To develop oneself in all areas as a socialistic personality is a high expectation, a valuable aim in life. This . . . is the way to give life a higher meaning, to become active for personal happiness and the happiness of everyone.

*Carpe Diem!* – Seize the day (Zentraler Ausschuß 1983: 260).

This quotation is taken from a book presented to young East Germans at the socialist coming-of-age ritual *Jugendweihe* [youth consecration]. They are only a few sentences out of an entire chapter, which deals with the so called ‘socialist personality’ [sozialistische Persönlichkeit]. The ritual *Jugendweihe*, which was attended by over ninety per cent of the East German fourteen-year-olds (Urban and Weinzen 1984: 28), was thought by its organisers, the Zentraler Ausschuß für Jugendweihe [Central Committee], to foster a very specific kind of personhood in young people. The preparatory sessions on ideology and history, the speech and vow during the ceremony thus embodied clear messages about a proper socialist sense of self. Participation in the ritual was supposedly voluntary. Hearsay, however, had it that a refusal to participate – in order to celebrate Evangelical or Catholic initiation rituals, for example – was likely to jeopardise a young person’s future career prospects (Griese 2001).

When conducting my research in Saxony-Anhalt during the year 2000, I mentioned my interest in the socialist personality to some friends. They were immediately taken aback and declared, audibly, that I ‘must know that it had not been like that!’ This episode illustrates a feature of life under socialism which in its consequences extends into the present, and thereafter came up frequently during the research. While the state took great care clearly to express concepts, values and norms as part of its ideology, everyday life seemed to be governed by its own, often discrepant rules. Gauss accordingly described the GDR as a ‘niche society’ [Nischengesellschaft] (1986), where a separate culture develops in the privacy of back gardens and family homes. Wolle captures this discrepancy between ideology and oppression on the one hand and the social cosiness of everyday life on the other in his phrase ‘*Die Heile Welt der Diktatur*’: the cosy world of dictatorship (1999). This metaphor expresses a crucial point: official ideology and grassroots practices were not separated from each other. They rather seemed to exist next to one another, at times overlapping and at times diverging, but clearly reinforcing each other’s validity.

In this article I will explore the relationship between official ideology and interpretations established in social interaction with regard to the notion of the person.

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I will illustrate how two sets of values and interpretations come together in the *Jugendweihe* to create ambiguous and multivocal messages. The analysis will show that it is this multivocality of the ritual that provided ‘a middle ground’ for both official ideology and social practice, and consequently enabled the ritual’s continuation after 1990. This continuation has to be contested in eastern Germany today (see Gallinat 2002: 36–67). After a brief decline in numbers between 1990 and 1992 the *Jugendweihe* became increasingly popular again. It is nowadays attended by approximately sixty per cent of the fourteen year old teenagers in eastern Germany. It has been ridden of its ideological content and is offered as a secular coming-of-age ritual by its organisers (see Gallinat 2002). The main association providing it is the *Interessenvereinigung für Jugendweihe* [association for *Jugendweihe*] which was founded in 1991. Critics of the ritual, however, see the association as the continuation of the GDR Central Committee.

In this article I will first briefly outline the socialist notion of the person and give an account of the ritual itself. I will then illustrate what participants remembered of their *Jugendweihe* when I asked them about it. In the final section I will explore the discursive relations of these two representations. Before turning to the ethnographic material, however, some considerations of a theoretical nature are in order.

**Resistance or complicity?**

Verdery writes that in the post-socialist countries a new morality was established simply by ‘stigmatising the communist one’ (1999: 38). In eastern Germany, where West Germany provided a new moral, anti-communist framework, this resulted in the public and personal questioning of individuals’ conduct under socialist rule. The *Jugendweihe* as an institution of the state was part of these debates. Participation was quickly seen as complicity and a refusal to participate as resistance. This moralising mood, however, soon changed, to be replaced by a revaluation of the past often described in eastern Germany as nostalgia (Berdahl 1999) as people realised that from this vantage point much of their own biography seemed complicit. Such thoughts contradicted their personal memories of the cosy, sociable world Wolle describes (1999), and the *Jugendweihe* ritual as a family celebration of coming-of-age. The collection of essays edited by Ruby Watson, *Memory, history and opposition under state socialism* (1994), is one of the few anthropological works to deal with these contentious questions (see Miller 1999 on the state security police; Passerini 1992 and 1987 on memory of opposition groups). The collection includes an essay by Humphrey, who adapts Scott’s idea of ‘hidden transcripts’ to explore ambiguous narratives in Mongolia (1994: 21–44).

