

*Time traveler's wisdom: A conversation with*

# David Woodard

by Jonas Obleser for  
[walloftime.net](http://walloftime.net)



There are various reasons why *David Woodard* is the perfect interviewee for the WALL OF TIME. First, he is a composer, he writes music, which is sound, which consists only of and exists only in: time. His interests are diverse, though, and include the somewhat failed utopias and their ramifications like *Nueva Germania* in Paraguay or North Korea, as well as the hypnotic lampshade-cum-artwork-cum-altar *Dreamachine* of William S. Burroughs fame, or—most recently—ambitious projects like *The Great Pyramid*.

This alone would make for a never-ending conversation, but on top of that, his name is tightly linked to a somewhat *new genre of musical pieces, the prequiem*, commissioned by individuals to be played right before their time to die has come. Woodard became somewhat notorious for composing and performing a prequiem for Timothy McVeigh. Death, of course, is another one of the manifold instantiations of time, that is, the passing of time.

Thirdly, Woodard recently has written a yet-to-be-published piece on one of our notorious bad guys, *Ernst Jünger*—a man who himself was deeply fascinated with time, who collected hourglasses, who saw Halley's comet twice, and who wrote one of the most ambitious 20th century essays on (planetary) time scales, „An der Zeitmauer [At the wall of time]“, in 1959, which lends its name to the present publication. Jünger himself became a monument of time in that he outlived his century, crossed the magical line of turning 100, and died ten years ago, in 1998.

Dr. Woodard, thanks for your precious time, we feel very honored to have you as the opening interviewee in our new series at the wall of time. Now, maybe Ernst Jünger is a good topic to start off. I was surprised and pleased to learn that you will contribute to a new anthology on Jünger. Could you give us a brief idea what to expect from your essay? What is your take on him, and what is it that renders Jünger a worthwhile subject for your thoughts and works (e.g., „Ernst Jünger in Leningrad“)?

Thank you, Dr. Obleser, you are very kind. It is a pleasure for me to be the Wall of Time's first guest.

Well, first of all you have to understand that Ernst Jünger is better known to Americans than Germans like to imagine. In Germany, his seemingly contradictory paths have yielded a charged fog. Neutered German academics look askance at the apparent militaristic sympathies found in *Storm of Steel*, for instance, whilst unabashedly marveling at Jünger's later ability to simultaneously be revered by and undermine the Nazis' international recruitment program in France. Jünger himself possessed a rare and inscrutable quality for a German, and that was his sense of aboveness, or actual aboveness, enabling him to command his person as if it were a radio-controlled airplane, from a distant tower—not like a Predator,

rather like a butterfly, whose brain has been neatly carved out and replaced by a UHF-transceiver.

When you examine photographs of Jünger, you see only the machine. They will not help you. He always combed and sprayed his hair nicely and scrubbed his face with more or less natural exfoliants and that sort of thing, had thin reedy lips which contributed favorably to his birdlike profile, sometimes romanticized and indeed eroticized war, sometimes took LSD in a forest near his home under the guidance of his friend Dr. Hofmann. These popular notions are as iridescent ice-dust clouds, twisting and turning, perfunctory and aleatory, and

I daresay irrelevant, characterizing the veneer or atmosphere of Jünger's centenary existence. Beyond the stratosphere, heliotropic Jünger occupied an invisible spinning tower. It is with this in mind that "Ernst Jünger in Leningrad" was written, during a visit last year to the psychoanalyst Dr. Victor Mazin, in the childhood home of Lou Salomé.

Hermes kam mir bekannt vor. Er lächelte, und Viktor wandte sich mir zu: „David, das ist Hermes. Er ist mein bester Freund“ – „Es freut mich sehr, Sie wiederzusehen, Hermes. Wir trafen uns kurz in Moskau im März letzten Jahres“, wagte ich einzuwerfen.

Hermes bestätigte meine Vermutung. Sein Anblick wurde von seinen neuen Schuhen geprägt—schwarze Leinwand-Slipper mit einem Fach für den großen Zeh und einem anderen für den Rest. Die Schuhe sahen wie Hufe aus, einem Attribut Satans. Im kommenden Monat sollte in Freuds Traumuseum eine Konferenz zum Thema Infernalität im Zeitalter des illuminierten Computermotors stattfinden.

„Das sind Schuhe von japanischen Bauarbeitern“, sagte Hermes. – „Interessant...Was passiert, wenn ein riesiger Betonblock auf Ihre Füße fällt?“ – „Er würde auf deren Füße fallen, nicht auf meine“. – „Ja, sicher“. Gesegnete Paranoia. „In diesem Fall würde es sich nur um fallenden Bambus handeln“.

