




OPEN ACCESS



# Grasping the scale of events: *Voices from Chernobyl* between the historical and the monumental

Theodoros Pelekanidis <sup>a</sup> and Ferraz Felipe Eduardo<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Freie Universitat Berlin, Berlin, Germany; <sup>b</sup>Rio de Janeiro State University, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

## ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the significance new forms of literary narration can have on the representation of groundbreaking historical events. Based initially on Hayden White's work and his term modernist event, we argue that new kinds of events need new ways of writing history. However, neither has White given any concrete persuasive examples of how his paradigmatic historical work might look like nor have his critics given enough attention to his considerations on the matter. By focusing our analysis on Svetlana Alexievich's literary work and specifically on her book *Voices from Chernobyl*, we try to achieve exactly this: to analyze the innovative literary features that Alexievich develops in the testimonial narratives she builds and to highlight the importance they have for representing the past. For this purpose, we take a closer look at the thematic connection of the testimonies and the sense of non-linearity they create; comment on her success to approach in this way the 'unseen event' and bring the reader closer to the horrific and confusing reality that the witnesses describe; and show how literary techniques like the use of parataxis can efficiently grasp and mediate the differences in the temporal scale of hard-to-comprehend historical events and their consequences. Especially examining how Alexievich deals with this temporal particularity in her narrative, the paper suggests new ways to deal with the complex temporalities and discontinuities that go beyond modern historical thinking.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 29 December 2022; Accepted 11 April 2023

**KEYWORDS** History; literature; event; Svetlana Alexievitch; temporality; scale; narrative

## Introduction

The recent rise of the debate about temporality in history and historiography has caused the rethinking of what constitutes a historical event. Although there are several perspectives from which we can approach the topic of time in its connection with

**CONTACT** Theodoros Pelekanidis  [theodor.pelekanidis@gmail.com](mailto:theodor.pelekanidis@gmail.com)  Freie Universitat Berlin, Pfalzburger Str. 7, Berlin 10719, Germany

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

our understanding of historical events, in this article we will focus on how literature with its artistic qualities can provide a new framework from which this connection can be further evolved. Artworks in general have a high potential to contest the *status quo* and disturb some of the conventional aspects of collective memory, as they provide new insights into debates concerned with historical events and time. As the topic is, of course, huge, in what follows, we would like to especially focus on the emplotment of a specific novel, Svetlana Alexievich's book *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*,<sup>1</sup> and show how analyzing the modes and tropes, the narrative techniques and literary figures used in it can offer new perspectives in writing about the past.

In this context, besides the many different possibilities to think about the event, we intend to enter into dialogue with the scholarly work that has shown a renewed and dynamic interest in the category of time as part of the problematization in historical studies. (See, for example: Lorenz and Bevernage 2013; Tamm and Burke 2019) Taking a look at the event's temporality also means bringing into stress new perspectives to deal with contemporary historical fictions that put catastrophes at the core of their narrative. What we would like to explore, therefore, is not only what theoretical notions of time we can make up by analyzing different events but also what form of writing we should evolve in order to be able to grasp these events taking into consideration the new different ways they relate with time.

What proved to be particularly challenging in the case of Chernobyl was its incorporation into the real-time frame of the people who lived through it, either the victims or the survivors. The nuclear contamination created a vastly different chronicle dimension in the lives of the people affected because it did not resemble any of their previous experiences. The bodies seemed to tolerate the contaminated environment without difficulty in the beginning but then collapsed gradually and without anybody expecting it or being able to understand it. The whole region seemed to be unaffected by the disaster, retaining its natural beauty, but people came to understand that this was an illusion; the negative consequences for their lives because of their being in this seemingly safe environment would follow them and their children for the decades to come. It is this unapproachable scale of the event, as well as the different temporal scales it entails – the planetary/environmental, the long-term /generational, and the short-term/momentary – that Alexievich's

narration manages to grasp through her narrative and this is what gives to her text its monumental character.

