Dear Mike,

Distinguished Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and an honour for me to address you on the occasion of a symposium whose topic “Transatlantic German Studies” (with an emphasis on “Personal Experiences”) is very close to my heart. I am particularly pleased to be back on campus and to enjoy once again the generous hospitality of Washington University as well as the lectures and discussions during the day. It was fascinating for me to listen to the clear-cut presentation of your arguments and the impressive sense of honour you demonstrated even when referring to critical moments in your careers. This is not very common in academic symposia at German universities. They usually seem to require that every sentence can be taken very seriously.

When I delivered my first lecture at a German university some thirty years ago, I was advised by an eminent professor: “If you want to be acknowledged as an up and coming intellectual, you should divide your speech into three parts. For the first part you must make sure that everyone in the room can fully understand what you are saying. The second part of your speech should address only the experts in your field, and the third part should be made so complicated that nobody in the audience can fully grasp what you are talking about.”

Well, I know that it would not be a good idea to follow this piece of advice on an occasion like this (nor did I follow it back then, and that may well be one of the reasons why I ended up in a position outside the university sector). Instead I will try to adhere to the advice a colleague of mine, John Cowan at New College Oxford, provided to his undergraduates with respect to their essays on modern German literature: “Always think about your three main points.” For the students it turned out to be a very helpful piece of advice, last but not least with respect to their ability to cope with the time constraints of usually one-hour examinations in various specialties. Many of them ultimately obtained first class degrees.
Given the time allotted to my banquet speech, I will also try to focus on three main points and – with the help of three titles of songs written by Bob Dylan – put them simply in historical order (past, present, future):

1) “Things Have Changed” – A few spotlights on my path into Germanistik and out of it.
2) “The Times They Are A-Changin” – Reflections on the role and function of the humanities in an increasingly globalized world.

1) “Things Have Changed” – A few spotlights on my path into Germanistik and out of it

Those of you who know the lyrics of “Things Have Changed” will remember the line: “Only a fool in here would think he’s got anything to prove”. (Bob Dylan: Lyrics, Leipzig 2008, p. 107.) I think this could even serve as a leitmotif for the whole meeting.

But when Mike Lützeler approached me with respect to tonight’s speech, also a poem by Wystan Hugh Auden immediately came to mind. It begins with the following four lines:

“What on earth does one say at a gaudy,
on such occasion as this,
  oh, what, since I may not be a bawdy,
    can I do except reminisce?”
(Wystan Hugh Auden, A Toast at Christ Church)

Although I do hope to extend my talk beyond more or less fond memories and recollections, I will indeed begin with a brief account of my CV.

Born as the oldest son into a family of farmers in the Western part of Lower Saxony, my parents expected me to one day take over the farm they inherited from my great uncle. There were some nice paintings and prints on the walls, but just like Gottfried Benn I can say: “In meinem Elternhaus hingen keine Gainsboroughs.” Throughout the 1950s there were always several servants around us. Had it not been for the teachers and librarians, who encouraged me to discover and explore the fascinating world of literature, all the way through from primary school to the grammer school at Meppen, I would probably not have made it to university (and still live peacefully in the Northwestern part of Germany?).
Just like today, when students of German, political science, and philosophy are asked “What is it good for?” or “What do you want to do with it?”¹, my choice of subjects met with a lot of skepticism, not only by my parents but also by others who expected me to either study theology and later on become a priest, or at least to study more useful things such as dentistry, engineering, or medicine. One of them even stated: “Gott segne Deine Studia. Aus Dir wird nichts. Halleluja. Amen.”

Perhaps, my own way into the study of these apparently useless subjects can best be characterized by a sentence of Ludwig Wittgenstein who once said: “Sometimes we do not know what we are looking for until we finally found it.” Right from the start I was fascinated by the incredibly rich knowledge base opened up to me at first at the University of Bremen, and as of 1974 in particular at the Philipps University of Marburg.

