Monika Maron und Jenny Erpenbeck: 
DDR Im Zeichen der Moderne

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English Summary of Doctoral Thesis
Summary

Literature by authors from the GDR has often been read with a focus on its socio-political context – before and after the fall of the Wall. This rather one-dimensional approach has resulted in a lack of engagement with the more complex issues raised in many of those texts. Frequently, they address broader theoretical questions and delve into universal themes, which tend to be overlooked or sidelined.

This PhD thesis concentrates on a selection of post-Wende texts by Monika Maron and Jenny Erpenbeck, two authors from the former East Germany. Starting from the premise that both authors' œuvres serve on one level as critical investigations of the GDR and the significant aftermath of its collapse, I aim to demonstrate that these narratives have more to offer. My analysis brings to light the complexity of the examined works by addressing what it regards as their central themes: the exploration of questions around the topics of Heimat and memory. This research project draws attention to the texts' representation of underlying issues such as dislocation and fragmentation, and in doing so it examines how both authors depict concerns that go beyond the GDR and its demise. A key task is the analysis of the ways in which Monika Maron and Jenny Erpenbeck portray the symptoms of a wider ‘modern condition’, a state characterized by instability and uncertainty. Based on the concept of ambivalence, introduced to the debates about modernity by Zygmunt Bauman in the early 1990s, this original comparative approach explores the failure and the ultimate collapse of the socialist utopia as a paradigm for the breakdown of the ‘grand narratives’ in modern, Western pluralist societies.

Thus, this PhD thesis illuminates how both authors position themselves in relation to competing discourses about the GDR, and it simultaneously alerts the reader to the texts' inherent complexity by revealing their strong ties to topical issues regarding the much-debated term of modernity. Ultimately, I claim that Maron and Erpenbeck set out to investigate the impact of larger processes of fragmentation, and try to establish the possible role of and a ‘place’ for the individual that is exposed to historical forces and the rapid changes of spatio-temporal parameters within modernity, of which the GDR experience forms one part.

The contextualization of so-called ‘GDR literature’ in an often uniquely political framework has frequently resulted in one-sided approaches that create the
impression of a static body of texts and underestimate many authors’ significant engagement with wider historical, theoretical and philosophical questions. Wolfgang Emmerich encourages a “rereading” of ‘GDR literature’ and its existing interpretations. In particular, Emmerich points out critically the neglect of aesthetic aspects that has happened so far, and he also discusses the problematic term ‘GDR writer’.\(^1\)

By concentrating on a selection of post-Wende texts by Monika Maron (born 1941) and Jenny Erpenbeck (born 1967), who were both raised in the GDR, this thesis demonstrates the writers’ concern with the former East German state and the still urgent consequences of its collapse. However, this thesis makes the strong point that the texts in question have more to offer than an examination in a solely GDR-related framework might suggest: the representation of the socialist metanarrative and the implications of its disappearance reveal, as this thesis shows, the symptoms a wider ‘modern malaise’ such as fragmentation, dislocation and uncertainty. In this context, it is important to note that neither of the two authors embraces the terms ‘GDR literature’ and ‘GDR writer’, and they do not perceive of themselves either as producing ‘GDR literature’.\(^2\)

In my use of the term modernity in this thesis I am guided by two works by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman: *Modernity and Ambivalence* and *Liquid Modernity*. Bauman employs the term ambivalence to refer in first instance to the ambiguity that can be produced by language. Furthermore, according to Bauman, ambivalence refers to an ambiguous state of existence that is produced as the result of the modern ‘prime task’ to create order. Bauman explains that the effort to create order, in fact, produces more and more ambiguity, which has to be seen as the almost paradoxical outcome of classification. The individual is left in an uncomfortable state of insecurity as it cannot establish with clarity the possible right and wrong of his / her actions.\(^3\) In *Liquid Modernity* Bauman describes the state of our present modernity. Bauman uses the metaphor of liquidity to express the characteristics of an


\(^2\) Monika Maron, ‘Rede zum Nationalpreis’ (2009), in *Zwei Brüder: Gedanken zur Einheit 1989-2009* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 2010), 199-206; Jenny Erpenbeck kindly answered a list of questions that I sent her and agreed to them being used as material for this dissertation, 20.6.2010.

existence that includes the idea of total freedom and boasts a lack of borders and regulations. Both space and time turn into shifting and shapeless categories in this age of ‘fleetingness’. The individual seemingly leads a life without rules but also without any guidance or support. Thus, Bauman draws attention to an even more ambivalent and insecure state of being within this liquid modernity of the present day.\(^4\)

In using concepts of Heimat and memory as methodological tools for the discussion and by looking at them in the light of Zygmunt Bauman's notions of ambivalence and fleetingness in relation to modernity, this thesis draws attention to the fluctuating and often ambivalent nature of those categories. This thesis argues that questions concerning Heimat, the yearning for a ‘place’, and coalescent issues of spatiality, time and identity lie at the core of Maron and Erpenbeck's texts. My first aim is to demonstrate that the authors' œuvres should be understood as critical investigations of their place of origin or Heimat, the former GDR. I suggest, however, that they also need to be contextualised in the wider framework of modernity, since both writers address fundamental concerns of contemporary existence: the significant modifications of the parameters space and time during the modern age. This thesis calls for the urgent recognition of the multiple layers in Maron and Erpenbeck's critical literature of memory. Modernity, memory and Heimat need to be focused on in both of these writers' works in order to demonstrate that the GDR was an influencing and shaping, but not an all-determining factor regarding Maron and Erpenbeck's texts in particular and day-to-day life in the GDR and the memory thereof in a broader sense.