We believe that by analyzing in detail narrative techniques found in the book, like parataxis<sup>2</sup>, we can give a more specific idea of what new perspectives such literary devices can open for historical studies. In *Voices from Chernobyl*, the implications of the ‘scalar procedures’ to historical thinking can suggest many new perspectives in relation to thinking about temporality. The scale influences temporality and it provides new ways to think about heteroglossia and its varying ways of evaluating, conceptualizing, and experiencing the world. This is why, although Alexievich’s book is not a conventional historical monograph for many reasons, its success in representing the demanding event of the Chernobyl disaster provides reasons for seriously considering it for historiographical purposes. It can be a guide for how to handle critical or catastrophic events in innovative, meaningful, and comprehensive ways, respecting the people who lived through them, sensitizing the public for them, and without compromising their truth. It is also useful, as it will become clear, to think about historical writing facing the Anthropocene, considered a contemporary challenge that demands from history to reinvent its epistemological foundations (Chakrabarty 2018).

### **Narrating the non-comprehensible: modernist writing and *Voices from Chernobyl***

The event has been framed as a defining instance in narrative employment by different theorists of history (White and Doran 2010; Ricoeur 1992). These theorists dealt with the similarities between literary and historical modes of representation of events and highlighted the dialectical relationship between the narrative order and the eruption of an event. In their understanding, the event constitutes the central point of discontinuity in the historical narrative and not a self-contained entity or the effect of immediate historical forces. Compared with social historians who understand the event as an irreducible moment in the historical process setting in terms of agency and contingency, these theorists of history chose a complex understanding of the historical event and linked it with other conditions to be reappropriated in the historical narrative, like the ways representation can deal with the time, and most significantly with the concepts of synchronicity, temporality, and historicity. Time and event are two categories of history that seem to be self-evident but can

offer fruitful debates which can reconfigure some old questions not only to the historical field but also to the contemporary literature, such as 'How to deal with a catastrophe?' or 'How to narrate after a deep break with time?'

In his essay 'The Modernist Event', the historian and theorist of history Hayden White argued that modernist literature, the literary stream that found its best expression in the works of writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, 'dissolves the trinity of event, character, and plot' that has dominated the previous literary tradition. (White 1999, 66) Modernist writers understood that the linearity of realist narratives could not grasp the ways people thought and acted and that the convention of presenting time through a coherent narrative with a distinct beginning (past), middle (present), and end (future) offered an only incomplete image of the human situation in its sociopolitical framework. In his critique of historiography, he highlighted the backwardness of the dominant forms of writing history which remained stuck in previous ways of understanding and narrating the past that did not take into account the newest developments in writing techniques.

But White went a step further than that: he did not just claim that historians should use modernist techniques because they could offer new perspectives on the human past and offer glimpses to the future; he also claimed that new events that started appearing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and could not appear before, events that he called 'modernist' – of which the Holocaust of the European Jews is for White the 'paradigmatic' event for Western European history – needed new forms of representation to be adequately narrated. The way events like the Holocaust or the nuclear bombs in Japan were experienced by the historical agents who were part of them cannot be kept imprisoned in linear narrative forms which fail to mediate the confusion of the moment and the trauma that occurs after it and which prevents this experience to be 'relived', and thus historicized, as a coherent and comprehensible event. These modernist events, to which White also, apart from the Holocaust, included 'the two world wars, a growth to world population hitherto unimaginable, poverty and hunger on a scale never before experienced, pollution of the ecosphere by nuclear explosions and the indiscriminate disposal of contaminants', (White 1999, 69) create so many different accounts of them that any notion of one and only objective image of them is rendered impossible. It is for this reason that White turned to modernist writing and connected it with previous pre-18<sup>th</sup> century ways of historicizing and narrating the past, and claimed that they cannot be represented with the traditional

representational techniques developed and promoted by classical historiography.

