

Adolescence in the 'Ostalgie' Generation Reading Jakob Hein's *Mein Erstes T-Shirt against Sonnenallee, Zonenkinder, and Good Bye, Lenin!*

Nicole Thesz

To cite this article: Nicole Thesz (2008) Adolescence in the 'Ostalgie' Generation Reading Jakob Hein's *Mein Erstes T-Shirt against Sonnenallee, Zonenkinder, and Good Bye, Lenin!*, Oxford German Studies, 37:1, 107-123, DOI: [10.1179/174592108x334472](https://doi.org/10.1179/174592108x334472)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1179/174592108x334472>



Published online: 19 Jul 2013.



Submit your article to this journal [!\[\]\(cf531ed27e91483460120fcc057b3901_img.jpg\)](#)



Article views: 250

ADOLESCENCE IN THE 'OSTALGIE' GENERATION

READING JAKOB HEIN'S *MEIN ERSTES T-SHIRT* AGAINST SONNENALLEE, ZONENKINDER, AND GOOD BYE, LENIN!

NICOLE THESZ

Miami University, Ohio

Jakob Hein's collection of vignettes, *Mein erstes T-Shirt*, has been read as part of the post-Wall vogue of Ostalgia that included the films *Good Bye, Lenin!* and *Sonnenallee* as well as Jana Hensel's *Zonenkinder*. While all of these works to a certain extent examine youth in the GDR, this paper argues that Hein's stories differ significantly. Ostalgia reconstructs memories of GDR objects and identity, whereas Hein primarily analyses images of adolescence in the 1970s and 1980s. Hein, who is a youth psychiatrist, conveys a dual perspective, using an adult's irony to criticize the effect of educational practices on children. He diverges from the nostalgic tendencies of popular post-wall works, and instead explores the nature of maturation, memory, and the awareness of passing time.

It is striking that a number of works about the GDR are coming-of-age stories, such as Wolfgang Becker's hit *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003), Leander Haußmann's film *Sonnenallee* (1999), Thomas Brussig's *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* (1999), and Jana Hensel's *Zonenkinder* (2002).¹ In a sense, this constellation is unsurprising, since the demise of the GDR lends itself as a *topos* of loss, much as depictions of childhood often reflect an awareness for an irretrievable past. Thus, in many works, the nostalgia of childhood coexists with 'Ostalgia' for the lost state. Each story about youth in the GDR balances these aspects in a different way. The popular appeal of the Brussig novel *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee*, which was based on Haußmann's film *Sonnenallee*,² and of the international film hit *Good Bye, Lenin!*, lies in a humorous recreation of the East. The heroes Micha Kuppisch and Alex Kerner, respectively, navigate worlds that are defined by their relationship to the GDR, and that

¹ Thomas Brussig, *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* (Berlin: Verlag Volk und Welt, 1999); Jana Hensel, *Zonenkinder* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2003).

² Haußmann and Brussig co-authored the film script.

allow viewers to re-experience the oppressive state with comic relief. In *Zonenkinder*, the East German author Jana Hensel, born in 1976, nostalgically depicts the GDR in an effort to create a type of transnational identity for young Germans from the former East. Although Hensel criticizes the vogue of *Ostalgie*, especially the related talk shows,³ she acknowledges that an acute sense of loss inspired her depiction of her generation's pre- and post-*Wende* experiences:

Eine wichtige Motivation, um das Buch zu schreiben, war für mich die Traurigkeit darüber, dass die DDR nicht mehr als Erlebnisraum, sondern nur mehr als erinnerbares Material besteht. Ich war in den neunziger Jahren einer Vergangenheit nachgelaufen, die unwiederholbar verschwunden war, und habe immer auf den Moment gehofft, in dem sie wiederkehren würde. (*Zonenkinder und Wir*, pp. 102–03)

The success of ostalgic works such as *Sonnenallee*, *Zonenkinder*, and *Good Bye, Lenin!* lies in the ability to recreate cultural memories on the one hand, and to provide a sense of identification with the East on the other. All three stories allow audiences to experience feelings of loss and nostalgia.

Jakob Hein, the son of the well-known author Christoph Hein, describes his childhood and adolescence in the former East Germany. *Mein erstes T-Shirt*, published in 2001, is Hein's first book and contains twenty-six vignettes written with the light-hearted irony characteristic of the 'new generation' authors described after 1990 in Germany.⁴ Like other coming-of-age novels, *Mein erstes T-Shirt* depicts recollections involving friendships, emerging sexuality, education, and confrontations with authority figures. Hein's first-person narrator focuses on memories that he presents from a seemingly naïve perspective, albeit undermined by surreal and dramatic exaggerations of past events. This invites readers to recognize Hein's criticism of his upbringing and education, much of which applies to both Germanies. In addition, hyperbolical scenes in these vignettes point toward the general tendency to fictionalize recollected memories. The analytical focus on adolescent experiences seems especially valid due to Hein's primary occupation as a psychiatrist for children and young adults. *Mein erstes T-Shirt* is not a straightforward memoir, but a text that defies categorization: Hein crosses boundaries between autobiography, fiction, cultural history, oral narrative, and psychiatric case history, all of which merge in his ironic depiction of youth in the 1970s and 1980s in Germany.

Mein erstes T-Shirt has often been received as part of the movement of *Ostalgie* that began after reunification.⁵ One might read *ostalgia* as the East German variant of a wave of

³ In an interview with Tom Kraushaar, 'Die Normalität des Ausnahmezustands: Ein Gespräch mit Jana Hensel', in *Die Zonenkinder und wir: Geschichte eines Phänomens*, ed. by Tom Krashaar (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2004) pp. 94–110, (p.104).

⁴ Martin Hielscher, 'Generation und Mentalität: Aspekte eines Wandels', in *neue deutsche literatur*, 48.4 (2000) 174–82. Hein has also published *Formen menschlichen Zusammenlebens* (2003), *Vielleicht ist es sogar schön* (2004), and *Herr Jensen steigt aus* (2006). The author's latest book has been lauded as Hein's first purely fictional work because it moves away from the autobiographical slant of the first three prose collections (see Jörg Magenau, 'In Hartz-IV-Abgründen: Leise Töne, kostbarste Literatur. Jakob Heins feiner Roman *Herr Jensen steigt aus*', in *taz, die tageszeitung*, 18 February 2006, p. vi).