This thesis for the first time brings to the reader's attention the paradigmatic function and meaning of the GDR, its collapse and aftermath for an adequate description of the individual's condition within modernity. This PhD project develops an original approach to both writers' texts. In a comparative manner this thesis examines in how far both authors' texts comment on and challenge developments in memory discourses about the GDR and its representation, and it highlights both writers' idiosyncratic position. This thesis argues that the search for a home, nostalgia

and an often diffuse yearning as faced by the protagonists in the analysed texts is not only important in relation to the GDR but in relation to the modern state of being.

Both Maron and Erpenbeck express in different ways the essential ambivalence that constitutes the individual's experience in modernity. It is this ambivalence that I regard as a key feature of modernity: a seemingly resilient belief in progress and relentless optimism on the one hand, and on the other hand, a nostalgic facing backwards and a yearning for supposed former securities. These securities disappear with the breakdown of major metanarratives (the socialist metanarrative being one of them), which leaves the individual in a state of uncertainty. Consequently, I argue that the texts I am looking at in this thesis are rooted in both authors' historical experience, of which the GDR and its collapse form one part. Beyond that however, they also draw our attention to issues within the spectrum of broader Western culture which are at stake in an age permeated by ambivalence and fleetingness. It is precisely this co-existence that makes these texts relevant for our understanding of the GDR and present day Germany, as well as of fundamental concerns of our modern times.

A few more words need to be said about the term ‘GDR literature’ in order to fully grasp the approach of this analysis. This thesis argues that the idea of a ‘GDR literature’ is reductive, because a) it suggests that the GDR had its particular ‘consciousness’, whereas the texts I look at engage with ideas beyond the social and historical realms, b) I wish to avoid a kind of historical determinism, and, linked to that point, avoid characterising these texts as ‘social commentaries’, c) I intend to situate these texts within an historical framework of modernity which obviously predates the formation of the GDR, is not particularly German in character, but belongs most obviously to a process which began somewhere around the Enlightenment and is European, or Western, in character. I aim to demonstrate that Maron and Erpenbeck's texts have more to offer than melancholy or nostalgia for the past (the GDR as one aspect of that past). Simultaneously, they are not just a critique of modern society (or of contemporary Germany).

In this context, this thesis frequently refers to the two critics Svetlana Boym and Peter Thompson. I develop the concept of a ‘critical nostalgia’ and look at the texts in question by describing Maron and Erpenbeck as critical and nostalgic
thinkers. This idea draws on Boym’s thought that nostalgia is not a static expression of the wish to return to a lost past or home, but rather should be seen as a dynamic form of dealing with the past, present and future. Peter Thompson examines the term Ostalgie, a neologism that is often used to refer to an assumed unwillingness on behalf of citizens of the former GDR to arrive and settle in the ‘reality’ of the Berlin Republic. Thompson argues that this negative view of Ostalgie is indeed one-dimensional. Thompson suggests that the feeling of Ostalgie alerts us to the innate human longing to find a stable place of belonging, a home. This home, or Heimat, as it is suggested by Thompson, was promised by the GDR. It is the loss of this utopian hope and the feelings this break created that are captured in Ostalgie. This in turn can tell us something about the modern state of being, which is characterised by the recurring experience of (historical) ruptures and losses. The loss of Heimat has to be seen as central here.

The themes of Heimat and memory, which are central to the analysis of the primary texts, are subject to much discussion, especially within academic discourses. The main points of those debates will be outlined briefly in the following paragraphs; I am going to return to the themes of Heimat and memory when I talk about the findings of the individual chapters.

The complex term Heimat is controversial, carrying a history of frequent ideological abuse. Discussions concerning Heimat have often focused on the task of remembering and coming to terms with the past. It is important to note that debates about Vergangenheitsbewältigung (id est, coming to terms with the past) – including in the GDR – have become more complex and nuanced in recent years: publications now speak, for example, of ‘memory contests’ in post-1945 German political and cultural discourses.