In his newest book *The Epochal Event*, Zoltán Boldizsár Simon connects the Anthropocene, the proposed name for the new geological epoch that we are living in right now, with historical thinking and the need of historians to adapt it to the present situation. According to his analysis, we can see the changes that take place in our contemporary society as ‘epochal’, significant of a new epoch in history, a term that is justified by the appearance of phenomena such as ‘the sixth mass extinction event, the technological singularity, and the potential transgression of planetary boundaries’. (Simon 2020, 80) This gives him the chance to analyze the idea of the event as it has been developed in the theoretical investigations in historiography in the last century, catch its significance as both a term connecting historical periods and creating ruptures in historical time, and, finally, create the term that gives the title to his book, the ‘epochal event’.

Simon does very well in understanding the need to ‘conceptualize a new kind of event’, (Simon 2020, 85) without, however, mentioning the metahistorical character of the term ‘event’, which gives it a dual character, as analyzed by H. White. His critique of White is, therefore, characteristic in this sense. He correctly criticizes him for not adequately differentiating these events, grouping them as if they are of the same essence or importance, but does not refer to their importance in challenging historical writing. In other words, White referred to all these phenomena he named, from the Holocaust to the assassination of Kennedy to space travel, not to show their similarity as *historical* moments but to highlight the need they create to be treated in a *historiographically* new way. His introduction of the idea of modernist writing in historiography can be seen as a distant successor of Virginia Woolf’s call to novelists in her essay *Modernist Fiction* to abandon the older ways of literary writing, so that they can grasp life as it really is. It is an effort to persuade historians to not just perceive events in a new way – which Simon gladly attempts – but also to treat them with innovative styles. This has important implications that Simon’s analysis of the epochal event does not sufficiently take into consideration.

What is important in this sense then is that, according to White, the dissolution of the event achieved by modernist writing had as a result the collapse of the distinction between fiction and reality. Historiography has developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century following the basic lines of writing that guaranteed a certain connection between what was written and the reality

it was presumably represented in the text. What happens, however, when the complexity of reality makes it so ungraspable, that this presupposed distinction between fact and fiction becomes impossible? Modernist writing, which made consciousness part of the narrative and distinguished between psychological time and clock time, (Whitworth 2000, 146) showed a different way of representing the past. It thus made possible the appearance of new genres of representation, related to the traditional 19<sup>th</sup>-century historical novel but also concerned with entirely different problems than their predecessor: genres such as the docudrama or the historical metafiction do not concern themselves with the ability or inability of the readers to distinguish between fact and fiction; they just do not deal with this distinction anymore. (White 1999, 67–68)

Modernist events as described by White do not constitute objects of what we understand as characteristic historical knowledge in the sense of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, because on the one hand, they cannot simply be forgotten and, therefore come back to life only through the historians' explorations into the past, and on the other, they cannot be totally and comprehensively remembered by the people who experienced them and for whom they are traumatic memories impossible to be 'unambiguously identified'. (White 1999, 69) These ideas about literary modernism and the modernist event seem to be theoretically complex and abstract when read on their own. They become much clearer though when they are read in parallel with concrete examples. Svetlana Alexievich's book *Voices from Chernobyl* constitutes one such example that shows the complications that a representation of an event such as the Chernobyl nuclear accident brings with it and how different approaches to the past can highlight important aspects that traditional historiographical methods cannot adequately grasp.