⁵ The critic Thomas Hermann links Hein to *Ostalgie* and claims that the author provides West Germans with a perspective on the East: 'Er befasst sich mit den Absurditäten des Systems und bringt Zeiten und Umstände mit diesem leichten Anflug von 'Ostalgie' denen zurück, die unter ähnlichen Umständen groß wurden, und jenen näher, welche durch andere politische Gegebenheiten geprägt sind.' Thomas Hermann, 'Gepunktete oder gestrichelte Uhren: Jakob Heins Kurzgeschichten von "Drüben"', *literaturkritik.de*, 27 Oct.

nostalgia that Svetlana Boym places in the context of globalization:

In counterpoint to our fascination with cyberspace and the virtual global village, there is a no less global epidemic of nostalgia, an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world. Nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals.⁶

One such upheaval, of course, was the fall of the Wall and the dissolution of the GDR. In response to these changes, the phenomenon of *Ostalgie* evolved and was examined in the nineties, as scholars and the public became aware of the 'wave that celebrates the quaintness and — occasionally — comforting provinciality of the former East-German everyday life.'⁷ In 1999, the highly popular film *Sonnenallee* presented an aesthetic reconstruction of the East, and the disappearance of GDR culture took further hold of the imagination. Paul Cooke emphasizes the element of mediation that *ostalgic* works perform when they offer images of disappeared East German culture to West German (or non-GDR) viewers and readers.⁸ In contrast, Martin Blum examines the potential link between lost consumer products and a sense of identity for citizens of the former GDR.⁹ Blum's definition of *Ostalgie* targets the level of identity formation and preservation, since the function of depicted products in *Sonnenallee*, among others, is 'to preserve and validate a community that — apparently — has no longer any material, political, or geographical foundations'.¹⁰ Nostalgia for the vanished GDR gained immense popularity with *Ostalgie-Shows* on television¹¹ and with the hit film *Good Bye, Lenin!* in 2003. As Daphne Berdahl points out, *Ostalgie* expresses 'more about the present than the past', since the 'business of *Ostalgie*' both serves to reaffirm GDR identity and displays support for the new market economy.¹² At the same time, these positive views of *Ostalgie* are rebutted by the writer Jens Bisky, born in 1965 in East Germany, who reads *Ostalgie* as a cultural victory of the former GDR over the West because it allows East Germans to ignore negative memories of socialist realities.¹³

⁶ 2006 <http://www.literaturkritik.de/public/rezension.php?rez_id=4348&ausgabe=200112>. Customer reviews on amazon.de indicate that the public also received Hein in the context of *Ostalgie*. One reviewer calls *Mein erstes T-Shirt* 'eines der besseren Beispiele für Ostalgie,' <<http://www.amazon.de/exec/obidos/tg/stores/detail/-/books/3492237398/customer-reviews/>>, [accessed 27 October 2006]. A second review is headed 'Kurzweilige Ostalgie.' A third reviewer on the same site claims: 'Jakob Hein schwimmt hier auf der Welle der ich-erzaehl-mal-meine-Jugend-im-Osten, die irgendwie gerade in Mode ist.'

⁷ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. xiv.

⁸ Anke Finger, 'Hello Willy, Good Bye Lenin!: Transitions of an East German Family', in *South Central Review*, 22.2 (2005), 39–58 (p. 40).

⁹ Paul Cooke, 'Performing "Ostalgie": Leander Haussmann's *Sonnenallee*', in *German Life and Letters*, 56.2 (2003), 156–67 (p. 156).

¹⁰ Martin Blum, 'Remaking the East German Past: *Ostalgie*, Identity, and Material Culture', in *Journal of Popular Culture*, 34.3 (2000), 229–53.

¹¹ Blum, 'Remaking the East German Past', p. 249. This aspect is also at the heart of the immensely popular film *Good Bye, Lenin!*

¹² Ostalgie Show (ZDF, 17.8.2003); Ein Kessel DDR (MDR, 22.8.2003); Meyer und Schulz: die ultimative Ost Show (Sat 1, 23./30.8.2003); Die DDR Show — Von Ampelmännchen bis Zentralkomitee (RTL, Oliver Geissen and Katarina Witt, September 2003, 4 episodes).

¹³ Berdahl, Daphne. ““(N)Ostalgie” for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things’, in *Ethnos* 64.2 (1999), 192–211 (pp. 206, 198).

¹⁴ Jens Bisky, 'Zonensucht: Kritik der neuen Ostalgie' in *Merkur: Deutsche Zeitschrift für europäisches Denken*, 58.2 (2004), 117–27.

Whether positive or negative reactions to *Ostalgie*, studies generally imply that this phenomenon compensates for the disappearance of material and political reality of the former GDR as well as the lack of authentic experiences on the part of West Germans.¹⁴ At the same time, Friederike Eigler notes that nostalgia can be productive to a certain extent since there is a potential link between nostalgic memory and the ability to form a meaningful identity.¹⁵ Memory texts can even integrate nostalgic and critical memories in order to produce both emotional appeal and analytical reception. In a similar way, Hein's stories are related to what Boym terms 'reflective' nostalgia, which takes the absent object of longing as a starting point for critical discussion, rather than the approach she calls 'restorative',¹⁶ which is visible in literary (*Zonenkinder* and *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee*) and cinematic (*Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye, Lenin!*) reconstructions of the East.¹⁷ Hensel's *Zonenkinder*, for instance, often conveys a sense of feeling lost in the Berlin Republic: 'Mich ängstigt, den Boden unter meinen Füßen nur wenig zu kennen [...] Ich möchte wieder wissen, wo wir herkommen' (p. 14). Hensel portrays her childhood as an inaccessible realm, 'ein Museum ohne Namen' (p. 25), and situates this past in a 'Märchenzeit' (p. 14): 'Eine Zeit, die sehr lange vergangen scheint, in der die Uhren anders gingen, der Winter anders roch und die Schleifen im Haar anders gebunden wurden' (pp. 13–14). By distancing her childhood from reality — it is locked in an anonymous museum and transferred on to a vague fairy tale setting — Hensel lends a nostalgic hue to the experiences in the former GDR, which provoked heated criticism, especially in the East.¹⁸ Hensel attempts to distance herself from the wave of *Ostalgie* and the commercial exploitation of the GDR past. At the same time, she favors this phenomenon where it supports the valid desire to remember the East. Hensel's attempt to create an 'Identifikationsangebot' (*Zonenkinder und Wir*, p. 95) for former GDR citizens favors the 'restorative' approach to

¹⁴ The West German fascination with *Ostalgie* can be read as a reaction analogous to the "retro" movements that recall other past eras, e.g., the fifties or seventies. *Westalgie*, on the other hand, seems to involve a longing for pre-1990 securities of the FRG, as Andrew Plowman points out (250).

¹⁵ Friederike Eigler, 'Nostalgisches und kritisches Erinnern am Beispiel von Martin Walsers *Ein springender Brunnen* und Monika Marons *Pawels Briefe*', in *Monika Maron in Perspective: 'Dialogische' Einblicke in zeitgeschichtliche, intertextuelle und rezeptionsbezogene Aspekte ihres Werkes*, ed. by Elke Gilson, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 157–80 (p. 160).

¹⁶ Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, p. 41.

¹⁷ Although Hensel acknowledges that her book could inspire people to deal with their respective East German pasts, she contends that self-reflection can interfere with an understanding of the *Wende*: 'Für eine wirklich konstruktive Diskussion über die Thesen des Buches ist es aber hinderlich, wenn jeder mit seiner eigenen, individuellen Geschichte kommt. So kann man nicht über Phänomene sprechen' (interview with Kraushaar, see fn. 3, p. 97).

