

In Memoriam David Bathrick

David Bathrick was born in New York City in 1936 and grew up in Darien, Connecticut, town of *Gentleman's Agreement* fame. He went to Dartmouth, became the Big Green football team's star linebacker, and joined the Marine Reserves. Since early childhood he had also developed a lifelong fascination with boxing, which years later led to his politically incisive commentary in the 2004 PBS documentary *The Fight*, about the two 1930s heavyweight matches between Joe Louis and Max Schmeling. All of it reflected part of David's personality and his prodigious ways of storytelling but was hardly predictive of his professional trajectory as a professor of modern German culture.

His interest in all matters German had been piqued during an American Field Service–sponsored summer high school exchange in Berlin in 1954. Between his sophomore and junior years in college, he took a year off to study history in Berlin and in Munich. This was before the wall, and he often spoke about his experiences in the divided city, going back and forth between East and West and absorbing history and politics on the go in one of the hot spots of the Cold War. No doubt, it was this experience that led to his interest in Marxism and graduate studies in German at the University of Chicago. He was married young to Serafina Kent, daughter of the architect of CIA intelligence; she later became professor of film studies at Hunter College. In the early sixties, as they had three sons in quick succession, David became involved in radical politics in the context of the civil rights struggles, the Black Power movement, and the anti–Vietnam War protests. When he was awarded a Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) dissertation fellowship in 1967–68, he relocated the whole family to Berlin, Lichterfelde West, crossing the wall every day to do his dissertation research in the Brecht Archive and working as a *Regiehospitant* on rehearsals for Brecht's play *The*

Mother at the Berliner Ensemble. This link of research to theatrical practice later became key to his work at Cornell University in both theater arts and German studies.

David's choice of Brecht was no coincidence, not only for political reasons but also because of an elective affinity to Brecht's love of sports, his combative personality, his deep sense of irony, and his determination to tackle all forms of idealism and affirmative culture. His dissertation, published under the title *The Dialectic and the Early Brecht*, still stands as one of the very best—and indeed most dialectical—readings of the early Brecht play *Drums in the Night*, engaging with political savvy and deep existential understanding the fate of its protagonist, a disillusioned war veteran and (non)participant in the 1918 German revolution.¹

Nineteen sixty-seven was also a key year for the German protest movement, and David was engaged with the West German Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund and helped organize American GIs in Berlin to protest the Vietnam War, if not to desert. As spokesman for an organization of American citizens living in West Berlin and speaking out against the war in Vietnam, he earned himself an FBI file, just as his later International Research and Exchanges Board visiting research professorship at Humboldt University in 1982–83 got him a Stasi file and the code name Diabolo. The Stasi, citing his *Ledernacken* (Marine Corps) training and describing him as a *Lebemensch*, had him (and *NGC*) pegged as part of the New Left and thus anticommunist, whereas for the FBI his activities were anti-American. You just could never pigeonhole the man.

David received his PhD in 1970 and his first job in Germanistik at the University of Wisconsin–Madison later that same year. Madison was one of the hotbeds of the New Left, and he fit right in with a fast-evolving conflictual political scene.² *NGC* was founded in 1973 after David had serendipitously connected with Jack Zipes, another cofounder and recent arrival at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, who in his undergraduate days had written articles for the Dartmouth student paper about David's exploits with the Big Green. In Madison, David had already befriended Anson Rabinbach, a student of George Mosse and a PhD candidate in history, who would write on Ernst Bloch and theories of fascism in the early issues of the journal. Jack Zipes in turn had recruited his Milwaukee faculty colleague Andreas Huyssen to join the journal. David's first major contribution to *NGC* was an article about Brecht

1. Bathrick, *The Dialectic and the Early Brecht*.

2. See Huyssen and Rabinbach, "New German Critique: The First Decade."

in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). It was published in the second issue of the journal, which was dedicated to the GDR and contained an extensive annotated bibliography of pertinent scholarship East and West.³ It was published about the time that Peter Uwe Hohendahl and Patricia Herminghouse had organized the first, controversial US conference on GDR literature at Washington University in the spring of 1974, shortly after both the GDR and the Federal Republic of Germany were accepted as full members of the United Nations. David spoke at that conference, and the *NGC* article he wrote still bears rereading today.