The understanding of and attitudes towards the term Heimat are of major importance to this thesis. Heimat, in my view, takes on a crucial function for the development of a sense of identity. This relates to the individual and to a nation. In

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7 Anne Fuchs, Mary Cosgrove and Georg Grote (eds.), German Memory Contests: The Quest for Identity in Literature, Film and Discourse since 1990 (New York: Camden House, 2006).
the German context, questions and problems concerning the issue of *Heimat* have played a significant role in the past and continue to do so in the present. The yearning for *Heimat*, on both an individual and a national level, expresses a deep psychological need for self-identity. Furthermore, the search for *Heimat* often implies a geographical place that is subject to modifications and redefinitions over time (for example, political changes and ruptures). Thus, this thesis argues that concepts of *Heimat* and the longing for *Heimat* can be located at the crossroads of place and time, hovering at the threshold of personal, collective and cultural forms of memory, and making us aware of the individual's (involuntary) involvement in history.

In particular, this thesis looks at the concept of *Heimat* and its use in the GDR, and it draws attention to the specific ambivalences of *Heimat* in the GDR, which in turn reveal interesting aspects about the theme of *Heimat* in more general terms. In his analysis of ‘GDR Heimat’, Jan Palmowski argues that

*Heimat* [...] allowed Germans to maintain a sense of community in the face of constant territorial, political, economic and social ruptures. It was located at the centre of an emotional and political discourse about place, belonging and identity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Germany, and the GDR era was no exception.

This interesting parallel between the concept of *Heimat* in German history and its function in GDR times is of essential importance for the argument of this dissertation as it illustrates the paradigmatic meaning of the GDR and the aftermath of its collapse.

It is important to note that Monika Maron and Jenny Erpenbeck have quite different attitudes to the concept of *Heimat*. This emerges clearly from the analysis of the primary texts. Whereas Maron is rather sceptical and critical towards any idea of *Heimat*, the concept of *Heimat* is dear to Jenny Erpenbeck. For that reason, I

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10 This view is expressed, for example, in Monika Maron, ‘Ich war ein antifaschistisches Kind’ (1989), in *Nach Maßgabe meiner Begreifungskraft* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1993), 9-28; also, ‘Die
refer in Maron's case especially to what the author herself describes as the **Sehnsuchtsort**, a place of longing.\(^{11}\)

*Heimat* and memory, this thesis claims, should be considered in a combined approach. Aleida Assmann has extensively written on the importance of places for our memory, and I draw in particular on one important observation she makes in this context. Assmann differentiates between *Raum* (‘space’, which is on the horizontal axis) and *Ort* (‘place’, which is situated on the vertical level).\(^{12}\) In this analysis, I question the possibility of an unambiguous distinction between ‘space’ and ‘place’. Instead, I develop the concept of an *Ort-Raum-Hybrid* (‘place-space-hybrid’) that suggests the constant blurring of ‘places’ and ‘spaces’, and also includes the factor time. This concept is explored in this thesis in relation to the analysis of the primary literature in question. *Heimat* and memory, too, are looked at with this concept in mind.

This thesis argues that spatial metaphors play an important role in Maron and Erpenbeck's literature and reveal one of the authors' key concerns: the relation of space and time in history, and the individual's attempt to locate himself / herself within the process of history. This effort depends, amongst other things, on the memory of personal experience, which is complicated by the at times contradictory outcomes of personal, social and cultural forms of memory. Starting from this assumption, this study analyses how Maron and Erpenbeck perceive of the socialist founding narrative of antifascism, its assumptions about the teleology of history and its eventual collapse.

Memory is an important aspect of this thesis and I explore the usefulness of existing theories of memory, often developed with the Holocaust in mind, for the GDR-related questions raised in my analysis. In particular, I subject the idea of ‘generational’ modes of memory to critical analysis, using the age gap between

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\(^{11}\) Monika Maron, *Wie ich ein Buch nicht schreiben kann und es trotzdem versuche* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 2006; 2005), 59.

Maron (born 1941) and Erpenbeck (born 1967). As the theoretical approaches and primary literature suggest that the act of remembering and notions of Heimat are in constant flux, I am interested in tracing this process of change within each author's œuvre. This enables me to compare how Maron and Erpenbeck reposition themselves in relation to evolving and competing discourses about the GDR in the Berlin Republic, from the victim-perpetrators-debate through to postcolonialism and Ostalgie. I ask how the authors' depiction of the GDR and the post-Wende relates to their experience of reunification, and how their texts intervene in developments in German memory culture since the Wende. Again, these issues are looked at in the broader context of modernity. I explore at which points and in how far both thematic fields (GDR / modernity) overlap, and I discuss the implications of those interferences with regard to the GDR, the processes of 1989/90 and beyond and modernity.

I use the general introduction to consider scholarship on representations of the GDR and developments in memory discourses about the GDR between 1989 and the present. Furthermore, I introduce the thesis with a section on the theoretical considerations of Heimat, memory and space, which are the analytical tools that I am using in my discussion. Also, I outline in detail my concept of modernity. To emphasise it at this point again: when I refer to the term modernity, I am in principal guided by the works of Zygmunt Bauman.