¹⁸ Ingo Arend, for instance, objects to a lack of analysis in *Zonenkinder*: 'warum dieser Staat, der nachträglich zu einer Heimat mit "schönem warmem Wir-Gefühl" romantisert wird, gescheitert sein könnte, darauf verschwendet sie keinen Gedanken' (p. 38) and faults Hensel's restorative approach to the GDR past: 'Fotos von Fünf-Mark-Turnschuhen und ihrem Ferienlagerausweis ikonisieren die bescheidenere Dingwelt des untergegangenen Systems. Jana Hensel hat ein Poesiealbum kreiert' (p. 39). Ingo Arend, 'Der Setzkasten der Erinnerung', in *Die Zonenkinder und wir*, pp. 36–41. Arend's sarcastic allusion to friendship albums and to a 'whatnot of memory' (title) are reminiscent of archival practices, which Moritz Baßler views as a fundamental strategy of pop literature (see Baßler, *Der deutsche Pop-Roman: Die neuen Archivisten* [Munich: Beck, 2002]). The collection of cultural tidbits thus seems to be a common ground between pop literature in general, and the restorative nostalgia of *Ostalgie* texts in particular. The fact that Hein for the most part stays away from such cultural allusions lends weight to the idea that *Mein erstes T-Shirt* is less *ostalgic* than a reflection on coming-of-age issues.

memories: 'Ich habe versucht, diese Kindheit anhand von Produkten und Markennamen, Kindheitshelden etc. zu entstauben und wieder als Erinnerung zugänglich zu machen' (p. 106).¹⁹ Thus, unlike Hein's emphasis on the culture of adolescence, Hensel's approach has been characterized as 'autoethnologisch', since she is primarily interested in GDR-specific cultural memories.²⁰

Hein, who is of the same generation as Hensel and Bisky, recalls socialist realities primarily as a background for his reflections on childhood. Reviewers may have read Hein as *ostalgic* because his coming-of-age stories use the former GDR as an 'Ost-Folie', as Christine Cosentino puts it.²¹ As Eigler points out, critics tend to categorically wield the 'Ostalgie-Vorwurf' against East German authors, regardless of their specific approaches and styles.²² In fact, Hein's texts do not follow what one might refer to as the compensatory nature of *Ostalgie*, which writes against the loss of the GDR. If nostalgic at all, Hein's texts are indicative of 'a longing for a different time — the time of our childhood'.²³ In an interview, the author vehemently denied missing the GDR or desiring its return:

Klare Antwort: Nein. Weil es kein Teil ohne das Ganze gibt. Ich fand die DDR furchtbar. Wie eine einengende, übergroße Mutter, bei der man nichts durfte und immer pünktlich zu Hause sein sollte.²⁴

Although Hein remembers the state as an oppressive 'übergroße Mutter', he is less interested in political aspects than in analysing relationships with peers and adults to develop his narrator's (and alter ego's) precocious and somewhat eccentric personality: '[Ich] könnte [...] kein Buch über die DDR schreiben, nur darüber, was ich in der DDR erlebt habe'.²⁵ In these anecdotal recollections of apparent simplicity, Hein integrates subtle criticism of German education and parenting and creates ironic 'patterns of childhood' — to borrow Christa Wolf's title of childhood recollections.

The fall of the Wall had positive consequences for Hein, who was able to avoid the army, study psychiatry in Berlin (a privilege that could have been rescinded based on political disobedience), and had the opportunity to travel extensively in the U.S., as described in *Formen menschlichen Zusammenlebens* (2003). Thus Hein does not miss the former state, as his comments in the media indicate. When asked whether his 'Sehnsuchtsort' lies in the GDR, Hein explains:

¹⁹ Bisky criticizes *Zonenkinder* as 'stimmungsgesättigt nostalgisches [Bild]' (p. 29): 'Jana Hensel verzichtet auf Reflexion. Sie scheut die dazu nötige Distanz, schreibt sie doch für alle, die sich wiedererkennen, identifizieren wollen' (p. 28). At the same time, Bisky's reception is unnecessarily cutting when he mocks Hensel's glossary of GDR culture: 'Ein albernes Glossar soll bestätigen, dass sie über das schwer zugängliche Wissen einer Eingeborenen verfügt' (p. 30). Jens Bisky, 'Traumbilder vom Osten in den Farben des Westens', in *Die Zonenkinder und wir*, pp. 26–35.

²⁰ Moritz Baßler, 'Die "Zonenkinder" und das "Wir"', in *Die Zonenkinder und wir*, pp. 111–19, (p. 118).

²¹ Christine Cosentino, 'Autobiographisch gründierte Rückblicke auf die DDR nach der Jahrtausendwende', in *Glossen: Eine Internationale Zweisprachige Publikation zu Literatur, Film und Kunst in den Deutschsprachigen Ländern nach 1945* 20 (2004): n.p.

²² Eigler, 'Jenseits', pp. 195–96.

²³ Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, p. xv.

²⁴ Interview, 'Die DDR war ein Komplettspaket: Jens Bisky und Jakob Hein über die DDR, den Mauerfall und Deutschland 15 Jahre danach', *Die Welt*, 9 November 2004, p. 29.

²⁵ Quoted in Henryk R Broder, 'In Mutters ewig kalter Küche', *Der Spiegel*, 29 October 2001, pp. 192–94.

Na ja, der liegt nicht unbedingt in der DDR, der liegt in der Kindheit. Das ist ja etwas relativ Natürliches. Durch den historischen Bruch ist für uns [aus der DDR] die Grenze an einer klareren Stelle gezogen, hinter die wir gucken können.²⁶

The end of the GDR is thus not necessarily a trauma or formative experience per se, but a useful line drawn between childhood and young adulthood. The disappearance of the GDR comes to symbolically represent the loss of things past, such as childhood and youth, but the state itself recedes into the background. In contrast, while *ostalgic* works such as *Sonnenallee*, *Zonenkinder* or *Good Bye, Lenin!* do tell stories of adolescence, their specific focus is on the loss of East German culture, which they attempt to recreate through ‘restorative’ nostalgia. Where *Ostalgie* indicates an inability to transcend memories of the GDR, Hein’s works, on the other hand, demonstrate that a discussion of the East German past can move to an analytical and symbolic level, to the point where the vanished state becomes a trope for the inability, as explored by Proust, to fully retrieve the *temps perdu*.

Jakob Hein presents memories of his childhood in the context of the universal experience of growing up. This retrospective encompasses bygone youth and the uncool hipness of the 1980s in East and West, aligning Hein more with West German *Popliteratur* authors such as Florian Illies than with Hein’s peers from the GDR or with West German Becker’s reconstructions of GDR youth in *Good Bye, Lenin!* Cosentino supports the view that Hein depicts experiences of general validity, which are not limited to those raised in the former GDR:

Es handelt sich in diesen anekdotischen Miniaturen zunächst um Kindheits- und Teenagererlebnisse, die allgemeingültig und typisch sind, ob der Erlebende nun im Westen oder Osten lebt.²⁷

Many vignettes reflect childhood in East and West Germany, immortalizing pop culture such as the fad of ‘Poesiealben’.²⁸ The multi-layered narratives convey the author’s perspective as an adult (and a psychiatrist), and reveal flaws in pedagogy, in sexual education, as well as demonstrating the abuse of power by a variety of adults and authorities.²⁹

A similar dual vantage point can be found in Christoph Hein’s autobiographical novel *Von allem Anfang an*, in which experiences are related ‘von der Warte der Distanz und des historischen Wissens’.³⁰ The ‘Kunstfigur’ of the first-person narrator in the case of both father and son is part fact, part fiction. Cosentino’s observations on the elder Hein’s work are also applicable to the son’s texts:

²⁶ In the interview “Generation Trabant” with Susanne Leinemann and Antje Schmelcher.