“The Dialectics of Legitimation: Brecht in the GDR” pointed to the fundamental problem of the role of a revolutionary artist in the context of an established socialist society that required historical legitimation from its authors. Sidestepping the typical struggles over the political meaning of Brecht between the official line in the GDR and various New Left interpretations in the West, David emphasized equivocation, contradiction, ambivalence, and intentional obfuscation instead. As in his later work on GDR culture, David dealt not with abstract theoretical or philosophical bodies of thought (Lenin vs. Korsch vs. Lukács) but with artistic practices, the legacies of avant-garde aesthetics, and what he later called “the powers of speech.” Brecht in the post-war GDR embodied all the conflicts, temptations, and compromises that GDR intellectuals and writers were confronted with in their genuine commitment to antifascism and hope for an alternative to capitalism. This was the beginning of David’s major work on writers, dissidents, and other public figures in the GDR, which resulted in his seminal study *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR*, published six years after the fall of the wall.⁴ This scholarly work was nurtured by close friendships and nightlong debates with Frank and Therese Hörnigk and other critical intellectuals in East Berlin.

With *NGC*’s focus on Frankfurt School critical theory in the wake of Western Marxism, on GDR literature, on German-Jewish relations, and on theories of fascism, feminism, cinema, and Holocaust memory, the arrival of the journal was a game changer for the field of German studies in the United States, and David was always a major player in it. Early issues of *NGC* dealt with the playwright Heiner Müller, a close friend of David, and the poet Wolf Biermann, whose expulsion from the GDR joined the topic of repressive *Berufsverbote* in West Germany in the wake of Baader-Meinhof terrorism.

3. Bathrick, “Dialectics of Legitimation.”

4. Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech*.

Biermann in particular raised the issue of subjectivity and poetic dissidence for us and with it the radicalizing function of culture. At the same time, David's work moved increasingly toward mass culture and cinema. He wrote significant articles on Béla Balázs and G. W. Pabst, radio culture and Nazi cinema, aesthetic resistance in the film of the Third Reich, and cinematic representations of the Holocaust. Ever one to think outside the box, David produced work saturated with his deep knowledge of the culture of the Weimar Republic and its unique designs for living, which generated his essays on avant-garde writers like Franz Jung, on Schmeling, and on German Americanism. In close cooperation with the late Miriam Hansen and somewhat later with Eric Rentschler, he shepherded several issues on film at a time when most film discussions in the United States focused on the apparatus theory championed by the British film journal *Screen*. *NGC* instead viewed film in the context of a more broadly conceived cultural and political history, rejecting the 1980s slogan "History is dead," popular in some poststructuralist circles at the time.

In all those early years David was the key voice in the journal's Milwaukee and Madison collectives, consisting of graduate students of German, faculty, local leftists, and hangers-on. Editing *NGC* with David as an unflappable guide and inspiration was always an adventure leading to new insights. His roaring laughter and good spirits in crises are legend. The annual Wisconsin Workshop in Madison, several memorable conferences in Milwaukee, and the journal itself gave members of the collectives opportunities to present their work. At editorial meetings David kept discussions from becoming amorphous or sectarian, steering us through political minefields and theoretical conundrums, always focusing on the tasks at hand. He was the master of the agenda in meetings that took place either in Milwaukee or in Madison or sometimes on "the farm," David and Fina's country place in Avoca, about fifty miles west of Madison. The spirit of the times was communal and collective, but David, so physically imposing and vibrant, was the undisputed teacher. He embodied the life of the journal.