The development of a comparative approach to Jenny Erpenbeck and Monika Maron distinguishes this thesis clearly from the existing scholarship. Jenny Erpenbeck's work has received quite little critical attention: it tends to be dealt with in isolated articles or in the context of a more general approach to contemporary German women writers. However, having said that, since the publication of her novel Heimsuchung (2008) slowly more attention has been paid to Erpenbeck's prose texts. This development promises interesting findings and debates for the future.

More research has been carried out on Maron, who is these days a high-profile figure in Germany. Two major monographs by Katharina Boll and Elke Gilson offer a detailed overview of Maron's work, yet neither attempts a comparative approach. Whilst Gilson emphasises the heterogeneity and polyphony in Maron's texts, most of the other secondary material deals with her work still with a focus on the GDR. This is also the case in Deirdre Byrnes' study of Maron's texts, which is the most recent monograph on the author and her work.

This thesis argues for an acknowledgment of the multiple layers laid out in Maron and Erpenbeck's texts, which address specifically GDR-related problems, simultaneously pointing beyond them towards existential concerns in a fragmented modernity, whereby the GDR and its collapse take on a paradigmatic meaning.

The first part of this thesis looks at Monika Maron's novel *Animal triste* (1996) and Jenny Erpenbeck's *Geschichte vom alten Kind* (1999). In both chapters, the analysis focuses on the protagonists' attempts to withdraw to a place that promises security and stability. In the first chapter on *Animal triste*, the female narrator of the novel, an elderly woman of uncertain age, bids farewell to the outside world and continues to live her life almost exclusively in the privacy of her own flat. The narrative takes place after the fall of the Berlin Wall and follows the end of the woman's affair with her lover Franz, whom she met after the Wende. Hiding away in her refuge, the narrator (re-)tells and ‘invents’ the unfortunate love story again and again. The second chapter on Erpenbeck's novella *Geschichte vom alten Kind* is a narrative about an ‘old’ child, who turns out to be a woman of the age of about thirty. At the beginning of the story, the ‘girl’ is found on the street at night time and is brought to an orphanage, just as she planned. In the orphanage, the girl hopes to find the stability and warmth that is missing in the outside world.

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In both cases, the protagonists' attempt to seek refuge in a realm that seems to promise continuity and security, should be understood as a way to escape the fragmentation that is experienced in the world surrounding the respective utopian places of safety and belonging. The outer world can be read in the context of the post-*Wende* or in the wider sense of modernity. In both cases, the protagonists' decision to dare their step towards an assumed pre-existing world of stability has to be read as their deliberate and intentional choice. Thus, the theme of memory and forgetting plays an important role in both narratives. In this regard, Monika Maron and Jenny Erpenbeck position themselves as critical-nostalgic observers. This point is of crucial importance for the argument of this chapter and, indeed, of the entire thesis. The descriptions of the old lady as well as of the supposed child contain features of both empathy and of scepticism, whereby Maron's account emerges as the more critical one of the two narratives.

Both places, the flat and the orphanage, have to be seen as the protagonists' hoped and longed for safe harbours. My analysis points out that in the case of both stories, these spaces have to be acknowledged as hybrids of ‘space’ (*Raum*) and ‘place’ (*Ort*). With regard to these two concepts, I refer again to Aleida Assmann's differentiation of the two terms, which is outlined in Assmann's work *Erinnerungsräume*. As explained, this dissertation demonstrates the hybrid form of the two concepts in question, and this point can be emphasised in particular when examining *Animal triste* and *Geschichte vom alten Kind*. Both narratives, as I have alluded to above, can be discussed in the context of the *Wende* and its aftermath. However, my analysis draws attention to the fact that the two texts essentially deal with the complex issues of fragmentation and dislocation which have to be treated as key features of the modern world. In order to remind the reader of a central idea of this dissertation: this world of modernity is characterised by ambivalence and fleetingness, and in my usage of the two descriptive terms I am guided by Zygmunt Bauman's works *Modernity and Ambivalence* and *Liquid Modernity*.

The individual, as it turns out in both narratives by Maron and Erpenbeck, cannot escape the penetration of external forces that it experiences in the world surrounding the promised safe places. The attempts to withdraw to a supposed secure and private space prove unsuccessful. The imagined utopia cannot last. The
protagonists’ desperate wish to (re-)invent themselves and their personal life stories by means of creative forgetting, serves as an interesting line of investigation in this part of the analysis, since it demonstrates the paradoxical situation of the free individual, both after the Wende and in modernity at large. Therefore, Animal triste and Geschichte vom alten Kind can underline another key point of this research project: the individual's ongoing search for its role, place and meaning in world that appears to be more and more in flux, marked by ambivalence and fleetingness. The idea of spaces and places has to be regarded as key in this search. Both texts display elements of the two contexts (GDR / Wende and modernity) that are under scrutiny in this dissertation. Thus, they emerge as multi-layered and complex narratives that should be explored with their broader relevance in mind in order to do them justice. As stated previously, the experience of the GDR, the collapse of the socialist master narrative and its aftermath serves as a paradigm for the condition of the modern individual.