Scott’s notion of ‘hidden transcripts’ (1990) builds on his earlier work on everyday forms of resistance amongst Malay peasants (1985). He uses the concept to develop a framework for understanding structures of domination, subordination and resistance (1990), arguing that in any power relationship both sides use secret transcripts to talk about the world. Conversing with one another, however, they refer to public transcripts – publicly acceptable ways of speaking and behaving (1990: 45–69). This explains how subordinate groups speak in one way when facing a superior and in another, more contradictory way when by themselves (for example, Scott 1990: ix). Usually hidden from the other side’s view, these transcripts provide ready material for acts of open resistance when they come into the public domain (Scott 1990: 191). Humphrey (1994: 21–44) appropriates Scott’s theory for Mongolia, which she
describes as an ‘encapsulated society’ surrounded by the Soviet Union, which controls the public transcripts. In this situation alternative narratives were not hidden but entered public discourse. According to Humphrey, these ‘evocative transcripts’ were fashioned ambiguously in order to result in a directed dual reaction (1994: 26).

Humphrey points out quite rightly that in a socialist context it is ‘impossible to make a simple correlation between the official ideology and the public realm, or between resistance and the private realm, since almost all social life is necessarily played out in conversations that are somewhat public and somewhat private’ (1994: 25). This crucial dynamic is, however, not adequately dealt with by Scott, whose theory relies on clear distinctions between power holders and subordinates that are often based on a notion of economical dis/advantages. In East Germany, however, the social welfare of the citizens was largely guaranteed. Boundaries between subordinate and superior groups were fuzzy, with many citizens occupying a number of roles that put them into different relations with the party elite and the state. After all, ninety per cent of young people did celebrate the state’s Jugendweihe and retained favourable memories of it.

Scott has been criticised by a number of authors (Ortner 1995: 173–93), for example, for overemphasising covert resistance at the expense of real struggles (Tilly 1991: 593–602; Gutman 1993: 74–92, 95–6; see also Scott 1993: 93–4). Another point of criticism is that Scott’s framework presumes a clear separation of public and hidden transcripts (Levi 1999: 99), both of which need to be shared by all members of the respective groups (Levi 1999: 102; Reed-Danahay 1993: 223; Tilly 1991: 598). Scott’s framework therefore relies largely on a perception of power relations as simply dichotomous (Gal 1995: 407–24). With regard to the Soviet Union the dichotomisation inherent in notions of resistance is criticised by Oushakine (2001: 191–214). Yurchak explains further that such approaches to the socialist past result in a skewed portrayal of Soviet personhood (2003: 480–510, also Junghans 2001: 383–400). They paint a picture of Soviet citizens shielding themselves from the public realm and conveying personhood only to friends and family because of their fear of state surveillance (Yurchak 2003: 483). Such accounts fail most importantly in not acknowledging that many ‘people living in socialism genuinely supported its fundamental values and ideals’ (Yurchak 2003: 484). In a recent book by Kürti on Youth and the state in Hungary (2002) the terms ‘resistance’, ‘oppression’ and ‘subordination’ are not even included in the glossary (cf. Markowitz 2000). Kürti’s work deals nevertheless with the difficulties and, at times, violence of life under state socialism through an in-depth account of young peoples’ relationship with the state (2002: 113–39; 140–179), and with friends and family (2002: 180–214). His descriptions of the latter setting as ‘youth against the state’ might seem to recreate the public–subordinate versus private–resisting divide. However, the depth of analysis, which highlights the interconnectedness of ideological state socialisation and individual relationships, prevents his being caught up in the dichotomy. Kürti therefore joins a literature which portrays youth as contributing creatively to the culture of the wider society (Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995; Dracklé 1996; Markowitz 2000: 195). This is in contrast to earlier writings which usually depicted young people as either ‘exotic others’ or subjects of parental socialisation (cf. Amit-Talai 1995: 225). Furthermore, the interstitial structural position of young people turns them into important agents in times of social change (Herdt and Levitt 1998: 7; cf. Furlong and Cartmel 1997;

2 Both Verdery’s (1983) and Humphrey’s (1983) ethnographies focus more strongly on economic aspects and not so clearly on the social and ideological.
Markowitz 2000). It also makes them an apt focal point when exploring the relations between state and family (Engelbrektsson 1995; Kürti 2002).