²⁷ Cosentino, ‘Autobiographisch’.

²⁸ In ‘Poesiealbum und Paria’ (*T-Shirt*, pp. 22–29) Hein describes the tenuous balance of acceptance and isolation in adolescence — it is only a small step from being sought after for an album entry to the permanent status of pariah.

²⁹ Jakob Hein voices similar concerns about the treatment of children in his article ‘Pssst? Gebt ihm ein “S”!’, where he compares childhood memories of *Sesame Street* with his contemporary views: ‘Pssst? Gebt ihm ein “S”!’, *Die Welt*, 4 January 2003 <http://www.welt.de/data/2003/01/04/29635.html> [accessed 27 February 2006].

³⁰ Christine Cosentino, ‘Überlegungen zu Formen autobiographischen Schreibens in der östlichen Literatur der neunziger Jahre’, in *Glossen: Eine Internationale Zweisprachige Publikation zu Literatur, Film und Kunst in den Deutschsprachigen Ländern nach 1945*, 12 (2001).

Die beeindruckende literarische Textur dieses Werkes liegt also in einem unaufdringlichen und schmiegsamen Verschlungensein zweier Erzählperspektiven, die dem kindlichen Wahrnehmungsvermögen keine Gewalt antut.

Although Jakob Hein has attempted to avoid comparisons between himself and his father,³¹ it might appear that he has not only learned a thing or two about writing from Christoph Hein, but also shares an interest in developmental psychology. While less serious than his father's novel, Jakob Hein's texts in *Mein erstes T-Shirt* nevertheless achieve depth precisely because of the intertwined naïve and critical perspectives on childhood.

Jakob Hein's vignette 'Gitarre' illustrates his twofold narrative approach by ironically depicting adolescent experiences, such as the unsuccessful formation of a band and the adoration of musical idols (*T-Shirt*, pp. 9–13). Hein laconically describes how a classmate, Christian, finds an electric guitar in his parents' basement and gives it to Jakob on permanent loan. This retrospective to 1984 and to age thirteen is not specific to the GDR, but rather mirrors timeless adolescent daydreams. Readers may recognize the teenager's desire to be cool, and the belief that it can be magically brought about by a cult object such as a guitar. In fact, Jakob doesn't bother to learn to play, claiming 'in jeder guten Beziehung [the relationship to the guitar he playfully calls "Giti"] muß es auch Geheimnisse geben, die die Partner einander nicht offenbaren' (*T-Shirt*, p. 13). Jakob's treatment of Christian reflects common teenage insecurities, as this classmate does not really belong and the younger Jakob only tolerates him on their way home from school, i.e. when no one else is around. In exchange for the guitar, Jakob agrees to eat dinner at Christian's house and to pretend in front of the parents that they are friends. Like other descriptions by the author, this anecdote is in all likelihood less a reflection of precisely what happened than a tragicomic description of the games universally played by teenagers attempting to enhance their pride and social standing. The narrator's exaggeratedly naïve tone in recounting these adolescent memories invites the reader to interpret the text ironically, and to suspect that the author implies a criticism of the social structures among friends and classmates.³² In this description of the boys' negotiation over the instrument, the adult Hein reveals the vicissitudes of youthful intolerance, opportunism, and ego protection.

Hein's ironic tone with regard to adolescent desires, which seem monumental at the time, and amusing in retrospect, is reminiscent of *Sonnenallee*'s Micha and his pursuit of happiness and love through extreme measures. In one instance, he writes diaries spanning six years of his life in one night in order to prove his sensitivity and political audacity to the beloved and elusive Miriam.³³ A further similarity with *Mein erstes T-Shirt* is the role of rock music in the dream of achieving a cool image. In the film *Sonnenallee* Micha and his friends are insulted at the school rock party by a West German student, but they eventually

³¹ Iris Alanyali: 'Der Sohn ist Jakob Hein äußerst ungern. Trotzdem hat er ein Buch über seine Mutter geschrieben. Sein bestes', in *Die Welt*, 9 October 2004: 'Literarische Welt', p. 2.

³² Following Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), I treat irony as an intended and covert area of the text in which certain signals invite the reader to find an alternative meaning, based on an evaluation of the implied author's most likely belief about the subject matter in question. In *Mein erstes T-Shirt*, Hein frequently adopts a naïve tone or makes exaggerated statements that clash with his age and educational level. Because his primary profession is psychiatry, for instance, oversimplified statements about childhood and education incite the reader to take a closer look, often deciding that the author is poking fun at or criticizing common educational practices.

³³ Brussig, *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee*, pp. 147–48.

triumph in the final scene, when the entire Sonnenallee (including the border guard) dances at their feet to the music of a black-market record.³⁴ The central difference between *Mein erstes T-Shirt* and *Sonnenallee* is the fact that Hein's vignette 'Gitarre' foregrounds the psychology of maturation through a 'musical transaction,' without specifically engaging an East German context, whereas *Sonnenallee* lets the reader and viewer indulge in a recreated East German neighborhood and in fantasies of political subversion. In this *ostalgic* work, the plot is driven by anecdotes of life at the Wall. Character development in Micha, his peers, and even his parents occurs vis-à-vis the state, as opposed to conveying universal 'patterns of childhood'.

Amid *Sonnenallee*'s efforts to smuggle, flee, and to outsmart the border guards, the oppressive former East German state is contrasted with the level of inner freedom gained by its protagonists. In other works, Brussig does move beyond the context of the GDR to emphasize the process of maturation in his characters. For instance, Jörg Magenau points out that in Brussig's novel *Wasserfarben*, the topic of adolescence is of a general nature — an observation that holds true for Hein's fiction as well: 'Es ist überhaupt erstaunlich, wie systemübergreifend Jugend und ihre spezifische Gefühlswelt erscheinen. Denkt man sich andere Kulissen und Kostüme, könnte *Wasserfarben* auch in der Bundesrepublik spielen'.³⁵ One can easily apply the universals of adolescence — music, relationships, and the longing for love — to Hein's fictionalized memoirs.

The third text in Hein's *Mein erstes T-Shirt*, 'Meine private Hölle' (pp. 17–21), reads like a sequel to 'Gitarre' in that it revisits the troubles of adolescence. This piece is likewise not representative of GDR culture, but rather reveals a not-so-private 'hell' to which anyone familiar with the 1980s can attest. The author begins from a contemporary perspective:

Die Achtziger sind wieder da, die schreckliche Musik der grauen Zeit zwischen 1980 und 1989. [...] [Es] werden Bands wie 'Wham!' oder die 'Triplets' gespielt mit ungesunden Kombinationen von 'You don't have to go home tonight' und danach 'Wake me up before you gogo'. Da werden bei mir schlimmste Erinnerungen wach. (p. 17)

The pop music titles function as ironized Proustian *madeleines* that take the narrator back to his adolescence in the 80s: 'Völlig mittellos stromerte ich seinerzeit durch die Straßen Ostberlins. Auf der Suche nach einem Netzhemd zum Über-den-Pullover-Ziehen, nach ein paar Straßsteinen für besagten Pullover, [...], nach einem Heilmittel gegen Akne vulgaris' (p. 17). As Hein recounts his search for a string vest, rhinestones, and a club for youth under sixteen, his memories are linked to the GDR only in passing:

Aber in der Diktatur der Arbeiterklasse hatte ich keine Chance. Don Johnson fuhr mit einem Cabrio und Drei-Tage-Bart durch Miami. Für so einen Bart mußte ich mindestens vier Wochen sparen und auf das Cabrio wahrscheinlich noch länger. (p. 17).