Some 25 years later, when I looked back at these first years of study for a contribution to a volume of essays titled “Grundlagen der Literaturwissenschaft. Exemplarische Texte” (published in 1999 by Böhlau Verlag), I wrote in my introduction to one of the paradigmatic texts demonstrating the virtues of “werkimmanente Interpretation”, Richard Alewyn’s famous essay “Eine Landschaft Eichendorffs”:

“Damals war die Krise der Germanistik bereits in zahlreichen Publikationen beschworen worden. Es war häufig von der Agonie einer bürgerlichen Wissenschaft die Rede; und eine sozialgeschichtliche, strukturalistische, psychoanalytische oder rezeptionsästhetische Erweiterung des methodischen Repertoires erschien dringend erforderlich, um einem bereits totgeglaubten Fach neues Leben einzuhauchen. Die Konzentration auf das jeweilige Werk, den einzelnen Text oder gar auf einige wenige Passagen war als unzulässige Verengung verpönt, verstellte sie doch den Blick auf das gesellschaftliche, soziale und politische Umfeld seiner Entstehung und auf die Bedingungen seiner Rezeption.” (p. 115)

Ever since then the word „crisis“ has been staying with not only German studies but with the humanities at large. I will come back to that in the second part of my talk. Just like at school, I owe a lot of thanks to individual professors such as Peter Bürger (at Bremen) and professors Heinz Schlaffer, Gert Mattenklott, and in particular Dieter Bänsch (who strongly encouraged me to do research on the literature produced during World War I, and then also became the supervisor of my doctoral thesis on the political prose literature of German Expressionism).

It was also Dieter Bänsch who introduced me to the world of the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach (whose current Director is a former fellow student of mine: Ulrich Raulff), and thus enabled me to uncover a lot of hitherto neglected material (poems, essays, stories, and

novels) produced during that period. In close connection with my research on Experiment prose literature I discovered that there were many more scholars at US universities working on related topics that at German or Austrian institutions. That is how I came across the works of Jost Hermand, Walter Hinderer, Peter Uwe Hohendahl, Sander Gilman, Eva Kolinsky, Egon Schwarz, and Walter Sokel, to name but a few. All of this also provided the basis for my first contract with a publishing house, more specifically with Metzler Verlag to produce a volume for “Sammlung Metzler” on the prose literature of German Expressionism (published in 1984; some of you may even have used it in class).

I prepared this book and a few articles like the ones on Anna Seghers, Gottfried Benn, and Wystan Hugh Auden during my time as a “Lektor” at the University of Oxford. The six colleges I worked for (Christ Church, Jesus College, Lady Margaret Hall, New College, Oriel College, and St. Edmund Hall) opened up a completely new world to me. In a booklet published by the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) in 2005 I referred to the transition from Marburg to Oxford as follows:


In the early 1980s many of my colleagues at Oxford were still specializing in medieval or early modern German literature. This offered me the opportunity to not only engage in language teaching but also offer several courses on 20th Century German literature, in particular on post-War German poetry and novels.

In the summer of 1984 I returned to Germany to work at the University of Bonn and to prepare a volume of stories on World War I for a series called “Deutsche Texte” edited by Gotthart Wunberg (University of Tübingen) which for various reasons did not work out in the
mid-1980s and finally got published with Wallstein Verlag in October 2013 (I am still very grateful to Mike Lützeler for his favourable review in “Der Tagesspiegel”, and to Egon Schwarz who attended my presentation of the book at the German Department in March 2014 for his strong interest in the subject matter).

Due to the huge expansion of the German university system in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was hardly any prospect of finding a permanent position at a German Department or Philosophical Faculty, at least not in the mid- to late 1980s. Therefore, I was quite pleased that almost in parallel to the fellowship at the University of Bonn I was offered a post at the headquarters of the German Wissenschaftsrat (an advisory body of the Federal and – at that time eleven – State governments).