A particular German concept relating to resistance, which has also been applied to socialist East Germany (Lindenberger 1999), is that of Eigensinn (Lüdtke 1993). Eigensinn means literally ‘one’s own will’ but spiced with a healthy portion of thick-headedness. Lüdtke (in particular 1993: 120–160) used the term to describe subversive strategies in everyday life of German factories in the early twentieth century. He considers instances in which workers ignored the regulated work processes without disturbing them directly: daydreaming, physically teasing colleagues, taking illegal breaks, and so forth (Lüdtke 1993: 140). Lüdtke describes Eigensinn as a ‘being-by-oneself’ and ‘being-with-others’, which is practised primarily in a physical way. This perception of the factory environment emphasises face-to-face relationships between co-workers while de-emphasising the structural set up and the roles assigned by it. Focusing on the workers’ self-understanding, Lüdtke manages to circumnavigate the difficult question of subordination. The boundary between Eigensinn and open resistance is, however, unclear and fluid (Lüdtke 1993: 142).

With regard to personhood Dumont provides a model of adaptation between two cultures in the process of civilisation (1994; 1970). He argues that in many modern contexts cultures appropriate traits from the dominant ideology instead of disappearing or ‘closing in’. Germany (1994: passim) and Russia (1994: 11–14), for example, adopted certain traits of the modern individualistic ‘configuration’ and in turn refined it. Dumont states that the newly developed ‘representations’ of individualism ‘constitute a sort of synthesis which may be more radical or less [radical]’ than the predominant ideology (1994: 14). The new representations, he continues, are self-justificatory and make a universal claim. Because of this, ‘such products of the acculturation…may [re]enter into the dominant culture’ (Dumont 1994: 14).

Lüdtke’s Eigensinn solves to some extent the dichotomisation inherent in Scott’s and, to a lesser extent, Humphrey’s notion of transcripts since it appreciates both the overlapping and the interaction of the differing interpretations and practices (cf. Reed-Danahay 1993: 221–9). Such an integrated view is also provided in Kürti’s ethnography, although he does not address the problem directly. Despite his return to unequal encounters, Dumont adds to this the idea that if two kinds of interpretations and narratives are used they may dialogically alter and reinforce one another. It is this idea of a ‘conversational’ co-development – a discursive reinforcing of two seemingly contradictory notions of the person and two value systems – that I would like to utilise here.

The socialistic personality in the Jugendweihe

The Jugendweihe originated in the German Free Churches in the middle of the nineteenth century and was adopted by a number of organisations and groups during the following decades (Gallinat 2002: 18–35; Hallberg 1979). One of these was the labour movement at the turn of the century. Forbidden within its customary contexts during the Third Reich, the ritual was appropriated by the government of the GDR in 1954. It was an initiation ritual (Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1967; 1969) conducted at the age of fourteen, which included preparatory courses to familiarise young people

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3 This is an interesting contrast to Scott’s (1993) work.
with the world view and beliefs of the group practising it. According to La Fontaine (1986: 102) and Spindler (1974: 303), initiation rites are at their heart about education; they aim to recruit and transform children. This is exemplified in the close connection between the Jugendweihe and the education system in the GDR (Rodde 2002). As the Central Committee explains: ‘The Jugendweihe will be fully integrated into the life of the school… in order to utilise better the many educational vantage points which result from the girls’ and boys’ preparation for the vow’ (Zentraler Ausschuß 1986: 19). In this respect the ritual constituted a culmination of the state’s efforts to turn young people into ‘socialist personalities’ (Zentraler Ausschuß 1986: 177; see also Fischer 1995: 853–75). The aim of creating a ‘new human being’ in socialism was included in the programme of the ruling party SED in the late fifties (Hanke 1976). It is based on the ‘ten commandments of socialist morality’ publicised by the then head of state, Ulbricht, in 1958 (Arnold 1961). What could be expected from ‘socialist personalities’ was reformulated a number of times, but GDR scholars arrived at a coherent argument by the 1980s. In the following section I will focus on the notion of the person surrounding the Jugendweihe. It is described in great detail in the last chapter of the book Vom Sinn unseres Lebens [On the meaning of our lives], which was presented to young people at their Jugendweihe (Zentraler Ausschuß 1983). This was the last in a succession of three books (Zentraler Ausschuß 1975; 1954).

