

# The Power of Vision and the Gift for Narration

BY CORNELIA KLINGER

To commemorate a departed person is not an easy task. Which phase or event of his life do we remember? Which feature of his personality, which aspect of what he has been or done, do we shed light on in commemoration? The better we have known him, the more difficult is this task because we recall so many moments and facets. As remembering necessarily implies forgetting this can only be a simplified picture.

Immediately before our eyes we see Krzysztof Michalski: the founder and Rector of the IWM, the public intellectual, the cosmopolitan, the European and the Polish patriot at the same time, the man of action, the ‘naturally’ talented and most effectual manager—sometimes more respected than loved—, the “man among people”, a witty and charming person, with a very special sense of humour, the smart and shrewd player in power games, impressively well-connected to celebrities all over the world.

All things considered, an active and ambitious man, a forceful and successful personality. This was the bright, publicly visible side of Krzysztof Michalski. The other side of his life was by no means invisible or dark, but it shone in a very different light. Let me recall him for a moment in his chosen profession, or rather, vocation: as philosopher and as teacher of philosophy.

“If you want to enter the realm of philosophy”, he taught his students, “you have to leave behind the certainties of common sense and everyday life, you have to un-know, to dis-acquaint the world and yourself in order to confront the absolute that is the unknown”. Let me try to elucidate this brusque advice to his students by quoting from his last book, *The Flame of Eternity*:<sup>1)</sup> “At every step—in the confrontation with the unknown, which demands courage, and in the pain of separating from what has been dear till now—this sense [of what I am, my identity, my self, CK] is created anew. Everything I know about myself, everything that is familiar and my own, is in each successive moment placed under a question mark”. (p. 51)

Paul Ricœur famously called Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche “the masters of suspicion”. *Avec toute proportion gardée* Krzysztof belonged to this intellectual tradition. He was less interested in finite answers than in the infinite questions behind them. He was engaged in an existential, immediately personal fashion in the ardent questions of time and eternity, life and death. Wielding the sharp weapon of logic, asserting “a reason that hurts”



Photo: IWM

he used philosophy as a way to deal with the conditions of contingency, or in his words: “the terrors of life”. He envisioned the wretchedness of existence as vividly as one of his favourite thinkers—Pascal—whom he quoted not only in his writings but during the months of his fatal illness: “The final act is bloody, however fine the rest of the play. In the end they throw some earth over our head and that is it forever.” (p. 44) Unlike Pascal, Krzysztof did not

take refuge to a merciful god nor did he trust in the stability and security promised by scientific rationality. Following Nietzsche he rejected the consolations (intoxication, narcotic, anesthetic) of religious faith as well as of secular knowledge. Following Nietzsche he boldly embraced the *singularity* and *plurality* of existence, of the world, of the self and also even of thought and concept. As a consequence, that is to say, as a radically modern thinker, he accepted the boundaries and limits of life as *the very conditions of its possibility and of freedom*. In this vein he could write: “Death is closer to me than any character trait [...] it is more mine than the person I love most or my most important task. Without [...] death there is no me. Death defines me: an irrepeatable individual, and not merely a particu-

lar case of something. It is only the prospect of death that makes the life I am living my own.” (p. 82) Considering the two sides in Krzysztof Michalski’s life and personality one might come to think that there was a split, a rift between them, that there were two diverging parts that could not have fitted together well. But no, this is not the case. There were no “zwei Seelen, ach, in meiner Brust”, no conflict of two souls within his chest. Both identi-

ties, that of the doer as well as that of the thinker followed from two capacities Krzysztof Michalski was endowed with to an extraordinary extent: *the power of vision and the gift for narration*. While Krzysztof the philosopher envisioned the sombre nightmares of the human condition, Michalski the man of action had the rare capacity to transform lucid dreams into reality. I can think of no better way to illustrate this latter ability than to recall the history of this amazing institution IWM: Soon after Klaus Nellen and I had met Krzysztof Michalski in 1980 he started to convince us to create an institution on the model of the Interuniversity Center in Dubrovnik (where we first met), that is to say, to establish a place where intellectuals and scholars from Eastern and Western Europe (and the rest of

the world, of course) could meet, discuss and work together. He did not only persuade two young philosophers from Germany of his dream to help overcome the division of Europe by the force of the mind but also countless others, individuals and institutions who soon concurred in the effort to found such an institution in Vienna. When some years after the foundation of the IWM in 1982 the iron curtain fell in 1989, this certainly did not happen as a result of the power of Krzysztof Michalski’s dreaming alone—and yet his, our initial dream had come true.

Well, the realization of one dream will never stop a true dreamer from dreaming. In the decades after 1989 we continued to realize dreams together. Basically we dreamt of two things: Firstly, to develop the IWM into an institute for advanced study where older and younger colleagues, outstanding scholars and newcomers could teach and learn on a face-to-face level without the constraints of big bureaucracy and hierarchy, where scholars could pursue their research sheltered from the pressures of the academic business, where people of radically converse opinions and controversial ideas could think and debate freely.

Even more important than just to provide a comfortable resort for a handful of lucky and privileged intellectuals, we continued to dream the original dream, namely to enlighten the heads and hearts of citizens and to make society a better place. In one way or another the various projects the Institute has initiated and carried out over the course of its existence serve this purpose. One important example is the long-term cooperation between Columbia University of New York, represented

by Ira Katznelson and Ken Prewitt, and the IWM. The conference on social solidarity<sup>2)</sup>, the eighth in a series that started in 2005 to focus on the pressing problems of inequality and poverty in today’s world, was the last conference Krzysztof Michalski had planned and worked for until a few days before his death.

I deeply deplore that Krzysztof’s death forestalls the continuation of his philosophical work. He had many plans for the future, as for example, to write on Hegel’s philosophy of religion or on Carl Schmitt’s concept of religion. And though I am sure that Krzysztof the thinker and Michalski the doer were in harmony as one and the same person, I have to admit: there was a constant struggle going on between the two for the just share of his scarce time. For so many years Krzysztof’s philosophical ideas had to stand behind Michalski’s indefatigable activities to develop the IWM. His hopes (and mine) to adjust this imbalance in the long years of a quiet old age have been thwarted.

While nobody can replace Krzysztof the thinker to complete his projects, we are well prepared to carry on the other part of his lifework. Three decades ago a beautiful dreamer together with a few young companions won sufficient support to establish and—what is more—learnt to run an institute for advanced study earning international renown over time. This is, as far as I know, an unparalleled story. We handled our enterprise in the spirit of independence and intellectual freedom, blending academic rigor with entrepreneurship, adding a pinch of audacity and nonchalance. Of course, like life itself the existence of this institution has never been safe in the past and it cannot be expected that it will ever become secure in the time ahead. And yet, the dream has materialized and found its unique stature. We will use the force of vision and the power of narration that we had the chance to learn from Krzysztof Michalski to convince as many people and institutions as possible to join us in the effort to give IWM a future. ◀

1) *Krzysztof Michalski: The Flame of Eternity: An Interpretation of Nietzsche’s Thought*, Princeton University Press, 2012

2) *Conference: On Solidarity VIII: Inequality and Social Solidarity*, April 5–7, 2013

**Cornelia Klinger** is Professor of Philosophy at Tübingen University and IWM Permanent Fellow. In May 2013 she was appointed the Institute’s Acting Rector, together with Michael Sandel, Professor of Government at Harvard University and member of the IWM Academic Advisory Board. This text is based on the introductory speech given by Cornelia Klinger at the Commemoration Ceremony for Krzysztof Michalski on April 5, 2013.