Hermes war es, der uns vom Flughafen hätte abholen sollen, sagte man mir. Viktor glaubt wie ich nicht ans Autofahren. Ich fragte mich, mit was für einem Auto Hermes wohl unterwegs gewesen war.

„Ein Paranoiker ist jemand, der Bescheid weiß.“  
– W.S. Burroughs, Gespräch

Ein bebrillter Freud, gemalt in Schwarz und Weiß, der über der Tür hängt, dient als ein ahnungsvolles Willkommen für den zweiten Raum, in dem die Dinge plötzlich wieder zeit- und raumlos werden—wie in einem Traum, oder damals, als man tot war. Im Mittelpunkt des Raumes arbeitet, auf einem 1 × 1 × 1.5 Meter hohem Sockel, die Dreamachine. Dazu hört man eine 10minütige Komposition namens „Sssexy“, aufge-

nommen vom elektronischen Ensemble Plecid; sie besteht aus Sounds, die an sich klangfarblich ständig verändernde Radiostörgeräusche erinnern, und die man hier etwas lauter hört als im ersten Raum. Die Atmosphäre ist nachdenklich und erinnert eher an ein Kuriositätenkabinett als an ein Museum.

(Brief excerpt from David Woodard, „Jünger in Leningrad“, in: Alexander Pschera (Hg.) *Bunter Staub. Jünger im Gegenlicht*. Matthes&Seitz Berlin, 2008)

**I do loathe what-if questions. Anyway, would you have liked to write a requiem for Jünger? As far as I understand, he wasn't very drawn toward music. How could it have sounded, and what would have been the instrumentation?**

It was his feminine side that resented music. I might have written and conducted a requiem for Ernst Jünger, had he known more or less precisely when he would make the Eternal Leap and given sufficient notice. I believe I would have scored such a work for bassoons, contrabassoons, bass clarinets, and a swarm of celli and contrabasses that would have entered the equation at the moment of death. I would have kindly advised Dr. Hofmann to be present, and the setting would have been a round wooden raft floating in the lake beside Wilflingen, the castle where Jünger lived during his autumn years, which stretched into autumn decades. Or, the circular raft could more fittingly have been floating in the serene lake here at Schloss Wiesenburg, in former East Germany.

As his death occurred on February 17, 1998, Jünger, Hofmann, the chamber ensemble, Jünger's physician and I would have been protected from the cold by a glass bubble fabricated specifically for the occasion, hermetically sealed along the raft's circumference and heated within by a central pyre consisting of Old Growth redwood logs harvested from the Black Forest.

Auxiliary attendees other than Hofmann would have been limited to a series of pleasant animals—cats, squirrels, birds, lemurs, possibly others depending on timing and availability, and finally a smallish group of flying squirrels tethered by an elastic cord affixed to their

collar at one end and to a collar worn by Jünger at the other.

At the moment of death, signaled by Jünger's physician discreetly gazing heavenward, a cloud of butterflies would have burst from portals alongside the stage—the imposing and many-colored Cairns Birdwing of Australia, the iridescent Blue Morpho of South America, the Painted Lady with its empathogenic eyes, the common yet reliable Monarch, every species of butterfly known to man would have been represented, their celebratory flight within the glass hemisphere commencing just as the chamber ensemble segued into the final movement, their gentle fluttering an elegant choreography of otherworldly microtonal celli and contrabasses serenading Jünger's newly remnant Earthly vehicle in tutti.

After the requiem, the glass hemisphere would have been carefully detached from the raft, turned upside down like an hourglass, and, tethered to an anchor, permitted to float near the middle of the lake for a period of three weeks. Inside, Jünger's remains, basted in maple syrup, would have been devoured by many wild southwestbound birds, pious wasps and courageously right-thinking bees.

**Fittingly, on Death. Maybe you object to my simplistic equating of sound to time to death. Nevertheless, I think it might function as a bracket around most of what you are interested in (as far as I can tell, from your creative output). Especially the requiem concept sounds like a very interesting little trick on time, anticipating one's own death, and having a usually post-death event B (a requiem) performed before event A (the death itself) has actually taken place. Did the idea of the requiem emerge in order to approach, to scrutinize, and maybe even to “measure” death by getting your art (composing music) as closely as possible to the event of death itself?**

It has been pointed out, waggishly, that something fundamental in my work resonates with the philosophical precepts of Dr. Condoleezza Rice. She and I have, over the course of a decade, demonstrated sensitivities toward the Locrian, or anticipatory, gesture. In Dr. Rice's case, this has assumed the form of the preemptive strike, a military strategy

wherein a B action obviates the possibility of an A action, even where there may have been no intention for an A action.