The Central Committee defines socialist personalities as follows:

> We understand thoroughly developed socialist personalities to be educated, politically aware, to be human beings strengthened in morals and character, who are able and willing to fulfil the manifold demands that are asked for in social life, in work, in learning, and in political activities, as well as in spare time and family life. (Zentraler Ausschuß 1983: 214)

As the phrase ‘thoroughly developed socialist personalities’ (emphasis added) indicates, people should be complete and henceforth harmonious and stable personalities. This finalisation ought to be ‘allseitig’, all-encompassing. The outcomes of a sufficient education, familiarity with politics and possession of morals and a strong character should then be put to the service of society. This should be done through adhering to public demands which concern all spheres of life, including the private. The self is therefore to be public and, crucially, political. From this view of a societal self the text comes to acknowledge the individual constitution of persons: ‘Personalities are people who distinguish themselves by individual attributes and creative abilities’ (Zentraler Ausschuß 1983: 211). The individuality that is expressed here is, however, confined and regulated by the demands of society: ‘To develop a socialistic personality includes the firm conviction to be capable in a certain field… All this for the good of the whole society and the own good’ (Zentraler Ausschuß 1983: 219). These quotes show that the development of personality is achieved individually but carried out in anticipation of a communal purpose. Talents that can potentially contribute to the society’s well-being should therefore be pursued.

4 The quotes from publications of the Central Committee and the excerpts from interviews appear here in the author’s translation.

5 For a detailed analysis of the development of a Marxist notion of the person amongst GDR scholars, see Brenner (2002).

6 Hille illustrates the all pervading character of politics with the fully structured timetable of members of the FDJ (1995: 1275–1313).
Apart from being political, the notion of the socialist personality is also inherently relational. This becomes most apparent in the idea of the Kollektiv [collective]. Kollektive were organisational groups based on work, study groups or the class room. The text explains that decision-making within Kollektiven can include disagreement and conflicts. Solutions must be sought under the primacy of the Kollektiv: ‘the solution of upcoming contradictions requires subordination under a collective aim’ (Zentraler Ausschuß 1983: 247–248). Obviously, relationships formed the basis of the social organisation in Kollektiven, and finally society as a whole.

The ability to establish relationships with friends and colleagues, to shape them in such a way that they become productive for everyone and make the others enjoy life and community also belong to it [character traits of socialist personalities] (Zentraler Ausschuß 1983: 213).

With these last quotes we arrive at a notion of the person where a concept of a community oriented self is underpinned by the acknowledgement of individuality. The expression of this individuality is, however, only possible within and through subordination to collective goals, since individuals are encompassed in a collectively willed society through their membership of different, smaller and larger, Kollektive. This emphasis on collectivity through politicised real and imagined groups occurs at the expense of individual relationships.

**The ritual in practice**

The book that provides these detailed descriptions of socialist personhood was not the only educational element of the Jugendweihe. The ritual was preceded by nine Jugendstunden, youth lectures, during which the young people were instructed in socialist ideology, the history of communism and the GDR, relations with the Soviet Union, the importance of work and much more (Urban and Weinzen 1984: 53). As the culmination of this educational process (Zentraler Ausschuß 1986: 135), the ritual’s most crucial elements were a speech made by a local official and the vow spoken by the participants. The ritual as a whole was heavily prescribed – a common feature of socialist rituals (Binns 1980; Lane 1981; Roth 1990). The Central Committee published a handbook of rules and suggestions for those involved in the ritual's organisation (1986) and a journal containing articles with advice and case examples (Jugendweihe). These texts not only provided suggestions about the organisation of the ceremonies but detailed ideological interpretations of each ritual element and, depending on these interpretations, made recommendations. The tremendous care taken by the Central Committee reflects the ritual’s central role in the formation of socialist personalities.

The question of how constraining or ambiguous rituals are has long occupied anthropology. Generally considered as ‘transmitters of culture’, rituals were often held ‘by their selection and emphasis’ to exercise ‘a constraining effect on social behaviour’ (Douglas 1970: 42). Rappaport considers ritual in a similar vein as the 'basic social act', which is most importantly an act of communication (1999; also 1984). This view of ritual as reproducing social or other structures is also inherent to Kertzer's work on political rituals (1988; 1996).

Bloch, however, offers a slightly different viewpoint (1986). Exploring a circumcision ritual in order to achieve insights into ‘the experience of ideology’ (1986: 10), he concludes that the ritual is a ‘collusion between inferiors and superiors’ (1986: 193) but not a tool of power-holders imposing their own world view, as most Marxist
approaches have it (Bloch 1986: 6). As Kertzer argues for symbols (1988: 11), so rituals are condensed, multivocal and ambiguous. Lewis argues as much, when writing that ritual is prescriptive with regard to action but not with regard to the meaning of these actions (1980: 11), which can be ‘indeterminate, private, various and individual’ (1980: 19). Gerholm makes an even stronger claim for the consideration of the individual in ritual analysis: ‘the individual’s possibility to take his [sic] distance from the official interpretation is often made too little of in analyses treating ritual as ideology in action’ (1988: 200). Bell’s idea of ritualisation, which ‘endows participants with some degree of ritual mastery’, strikes a similar note (1992: 141).