The second part of the thesis explores Monika Maron's Endmoränen (2002) and Jenny Erpenbeck's Heimsuchung (2008). Both chapters address the question of the function of the landscape in the respective novels. In particular, I look at metaphors referring to the theme of ‘ice’. Especially with regard to Maron's novel, the depiction of the ‘province’ is of importance to the analysis. In Endmoränen, the female protagonist of the novel, Johanna, finds herself in the bucolic surrounding of Basekow, a small village near the German-Polish border. There, in her and her husband's weekend / summer home, she awaits the relief from her creative and life crisis that has come to the fore with quite some vehemence after the fall of the Wall. The narrative of Heimsuchung is centred on a plot of land at the shore of the Scharmützelsee in the wider periphery of Berlin. It encompasses a timeframe from the end of the 19th century right up to the Germany of the present day, and it tells the interlinked stories of its different characters. Many points raised in relation to Heimsuchung are essential for the argument of this dissertation. Therefore, aspects of the novel and the results of my analysis will be referred to in the following with some detail.

Erpenbeck uses this plot of land near Berlin to mirror its different owners' vain attempts to make that place their home as they are confronted with the forces of
history. Throughout the novel, one encounters different characters, all of whom share the same experience of being haunted by home. Twelve times, one witnesses the story of *Heimat* with the land at the lake as its centre piece being hoped for and, in most cases, lost. One figure clearly stands out: the gardener. In my analysis, I pay close attention to the examination of the gardener figure. He is eternally present, works on the land and with the land according to the natural cycle. He is a symbolic figure for the rhythm of nature and for tradition. Yet, in a way, he also resembles the modern individual. He seems to have an insight into the processes of nature and an imminent consciousness of the ‘place’ (*Ort*) in Assmann's sense that the other characters are lacking or which they only begin to develop as a reaction to a specific experience of rupture and loss. In its portrayal of the gardener and the traditional life he stands for, the novel hovers between nostalgia, the wish for the mythical return and a critical awareness of history – again, ambivalence as the key term here.

Erpenbeck's depiction of the land and its geological formation can help to illuminate this state of ambivalence further: in the prologue Erpenbeck goes back to the ice age and is concerned with the origin of the rock, which is located above the novel's central piece of land. What one now perceives as a smooth hill, acted as a very powerful force during the ice age, crushing everything in its way down, disregarding and destroying life. This view is contrasted with the continuously failing human attempts to create a lasting home. The idea of the natural cycle also stands in juxtaposition to the epilogue, in which the by now sold house by the lake is demolished. As part of this demolition the house is being weighed, measured and quantified. The ambivalence between a longing for the mythical return and the awareness of being born into an age dominated by quantification and rationale - modernity - resonates.

The chapters are interwoven through the issues of dislocation, time and memory. Every single one of the characters is painfully aware of his / her entanglement in history – the modern awareness of being in time. Simultaneously, one gets the impression that history is repeating itself: individuals lose the spot where they try to settle, they have to leave due to war or other historical / political circumstances, they are forced to leave belongings and their family behind. In fact, one gets the sense of time that is both: historical and ahistorical.
Erpenbeck's novel transcends any immediate historical situation. It explores broader history and the effects history has on the innate human yearning for *Heimat*, a permanently stable and secure ‘place’ of belonging. Also, Erpenbeck's *Heimsuchung* contains an interesting autobiographical element. The plot of land that serves as the novel's centrepiece was owned by her grandparents. This aspect is pursued further in my analysis. Looking at the overall theme of the novel, *Heimsuchung* points in two directions: towards a *Heimat* that one looks for and towards oneself: one is *heimgesucht*, haunted, by that very ideal concept of *Heimat* and, often, by its transience.

My reading of the novel fits in with the notion of a form of nostalgia which I have explained above referring to Svetlana Boym: ‘critical nostalgia’. This form of nostalgia does not aspire towards the mythical return. Critical nostalgia can be described as a state of being, whose main feature lies in the ambivalent aspect of longing; a longing that is informed by the notion that what has been lost, or what belongs to the past, cannot and will not be revived, and this includes the idea of broken metanarratives and shattered formerly assumed securities. Thus, my analysis of *Heimsuchung* draws on and demonstrates many important aspects, concepts and ideas of this thesis.

As I have pointed out, the representation of aspects concerning landscape plays a crucial role in both *Heimsuchung* and *Endmoränen*, which make up the second part of this thesis. My analysis illuminates that these ideas referring to the landscape serve to reveal notions of continuity, permanence and the longing for an existence beyond and above time and history and its influences of fragmentation, which permeate the individual existence. Against this backdrop, both novels address questions as to how meaning can be bestowed upon the individual existence. Both texts emphasise the authors' concern with the role and the place of the individual amidst historical forces and ruptures. This comes up in both novels in similar ways, despite their different historical outreach. Both authors also ask how the individual can possibly deal with these historical and socio-political factors penetrating his / her life. The GDR and its demise have to be seen as one possible focus for interpretation. However, both texts again draw on issues and problems that are of relevance when
looked at and analysed in the framework of modernity. The theme of memory and forgetting once more is paid attention to in the analysis of both texts.

