



ON THE UNITIES OF PLACE, TIME,
AND ACTION
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In his treatise-poem *L'Art poétique*, Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux formulated the generic rules of Classical drama – the unities of place, time, and action – in concise form: “Qu'en un lieu, en un jour, un seul fait accompli / Tienne jusqu'à la fin le théâtre rempli.” These rules have long since become a standard object of critique, demonstrating the mechanical schematism, lifeless rationalism, and, simultaneously, ingenuous naivety of artistic cognition that seeks to grasp life's diversity by reducing it to strictly observed compositional principles. Yet take note of a historical irony: these same principles, which have long since been exhausted in theater, where they provoke only boredom in the spectator, in this same

spectator's daily life may become a coveted ideal – something available only during a brief vacation and for good money. Riven and decentered, mystified by capital and neurotized by its lack, the subject (as described by Freud and Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault and Althusser, Žižek and Butler...) seeks inner peace and stable identity in the disciplinary daily routine offered by seaside hotels; in the structural orderliness of medical and wellness treatments, as advertised by spas; in the soothing monotony of gardening in the yard of one's own country house.

These same unities – of place, time, and action – which have abandoned not only the theatrical stage, but the real world as well, have become an unattainable dream, a collective fantasy of equilibrium, an imaginary horizon that may be inscribed into reality only with great difficulty, in which the ecological topos of “sustainable development” has become an empty commonplace in the bureaucratic language of international organizations and the annual reports of global corporations, as well as a ritual attribute of applications for research funding. The unities are a dream, a fantasy, an imaginary horizon, in a word: a utopia, a place absent on the map of modernity.

Nevertheless, as it turns out, there does exist a *place* that unites *time* and *action* into a single whole. *Un lieu*: a small plot of land radiating along Wallotstraße and Koenigsallee, along which one finds several villas – their quantity precisely matches the number of fingers on one hand (communicating the readiness to perform an *action*, as encrypted in the geographical structure of *place*). *Un jour*: the 2021/2022 academic year has flown by as though it were a single day. *Un fait*: this, of course, is a bit more complex, but all the same let us define it as the opportunity to focus attention on one's own academic or artistic interests (a stroke of good fortune that lasts a year) that was presented to the several dozen lucky individuals who were given the *place* and the *time* to escape from their usual life routines. The unities of place, time, and action described above, which set the dramatic coordinates for the play in question, can be named with precision: *Das Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin*.

We are indebted to the Russian philosopher and cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) for his invention of the concept of “chronotope,” which he employed to describe the various amalgamations of space and time that allow each artistic genre to master, cognize, and depict the world. A chronotope, according to Bakhtin, is a “merging of spatial and temporal characteristics into a concrete and meaningful whole. Here, time is thickened, made dense, becomes artistically visible; space is intensified, pulled into the movement of time, of emplotment, of history... The characteristics of time are made evident in space, and space gains meaning and is measured in time.” The chronotope of *Das Wissenschaftskolleg*

combines the features of several genres: those of *Bildungsroman* and carnival, of adventure novel and the *Georgics*, of scientific treatise and circus act. Historically and typologically, these genres oppose, rather than complement or supplement one another. As a result, a portrait that combines these features would be more reminiscent of the grotesque portraits of Giuseppe Arcimboldo than the ceremonial ones of the Classical era. If one seeks the closest literary analogues of the chronotope under consideration, combining elements of mundane idyll and intellectual drama, the first thing that comes to mind is the cultural heteronomy of Castalia from Hermann Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel*; the measured everyday life of the Davos sanatorium, which establishes a rhythm for its inhabitants' ideological clashes, in Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg*; and the Abbaye de Thélème from François Rabelais' *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, the luxurious infrastructure of which (and allow me to remind the reader that in addition to bookstores and galleries with frescoes, that abode included a stadium, hippodrome, theater, swimming pool, baths, as well as a park full of animals, an orchard, and arenas for playing ball; as anyone who spent a year in *Das Wissenschaftskolleg* can confirm, all of these amenities are also present in our own Abbaye) made it possible to indulge not only in scholarly activity, but also in everything that allows a scholar to pronounce: *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*.