Socialist rituals differ from those usually considered by anthropologists in so far as they were created consciously to serve certain ends. Binns concludes with regard to such settings that, ‘whatever the regime’s intentions of extending its ideological control into family life and leisure, the actual conduct of these ceremonies has given expression to, and thereby encouraged, pluralism, individualism and consumerism, which undermine a centralist ideology’ (1980: 183). Kürti provides a more differentiated view in outlining a number of possible reactions to newly installed rituals: partial rejection, adaptive acceptance, over-acceptance and the change of meaning through a focus on the private feasting (1990: 5–10).

In the following section I will provide a brief account of how a Jugendweihe ritual could have looked in the 1980s. This is a synthesis of different material, including publications of the Central Committee, two films (Paeschke 1988; Rentzsch et al 1979) and interviews.

The ceremonies, which took place during May, were often conducted in town or village halls, schools and similar public places. The families of the participants put considerable emphasis on this day, often celebrating the Jugendweihe with a private party. The public ceremony extended into a family celebration that continued after the official element. The day was therefore marked by the arrival of guests, last-minute preparations and dressing up. The young participants would kit themselves out in new clothes, often in the fashion of adult formal dress. The hall where the ceremony took place would be decorated with flowers and political symbols (the red flag, a picture of the head of state, and the symbol of the GDR state – a corn garland with hammer and compasses), and be divided into an auditorium and a stage in a set up similar to that used for school assemblies or concerts.

The structure of the ceremony was reminiscent of the evangelical ritual of Konfirmation. It began with a procession of the participants into the hall during which the audience stood and music was played. The young people walked towards the stage and sat down in the front rows. The ceremony lasted one hour and consisted of four main ritual actions: a speech given by an official from the locality (for example, the mayor, the headmaster, or an army officer); a vow sworn by the participants; the appearance of the participants on stage to receive congratulations, flowers and a gift; and words of thanks from the participants. During the speech all remain seated. The speaker was supposed to make both participants and audience aware of the vow’s content, and apply it to their experiences and current political affairs (Zentraler Ausschuß 1986:

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7 Having originated in the Free Churches, the Jugendweihe was developed from Konfirmation and remained close to it in structure. Other similarities like the age of participants and the timing of the ceremonies increased the pressure on young Christians to choose between one of the two rituals (Griese 2001).
The vow which followed was taken by the young people standing, usually facing towards the front with their backs to their parents. Another official would read out the verses of the vow, which the participants would answer with an unanimous ‘Yes, so we swear’. The vow addressed their initiation into citizenship under the socialist ideology, into the community of workers and peasants, their agreement to fight for peace and for the people, to be patriots supporting proletarian internationalism and so forth (Zentraler Ausschuß 1986: 14).

These primary ritual actions were framed by an entertainment programme that included songs, instrumental music and the recitation of poetry chosen to echo the ideological flavour of the occasion. Music, for example, was considered appropriate because it mirrors emotions (Zentraler Ausschuß 1986: 150). It therefore led up to the vow, utilising ‘emotionally heightened psychological activity’ (Zentraler Ausschuß 1986: 150). The choice of music could include songs of the socialist youth organisations sung by an FDJ [Free German Youth; a socialist organisation] choir, detectable by their blue uniforms, or classical music or folklore. As part of the congratulations participants often received flowers from a group of Young Pioneers [a socialist children’s organisation] who wore white blouses and blue neckerchiefs. The presence of these two organisations introduced the neophytes into a socialist life-cycle. At fourteen they could be seen as standing between pioneer and youth organisation, although they had been initiated into the latter during one of the preceding youth lectures.

When the ceremony was finished, the young people filed out again while the audience stood up. The families then re-assembled and proceeded to their private celebrations as ‘the final act in which the new status of the initiate is recognised’ (La Fontaine 1986: 185). The family celebrations were very similar to those connected to Konfirmation and baptism. Often the close family would have lunch. More guests would arrive for coffee and cake in the afternoon and stay for dinner. These arrangements were flexible with regard to scale, but had to encompass certain elements such as the presentation of gifts to the participants, many of which took the form of money, which could amount to a considerable sum. Usually the young people were also allowed their first glass of some alcoholic beverage despite not yet being legally of age.