In *Endmoränen*, the tranquil idyll of Basekow serves as Johanna's *Sehnsuchtsort* (place of longing). However, the supposed idyllic setting and Johanna's associations of order and continuity that she ascribes to Basekow turn out to be a feature of her utopian yearning. Whereas in the analysis of *Endmoränen* the term *Sehnsuchtsort* serves as a useful tool of investigation, in the analysis of Erpenbeck's *Heimsuchung*, I frequently use the term *Heimat* to explore the different characters' search and longing for a stable place and a home. The differences between the two terms / concepts of *Sehnsuchtsort* and *Heimat* and the authors' attitudes towards them have been explained earlier on. What Erpenbeck's novel demonstrates in particular is, that very often the idea of *Heimat* still tends to be associated with notions of topography, however, not just in the sense of *Heimat* as a specific geographical entity, but moreover as a locus of belonging and security, which is ultimately connected to memory and ‘identity’. In the novel, the individuals' experiences of specific historical circumstances reveal *Heimat* – either directly or indirectly linked to a place – as a transient construct, thus pointing towards wider processes and problems of self-understanding. A similar point can be made for the place of longing in Monika Maron's *Endmoränen*.

The findings of the second part of this thesis once more bring out the difficulty of coming to a clear distinction between ‘places’ and ‘spaces’, the two concepts used by Aleida Assmann. Keeping in mind the notion of landscape in particular, both novels have proven themselves eminently useful in order to demonstrate the complex or, indeed, impossible task of identifying an unambiguous border between the two categories. The longed for vertical ‘place’ (*Ort*) emerges in both narratives as a hybrid ‘place-space’ in time and history. Instead of providing stability, the close inspection of the places in question reveals in both novels even further layers of fragmentation and uncertainty for the individual. History, its ruptures and its penetrating forces cannot be escaped – neither in *Heimsuchung* nor in *Endmoränen*. This claim is valid in the context of the GDR, its collapse and its aftermath and for history in general, which is explored in both novels. Especially in
Erpenbeck's novel the question is posed as to whether the inescapable net of history that surrounds the individual should be regarded as a burden or as a relief.

Both novels depict the crisis of the modern individual, and the crisis of the individual after the Wende has to be seen as a part thereof. Furthermore, in the chapter on Endmoränen attention is paid to aspects of a female dimension of that crisis. I argue that these elements of a potential female crisis serve as factors within the wider crisis experienced by the individual in modernity. As I point out in the conclusion of the thesis, the possible particularities of a female crisis of subjectivity in modernity and / or after the Wende and their representation in Maron and Erpenbeck's texts should be explored in future research projects.

At this point, in order to illustrate further the individual's search for a place (of longing) or Heimat, which is central to this thesis, the term Heimsuchung, the title of Erpenbeck's novel, shall be explained in some more detail. This is useful as it serves to clarify some of the key aspects discussed in this research project. The German term Heimsuchung has various connotations. In its usual sense, Heimsuchung signifies the harmful experience of a disease or catastrophe, and the term also tends to be associated with the notion of being haunted by a recurring, in some cases supernatural phenomenon corresponding to the English word ‘visitation’, which is also the title of the English translation (2010) of Erpenbeck's novel. Furthermore, the two components Heim (home) and suchen (to look for) bring to mind the search for this complex and evocative space Heimat (or home). Both the literal and the figurative meaning are crucial for the argument of this dissertation. In this research project, I employ the term Heimsuchung in the analysis of the individual's search for stability and security, which is very often captured and contained in spatial metaphors. Elizabeth Boa and Rachel Palfreyman argue in this context that the concept of Heimat connects

the self with something larger through a process of identification signified by a spatial metaphor. Heimat is, then, a physical place, or social space or bounded medium of some kind which provides a sense of security and belonging. As a surrounding medium, Heimat protects the self by stimulating identification whether with family, locality, nation, folk or race, native dialect or tongue, or whatever else may fill the empty signifier to fuel a process of definition or of buttressing which feeds and sustains a sense of identity. Heimat is an intrinsically conservative value connoting originary or primary factors in identity,
or at least it expresses the longing, perhaps illusory, for such an absolute foundation or unchanging essence.\textsuperscript{18}

To reiterate it at this point: this thesis demonstrates that the authors' œuvres should be understood on the one hand as critical investigations of their place of origin or Heimat, the former GDR, which they investigate critically, sometimes, in the case of Erpenbeck in particular, with affection, whereby the latter never lacks critical acumen. This dissertation, however, makes the strong case that the analysed texts need to be contextualised in the wider framework of modernity, since both writers address fundamental concerns of contemporary existence. They deal with the significant modifications of the parameters space, time and identity (self-understanding) and, as a consequence thereof, the individual's key experience of fragmentation and dislocation. The critical investigation of the concept of Heimat (Heimsuchung) and its representation in both authors' works is eminently useful to explore these matters and both authors' positions. The GDR, its collapse and the post-Wende period are exemplary because they can help to illuminate the conditions of modern existence.