The fashion horror of rhinestones and the adolescent curse of acne, as well as lacking facial hair and car recreate a 1980s coming-of-age comedy. Hein makes it clear that the preoccupation with and desire for important attributes has nothing to do with the dictatorship of the proletariat. Instead, he alludes to icons of American pop culture in order

³⁴ Brussig's book includes the school party scene, but does not end with the dance scene that closes the film.

³⁵ Jörg Magenau, 'Kindheitsmuster: Thomas Brussig oder Die ewige Jugend der DDR', in *aufgerissen: Zur Literatur der 90er*, ed. by Thomas Kraft, (Munich: Piper, 2000), pp. 39–52 (p. 48).

to express a dream world that remains inaccessible to all adolescents of his generation, whether in the East or the West.

Richard Herzinger reads the proliferation of generational discourse after 1989 — with labels such as 'Generation Berlin', 'Tristesse Royale', or 'Generation Trabant' — as a reflection of a need for orientation, on the one hand, and a desire to symbolically unite East and West, on the other:

Die 'Erfahrung' rückte jetzt als emphatische Kategorie der Identitätsfindung in den Mittelpunkt sozialhistorischer Aufmerksamkeit. Man wollte sich in diesen Jahren 'seine Biographien' erzählen und so [...] zu einer Authentizität gegenseitigen Verständnisses durchdringen.³⁶

Thus, there may be more than a coincidental connection between the fall of the Berlin Wall, the notion of belonging to a generation, and the penchant for autobiographical accounts. The protagonists in the works by Hein, Becker, Brussig/Haußmann, and Hensel each are situated within a specific socio-political milieu after 1990, which they narrate through the lens of their fictional(ized) biography. The retreat into a small-scale, familiar narrative space can be interpreted as a reaction against the weighty moralism of Günter Grass's generation, as a 'Rückzug ins Unmittelbare der kleinen, überschaubaren Lebenserfahrung'.³⁷ This is visible in the *Popliteratur* among young authors from both the FRG and the former GDR. Perhaps, then, the 'Generation Golf' and 'Generation Trabant' are more similar than German pop culture would have it.³⁸

Hein's stories have been compared to the depiction of West German youth in the 1970s and 1980s in *Generation Golf*, published in 2000 by Florian Illies.³⁹ The fact that these two autobiographical texts by Hein and Illies, both born in 1971, appeared around the same time suggests that the humorous treatment of childhood memories is a generational approach taken by young East and West German authors of the Berlin Republic.⁴⁰ Similar to Hein in a tone of ironic distancing, Illies describes his peers as brand-conscious egotists. In his study on *Westalgie*, Andrew Plowman sees a depiction of 'childhood and adolescent consumption of Western products as the indicator of an exclusive "Westernness"',⁴¹ but cautions against understanding *Westalgie* as a 'reverse image' of *Ostalgie*. Where nostalgia for the former GDR targets specific elements of the vanished state, brands and products

³⁶ Richard Herzinger, 'Mythos, Stil und Simulation: "Generation" als Kampfbegriff und literarische Selbsterfindung', in *neue deutsche Literatur*, 48.4 (2000) 144–64 (p. 152).

³⁷ Herzinger, 'Mythos, Stil und Simulation', p. 163.

³⁸ In online book reviews, several readers comment on the similarity of Illies' *Generation Golf* and Hein's *Mein erstes T-Shirt*. Most reviewers believe that Hein is copying (unfavorably) Illies' style, but they seem to ignore the closeness of the publication dates which makes it unlikely that Hein read Illies before submitting his manuscript to Piper.

³⁹ Illies coined a phrase with his title that has been modified into its counterpoint 'Generation Trabant', just as Jana Hensel provided the catch phrase 'Zonenkinder'. These two phrases are combined in the above-mentioned *Welt* article by Susanne Leinemann and Antje Schmelcher in which Hein and other young East German authors were interviewed about the cultural influences of the GDR on their identities and writing.

⁴⁰ The 'Generation Golf' rubric has even been used to describe members of both East and West Germany, placing Jakob Hein into this category, on a site authored by Bernd Kittlaus <<http://www.single-generation.de/kohorten/golf.htm>>.

⁴¹ Andrew Plowman, 'Westalgie? Nostalgia for the "Old" Federal Republic in Recent German Prose', in *Seminar*, 40.3 (2004), 249–61 (p. 256).

are not simply elements of Westerness, but actually define its self-image as a consumerist system. Illies carefully stylizes his generation when he suggests that it was pacified into an apolitical consumerism, which he introduces through a description of his Saturday night childhood ritual of soccer, bath, and 'Playmobil' toys: 'Ich fühle mich, als hätte der Postbote gerade das Rundum-sorglos-Paket abgegeben' (p. 9). The consumerist childhood idyll of the 'Generation Golf' is topped off by prime time television and Nutella sandwiches: 'Es war damals selbstverständlich, daß man *Wetten, daß...?* mit Frank Elstner guckte, niemals wieder hatte man in späteren Jahren solch ein sicheres Gefühl, zu einem bestimmten Zeitpunkt genau das Richtige zu tun'. Illies revels in the memories of being pampered, while also humorously hinting at later difficulties when the security-blanket of parents and products would be taken away.

Although Hein likewise ironizes childhood experiences, he does not share Illies' stylized image of his adolescence. Instead of characterizing an entire generation and its consumption habits, as Illies does when he uses the impersonal pronoun 'man' to describe the 'Generation Golf', Hein tends to select individual memories and places them in the context of developmental psychology. This is further illustrated by Hein's text entitled 'Warum ich Antikommunist wurde' (*T-Shirt*, p. 14–16), which only at first glance focuses on political content. Upon closer scrutiny, this vignette is a combination of situation comedy and an ironic portrayal of adolescence. As in the above-mentioned texts of *Mein erstes T-Shirt*, one of the starting points is the eternal boon of coolness and attractive appearance. Hein ironically begins:

Ich habe nicht soviel Erfolg bei den Frauen. Ich glaube auch nicht, daß ich soviel Erfolg bei Männern hätte, denn ich bin mal in eine Kneipe gegangen, die hieß 'Adonis XXX Male Love Club'. Als ich dann fragte, ob das hier 'ne Schwulenbar wäre, haben mir alle versichert, daß dem nicht so sei. Komisch. (p. 14)

This brief introduction evokes adolescent insecurity regarding sexuality and sexual identity. Hein continues in this vein with references to the proverbial 'Plattensammlung' that teenage boys would like to show someone, and also mentions the West German youth magazine *Bravo* and the East German *FRÖSI* (p. 14). In the latter, Jakob one day finds a record to commemorate the 100th birthday of Wladimir Illitsch. In passing, Hein resuscitates a piece of GDR cultural history in a move similar to Haußmann's *Sonnenallee*, which displays 'attempts to normalize the experience of viewing the East for a Western audience'.⁴² But while the explanation of the title *FRÖSI* — 'Fröhlich sein und singen' — does communicate a cultural memory, this comment takes up less space (6 lines) than the introduction on the gay bar and the narrator's failures at seduction (13 lines), and is not even situated at the beginning, but rather constitutes a mere transition to the story of why the narrator became an anti-Communist.

