



FROM IMPERFECTION
TO Dr. STRANGELOVE:
THOUGHTS ABOUT A YEAR
AT THE WISSENSCHAFTSKOLLEG
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An experiment in the formation of a community – this is how various past Fellows have defined their experience of the Wiko. I would suggest transcending the singular in this formula: the year of 2012/13 was, for me, a set of on-going experiments in the creation of multiple communities, all subsumed under the larger, liberal Church of the Fellow Assembly as seen on Tuesday mornings or Thursday evenings.

This perspective established itself slowly but soundly from the outset. In the beginning was the C-Gruppe of the intensive language course. In late August/early September, when the Wiko was yet to be awakened from its summer slumbers and before being exposed to the magical dishes of Lena and her staff, the five of us met: Franco Moretti, Delphine Gardey, Atac and Özlem Imamoglu and me (to be joined over the last few days

by the charming Mike Squire and Chris Whitton). We immediately warmed to each other and embarked on lively (German!) discussions of literature, philosophy, quantum physics, prime numbers and the comparative merits of different academic systems, noting *en passant* that the Wiko was a second degree of academic alienation for us. We all work and teach outside our countries of origins, and Berlin was yet another way for us to experience the internationalisation of academia. This small community proved resilient: throughout the year I was fortunate enough to taste Özlem's legendary Hünkar Beğendi, smoke Delphine's eucalyptus mini-cigarettes – and beyond many discussions of Kleist, Benjamin, history, literature and classicism – to sample several of Franco's exquisite pasta dishes.

This communal experience quickly expanded into the full size of our annual class, with various parallel small communities in its midst: the thematic reading groups, partners for musical experiments in the city centre, Froma Zeitlin's innumerable lunch guests – and not least, the random yet invigorating meetings on the first floor of the Neubau, resulting in many fascinating conversations outside, on the threshold of and inside our offices.

These were not merely disruptions or interruptions, which – as Thorsten Wilhelmy warned us at the outset – are an integral part of such a collegiate institution. They were also an intellectual spur to rethink the outlines and framework of this year's project. My initial idea concerned a comparison between two discourses on imperfection in the Enlightenment, which had hitherto been examined in almost complete isolation from one another. Eighteenth-century authors were fascinated by several "imperfect" groups they placed in the grey zone between bestiality and humanity: feral children, deaf-mutes, so-called idiots and speaking apes. In the same period, the discourse on imperfect (or perfect) rights and duties enjoyed a substantial revival. My aim was to explore the links between these two domains, partly in order to question the biological turn in the humanities from a historical perspective and to ask whether eighteenth-century authors apotheosized "bare life" or "mere humanity". Yet throughout the year I realized this could be a launching pad for a wider examination of *idées reçues* on the Enlightenment, and especially of its manifestations in Germany. This has become the wider focus of my current project, for which I am indebted to invigorating conversations with guests from the Berlin academic community – as well as to insights garnered from many fellow Fellows: from Jonas Grethlein, who provided me with a classicist's take on historicism, to Bruce Kogut's economic view of progress. Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus's persistent enthusiasm, advice and good spirits were particularly significant for the finer tuning of my project.

Yet there was life beyond research and Grunewald. Indeed, the initial heading of this report was supposed to be “The Wissenschaftskolleg, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the 19th Century”. Dr. Strangelove, a somewhat deranged scientist and the protagonist of the eponymous 1964 film, might not be the most obvious figure with which to summarise a year at the Wiko. Having learned about the quirks and idiosyncrasies of forty-something scholars from around the world, I am still not certain whether anyone among us would qualify as the Dr. Strangelove of the class of 2012/13 (though some would be likelier candidates than others). However, the conversion experience described in the title of Stanley Kubrick’s film is a fitting description of my own year in Berlin beyond the academic work. I arrived at the Wiko as an enthusiast for all matters Baroque who tended to dislike most of what was produced between 1800 and 1900. Yet over the year I gradually opened myself to nineteenth-century aesthetics on various levels. Particularly helpful was a heavy dose of the wonderful productions in this Wagner-Jahr: from the new Parsifal at the Deutsche Oper, so vigorously discussed by Jonas Grethlein and Gustav Seibt, to a rare performance of Rienzi and – of course – Tannhäuser, following Daniel Boyarin’s interpretation of the opera as an ur-Zionist symbol. These were accompanied by many more concerts of nineteenth-century music, discussions of theatre and literature with Franco Moretti and José Burucúa and teaching myself the history of the Wiko’s villas as well as the neighbourhood surrounding them. All proved to be unexpected pleasures stimulated by the open-ended and open-minded atmosphere so typical of the Wiko.

This experience would not have been possible without the renowned generosity, kindness and effectiveness of the Wiko staff. Without them, we could not have created our different yet juxtaposed communities on the Wallotstraße and the Koenigsallee. At the end of the day, the audacious experiment of confining forty-something academics in Grunewald proved much more sociable and successful than it could have otherwise been. As a coda for these reminiscences, I cannot resist repeating Gustav Seibt’s point in the 2013 issue of *Köpfe und Ideen*, which originated in one of our many lively conversations: a unique form of earthly bliss would be a permanent fellowship in the permanent Wiko year of 2012/13.