Alexievich has a very distinct way of handling historical events of traumatic significance. From her first book already, *The Unwomancy Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*, originally published in 1985, we can see her characteristic way of using testimonies from interviews in order to highlight unknown aspects of the Second World War. In her own words, 'I write not about war, but about human beings in war. I write not the history of a war, but the history of feelings. I am a historian of the soul' (Alexievich 2017, 10<sup>\*3</sup>). In a later book, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, published almost 30 years later, we see that she remained faithful to her belief: 'History is concerned solely with the facts; emotions are outside of its realm of interest. In fact, it is considered improper to admit feelings into history. But I look at the

world as a writer and not a historian. I am fascinated by people' (Alexievich 2017, 11). Focusing, then, on the oral history of common people and forgotten characters of wars and events, her method challenged the modern concept of history as formed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries characterized by the plot of events. This meant in practice that her handling of Soviet history in this way challenged traditional narrative lines on the socialist regime and her work had difficulties getting published in Russia. Her reputation exploded, however, after 1991 and her work was immediately recognized for its depth and sensitivity in which she shows the place people have inside the big moments of history. 'Once a book fell into my hands: *I Am from a Burning Village*, by A. Adamovich, Ya. Bryl, and V. Kolesnik . . . I had experienced such a shock only once before, when I read Dostoevsky. Here was an unusual form: the novel was composed from the voices of life itself, from what I had heard in childhood, from what can be heard now in the street, at home, in a café, on a bus. There! The circle was closed. I had found what I was looking for. I knew I would. Ales Adamovich became my teacher . . . ' (Alexievich 2017, 8\*).

Svetlana Alexievitch's books intend to construct something robustly and distinctly personal by joining together many testimonies from and about everyday life and its relationship with the unprecedented event she is referring to. When she decided to write her book *The Unwomanly Face of War*, she started receiving letters and testimonies: 'I had no doubt that I was doomed to go on writing my books endlessly. Not rewriting, but writing. A full stop immediately turns into an ellipsis . . . ' (22) In *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, the fall of the Soviet Union and the turbulent years between 1985 and 1993 are described by all the interviewees as a total break with the immediate past but also as if they resemble a very distant past. Phrases like 'Everything that was once ours is now gone' (Alexievich 2016a, 95\*) and 'The way we lived used to make sense to me . . . Now I don't understand anything anymore' (2016b, 449\*) show that the people cannot compare the situation after the event with the one right before it. The only thing they can do, however, is to connect it with a past long gone or even existing only in the imagination, like living in a secondhand time. Similarly, her book *Chernobyl Prayer* develops a unique perspective on historical thinking and historical representation, mainly focusing on the interruption of the march of chronicity after an 'unseen' event. The filmmaker Claude Lanzmann once said, concerning the people that would like to write or make a film about

the Holocaust, that ‘the worst moral and aesthetic mistake you can make is to approach your subject as if it belongs to the past’. (Runia 2014, 3) Her creative technique of collage or mosaics treats the event she is handling similarly; yet her writing does not unfold exactly like a narrative because there is nothing like a chain of events that are somewhat connected. There is only some kind of emplotment that happens after the unprecedented event of the power plant explosion.

Like her other books, *Voices from Chernobyl* consists of a series of interviews conducted by the author with victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the worst nuclear accident in history in terms of costs and casualties, which contaminated almost the whole of Europe. But Alexievich chooses not to put her own voice into the narration and the interviews do not appear as a set of questions and answers; the interviewees’ voice is, therefore, not interrupted and most of the testimonies are titled ‘monologues’, into which the author (and interviewer) adds narrative elements only when she judges such interference to be necessary either for clarification or for dramatization. This narrative technique which has been categorized into the genre of testimonial literature (Saini, 1092) and which we can call recorded monologues, in order to grasp its particularity, has many benefits concerning both how the interviewer can relate to, narrate and explain their experience and how the readers can feel and understand the witnesses’ narration and the reality in which they participated. *Voices from Chernobyl* is written using some of the common writing strategies from the contemporary prose of fiction. The most remarkable one is the relationship between fragment and wholeness made by the switch between different voices from the witness of the disaster creating polyphonic writing. Besides the contemporary disposition to mix fiction and non-fiction, Alexievich’s book does not conform itself with a narrow set of generic and formal norms. Indeed, the polyphonic writing is also a way to highlight the polyphonic witness about the abrupt change and the disaster which is also a disaster about time and its common categories as present, past, and future. Although Svetlana Alexievich’s book begins with an intimate testimony about the disaster called ‘A solitary human voice’, *Voices from Chernobyl* suggest immediate and abrupt change because the world that she lived is no more the same. ‘You have to understand. This is not your husband anymore, not a beloved person, but a radioactive object with a strong density of poisoning’. (Alexievich 2005, 16) The unprecedented event disrupts the chain of events and the world that we knew is no more what it was. In her own words, “What lingers most in my memory of Chernobyl is life



afterwards: the possessions without owners the landscapes without people (Alexievich 2016a, *Prayer*, 37\*).