In relation to some of the points I have made above referring to the findings of the second part of this thesis and the concept of Heimat in particular, it should be noted that Boa and Palfreyman regard time as necessarily hostile to any stable notion of Heimat, since the passing of time inevitably causes change. They observe that

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\begin{itemize}
  \item time is the ever present-present enemy of Heimat which is only ever overcome in the heavenly home of paradise or the Garden of Eden.
  \item The inexorable passage of time brings distance from the imagined Heimat of childhood, hence the yearning nostalgia and sense of loss which the idea of Heimat so often invokes.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{itemize}
\end{quote}

The two critics also draw attention to the “interplay of space/place and time”, thus pointing towards a major line of investigation that is explored in this thesis.\textsuperscript{20}

The third part of thesis introduces two texts that are concerned with far-flung territories: Monika Maron's Ach Glück (2007) and Jenny Erpenbeck's Wörterbuch (2004). In Maron's novel, Johanna, the protagonist the reader is already familiar with

\textsuperscript{18} Boa and Palfreyman, 23.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
from *Endmoränen*, travels to her place of longing, her *Sehnsuchtsort* Mexico, in an attempt to find the meaning her life seems to have been missing for quite some time now. Johanna's parts of the novel are told while she happens to be on the plane to Mexico. In the alternating chapters, the perspective changes to that of her husband Achim. He walks around Berlin, lost and looking for meaning as well, after his wife has left him and the country, in her almost desperate search for happiness. The aftermath of the collapse of the GDR and the idea of disrupted lives and biographies, have to be seen as central to the novel. These issues are of importance to both characters, despite the fact that husband and wife are situated in different places for the duration of the novel. The search for meaning is also present in some of the other characters of the narrative, as my analysis reveals.

Maron's questions and concerns, and this is the main argument of the chapter, remain the same, even when looked at from the wider global perspective that forms the background of the novel. In *Ach Glück* the author explores once more the possible meaning of the individual life in the context of wider forces of fragmentation, both historical and socio-political. The shifting of spatio-temporal parameters is an interesting line of thought and analysis in this chapter, which is explored, too, with global issues in mind. In particular, Zygmunt Bauman's observations regarding the age of fleetingness and fluidity, which he expresses in his work *Liquid Modernity*, can be usefully employed in the analysis of the text. The same can also be said for Aleida Assmann's notion of ‘places’ and ‘spaces’ and the aforementioned difficult / impossible differentiation of the two terms. It can be argued that the present state of modernity could be described as a more ‘horizontal’ one, with a lack of the ‘vertical’ elements that the individual is looking for. The fact that this thesis keeps coming back to the same concepts and themes and explores them from different perspectives, proves the usefulness of the tools that I have chosen for the analysis of the primary texts and for the discussion of the issues which are at the centre of this PhD project.

Additionally, the analysis of *Ach Glück* helps to illuminate the ambivalent nature of freedom and its perception by the individual: an abundance of space and possibilities does not necessarily produce positive effects. Rather, it can lead to negative feelings of uncertainty, disorientation and helplessness. The individual is
left with the difficult task to find its way and invent itself and meaning, in a world that is getting broader, faster and more and more uncertain. These issues are again of relevance for the understanding of the post-Wende period and for the context of modernity, and they are pursued in this chapter in particular, but also in the analysis of the other texts in question. Thus, freedom and its ambivalence emerge as an important theme in this thesis.

In the novel, Mexico features as Johanna's *Sehnsuchtsort* that needs to be seen in a critical light. The protagonist tends to ignore important facts relating to Mexico's bloody history and she ascribes a meaning of her own to the country at the other end of the globe. The issue of remembering and forgetting is dealt with critically in the novel. Remembering and longing, time and space function as interlinked and shifting categories in Maron's text.

Erpenbeck's novella *Wörterbuch*, based on an authentic case from Argentina during the military regime of the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, describes a place of horror and the destruction of an individual's biography. As well as Maron, Erpenbeck draws the attention to the search for meaning that happens all around the globe, everywhere and all the time. Paying particular attention to the issue of language, the novella portrays in an at times disturbing way the penetration of the individual and the private life by historical and socio-political forces. In critical-nostalgic manner, the narrative highlights the problematic attempt to hold on to a cohesive narrative of the self that can only be maintained by means of forgetting. This is exactly what the girl in the story decides to do.

Again, Erpenbeck focuses in her narrative on a child, thereby emphasising the fragility of all human existence. Simultaneously, she alerts the reader to the fact that responsibility is an urgent matter. This can be related to one's own existence and to the responsibility one shares for others. Whilst the setting of the novella could be seen to be located either in South America or in the former GDR, my analysis makes a strong claim for the universal meaning of the story, since the ‘case’ of the child can happen everywhere and all the time.