**‘That was my Jugendweihe’**

During my field research in Saxony-Anhalt in 2000 I conducted life-history interviews. Most of my informants were in their thirties and early forties, which places their Jugendweihen in the 1970s and 1980s. As part of these interviews I asked about their experience of the Jugendweihe in particular. The narratives which I recorded contrast with the texts of the Central Committee. Informants omitted large parts of the ritual, de-emphasised the vow and speech but recorded in detail personal issues, such as dress and being on stage, and social ones like the family celebrations.

Nadine describes her Jugendweihe to me as part of a partner interview with her husband. In his story he failed to mention the youth lectures, a fact Nadine criticised. She therefore began her narrative by recounting the one youth lecture she remembers – a talk about a small concentration camp very near to her home town. The session was emotional because the young people had not been aware of a camp existing in such close proximity. Nadine recalls that they had readings in some other lectures, but is unable to say what they were about. How about the Jugendweihe? ‘Apart from the
fact that I had to wear a really awful dress...’ This is how Nadine’s narrative of the ‘big day’ begins. She continues to explain how the dress was bought and what it looked like. This narration is interrupted by frequent laughter and remarks from her husband: ‘A blue dress with coloured dots... I hated it. And blue suede leather shoes with heels. I will never forget that!’ The clothing dominates her entire story.

Although Nadine mentions that the family departs for the ceremony, she never actually talks about the latter. Rather, her story continues immediately with the family lunch afterwards. She then turns to the presents and the money she received: ‘I had never had money and I really wanted to buy something for myself’. She therefore recorded all the gifts in a little book, behaviour which some guests found inappropriate. ‘And then guests at the family celebration got worked up about the fact that I was writing down what I got from whom.’ She also remembers that the men drank a lot of alcohol and that she had her first glass of cherry liqueur. Nadine then turns to how she went out with a friend to a local youth club where another family’s celebration was taking place and had another drink there. Returning home she found her father somewhat angry and concludes: ‘Then I got into trouble with my father when I came home. [laughing] Yes, that was my Jugendweihe’. After some remarks about the youth lectures, the political backdrop and intent of the day moved into the background of Nadine’s mind. Her subsequent narrative is clearly preoccupied with the personal and social details of her Jugendweihe.

Nadine’s story is no exception. Most interviewees recalled the family celebration in greater detail and retold it with more emotional engagement than the public ceremony. The public ceremony seemed to fail to capture the young peoples’ attention and to address their emotions (cf. Thorne et al 1998: 237–68). If it was recounted, it was usually to list different rituals acts, often in the wrong order:

Well, I can remember that we had a rehearsal before and were told exactly who had to stand up when. You went on stage in groups of six and you had to do a vow... when you were up there a picture was taken, and at the marching in, and the headmaster led the group and then you sat down. It took place in the communal hall [Kreiskulturhaus] and afterwards another picture was taken at the side by the staircase. That was it. (Frank)

Some interviewees said explicitly that the public ceremony failed to engage them. It was described as ‘bambule’ [fuss] by one of my informants, and as an ‘average political function’ that was ‘nothing special’ by another. In another interview I asked about this directly, after Jan had told me the story of his Jugendweihe as a family celebration only. He affirms that the political backdrop remained in the background. Jan argues that this was the case because it ‘belonged to everyday life back then’. Ideology was so at the forefront of everything that it seemed to have rendered itself meaningless. Instead, the young people emphasised their immediate, personal lives. This was the case with the youth lectures for example, as Jan explains: ‘It was a trip for the class, whether it [the topic] was a communist in a show trial against fascists that went wrong [or something else], that didn’t matter. We were not interested in it. It was a trip and you got out of your hometown’. The same holds true for the ritual according to him:

It was a celebration and that you got a book there... and you had to do a vow and the Young Pioneers were standing before you...[did not matter]. You just accepted it. After this it was, ‘All together please’, a picture of the group and of yourself, and then you disappeared and the most important thing started: the [family] celebration. Right?
Jan’s failure to tell me about the official ceremony in his first account, even though he clearly remembers its details, was a deliberate oversight. As he explains here, the ideological attributes of the ritual did not matter to him. Why therefore should he mention them? They were simply accepted as part of a deal that contained the family celebration.