In my case, it has taken the form of a funerary music called a prequiem—a B action occurring before, during, and after an A action: the melodic arch of a prequiem meets its subject along the Nile's Eastern bank, lifts him up and then safely deposits him along the Western bank, serenading the remains for a short time thereafter. The subject's life and death are thus A and A, and the river flowing between them is B. The prequiem is intended to ease and comfort its subject's passage across the Great Divide and assure his transit to Heaven, and is only kindred in spirit to Dr. Rice's preemptive strike from the perspective of the undertaker or, perhaps, the feeble-minded.

B and A are components of Sonata form, the ABA compositional structure defining Classical music, as intuitively defined by Mozart. In light of Dr. Rice's distinguished avocation as a classically trained pianist, it is more interesting to consider the possible influence that Classical music has had on her work as a philosopher and strategist. B always precedes A.

"A Cornerstone Cringle", a brass fanfare commissioned by *Friends of the Great Pyramid* to help celebrate the Great Pyramid project's symbolic cornerstone laying ceremony last year at its possible Dessau-area site, bears a conceptual kinship to prequiem. Therefore, project ideologues Ingo Niermann and Jens Thiel later asked if I would be willing to render the piece at related prequiem services and/or internment ceremonies once the proposed structure, potentially the world's largest columbarium, crosses its feasibility hurdles and becomes established. I am taking the idea under advisement. It is a composition that I like very much—and, incidentally, that I shall be conducting at the *Great Pyramid Gala on March 10, at Berlin's small but lovely HAU theatre*.

*Wall of Time will most certainly be there. Now two questions, which we would like to include in all or most interviews to come on time and the phenomena around it. Please feel free to answer quite shortly or to draw, or to remain silent, of course. First, the big issue: What is time?*

Time is heavier than a heartbeat. It may have been invented as a scare tactic by a shaman in a tiny prehistoric Paraguayan village many thousands of years ago, and the price he had to pay for his fleeting glory was the nerves of all future humankind. It makes one wonder what price all future humankind will pay for the present shamanic benefits offered by David Bowie, David Sylvian or Momus, for example.

*What role does time play for your primary work (i.e., composing, in your composed pieces, and writing, in your written pieces)?*

Composing and writing are equally time-based. Time is the element of language that another person will always relate to best. Events occur in our life over time, in sequence. They occur in books and movies over time, in sequence.

**"Time may have been invented as a scare tactic by a prehistoric Paraguayan shaman many thousands of years ago, and the price of his fleeting glory was the nerves of all future humankind. It makes one wonder what price all future humankind will pay for the shamanic benefits offered by David Bowie, for example."**

Sometimes things happen all at once, in parallel, though in such cases the parallel aspect is nonetheless experienced in time, as in the congress of a fugue: consolidated time, with increased tension. In this way the internet is quite fugal, perhaps dangerously so, threatening the preconditions for a hero's narrative to unfold, conditions that have prompted our understanding of what is good in the world.

Time is at least as important in writing as it is in music. Students writing a dissertation with the object of obtaining a degree often neglect this obvious fact, a dreadful source of annoyance to most professors.

When you write something for another reader (i.e., other than notes to self), you are counting on the reader to follow your words and thoughts and hopefully understand what it is that you see so clearly in your mind that you must author a text. The reader will not understand unless you have taken into account what will be the likely trajectory of his thought and emotion whilst passing time reading the text. Therefore, aside from being able to see clearly what is to be written, the writer must also be a composer, a conductor, a musician, a hypothetical listenership, a musicologist.

Words are a form of music: their effect has absolutely nothing to do with their apparent meaning. Hölderlin recognized this, to a certain extent. I sometimes wonder if it isn't reasonable to assume that words were invented by the praeterhuman feminine spirit, which felt otherwise defeated by the male Apollonian spirit of music. They are a deceitful ver-

sion of music, though equally dependent on melody and rhythm, hence time, to be effective. Ultimately any piece of writing expresses human conditions that exist beyond the circles of time: yearning, protection, alienation, love. It is best to avoid language and default instead to the realm of facial expressions, subtle gestures, gentle emotive sounds, music. The more you use language, the more you are obliged to continue to use language, just like telling a lie, and this steals precious time.