Nineteen eighty-six was the year when Wisconsin stopped being the journal's home base and was replaced by New York. After seventeen years of teaching at Madison, David hit his stride during the twenty years he taught at Cornell in the Department of German Studies and the Department of Theatre, Film and Dance, where he was Jacob Gould Schurman Professor of Theatre, Film and Dance. He chaired both departments at various times. Under his leadership the theater program grew significantly and reached a professional level. Always a thespian, on stage or off, he once even played Willy Loman's only

friend in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. He received the prestigious DAAD/German Studies Association Book Prize for *The Powers of Speech*, and he offered several DAAD/National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminars for college teachers devoted to German film studies, which had a strong impact on the rising careers of young scholars. Divorced in 1980, he remarried in 1997 and led a commuting marriage with Ulrike Liebert, a German political scientist from the University of Bremen. It is hard to say when he retired from Cornell, because after his emeritus party there he continued for years to digitize and create the Cornell archive of Alexander Kluge's TV interviews, a treasure for researchers in the intellectual life of Germany. An indefatigable cinephile, David attended the Berlinale every year and took pleasure in watching four or five features every day. In Berlin and Bremen, David created a lively group of friends and colleagues, all of whom joined with his two families and with friends from America at his eightieth birthday, celebrated in Bremen in 2016. The last time we saw him in the United States was in 2017 when, despite his frailty, he came to New York for fellow editor Andreas Huyssen's retirement party and to Wisconsin for a large family gathering. His decline was slow but steady, peaceful in the end.

Students at Wisconsin, Cornell, and elsewhere, many of them now active in the fields he helped shape, recall his generosity and his wit. He was a remarkably gifted teacher, adviser, and mentor who inspired countless students, both doctoral and undergraduate, to explore new avenues of research into East German history and culture, film history, and Holocaust studies. Discussions with him always seemed to turn into master classes in how to think. His students also remember him as an extraordinary raconteur whose encounters with protest movements and the secret police provided them with insights that went well beyond the written page. As one of his colleagues at Cornell put it in a tribute, the trouble with David is that he did a much better job of telling his own stories than anyone else ever could. And he did have many of them.

David embodied a form of critical thought that was passionate about its objects, exploring their contradictions and complexities. He had an acute sensitivity to the cognitive as well as the affective dimensions of literary and theoretical texts, films, and historical constellations of culture and politics. Generosity toward other modes of thought and impatience with narrow moralizing, ideological closure, and the mind-set of victimization and *ressentiment* were hallmarks of his being. As Biddy Martin, one of his students and a member of the journal's Madison collective in the 1970s, wrote in the special issue dedicated to him on his seventieth birthday:

Bathrick observes, probes, pierces, teases, taunts, laughs, and gazes with a cutting edge and an extraordinary tenderness. He delights with his capacity for amazement and with his irreverence. Nothing is automatically sacred, but his humor, while aggressive against closure, complacency, and piety, also reveals his profound humanity, his love of quirkiness, his embrace of absurdity, and his appreciation of our various limitations.⁵

This memory image of David speaks to the power of his personality, his disregard for institutional hierarchies, his deep human understanding, and his inimitably grounded realism of perception and judgment that was as pragmatic as it was utopian.

David Bathrick was the soul of *NGC*. His memory will always be with us.

The Editors

One special experience of my time with David was the opportunity to share the stage with him: he played Charley and I played Ben in a production of *Death of a Salesman* at Cornell. His performance was emotionally rich and powerful—I'll never forget his rendition of the "Nobody dast blame this man" speech at Willy's funeral.

—Roger Bechtel

David was dramatic and fun-loving, very kind and very humorous. He was passionate about everything. We disagreed a lot, which was part of the pleasure of knowing him. He taught a whole generation, including mine, about German culture during the East-West division. He was a significant part of what made Cornell's program in German studies with its journal, *New German Critique*, the best in the country and perhaps the world.

—Susan Buck-Morss

As he may for many, I suspect, David stands out in my memory as a *presence*, both physical and intellectual. Really, those elements refuse to be separated: the lean of the torso over the seminar table in explanation of the "inability to mourn"; the inversion of hands and the tips of impossibly long fingers in pinning down *The Hamlet Machine* for just a moment; the lowering, then extending forward, of a head transformed wholly into smile as a reminder that, in dealing with serious matters, we had forgotten not to take ourselves too seriously. David's vitality, generosity, intelligence, and tireless efforts to facilitate

5. Martin, "The Work of Love," 36.

David was a gracious, open-minded, and solidary friend to us from his first stay in East Berlin in the early 1980s. He remained so throughout all the changing circumstances and revolutionary transformations in our lives. We were connected by a desire for productive debates and an interest in personal life plans as well as in questions about the possibilities of literature for effecting change. Laughing and grieving together, Frank and I were able to walk a part of his life with him. What remains is the memory of a special person.