At first I considered this an experiment in policy-making, and I kept on teaching seminars as well as publishing articles on German and British authors such as Theodor Fontane, Peter Härtling, and John Fowles as well as writing reviews for Frankfurter Rundschau. But in 1987, after having been offered a leadership position for research policy and international relations by the Secretary General of the Council, Peter Kreyenberg, I decided to focus on these areas of expertise and stay with the Council which also enabled me (with the help of a Fullbright fellowship) to spend two months visiting the United States in the autumn of 1988. On that occasion Mike Lützeler and I met here in St. Louis for the first time.

What I could not foresee in 1987 – 88 was, of course, that in November 1989 the Berlin Wall would fall, and I would enter into a process of conceptually anticipating the unification of two quite different higher education and research systems, and subsequently be in charge of managing the transition of more than 130 research institutes with some 34,000 employees from a centralized, largely Academy-focused system in the former GDR towards a federal system of higher education and research funding.

At the age of 38 this gave me an enormous visibility which subsequently led to several job offers in 1992 ranging from the Institute of Human Sciences in Vienna and the newly established Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Science to the Max Planck Society in Munich.

It was just 18 months after I had moved to Munich that I was approached with a view to the position of Secretary General of the VolkswagenStiftung in Hanover. Although I was by far the youngest candidate the search committee interviewed, I was lucky to be offered the job, and ever since then I have been staying with the Foundation (to which I will return later on).

2) “The Times They Are A-Changin” – Reflections on the role and function of the humanities in an increasingly globalized world
Today, not only in the United States the formative, humane and civilizing function of the humanities is seen as one of the most important reasons for providing opportunities to study them in depth at our universities. At the same time more and more doubts are being raised about the approach taken by the humanities themselves as well as threads articulated to which the humanities are being exposed in an environment that has rapidly changed over the past two decades. As far as I can gather from having looked at the literature as well as from having talked to colleagues from various universities across the United States, there seem to be rising concerns also in this country about the more or less universal trend to cut away the seemingly “useless subjects” in the humanities and the arts, and to shift resources from these domains to apparently more profitable subjects in science and engineering.

Martha C. Nussbaum in her book “Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities” clearly stresses this point: “Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize traditions, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements. The future of the world’s democracies hangs in the balance.” (Princeton University Press, 2010. P. 2)

Martha Nussbaum presents several examples of institutions and conferences around the world where in recent years the humanities, the arts, and critical thinking were left aside in favour of focusing on “profit-making strategies” (ibid., p. 3). She criticizes the predominant, all too narrow focus on economic growth, and argues in favor of developing a concept of global citizenship that involves a broadly based training in the humanities way beyond the usual facts and figures about foreign parts of the world. For her responsible citizenship requires among others: “The ability to assess historical evidence, to use and think critically about economic principles, to assess accounts of social justice, to speak a foreign language, to appreciate the complexities of the major world religions. The factual part alone could be to pervade without the skills and techniques we have come to associate with the humanities. But a catalogue of facts, without the ability to assess them, or to understand how a narrative is assembled from evidence is almost as bad as ignorance, since the pupil will not be able to distinguish ignorance stereotypes pervaded by politicians and cultural leaders from the truth or bogus claims from valid ones. World history and economic understanding, then, must be humanistic and critical if they are to be at all useful in forming intelligent citizens, and they must be taught alongside the study of religion and of philosophical theories of justice. Only then will they supply a useful foundation for the public debates that we must have if we are to cooperate in solving major human problems.” (ibid., p. 93 f.)
Cultivating critical thinking and imagination as well as training suitable “citizens of the world” do not seem to be objectives that are widely shared among the current university leadership on both sides of the Atlantic. In today’s market-driven, rankings-, and ratings-obsessed world of higher education even the status of university professors in the humanities appears to be threatened. Frank Donoghue in his book “The Last Professors. The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities” provides a wide array of facts, statistics, and other data underpinning his view that the growing corporate culture of higher education undermines some of the most fundamental values of the university, in particular by erasing one of its defining features: the tenured professor. According to Donoghue, fewer than 30 % of college and university teachers are tenured or on tenure track. Donoghue particularly criticizes the humanities themselves for making too many concessions to corporate values. He argues “that the market categories of productivity, efficiency, and competitive achievement, not intelligence or erudition, already drive professional advancement in the academic world, even in the humanities. Today’s professors have, in other words, internalized the very standards that have traditionally been used to attack them. The most crucial aspects of academic careers – surviving graduate school, finding an academic job in the humanities, and running in the publication race that now determines tenure decisions – have the effect of turning budding scholars into sales people.” (Fortune University Press, 2008, p. XVI)