As Jakob is forbidden to use the family record player, the boy finally builds a makeshift one using an electric mixer and dragging his finger nails (clipped to a point) along the record. The denouement amid bloody fingers and a destroyed mixer is hilariously anticlimactic. In answer to the question 'was ist das, Sowjetmacht?' (p. 15), Jakob hears the predictable slogan by Lenin, 'Kommunismus und Elektrifizierung des ganzen Landes' (p. 16). From that moment on, he claims to be an anti-Communist. The surreal

⁴² Cooke, 'Performing "Ostalgie"', p. 162.

development of this vignette from the uneventful visit to the gay bar to a propagandistic record not only amuses readers, but also leads them to question the authenticity of this memory. Above all, this text contains several insights into youth psychology. The boy's absurd tenacity in building the mixer/record player reflects the ability of children to pursue goals that make sense to them, or if nothing else, to engage in adventurous fantasies of circumventing parental power. At the same time, the introductory musings about the narrator's attractiveness show that looming ahead are the sexual frustrations of adolescence.

Precisely the hilarity of such depictions has been negatively received, as members of the 'Generation Trabant' have been faulted for their whimsical approach to GDR history. The author Bernd Wagner, who was born in 1948 and resided in the GDR until 1985, criticizes the markedly humorous and normalizing attitude of writers such as Jakob Hein. Most notably, Wagner claims that these young authors simply have no bone to pick with the GDR because of the privileges they enjoyed through their prominent parents. Wagner contrasts this lifestyle with the hardships endured by less prominent critics of the SED regime, who spent years in prison and who were denied privileges such as travel, choice of profession, or certain consumer products. For these reasons, Wagner attacks the authors of the 'Generation Trabant' in an interview with *Die Zeit*:

Aber was sagen die uns? Dass man ganz gut durch dieses Leben ohne Schmerzen kommen kann und trotzdem zur Erkenntnis, dass es die DDR besser nicht gegeben hätte? Sind solche Erkenntnisse wert, in unser Gedächtnis einzugehen, oder wären es nicht eher diejenigen, die 'zur falschen Zeit am falschen Ort' waren und es womöglich noch sind und deshalb wirkliche Erfahrungen mitzuteilen haben?⁴³

These critical comments indicate a competition for narrative authority of 'real experiences' between the older and younger generations with respect to East German history. Wagner, who sees himself and his contemporaries as victims of the SED government, scorns the 'Generation Trabant' because he objects to their naïve approach to history and because many of them escaped repression. While it is true that social status, privileges, and date of birth played an enormous role in deciding fates in the former GDR, such conflicts need not be used to discredit the works of young East Germans who might have written different texts had they been in different situations both before and after reunification.

At the same time, a tendency is visible in the works of the younger generation of German authors — albeit from East and West — toward writing that is either apolitical or treats politics with light-hearted humor, which represents a break with a time-honored literary tradition in post-war Germany. Earlier generations of GDR authors, such as Monika Maron, describe childhood in East Germany as a period stunted due to political and societal constraints of communism.⁴⁴ As opposed to Maron's protagonists, who carry an unfulfilled longing for a childhood they never fully experienced, younger authors engage in happier memories of adolescence, as in the film and book version of *Sonnenallee*,

⁴³ Bernd Wagner, 'Nutella zum Frühstück, Michael Ende im Regal: Was die "Generation Trabant" erzählt, passt nicht zu meinen Erfahrungen', *Die Zeit*, 25 November 2004 <<http://www.zeit.de/2004/49/L-DDR>> [accessed 27 February 2006].

⁴⁴ Brigitte Konze, 'Das gestohlene Leben: Zur Thematisierung und Darstellung von Kindheit in der DDR im Werk von Monika Maron im Vergleich mit Werken von Uwe Johnson, Irmtraud Morgner und Thomas Brussig', in *Monika Maron in Perspective*, pp. 181–203 (p. 182).

where the confrontation with authorities, such as the border guards, takes on a humorous note.⁴⁵ Haußmann's film also offers satirical glimpses of the 'Pioniere' being shepherded along the Sonnenallee, indicative of children's enmeshment in East German politics, but casting it in a comical light. Similarly, Becker's script inserts 'Pioniere' into the plot by having them sing at the birthday party for Alex's mother Christiane Kerner, dressed in their old blue uniforms — and awaiting their payment from Alex upon leaving the celebration. Both Haußmann and Becker thus ironize the image of the East German youth organization by passing the 'Pioniere' off as passive subjects and as capitalistically reformed entrepreneurs respectively. As opposed to Maron's works, the younger authors/filmmakers avoid any serious discussion of oppression or harm to children. What Maron's, Becker's, Haußmann's, and Brussig's approaches do have in common is the fact that they foreground a specific generation's experiences in the context of the GDR. In contrast, Hein's texts focus primarily on the psychology of youth, regardless of political surroundings. Sharon Stephens has noted recent concern about 'the threatened spaces of an ideally safe, innocent, and carefree domain of childhood', while acknowledging that such a 'protected space' may be an idealization of the past.⁴⁶ In his texts, Hein does reflect 'adult nostalgia for youthful innocence'⁴⁷ as well as a desire to observe children (his reconstructed childhood self and peers) in an environment into which the state did not intrude. The depolitized world his narrator lives in avoids memories of 'Pioniere' and FDJ, and instead constructs a child's space in which society, relationships, and surroundings can be explored in an age-appropriate context.

Based on his background in psychiatry, Hein writes what Henryk Broder calls 'case histories' of childhood, examining both his own behavior in the past and that of classmates and authorities, as he intertwines his medical insights with memories of his childhood: 'Viele seiner Miniaturen lesen sich wie Krankengeschichten. Die rote Republik war für ihn ein großes Hospital mit vielen Stationen, die Bürger waren Patienten, die verschiedenen Behandlungen unterzogen wurden'.⁴⁸ Hein's scrutiny of childhood continues on a more serious note in 'Die schlimmsten Jahre' (*T-Shirt*, p. 45–51), where he scoffs at the intense warnings by adults against all sorts of dangers: 'Mein Leben war von frühester Jugend an furchtbaren Gefahren ausgesetzt, und daß ich heute, entgegen jeder Statistik, Thermodynamik und Vernunft, noch hier bin, verdanke ich nur dem Zufall' (p. 45). Here, Hein makes fun of German society whose paranoia, he contends, leads children to suppose that survival is unlikely. While Barry Glassner has similarly diagnosed the U.S. as a *Culture of Fear*, these fears center on violence and conflict. German anxieties, I would argue, are more strongly based on environmental hazards and health concerns, as reflected by Hein's examples (see also the common outcry, 'das ist krebserregend!'). Although comically exaggerating his childhood anxieties, the author does suggest that such cautionary

⁴⁵ Konze, 'Das gestohlene Leben', p. 198.