—Therese Hörnigk

It's quite a challenge to sum up David in "two or three sentences." Perhaps the best summary would be to recall my delight in sharing his fearless, humorous, and omni-interested intellect. There was nothing, from boxing to genocide, from poetry to propaganda, from TV series to world literature, that did not engage his curiosity or spark his critical mind. David was fun; he was a real joy to be with and, above all, to think with. I miss his larger-than-life presence.

—Itsie Hull

For four decades David was my mentor and trusted friend. Over all these years he inspired me and my students with his vision of a new *Germanistik* that was open to theory and media. We owe it to him that German studies has become an exciting area of study. Let us make sure that his ideas live on, especially in these dark times.

—Tony Kaes

David's pedagogy was mindful of its staging: to begin, he would open up a space of suspense and allow the student to audition her thinking. He was uninterested in superfluous narrative, was keenly interested in insight as action with forward momentum, and held out for whatever surprise might be just around the next corner. He listened without judgment, his critiques were clear and direct, and his joy of engagement was key to how he distilled what was worthwhile.

—Lara Kelingos

David always could surprise me—not only with his wit and humor, which animated all our intellectual discourses, but also with perspectives I wouldn't spontaneously take on. After 1989, when the former GDR became actual and historical at the same moment, it was David who opened my mind with insights into a culture very far from my own experiences—he had a Brechtian talent to tell remarkable stories within conceptual frames. The best places and times we shared were at street corners, seriously joking about what really concerned our thoughts and intellectual lives. A deep voice of generosity.

—Gertrud Koch

I met David at a Heiner Müller conference at Cornell and later again in Bremen, where he lived with his wife after his retirement. He was always eager to get to know and support younger scholars, not at all by lecturing them but by expressing sincere interest in their perspectives and ideas. With his wonderful and genuinely hospitable character, he made it easy to befriend him and learn from his vast expertise in many ways.

—Janine Ludwig

David was a big man with a big heart. I remember watching him lecture in his graduate seminars before his hip operation, putting his faded yellow pads with notes on top of the trash can on top of the seminar table because he was in too much pain to sit down. His unrivaled lack of pretense shaped my vision of the academy.

—Barbara Mennel

From the first time we met in the late 1980s I was impressed by David's charming and intellectual appearance. After our first meeting we got together at several conferences and other occasions and enjoyed fruitful discussions about Germany's history, culture, politics, and society. Finally, David found a second home in Bremen, where our friendship became even closer and more personal. I owe David a lot of insights into the history of the Holocaust and in American politics. He leaves a gap in my personal and intellectual life.

—Lothar Probst

Were the hallmarks of David's later career already present when the eighteen-year-old spent a summer in Berlin as a high school exchange student in 1954? Did he already possess, however incipiently, the conversational skills that enlivened so many encounters throughout his life, the broad-ranging interests that captured his intense and often quirky curiosity? From his initial studies in Germany and his frequent later stays there, he brought to his scholarship and teaching an insistence on more nuanced understandings of literature and culture. Even on topics that captured his deepest personal fascination, David continually aimed to grasp the whole picture in all its complexities and contradictions. More than ever, we need to draw attention to David's body of work as a model for students and accomplished scholars alike.

—Judith Ryan

I met David when still a grad student at Indiana University, making a pilgrimage to Madison for a Wisconsin Workshop in the fall of 1974. Afterward I stayed in intermittent contact, contributing book reviews, translations, and articles to *NGC* and sharing research interests, visits in Madison and Berlin, and publications. David's enthusiasm was infectious, his support consistent, a real mensch.

—Marc Silberman

I could scarcely reimagine my years at Cornell without David's friendship and guidance, countless conversations during which he prodded me with his encouraging bark—"Right, right"—to get to the point, figure something out.