If we turn for a moment to the German scene, we will have no difficulty in identifying similar criticisms and complaints. Just a few quotations may suffice to illustrate that humanities scholars feel heavily stressed and neglected by their university leadership as well as by politicians. They consider themselves totally underfunded, and they complain about being at a disadvantage when it comes to applying for large sums of money at the respective funding agencies. The quotations run as follows:

- “In many subject areas of the humanities one is already standing up against the wall. In some areas further cuts will immediately lead to their exitus.” (Hans-Joachim Gehrke: Erfolg auf wackeligen Beinen. Was die Geisteswissenschaften fördert – und was sie bedroht. In: Forschung, 1/2008, p. 3 – my translation)

- “The humanities suffer from an ideological curse expressed in 1959 by Charles Percy Snow, physicist, novelist and high-ranking British civil servant when he coined the phrase of the two cultures, the scientific and the humanistic (literary) culture. He rather did it in passing, in a kind of Sunday sermon with an enormous impact, in particular on the humanities. This impact may indeed not tell us a lot about the truthfulness of Snow’s concept but rather about the nervousness and the lack of self-esteem which has its firm grip on the humanities.” (Jürgen Mittelstraß:
• „Jacob is yearning for a research scholarship (or at least a sabbatical) that allows him to get rid of his work in the library which he very much dislikes” (p. 338), and “Wilhelm subsequently cultivates his disrespect for the students. Mediocrity is spreading everywhere.” (Steffen Martus: Die Brüder Grimm. Eine Biografie. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2013, p. 340f. – my translation)

The last quotations – from Steffen Martus’ book published in 2013 – refer to, as no doubt some of you will have recognized, the Brothers Grimm. This clearly shows us that complaining about students, their competence and commitment, as well as trying to get rid of one’s institutional duties is at least about 200 years old. The only more or less up-to-date quotation just read out to you is the first one from the eminent classics scholar and former president of the German Institute of Archaeology, Hans-Joachim Gehrke, and it was published in the Journal of the German Research Association in 2008. The comments on C. P. Snow and his impact on the humanities are by the quite well-known German philosopher Jürgen Mittelstraß, and they were written already in the 1980s, almost at the same time when the philosopher Odo Marquard in his famous speech at the annual meeting of the then still West-German Rectors Conference claimed that the humanities should be much more aware of their “unavoidability” (Unvermeidlichkeit) and in particular be prepared to compensate those effects of science and technology which he calls “the downside of modernity”, or even “damages done by modernization” (Modernitätsschäden). In a nutshell, Odo Marquard expressed his view in the following sentence: “The more modern the modern world becomes, the more unavoidable (or indispensable – W. K.) will be the humanities” (p. 98).

Whilst Marquard wanted to stimulate an intellectual debate about the historical preconditions of the complex presence and complicated future as well as the inter-, and often transdisciplinary approaches necessary to build bridges between the two cultures, many of his colleagues are still behaving according to the following motto: “I’m a philosopher, I have a problem for every solution.” Occasionally even a sense of arrogance prevails, just like the well-known scholar of romance literature Professor Ernst Robert Curtius who once refused to take an offer for a professorship by the quite famous Technical University of Aachen (Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule). He declined the offer with the following words: “At the RWTH I will be in danger of meeting perhaps one morning the professor for heating and air-conditioning, and he may even want to address me as his ‘dear colleague’.”