⁴⁶ Sharon Stephens, 'Children and the Politics of Culture in "Late Capitalism"', in *Children and the Politics of Culture*, ed. by Sharon Stephens, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 3–48 (p. 9).

⁴⁷ Jo Boyden, 'Childhood and the Policy Makers: A Comparative Perspective on the Globalization of Childhood', in *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, ed. by Allison James and Alan Prout, (London: Falmer Press, 1990), pp. 184–216 (p. 185).

⁴⁸ Broder, 'In Mutters ewig kalter Küche', p. 194. While Broder implies a political reading of *Mein erstes T-Shirt*, I use the term case history in the original, psychoanalytical context to describe Hein's approach to youth.

impulses on the part of adults are problematic. Children, the psychiatrist points out, are led to drastically overestimate the negative consequences of drinking tap water, mixing Coke with ice cream, or making faces (pp. 45–46). With a seemingly straight face, the author also shows us the way in which young Jakob blames needing glasses on having ignored earlier warnings:

Mit sechs Jahren bekam ich dann eine Brille, was ich als gerechte Strafe empfand, ich hatte nämlich nicht nur häufig aus Spaß geschielt, sondern auch noch im Dunkeln gelesen und konnte mich insofern freuen, noch nicht vollständig erblindet zu sein (p. 47).

Demonstrating the dramatic overstatement of the dangers of existence, as seen from an impressionable child's perspective, Hein ironically uncovers his generation's fear-based upbringing, while also opening the eyes of the adult reader to the thought processes and reactions of young children.

The traditional hierarchy between adults and children places power in the hands of the former. In fact, Stephens points out that the 'development of child-focused institutions' in the modern nation-state indicates a desire to create 'age-graded subjects and spaces' (p. 15). If the above-mentioned instilling of fear can be read as a way to preserve authority and order, the same could be said for compulsory education. Hein complements his depictions of peer and family relationships with insights into the German educational system based on his nursery-school to secondary-school experiences. These observations are not GDR-specific, but rather relate to both Germanies. In the vignette, 'Wir hießen polytechnisch'⁴⁹ (*T-Shirt*, p. 38–44), Hein mocks his own scientific limitations and goes on to criticize the idea of school altogether. His satirical theory of education is this:

Das Problem ist wahrscheinlich, daß Leute mit Kindern irgendwann arbeiteten und es deswegen einen Ort geben mußte, an dem die Kinder tagsüber sind. [...] Und so wurden die Kinder also beschult" (*T-Shirt*, pp. 38–39).

The rather unusual choice of the verb 'beschulen' places children in the roles of passive victims to adult aspirations. Here Hein again conveys a dual perspective that evokes both the child's boredom in school and the adult's criticism of flaws in education. According to Hein, the 'uselessness' of schooling goes back to a misunderstanding:

Das ist alles soweit gut, aber irgendwann wurde dann vergessen, daß Schulen nur als Verwahranstalt konzipiert waren, und es wurde angenommen, daß den Kindern dort Dinge fürs Leben beigebracht werden. Das ist natürlich nicht so (p. 39).

Hein's criticism of uninspired parenting and education in Germany adds a serious note to the light-hearted overall tone. It is never quite clear whether the author is poking fun at the educational system or at the anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment rhetoric lingering in Germany from the sixties and seventies. In fact, one might come to the conclusion that the psychiatrist's stories target both: the traditional ideal of 'Bildung' as well as the anti-authoritarian resistance to discipline, two aspects that remain central to German identity and culture.

The focus on adolescence and maturation is revisited in Hein's third book, *Vielelleicht ist es sogar schön*, where he combines memories of his childhood with recollections of his

⁴⁹ This refers to the 'polytechnische Oberschule', the high schools in the GDR, but the vignette focuses on general pedagogical notions.

mother, who died in 2004. Hein depicts the illness and death of his mother, Christiane Hein, juxtaposed with a number of his childhood memories. This work complements the earlier light-hearted recollections as it more seriously expresses existential fears of growing up and simultaneously confronts the inability to retrieve the past. This book is both a eulogy of Hein's mother and a final letting go of childhood. In one of the final episodes, 'Erwachsen werden' (pp. 145–48), Hein describes various attempts to grow up, moving from his adolescent hopes for maturation to his observation at thirty that he still lacks the feeling of 'being adult'. This perception, which belies the fact that maturation is a continuous process, is nevertheless accentuated by Hein's realization that in his mother's final days, their roles are reversed. When he brings his ailing mother food that she can't keep down, he turns into the comforting 'parent':

Sie war verzweifelt, weil sie fürchtete, dass ich gekränkt sein könnte über ihre Missachtung meiner Bemühungen. Ich brachte sie ins Bett und erzählte ihr ein bisschen, dabei schlief sie ein. So wurde ich in meinem dreißigsten Lebensjahr doch noch plötzlich und unerwartet erwachsen. (pp. 147–48)

As Jakob Hein explores his biography in *Vielleicht ist es sogar schön*, he looks at earlier perceived failures to grow up in what seems to be an attempt to bring meaning to his mother's early death. Presented in this way, the trauma of the terrible loss is interpreted as necessary to bring about a maturity that the author-narrator might have achieved eventually, but that he meanwhile links to the permanent rupture with childhood through the death of his mother.

In *Good Bye, Lenin!*, the death of Alex's mother, Christiane Kerner, represents a comparable rupture in the son's life. During her illness, Alex not only recreates the East German life-style in order to protect his mother's health, but also to preserve the security of the familiar childhood settings for his own sense of comfort. Where Hein relates the parent's death to his own personal development, *Good Bye, Lenin!* uses the loss of both father and mother — through abandonment and illness, respectively — at a different level, by creating an analogy between parental loss and political instability. The imminent death of Alex's mother in Becker's *ostalgic* movie is the starting point for recreating the vanished GDR. Although at the end we share the family's — especially Alex's — personal grief at his mother's death, the film's focus is on the loss of a home in a larger sense, in other words, on the entirety of cultural, economic, political, and everyday surroundings, from childhood to Honecker and Spreewaldgurken. One might interpret *Good Bye, Lenin!* as 'a rites of passage movie in the double sense' since just as Christiane Kerner's brief reawakening from the coma allows Alex 'to prepare himself for the eventual trauma of losing his mother, so the "extra time" the "GDR" enjoys also gives him the opportunity to make the transition from the old to the new world order'.⁵⁰ Above all, however, Becker's *ostalgic* film foregrounds reconstructions of GDR culture, whereas Hein's text uses personal loss to reflect on the psychology of maturation.

