses used by the Fellows in their lectures formed no serious point of discussion. However, along with the dominance of the alpha scientists among the Fellows, another reason for this rather salient phenomenon could be their inclination to adapt their talks to their “multidisciplinary” audience.

Anyway, in my view one of the really great merits of the Wiko is that this well-oiled institutional “machine” with all its fascinating facilities for both Fellows and spouses, its fabulous routines and traditions, its unique staff and splendid setting, that this “Dampfer”, as an ex-employee once called it, knows how to generate a climate in which this kind of refreshing rapprochement can crop up. I therefore hope that it will remain for decades to come an intellectual refugium for all kinds of scholars, writers, composers, actors and artists in which they not only get the outstanding opportunity to work on their projects far away from hectic and madding university regimes with messianic managers and aggressive administrators, but also to become familiar with other universes of discourse, for without looking beyond the classical, disciplinary boundaries one might fall prey to fossilization.

A really impressive example of the way the Wiko furthers communication among scholars of different backgrounds was the generous support it gave to an initiative of Fellow Petra Gehring, a really versatile philosopher, and myself to invite the German philosopher Kurt Röttgers for a mini-seminar on his fascinating book *Kants Kollege und*

seine ungeschriebene Schrift über die Zigeuner (1993), which I found on one of my book safaris in Berlin. It deals with the life and work of Christian Jakob Kraus, who was appointed Professor of Practical Philosophy in Königsberg in 1780 and who suffered almost constantly from writer's block, which was why he never became as famous as his colleague Kant, who, incidentally, greatly admired him. Salient here is that Kraus, who started as a fanatic fan of Kant's philosophy, increasingly became a sceptical empiricist or a man with what Röttgers calls a *nomadische* or *vagabundierende Vernunft* (the counterpart of a *reine Vernunft*). The mini-seminar, visited by a small number of Fellows, was devoted mainly to a fruitful discussion about the relevance of the kind of reason that helped me very much to write a short essay on so-called "new savages" in Western societies.

In this connection I have to succinctly mention the inciting German course I got from Eva von Kügelgen together with two other spouses, the historian Susan Pinkard and the philosopher Daniel Warren, for during this course we not only spoke about Röttgers' text as well as a host of other themes and topics, but also learned a lot to understand this kind of German texts much better.

I want to conclude this piece by mentioning a kind of discovery I made during my stay in Berlin. Due to my regular visiting of bookshops, as well as my contacts with both the German Fellows at the Wiko and German scholars outside this institution, I came to realize how my rather outspoken Anglo-Saxon orientation has prevented me from noticing the great amount of brilliant and solid scholarly work in the realm of the humanities and the social sciences that has been and still is produced in Germany. Since the English language is rapidly marching on within the academic world, I think that it would at least be worthwhile to translate more into this lingua franca, so that fewer parallel intellectual "inventions" of the same things at a later date might occur in the non-German-reading world.

Thanks Wiko, many thanks.