1. Place

Some say that the activities of social scientists and humanists are largely independent of the location in which they work and any opportunities it might present to them, since they have no special need for extensive and costly laboratories or large teams of colleagues focused on the resolution of common problems. Attachment to a specific place arises only at the stage of collection of empirical materials (for anthropologists, sociologists, and archaeologists – during field work; for historians and philologists – in an archive; for art historians – in a museum). The touring kit and needs of a humanist in the final stages of work are quite modest: a personal computer and a relatively decent library.

As a rule, a humanities scholar or social scientist works alone or in a small research group, so that the intensity of direct communication with colleagues tells us more about personal temperament than about levels of scientific productivity. Nevertheless, practices organizing academic life at university research centers and Institutes for Advanced Study demonstrate the productive potential of temporary communities that unite scholars from various disciplines and regions. The premise of interdisciplinarity and the internationalization of science, hardwired into their existence, lifts such institutions' structures far

above the contest of faculties or the boundaries dividing national university traditions. The *raison d'être* of such settings relates primarily to the academic exchange of research results and their discussion. Yet another important legitimating argument for such institutions is their provision of the opportunity to spend a semester or full year of sabbatical in comfort and with financial support. That's no small thing. But the *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin* is a different matter entirely.

Colleagues in this Kolleg are connected not only by shared scholarly exchange – a weekly colloquium – as is usually the case in institutions of this kind. The republic born within the walls of the institute combines the features of what Ferdinand Tönnies described as the distinct phenomena of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. The presence of the latter is of course to be expected in a scientific society: the professional and practical linkage of rational individuals in the exchange of knowledge and of social and symbolic capital, allowing them to derive mutual benefit from these exchanges and conversions. But the emergence of relationships typically characteristic of the former, it seems, renders the Berlin Kolleg unique: not *ein* Wissenschaftskolleg, but *das* Wissenschaftskolleg. Life together (in separate apartments, but under the same roof) and daily shared meals, which reach a peak of vitality on Thursday evenings, establish organic, familial relationships (partners' and spouses' equal participation in the life of Wiko, as well as the exuberant presence of children, bringing parents into closer relations, make it possible to speak of family not just as a metaphor, but as the actual model for life at Wiko). This is a *corporation* and a *company*, returning us to the etymological origins of these terms, the life of the whole body (*corpus*) and shared meals (literally, breaking bread together: *com pānis*). Emotional involvement, love, and friendship, as well as the mutual support of Fellows and the endlessly generous willingness of Wiko employees to help in resolving any and all challenges, bring about more than just a different approach to knowledge production. They establish a new standard for the organization of human community. If this combination – of organic community and highly functional institutional structure, of affect and rationality, of leisure and work, of a disinterested willingness to help and a generously supported annual budget, of poetry and accounting, of gastronomic art and the art of management – is possible for a community of scientists (individuals whose levels of vanity and selfishness, jealousy of the successes of others, and self-absorption are on average higher than in the human population in general), perhaps it might be possible on a larger and more socially significant scale.

2. Time

The specificity of temporality characteristic of the *topos* in question (*das Wissenschaftskolleg*) is mediated by the place where it takes shape. Linearity – inherent to the development of thought, text, human life, and history – here meets cyclical nature. The only possible place for such a meeting is the suburbs – the intermediate space at the frontier between first and second natures, between historical time and the seasons of the year. Yet also, the five villas (lat. *villa*: country house), whose placement organizes the daily pedestrian movements of Wiko's inhabitants, are close to the city center. So, the M19 bus line and line 7 of the S-Bahn take you from the lake district to the urban metropolis, from the hunting grounds of the Electors of Brandenburg to the capital of the 20th century, in some 15–20 minutes. It must be said that the architectural landscape of Grunewald itself is densely inscribed with traces of the last century's tragic history, as evidenced by the names of its past inhabitants – from Walter Benjamin to Walter Rathenau, who was killed ten steps from the M19 stop closest to Wiko; not to mention Gleis 17, leading from idyll to hell, from which the trains carrying Berlin Jews to the extermination camps departed (this memorial platform is now adjacent, to some degree imperceptibly, with the Bahnhof Berlin-Grunewald platforms from which you can depart – often even on schedule – to infamous Wannsee and Potsdam or, conversely, to the center of Berlin). Still, in the 21st century, Grunewald time is calculated not so much by historical periods as by the change of seasons, with a greater focus on flora and fauna than on politics and economics (except, of course, with regard to local real estate prices).