At the same time, there is perhaps a deeper connection between these two narrative explorations of the mother's death. Carolyn Steedman argues that the idea of childhood, as it developed throughout the nineteenth century, can be linked to the concept of history, since in both contexts one detects a search for interiority as a means to resist the

⁵⁰ Seán Allan, 'Ostalgie, fantasy and the normalization of east-west relations in post-unification comedy', in *German Cinema Since Unification*, ed. by David Clarke, (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 105–26 (p. 121).

progression toward death: 'The vast historicised world was turned inside, so that history itself might be de-historicised, removed from the time that allowed growth and decay';⁵¹ in a similar fashion, theories of childhood resisted 'the implications of growth' in order to avoid the logical connection to death. As Becker and Hein describe the son's reactions to their mother's illness, both emphasize the resistance to passing time — in the case of Alex, to the cultural upheaval of unification, and in the case of both sons, to entering fully into the adult world. Only the caesura of death forces both protagonists to accept that fantasies of a perpetually unchanged childhood personality are just that — illusions of frozen time.

In contrast to the overall focus on childhood and education, the final two vignettes in *Mein erstes T-Shirt* describe the fall of the Berlin Wall, albeit with surreal undertones. The interplay of fact and fiction is most striking in the penultimate vignette entitled 'Wie es damals wirklich war' (*T-Shirt*, p. 137–41). The title suggests that this narrative contains a factual account, but this is not the case. In this text, the narrator's class is loaded on to a Russian truck one morning for a paramilitary exercise. From the start, the tone makes readers wonder about the truth of the account, as they are blithely informed: 'Das war gar nicht ungewöhnlich, denn wir lebten in einer Diktatur' (p. 137). This statement is not completely untrue, since adolescents did participate in paramilitary training in the GDR. But one must take this dramatic depiction as a satirical portrayal of victimization at the hands of teachers. As the students disappear into the cold morning, the headmaster watches them from the window and sips warm tea from his samovar, a gift 'für treue Dienste vom russischen Geheimdienst' (p. 137). In this ironic account of corruption and underage drills, the narrator seems further removed from Hein, since it is not believable that the author would have naïvely participated in paramilitary training. According to Eigler, the juxtaposition of fact and fiction introduces alienation effects into memories of the GDR: 'Durch die Integration von phantastischen und grotesken Elementen kommt es dabei aber nicht zur ostalgischen Verklärung der DDR-Vergangenheit'.⁵² In fact, Hein grossly exaggerates the hardships and pokes fun at the self-importance of the narrator: 'Wir aber saßen klappernd auf der metallischen Ladefläche und fragten uns, wo die Fahrt wohl hingehen würde. Wieder zu einer paramilitärischen Übung, wie seinerzeit, als wir plötzlich in die Schweinebucht mußten?' (pp. 137–38). In view of this blatant historical discrepancy (Hein was born in 1971), the reader knows for certain that the author does not mean to speak of events he could actually have experienced.

Hein thus invites his audience to read between the lines and to critically reflect on the aggrandized stories people tell of their adolescent experiences. The surreal development of 'Wie es damals wirklich war' only serves to reinforce the suspicion that the entire vignette is a parody of political memories. The narrator runs into the woods during the drill and hears voices underground. Are these Communists still in hiding from World War II?, he wonders. As it turns out, the young narrator has run into a conspiracy that includes Helmut Kohl, George Bush, and Mikhail Gorbachev (*T-Shirt*, p. 140). At the end, the narrator's fantastic involvement in the fall of the Wall adds to the surreal plot: he dresses up as Günter Schabowski and orders the opening of the border (p. 141). Not unlike Brussig's Klaus

⁵¹ Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780–1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 95.

⁵² Eigler, 'Jenseits', p. 204.

Uhltzscht in *Helden wie wir*, Hein places his narrator in a hilariously megalomaniac position vis-à-vis the November 1989 events, ending his ‘memories’ of the GDR not in *Ostalgie*, but in satirical portrayals of underhanded politics and self-important recollections.

The intersection of fact and fiction that Hein uses to describe the events of November 1989 reappears in the final vignette, ‘Wie es damals wirklich gewesen sein könnte’ (*T-Shirt*, pp. 142–50). The first-person narrator describes how he is drawn into a demonstration after a concert late one night, ends up in prison for six weeks, and is then released to a post-Wall world à la *Good Bye, Lenin!* Some elements of this story may be based on Hein’s experiences, but the events are clearly exaggerated since there is no documentation of Hein having been imprisoned.⁵³ Here again, Hein ironizes the narrator’s fantasies of political involvement during the *Wende*, suggesting that people who did not actively participate in demonstrations might in retrospect desire to refashion a more exciting image of themselves as courageous protestors. As the title of the last vignette suggests, the narrator, or Hein, could have played a leading role in demonstrations. The narrator’s dramatic recounting of paramilitary adventures and his purported involvement in the *Novemberrevolution* ironically points toward the numerous *Helden wie wir*, or the tendency to retrospectively aggrandize one’s role in political events. Nowhere does Hein show more clearly the connection between adolescent heroics and the revision of memories to enhance the self-image. The turmoil of the *Wende* is reinterpreted as adventures of adolescence and sheds light on the tenuous process of retrieving and expressing memories, which come to serve the present self in its search for a heroic image, rather than authentically recalling the past. As Brussig puts it in the final sentence of *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee*, memories can be happily misleading:

Wer wirklich bewahren will, was geschehen ist, der darf sich nicht den Erinnerungen hingeben. Die menschliche Erinnerung ist ein viel zu wohliger Vorgang [...] Sie vollbringt beharrlich das Wunder, einen Frieden mit der Vergangenheit zu schließen, in dem sich jeder Groll verflüchtigt und der weiche Schleier der Nostalgie über alles legt, was mal scharf und schneidend empfunden wurde. Glückliche Menschen haben ein schlechtes Gedächtnis und reiche Erinnerungen. (pp. 156–57)

Because of its sudden and complete demise, the former GDR seems predestined to be a background for stories that convey a nostalgic sense of loss. After 1990, a number of works express *Ostalgie* through symbolic links to and ruptures with the past. The most poignant metaphor for nostalgia and loss is represented by the images of childhood and the trauma of losing a parent, as visible in *Good Bye, Lenin!*. Of the works under comparison, Becker’s film as well as Hensel’s *Zonenkinder* most intensely deal with the GDR and with emotions of loss on a personal and cultural level. The plots of both *Sonnenallee* versions tend toward a balance between the themes of youth and *Ostalgie*, placing stories of adolescent dreams and insecurities in the context of life in the former GDR. Each of these *ostalgic* works seems to fulfill a need for a positive identification on the part of East Germans, and a normalizing role for non-GDR audiences. In contrast, Hein’s stories in *Mein erstes T-Shirt* transform the affective, nostalgic — and ultimately political — dimension into an analytical portrait of childhood, while circumventing the *Ostalgie* of *Zonenkinder* or the youthful, nostalgically tinged adventures in *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye, Lenin!*. Hein does not focus

⁵³ Cosentino also discounts the story of imprisonment, describing it as ‘der schon nicht mehr ernst zu nehmenden Inhaftierung des Achtzehnjährigen’: ‘Autobiographisch’.

on the GDR, only tangentially evoking the repressive SED regime when mentioning conflicts with teachers and authorities. By looking back with a dual adult-child gaze in *Mein erstes T-Shirt*, Hein creates a document of the past that intertwines his own childhood with his contemporary understanding of adolescence. Hein's literary memories navigate *ostalgic* distortions and flashy generalizations such as those in *Generation Golf*, expressing a universal fascination for lost youth as a means to understanding the present self.