One part of the ceremony, however, featured strongly in other informants’ stories. This was the going on stage, where the participants lined up facing the audience and received congratulations, a certificate, a book and flowers. Everything that went on until then, observing the entertainment and the speech, speaking the vow, had been done by the participants as a group. They observed, listened and swore the vow communally. Now, they would get up in groups of ten and step on the stage, turn around and face the audience individually, visible to everyone. This situation seemed to have excited many of the young people. In the adults’ accounts of their memories worries about their clothes, hairstyle and a fear of stumbling featured quite prominently. It is clear that in this performative act (Goffman [1959] 1969) the young people wanted to make an impression and communicate messages about their proper and likeable individual selves to the audience, and to themselves (Rappaport 1999: 52). Nadine’s concern with her dress is mirrored by Frank, who found his appearance threatened shortly before the public ceremony: ‘And I remember with horror the mother of my friend was a hairdresser, and she thought that my hair wasn’t right yet . . .’. Similarly, Jan reports the trouble his mother went through to get him a good suit for the Jugendweihe only to discover that a boy, who went on stage in the same group as Jan, was wearing the same one.

These stories reveal that the ideology that underpinned the ritual Jugendweihe was not important for the young people’s celebration of it. They were not concerned about their ‘self-development’, their ‘contribution to the progress of society’ or the chance to ‘achieve their happiness through the happiness of everyone’. These overtly generalising notions were too far removed from the immediate environment of the youngsters. In contrast to the notion of the socialist personality, they saw themselves as individuals. Even more, they saw themselves as individuals in immediate relation to others: their friends and families.

The individual relationships which are de-emphasised in socialist personhood in favour of a politicised collectivity were re-emphasised by the young people. However, the two notions of the person and the two interpretations of the Jugendweihe as a socialist and a social coming-of-age ritual were not in conflict with one another. In contrast, the ambiguous nature of the ritual, which provided space for collective, individual and social representations, allowed for both forms of personhood and both interpretations to co-exist. The ritual entailed acts of a clearly political meaning (the speech and vow), acts of personal meaning (the congratulations on stage), and ambiguous acts that emphasised the importance of the ceremony per se (the music and recitals). Instead of transmitting ‘conventional [here ideological] understandings, rules and norms’ according to which life was ‘supposed to proceed’ (Rapport 1999: 123; emphasis original), the Jugendweihe consequently endowed all participants with some kind of ‘ritual mastery’ (Bell 1992: 141), thereby leaving space for interpretation (Lewis 1980; Gerholm 1988: 190–203).

Integration and divergence

The character of the Jugendweihe as an appropriate arena for diverging notions and practices was, however, also secured by the respective advocates’ knowledge of this divergence. Even though not stressing the political dimension in their narratives, it was unquestionable that all interviewees were aware of it. As part of his ‘list-like’ account of the public ceremony, Frank describes the vow: ‘You went on stage in groups of six and you had to do a vow. The ‘Ich gelobe’ [I swear] became ‘Ich jlobe’ [Saxon dialect: I think so] in the end. That was fun then’. The young people ridicule the vow by intently mispronouncing the crucial ‘I swear’. This mispronunciation makes the phrase sound reminiscent of the Saxon dialect, and can now be understood as ‘I think so’, which clearly breaks the ritual rules. However, the act of ridicule was likely to have been apparent only to Frank and his friends; otherwise there would have been consequences. From the viewpoint of the audience the group was therefore still engaging with the ideological vow. This episode illustrates the ambiguous character of a ritual in which official and personal interpretations come together in practice, merging and diverging depending on the eye (or ear) of the beholder.

The authorities of the Central Committee also recognised the Jugendweihe’s potential for ambiguity. With regard to the public ceremony, this is expressed in an article by Gottfried Dahler in the journal Jugendweihe (1983: 26–8). Dahler ponders the arrangement of the vow, for example. He finds the usual situation where the young people stand with their backs to the audience unsatisfactory and explains that they should be on stage, visible to their families, who ‘search for the reactions of their children in this decisive moment’ (Dahler 1983: 26). When parents can only see the backs of their children, a ‘great amount of the impact’ of the moment is lost. However, Dahler explains that all the young people need to be on stage together to maintain the vow’s collective connotation. The lack of space on stage therefore prevents better practice in most cases. Dahler then addresses the congratulations that occur on stage. He explains that this is a difficult moment since: ‘It is always about collective action; on the other hand we also want to place the individual participant at the centre of attention here’. And he adds: ‘This seems to be nearly incompatible’ (Dahler 1983: 26). In this article, Dahler recognises the tension between the collective connotation of the ritual and the individual dimension inherent in some of its elements – here the moment on stage and the potential of the ritual’s ambiguity to limit the intended impact. This point is also apparent in those texts which deal with another difficult part of the Jugendweihe, the family celebration.