What all of this shows is that in the humanities the mood of the respective researchers is oscillating between on the one hand a lot of self-confidence, a certain degree of
complacency, and at times even arrogance whilst on the other hand feelings of neglect, disrespect, and even fears of unfriendly takeovers by other disciplines prevail. Under such circumstances the specific abilities and competences of the humanities get lost. It is about time to rethink and reconfigure the specific strengths, opportunities, and perspectives the humanities can bring to the table when we try to confront issues related to social, cultural, or technological change and the intricacies of globalization. The humanities will only succeed in this endeavor if they can build bridges across cultures and continents, last but not least based on the conviction that it is necessary to be aware of the others, of the past, and of the path dependencies of our present day lives if we want to responsibly shape the future.

Thinking and working in terms of complex and possibly time-consuming endeavors is not favored by the current framework conditions for resource-allocation, at least not in Germany and other Central European countries. We all too often pursue a “we don’t trust you, we know better, and we want results now” kind of approach which extinguishes small flames of creativity, and certainly prevents them from turning into strong fires of transformative research. No doubt, the implementation of evaluation processes and assessment exercises at regular intervals has brought about not only a wealth of information about the respective unit of analysis but also initiated a lot of learning processes as well as numerous improvements. For many a rector or president of a university the results of such state-, or country-wide comparisons have been serving as eye-openers concerning the qualitative positioning of the department or centre assessed. But if we look at the current situation of an almost ubiquitous array of monitorings, reviews, rankings, ratings, assessments, and evaluations, we cannot help but recognize that these various instruments in one way or another have fallen victim to their own success.

Let me illustrate at least some of the weaknesses of these kinds of efficiency-oriented approaches to the concept of a modern university by referring to a quite different domain with the following anecdote, in this case referring to an analysis of Schubert’s Unfinished Symphony and the performing orchestra. The analysis of the concert summarized in five points by a specialist for streamlining public administration reads as follows:

1. For large parts of the concert the oboists had nothing to do. Their part should be reduced, and their work is to be delegated to other members of the orchestra.

2. All of the 12 violinists played the same notes. This is an unnecessary duplication of effort. Therefore, this group should be drastically reduced. If it is really necessary to have a huge orchestral volume, electronic devices should be used to achieve the same effects.
3. It seems totally unnecessary that the horns were repeating the same notes which had just been played by the violinists.

4. If all repetitious elements were deleted, the concert could be reduced from about half an hour to four or five minutes.

5. Had Schubert been able to receive and follow this piece of advice, he surely would have been able to complete his (unfinished) symphony.”

(Translated and adapted from the newsletter “Rundblick”, No. 160, Hanover, 20 August 1996).

It takes a reliable, high trust mode of long-term funding for teaching and research in order to fully reap the fruits of scholarly explorations. Despite the many errors and failures that do occur in our universities, the answer cannot be to introduce ever more and ever tighter reporting, rating, and control mechanisms. To my mind we rather need a leap of faith based on high trust principles that allow us to thoroughly rethink common wisdom and to conduct research in unknown territories and off the beaten track areas. This particularly applies to the humanities and their contribution to dealing with the changes, challenges, and complexities of our multipolar world.