—Michael P. Steinberg

I remember, it must have been the beginning of September 1967 at the Berliner Ensemble: I was starting rehearsals for the revival of *The Mother* when I was called into the office of Helene Weigel. There I met a young, athletic man. "This is our friend Bathrick from the USA," Weigel introduced him. "He is writing a dissertation at the FU [Free University of Berlin] on the early Brecht and so, I think, *The Mother* can't do any harm. In addition to his work in the Brecht Archive, he will visit rehearsals. Get to know each other and exploit him." This conversation with Weigel was David's entrée into the circle of colleagues at the Berliner Ensemble and the beginning of the lifelong friendship that connects our families. *Salut*, David.

—Alexander Stillmark

What I admired about David was his self-confidence in dealing with people, but especially his kind of humor. When you worked with him, you always had the feeling that things were going to be all right.

—Rainer Stollmann

David, a great friend since the Wisconsin Workshop in 1971, brought a progressive agenda to life in a rather conservative discipline. He inspired colleagues and students and did it with enthusiasm, Brechtian commitment, and wit.

—Frank Trommler

I don't specifically recall when I first met David: somehow he was always already there. That's as true for my cohort of German film scholars, *NGC* readers, or anyone who shared David's wide-ranging interests, really, as it is for those of us who'd wind up next to him in some Berlinale basement cinema. Which is where I remember last seeing him. His abiding love for the art form was unmissable, shot through with his incisive critical wit that he would impart with a twinkle in the eye: *Verschmitzt*, that's how I remember David.

—Johannes von Moltke

Having discovered *NGC* in the revolution section of San Francisco's City Lights Books in the late 1980s, I was delighted to be assigned to work with David on the journal as a newly admitted graduate student. He welcomed me into the circle surrounding the journal with such openness; this generosity and candor also made him an ideal dissertation adviser. With David's long experi-

ence shaping, energizing, and sustaining a field through publishing, his contributions in the early days of Cornell's Signale book series were invaluable. Cornell's ongoing collaboration with Bremen on our Alexander Kluge project kept me in touch with David in recent years—I will sorely miss him and these conversations.

—Kizer Walker

By treating me like a peer, David, my *Doktorvater*, showed me how to become one. He insisted that I, a hesitant new graduate student, call him by his first name, engaged all my ideas—even the bad ones—with rigor and respect, and once complimented me by calling me “intimidating.” He urged me to draw out “den roten Faden” in my writing and spun a red thread of generous mentoring and advice that guides me through my career.

—Valerie Weinstein

I got to know David personally only late in life when we both settled in Bremen with our wives. The rapport was instant. We would laugh together at life's absurdities, our own included, in cafés and later at the home, to which he adapted with an uncomplaining grace that said a lot about who he was. He would greet me with a big smile, reminisce about the memorable moments of his life, and thank me for having come, and he wasn't the only one of us to be thankful. David was that rare thing, an all-American gentleman. He combined the best of America—warmth, trust, informality, enthusiasm—with what the Germans call “politeness of the heart.” I miss this new late friend more than I would have thought.

—Irving Wohlfarth

Light flooded through a bay window. We were interviewing an anti-Vietnam War activist in David's bungalow in Madison for our feature-length documentary *The War at Home* (1980). A University of Wisconsin graduate student, I knew David through political solidarity circles. We could not shoot in our messy apartments. So David offered his gorgeous East Side home. As in everything he did, his generous, infectious sense of solidarity infiltrated the shoot. He peppered the cameraman with questions. Although it felt impossibly daunting to produce a radical political documentary, David maintained that we had to do this film chronicling Madison's antiwar movement. He relished his self-appointed set designer role, moving a colorful pillow into the shot and insisting, Yes, you can do this.

—Patricia R. Zimmermann

References

- Bathrick, David. *The Dialectic and the Early Brecht: An Interpretive Study of "Trommeln in der Nacht."* Stuttgart: Heinz, 1975.
- Bathrick, David. "The Dialectics of Legitimation: Brecht in the GDR." *New German Critique*, no. 2 (1974): 90–103.
- Bathrick, David. *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.
- Huysen, Andreas, and Anson Rabinbach. "New German Critique: The First Decade." *New German Critique*, no. 95 (2005): 5–26.
- Martin, Biddy. "The Work of Love." *New German Critique*, no. 95 (2005): 27–36.