A last, important question. Dr. Woodard, you went to Paraguay many times and support the people in Nueva Germania. In a way, the sheer existence of this village gives us an impression of having fallen out of time and history: A project that had begun more than hundred years ago, an incredible amount of time must have passed since Bernhard Förster and his wife boarded a ship 120 years ago. Nueva Germania seemed forgotten and off the record for a long time, yet it has been there all the time, and it all feels oddly out of sync with our own notion of a modern society. However, it exists, the people are living there, and you occasionally take a plane and go there, almost like traveling between time zones. Are they living in the same century as we do (and, please, do not take this as a disregardful or Eurocentric comment)? Do you yourself feel as if living in 2008 Berlin?

This is an interesting observation for you to make, Jonas, and a harrowing question to follow. In a way, *Nueva Germania* has become a metaphor representing the possibility of different forms of time passage on Earth. It is a family-planning sodality founded in the mid-1880s by Elisabeth Nietzsche and her anti-Semitic agitator husband Dr. Bernhard Förster, in the middle of the Paraguayan jungle, inspired by Wagner's 1880 essay "Religion and Art," which appeared in the *Bayreuther Blätter*. Wagner whimsically pleads for the exodus of a group of brave Germans to found a New Germany in South America, where German culture could flourish unhampered by what he perceived to be antagonistic mercantile influences in the Motherland. There are lovely sub-themes in the essay that one might not associate with Wagner, such as the karmic wisdom of vegetarianism, and the spiritual stability that Lutheranism might offer in the New World.

It is a miracle that Elisabeth and Bernhard managed to establish any kind of colony in the very dangerous interior of South America, given their lack of experience in subtropics—with potentially deadly sand flies, very deadly jarara (5-minute) snakes, virtually non-irrigable soil, and other serious hardships in store. It is my view that the reason Nueva Germania still resonates with us today, if faintly, is that it was a project Elisabeth and Bernhard poured their souls into.

They pursued the Utopian family-planning dream with sincerity and focus—the more deeply they penetrated the dream, the more solemnly their honor was at stake. It broke Bernhard Förster. When Christian Kracht and I visited the room at Hotel del Lago where Dr. Förster committed suicide, it was heartening to find that a kind of inadvertent reverence still hung in the air. It is a top floor room, the veranda of which is larger than any of the others, and the windows of which gaze upon a most fantastic view overlooking a seemingly endless expanse of trees to the West. Despite these advantages, the room has for many decades remained unoccupied, serving as a janitorial supply room. The combination clerk/cook on duty explained that the 19th Century suicide is well-known, at least in Asunción and environs. The room is viewed with trepidation.

The process of developing a eugenics colony to please the Master was the blossoming of Elisabeth's and Bernhard's united souls. The people who live there now—i.e., those who genetically descend from the colony's first wave of pilgrims—understand more clearly why they are there than any of the scholars or journalists whose research I've examined.



Wagner does not resonate or seem relevant or make sense in Paraguay. What the colonists understand is that some-

one in their ancestry had strong feelings about the goodness of being who they were, to the point of shirking convention and forcing the hand of Fate, and that this is why their family lines teleported to Paraguay. They do not recognize that they speak in a 19th Century Saxon dialect.

Nueva Germania almost ceased to exist in the early 1950s, and two years ago I visited and partook of imported sardines and beer with the aged man whose vote kept it alive. Klaus Neumann held a chair on the Municipal Council back then and had the deciding vote on whether or not the community's name should be changed to Sanchez. Recognizing Nueva Germania's historical significance, without tears, and also his own father's renown as Elisabeth Nietzsche's pilgrim who invented what would become the standard growing and curing procedures for Yerba Mate, Mr. Neumann effectively saved Nueva Germania. Had the name been changed to Sanchez, I believe the teetering enclave would have suffered unmanageable cognitive dissonance. Inside their misplaced brains, they would have short-circuited and faded to black. Passing the century point in 1987 has been psychologically beneficial to Nueva Germania, restoring a sense of identity and security to its bluebloods.

Thank you, Dr. Woodard. It was an insightful and inspiring Journey.

Our conversation took place in February 2008 during a visit at Dr. Woodard's current refuge, Schloß Wiesenburg (Mark). Pictures show Dr. Woodard in Berlin 2008 on a pilgrimage to David Bowie's 1970s apartment (picture: Momus) and in Paraguay 2004 with Nueva Germania's mayor Ceferino Zena Duarte who bears—to WALL OF TIME's eyes—a resemblance to author Stephen King (picture: Christoph Schubert, MD).

All rights reserved, (c) Jonas Obleser for [walloftime.net](http://walloftime.net), 2008. No reproduction or re-posting without permission. For inquiries please contact [time@walloftime.net](mailto:time@walloftime.net). Interviews or some parts of it may cause offence to some people. All views expressed in these interviews represent the persons interviewed and not necessarily the views of [walloftime.net](http://walloftime.net) and staff.