Indeed, the humanities can help to prevent us from taking an all too narrow perspective on issues such as digitization and globalization. They can also prevent us from considering these phenomena only in economic terms. Social and ethnic conflicts should not be overlooked. While on the one hand there is clearly a trend towards a worldwide acculturation and inter-linkages, we can, on the other hand, also observe a growing tendency to erect walls against other cultures, against anything that appears “alien” or “foreign”, an attitude which often turns into hatred and open hostility. If attitudes are to be developed which enable fruitful contacts with what is at first sight perceived as alien or foreign, and thus facilitate a better understanding of what seems to be strange or unfamiliar, intercultural encounters and the comprehensions they engender must be better understood. In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world the humanities have an important role to play. By opening up historical as well as cross-cultural perspectives they considerably enhance the reflexive capabilities of universities, research institutes, and the public at large. An impressive example of how this can be achieved by a bridge-building individual scholar has been presented by Mike Lützeler in many of his books and articles. It is most impressively summed up in one of his latest books “Transatlantische Germanistik. Kontakt, Transfer, Dialogik” (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013). If we continue on that path, maybe one day the following three lines of Bob Dynlan’s song become true:

“For the loser now
Will be later to win
For the times they are a-changin."

(Bob Dylan: Lyrics, ibid., p. 11.)

3) “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” – Some remarks on the way ahead for scholars, funders, and policy-makers

Instead of “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” and the first line “Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?” (Bob Dylan: Lyrics, ibid., p. 8.), I could just as well have referred to “Back to the future” (the title of a well-known movie). Let me illustrate this with a quotation: “Is it not a curious fact that in a world steeped in irrational hatreds which threaten civilization itself, men and women – old and young – detach themselves wholly or partly from the angry current of daily life to devote themselves to the cultivation of beauty, to the extension of knowledge, to the cure of disease, to the amelioration of suffering, just as though fanatics were not simultaneously engaged in spreading pain, ugliness, and suffering? The world has always been a sorry and confused sort of place – yet poets and artists and scientists have ignored the factors that would, if attended to, paralyze them. From a practical point of view, intellectual and spiritual life is, on the surface, a useless form of activity, in which men indulge because they procure for themselves greater satisfactions than are otherwise obtainable.” (Abraham Flexner: The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge. With a companion essay by Robbert Dijkgraaf. Princeton and Oxford 2017, p. 51) Although in several respects the first part of this statement could serve as a clear-cut diagnosis of the world we live in, it was in fact written some 80 years ago by Abraham Flexner, and first published in the Spring of 1939.

In his introductory essay for the new edition published this Spring by Princeton University Press, the present Director of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, Robbert Dijkgraaf, emphasizes that “the unobstructed pursuit of useless knowledge” may be even more important today than it was in the 1930s, in particular when our “current research climate, governed by imperfect ‘metrics’ and policies, obstructs this prudent approach. Driven by an ever-deepening lack of funding, against a background of economic uncertainty, global political turmoil, and ever-shortening time cycles, research criteria are becoming dangerously skewed toward conservative short-term goals that may address more immediate problems but miss out on the huge advances that human imagination can bring in the long term.” (ibid., p. 10)
Those of you who had a chance to take a look at my latest book “Die vermessene Universität. Ziel, Wunsch und Wirklichkeit“ (Vienna, 2017) will know that the issues raised by Abraham Flexner and Robbert Dijkgraaf are also of great concern to me. Due to the fact that the political discourse in almost all countries is dominated by the demand for more applied research, impact, and innovation, it is about time for us to raise our voice in favour of curiosity-driven research, and to fight for more public funding for the humanities and social sciences. Furthermore, it is worth every effort to convince politicians, policy-makers, university presidents and research funders that for the future well-being of our research systems we have to work our way towards a high trust culture of creativity.

Whilst providing the right framework conditions for the most creative minds is largely in the hands of academia itself, other developments on both sides of the Atlantic are not. But they nevertheless call for our attention, and they do require a strong commitment from all of us if we want to succeed in preventing them from dominating our common future. Let me finally just illustrate this concern of mine by referring to three points of departure into an uncertain future:

- Freedom of thought and freedom of expression are increasingly at risk around the world. The rising popularity of nationalist and populist groups indicates a loss of trust in the established political parties as well as in expert advice (cf. Michael Goff: “We have had enough of experts.”) Suspicion and feelings of alienation towards the elites in various domains of society are on the rise in the United States as well as in many European countries. Furthermore, in some parts of Europe democratically elected governments are about to turn into authoritarian regimes and – like in Hungary – are even threatening internationally minded institutions like the Central European University (on whose board I served for quite some time) with all kinds of measures that will probably prevent it from continuing its operations in Budapest. But it is not only the Hungarian case that makes me worry about the future of academic and artistic freedom. Those of you who over the past three weeks had a chance to look at some of the German newspapers will have noticed that at the Alice-Salomon-Hochschule in Berlin the representatives of the Students Union jointly with the members of the Senate request to eliminate a poem by Eugen Gomringer called “avenidas“ from the wall of the building at the Southern entrance of its campus. The poem is a very short one. It finishes with the following two lines:

“avenidas y flores y mujeres y un admirador.”
Apparently, the admirer of flowers and women has turned into a problem for some female activists. It should be mentioned that the whole poem was put on the wall after Gomringer had been awarded the “Poetik-Preis” of the same university in 2011. Now it is all of a sudden being viewed by some members of the university as a product of a patriarchic tradition which acknowledged women only as sexual objects. The whole affair tells us something about the repercussions of partisan demands for political correctness if not even the leaders of a university are prepared to stand up and take a stance against it (cf. the intellectual cowardness demonstrated in an interview by Uwe Bettig, Rector of Alice-Salomon-Hochschule, in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Number 200, 29 August 2017, p.9.)

- The quite frequent attacks on democratic and cosmopolitan values, the increasing trend towards a retrabilization of public discourse as well as an implosion of what we used to call “the public sphere” (which is more and more being replaced by echo chambers and populist networks of outrage) make it imperative for us to rethink (and subsequently reconfigure!) the role and function of the humanities in our universities and beyond. Instead of sitting on the sidelines and enjoying the pleasure of the margins, we must be prepared to get engaged in training globally concerned citizens and in shaping future publics by reinventing what we once called “Streitkultur” for our digital world.
- In times of “human upgrade” and “neuro-enhancement” medical devices are becoming parts of our body. Almost in parallel, the more recent developments in the area of artificial intelligence point towards a new world in which machines cannot only learn but also apply “digital intuition” to solving problems hitherto left to human beings. In the not too distant future computers and robots will not only reproduce works of art but even compose music, write novels, and shape sculptures. Some of you may consider this as “Zukunftsmusik”(or false expectations) but in one way or another we will have to launch a debate on scenarios of desirable futures beyond the quite frightening future of entering into what already has been called an era of “posthumanism”.

As head of a foundation I am always prepared to take an optimistic view and to stick to Friedrich Hölderlin’s belief: “Wo aber Gefahr ist, da wächst das Rettende auch.” Just like tonight when, I suppose, you are all glad to have been served such real and delicious food, and not a “digital data soup” or a “virtual dessert”, you will hopefully share my attitude towards the future by getting engaged in public debates as well as in actively shaping a society that is governed by democratically legitimized institutions and open to the world on both sides of the Atlantic. Perhaps, the envisaged “German-American Year” starting on 3
October 2018 can take us a few steps further in this direction. And I also very much hope for more substantial investments in collaborative research funding and exchange schemes from public agencies on both sides of the Atlantic, thus transgressing the limits of the fellowship programme for postdocs in the humanities generously supported for years by the Mellon Foundation, Washington University, and the Volkswagen Foundation.

At the beginning of my talk I mentioned the somewhat strange advice I got with respect to the composition of a lecture at a German university, i.e. to make things increasingly complex and complicated so that the third part cannot be understood by anyone in the audience. Some years later, I learned that there is a fourth piece of advice for those who want to be perceived as “Meisterdenker” or master thinkers (if the word exists in English) by the media as well: “In that case your speech should contain at least one sentence which even you yourself do not understand.” All I can offer in this respect is to suggest that we leave any attempts to produce such a sentence to another occasion.

I do wish us all an enjoyable evening. Thank you very much for your attention.