The paradoxical unity of time at Wiko lies at the crossroads of these two modes of temporality: city and suburb, history and nature, the uniqueness of events (lectures by Wiko Fellows, discussions, seminars, and round tables) and the almost natural regularity of their rhythm, overlaid by the therapeutic routine of the working day, broken into the time before lunch and the time after it (the successive progression of days of meat, fish, and fast, of days of smorgasbord and full service, deserves a separate discussion inspired from readings of Nikolai Gogol and contemplation of seventeenth-century Dutch still life).

As a result, the political economy of intellectual labor fits within a unique framework that does not coincide with any of the paradigms that have guided academic life over the last century. This is not the work of an industrial laborer, immersed in assembly line production. Neither is it the work of a neoliberal effective manager obsessed with demonstrating the growth of a KPI. Nor is it the work of a modern creative industries worker, engaged in hyper-exploitation of the self and of one's own time. One might say that the

mode of work one settles into over a year spent at Wiko should be compared to that of a farmer: measured, but not mechanical, distinguished by both consistency and variety, inscribed in natural cycles more than in any other. Wiko time is linear time of reading and writing, looped between the end of one summer and the middle of the next: a continuum between a moment when it is *still possible* to swim in the surrounding lakes and one when it is *already time* to do so.

3. Action

The unities of place and time are also determined by the specific nature of the unity of action that is characteristic of the flow of life at Wiko. One of the main features determining this third unity is the intermingled diffusion of various types of activity (from reading groups to choral singing), thanks to which work and leisure imperceptibly begin to interpenetrate, creating ever denser and more extensive zones of intersection. Whereas outside of Wiko, work in the office and time spent with family and friends are quite distinct from each other, the question remains open as to how one should describe the joint lunches and dinners that Fellows are expected to attend, just as surely as they are expected to participate in colloquia. The answer depends on position and perspective. On the one hand, the regular Tuesday Colloquium can be viewed as a form of intellectual leisure, diversifying one's own research routine. On the other hand, Thursday's inevitable arrival brings with it an equally inevitable Thursday evening dinner, which, in turn, may be seen as a form of intellectual labor, leading to a characteristic feeling of enervation the following morning. And how, in this light, is one to evaluate the parties that the Fellows themselves organize at the Villa Walther in connection with birthdays (their own and those of partners and children), on various holidays of their countries of origin, or (surprise!) in honor of a colleague following a Tuesday Colloquium presentation?

Thanks precisely to the communal nature of everyday life within the walls of Wiko, each researcher or artist gains a better sense of the boundaries and limitations of their own scholarly optics, of the work that each habitually associates with their own discipline, subject, theme, or project. No matter what stance one adopts toward this communal life – whose level is largely regulated by each particular communitarian (and which is, furthermore, a more organic experience for some, while others may resist it or even find it somewhat traumatizing) – this experience of togetherness turns out to be unforgettable and useful, both in an academic and in a simple human sense.

In conclusion, I will turn once more to the unities of place, time and action. My own research project focused on the intertwining of culture and politics in Putin's Russia: on how culture is reduced to practices of symbolic legitimization of current policies, while politics appeals predominantly to arguments of a cultural nature. This is to say, I focused on how Russian culture (whose borders extend far beyond the political borders of the Russian Federation) began to function in the framework of state cultural policy as a muted palliative for Russian empire, justifying the geopolitical ambitions of the Putin regime. One of my research goals was to demonstrate how, since 2014 (the year of the Russian annexation of Crimea), culture and the appeal to cultural identity had been transformed into a *casus belli*. The beginning of Russia's new phase of military aggression against Ukraine found me in Berlin. What had been a matter of metaphor ("wars of memory," "culture wars") acquired the monstrous reality of real war, becoming our own historical and biographical context. The research topic, transformed into the researcher's own conditions of existence, took on a determinative character for decisions about life. If it were not for the help and support from Wiko as a whole and all its employees individually, it would have been much infinitely more difficult to make these decisions.