The fourth part of this research project asks questions about the role of writing and literature in the individual's described search for meaning and identity that is explored in different places. The question is posed as to how writing can and
does function as a ‘space-place’ that features in Maron and Erpenbeck's work as a medium to come closer to the existential concerns they raise in the age of ambivalence, uncertainty and fleetingness. These points about self-reflexivity serve as a means to investigate closer the authors' positions in relation to the topics discussed and dealt with in their texts and in this thesis. These refer to both, discourses about the GDR and modernity.

In chapter one, I look at Monika Maron's report *Bitterfelder Bogen* (2009); chapter two deals with Jenny Erpenbeck's collection of columns *Dinge, die verschwinden* (2009). In *Bitterfelder Bogen*, Monika Maron revisits the town of her first novel *Flugasche* (1981). With a mixture of enthusiasm and scepticism, the author portrays the developments in Bitterfeld since the fall of the Wall. In particular, she tells the success story of the solar firm *Q-Cells*. The chapter highlights the post-*Wende* as part of the modernity of the present, *id est* Bauman's liquid modernity. The ambivalent consequences of this interplay and the forces at work are looked at closely in this chapter. The concepts of the place of longing (*Sehnsuchtsort*) and *Heimat* are analysed in the context of this force-field of the post-*Wende*-modernity. The chapter also addresses issues of globalisation, which have to be seen as crucial factors within this modernity of the present day.

In chapter two, the analysis focuses on a selection of short texts collected in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Dinge, die verschwinden*. The term ‘fragment’ can be usefully applied to describe and explore these individual texts. In the fragments, one finds microscopic revelations of the wider and central themes that Erpenbeck's texts in general are concerned with – questions that are also of concern to Monika Maron, which should be evident at this point. In the short prose pieces, Erpenbeck alerts the reader to the transient nature of all that exists. From this premise, she explores the themes of *Heimat*, memory and the role and the meaning of the individual. Once more, the author's perspective can be described as critical-nostalgic. One of the key arguments of this thesis, namely the paradigmatic function of the GDR and its demise for the analysis of the situation and the state of the modern individual, can be exemplified and demonstrated in the analysis of the individual fragments in an idiosyncratic way. Those fragments that deal with the GDR and its collapse in
particular are of meaning for the explanation of wider issues that come up in the context of modernity and vice versa.

In Bitterfelder Bogen and in Dinge, die verschwinden the representation of the GDR and the Wende plays a significant role. Both authors look at the process of the Wende and its consequences, as well as at some tendencies of the modern world with an amount of scepticism. Erpenbeck can in this sense be described as the more nostalgic of the two authors. Monika Maron's account shows her enthusiasm for individuals who take on responsibility for their own life and create themselves anew. These efforts are carefully placed and looked at by the author in the context of the post-Wende period and with the wider framework of modernity and globalisation in mind. Whereas Maron in this text comes closer to the concept of Heimat and tries to understand how people can perceive of Bitterfeld in particular as their Heimat, she still treats the idea of Heimat in general with a generous amount of scepticism. This leads to a report about the developments in Bitterfeld that is ambivalent itself.

The presented search and the yearning for a place and for meaning, for a Sehnsuchtsort or for Heimat, are explored in Maron and Erpenbeck's texts in a critical-nostalgic way. Both authors examine the state of being of the individual in modernity and after the GDR. The arrival at this place of longing and belonging cannot happen. It is eternally postponed, but continues to exist and is reflected upon, as a human, utopian hope and longing in the literary text.

To conclude: literature by authors from the GDR has often been read in a mainly socio-political context. This has frequently resulted in one-dimensional approaches, which ignore the engagement with wider theoretical and philosophical questions raised in many of those texts. Concentrating on a selection of novels by Monika Maron and Jenny Erpenbeck, two authors from the former East Germany, this thesis demonstrates that, while it is certainly true that both œuvres serve on one level as critical investigations of the former socialist state and the still urgent consequences of its collapse in contemporary Germany, this is not the whole story. Instead, this thesis makes the strong point that key themes such as fragmentation and dislocation draw attention to the symptoms of a wider modern condition that is characterised by uncertainty and ambivalence. In its original comparative analysis of Maron and Erpenbeck's texts in light of Zygmunt Bauman's observations regarding
modernity and ambivalence / fleetingness, this thesis differs from existing scholarship. Focusing on the themes of Heimat and memory, my analysis has shown, that expressions of nostalgia and an often diffuse yearning in the examined texts, not only refer to the breakdown of the socialist master narrative or a lost GDR past. Instead, they should be regarded as essential features of Western pluralist society – of ‘our’ modernity. Thus, by taking the texts out of a primarily socio-political line of investigation, this thesis has explored how the authors position themselves in relation to competing discourses about the GDR and it simultaneously alerts to the multi-layered complexity of the texts by reading them in a framework of modernity.

Two recent publications, Jenny Erpenbeck's Aller Tage Abend (2012) and Monika Maron's Zwischenspiel (2013) offer exciting possibilities to pursue further the issues and themes that have been explored in the framework of this research project.