The handbook of the Central Committee for organisers of the Jugendweihe dedicates an entire section to family celebrations (Zentraler Ausschuß 1986: 158–61). It is described here as the: ‘solemn continuation of the Jugendweihe within the family circle’ (Zentraler Ausschuß 1986: 159). This continuation can take a number of forms, ranging from a visit to the theatre followed by dinner in a restaurant to visits of galleries and museums, or a meeting with relatives and friends (Zentraler Ausschuß 1986: 159–60). Educational activities are emphasised. With respect to the actual celebrations, the Committee remarks that: ‘there has been a growing interest in choosing collective forms of the solemn continuation of the ceremony in order to adapt this festive day even more strongly to the interests of the young people’ (Zentraler Ausschuß 1986: 159). Such collective forms are, for example, the co-celebration of several families with the support of the FDJ, schools and local clubs.
On the one hand the text makes it quite clear that ‘the young person’ should be at the centre of attention. However, it does not refrain from outlining what kind of educational activities or collective celebrations would serve ‘the young persons’ best. My change from the singular to the plural here is not accidental but in line with the text, which constantly merges the individual form with an anonymised pluralisation. This is illustrated well also in a book for parents on how to celebrate the Jugendweihe. Here the author moves from the individual to a general plural within one brief sentence: ‘But Juanita was the most important person. She, her interest and those of the Jugend [all young people] should have had centre stage’ (Helbig 1987: 14).

More direct than this were the authorities’ attempts to regulate the exchange of presents. Again, the handbook stresses the importance of these presents since they express the affection of relatives for the young people, underline the ideological intent of the day, and also show the increased living standard in the GDR (Zentraler Ausschuß 1986: 161). The committee explains that care should nevertheless be taken in the selection of the presents. Gifts which educate, such as theatre visits, trips and ‘other collective forms of entertainment’, should be chosen, as well as ‘longer lasting goods of consumption’ (Zentraler Ausschuß 1986: 161). Helbig (1987: 39) directly discourages big ‘prestige presents’, preferring to emphasise ‘simplicity, usefulness and taste’.

These brief excerpts illustrate that the authorities acknowledged the dynamic character of some features of the ritual. On the one hand they tried to guide the practice of the ritual through publications such as Helbig’s, which made suggestions about how to arrange the family celebrations. On the other hand, and more interestingly, these social features became a part of the authorities’ texts after their ideological reinterpretation. The family celebrations turn into ‘collective occasions’, which underline the socialist intent of the Jugendweihe. To use Dumont’s words (1994: 14), the ‘new representations’, the family celebration, ‘enter[ed] into the dominant culture’, here the socialist ideology, albeit in an ideologically tinted version.

**Conclusion**

The diverging interpretations of personhood in the ritual Jugendweihe are not instances of resistance and domination. Acts of resistance took place outside this sphere, practised by those who refused to participate and bore the consequences. On the ritual middle ground, however, not one party seemed to be able to dominate action or meaning for any period of time. The participants brought their own interpretations and emphasis to the Jugendweihe, which were grounded in social immediacy. Focusing on their ‘being-with-one-another’ they maintained these interpretations in an eigensinnig fashion (Lüdtke 1994). Diverging notions of the person, interpretations and narratives therefore came together in the ritual creating ‘tangled states’ (Parkin 1992: 23). Realising this entanglement, both individuals and authorities attempted to reorder the rite through a reinterpretation of the most ambivalent acts: Frank ridiculed the vow to try to maintain his a-political view of the Jugendweihe; and the Central Committee commissioned advice books for parents on what presents to buy. In doing so, however, they also acknowledged the diverging interpretations and fostered them. In this ‘conversational co-development’, the newly established ‘representations’ nevertheless remain discrepant in their emphasis. While the participants’ perception revealed an emphasis on family celebrations at the expense of the public ceremonies, the authorities
came to regard the such celebrations as adding weight to the ideological impact of the ritual.

It is this character of the Jugendweihe ritual as an arena providing for diverging interpretations that guaranteed its continuation after 1989. The partial appropriation of the Jugendweihe as a coming-of-age ritual allowed it to be continued after unification. The ritual had become a part of East German culture through having been a part of many family histories. However, due to its simultaneous character as an instrument of the socialist state, this continued practice is inevitably contested by groups and individuals which had felt oppressed. These are also usually those people who practised open resistance against socialist rule. In this way the Jugendweihe is also of continuing relevance for the negotiation of perceptions of the past, culture and identity in present-day eastern Germany.

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**Films**