We could argue, based on this, that *Voices From Chernobyl* denies the most common strategies to represent the disaster. There are two main ways to represent events and their causation: the old idea of history as fixed points of reference which we understand as events and the idea of the dynamic system of retrospective correspondences. Hayden White's work develops a deep theoretical approach about the last one which he calls figural-fulfillment as an adaptation of the aesthetic notion of figuralism modeled on literary history to the historical field especially to develop a theory of the event. The historical event Chernobyl is not the desired outcome of human development or the USSR's technological development. Conversely, it cannot be fulfilled by the previous events which break the common conventions of historical representation. Hayden White's late work highlights that though literally chronological, history is figurally anachronistic because always a later event alters the meaning of the previous one whose fulfilled White calls this process 'reverse causation'. (White and Doran 2010, 267) In general, the figural interpretation is the desire to see the later event *as if* it was entangled with an earlier event without any causal connection. If we consider that figure-fulfillment is the possibility to choose a past of the historical event as the possibility to choose a corresponding present, Svetlana Alexievitch's book denies any immediate past to the abrupt rupture of the catastrophe. *Voices from Chernobyl* is not a representation of the discontinuity of an event, but much more a narrative about a historical event that denies 'reverse causation'. Figuralism structures both narrative and historical consciousness, as Hayden White argues. Nevertheless, Alexievitch's book performs narrative and witness to deny the primary intentions of the emplotment and its form of verbal figuration as fulfillment. The catastrophe of Chernobyl cannot be predicted by the earlier parts of a story and it cannot be revealed in the later moments as in the literary technique of 'foreshadowing'. Compared with nineteenth-century historical novels, where the 'foreshadowing' is a cornerstone of the historical narrative as in the Tolstoi's *War and Peace*, Svetlana Alexievitch's book *Voices From Chernobyl* is a creative enterprise that suggests new ways to deal with historical narrative without the most common relationship between character, plot and historical event. The fragmentation of the witnesses blocks the flow of the plot.

At the core of Alexievich's book lies a conception of the event as a deep break never seen before by the people. The distinction between agitated

periods (crises and revolutions) and others in which little seems to happen cannot be applied here. Chernobyl could be considered not only as an epochal or historical event or as the pivotal of historical periodization, but also as the historical event that begins a new period of human life and a new way to deal with time. Some of the witnesses in Alexievitch's book remark that they live in a new time in which 'there wasn't any time to think, there wasn't any time to cry', (Alexievich 2005, 12) while others mention their inability to describe and comprehend the event or show disbelief to the new relationship with an invisible enemy. (Alexievich 2005, 34) This is why Alexievich's choice of representing the event through interviews, without allowing the reader to directly come in contact with her subjective viewing even in the form of the questions she asked seems so inspiring. As we saw in White's and previously Woolf's suggestions, new kinds of events need new forms of representation, and one of the characteristics of the modernist writing proposed by both was the disappearance of the omniscient objective narrator. Alexievich achieves this almost automatically, showing that it is after all the events by themselves that demand new ways of expression to be created.

### **The figuration of scale: time and temporality in *Voices from Chernobyl***

Like the concept of the event, the concept of time constitutes a cornerstone in Alexievitch's narrative. Departing from the specific temporal character of the modern era, mainly in terms of the standardization of the rhythm of temporality, common people affirm their problematic relationship with the abrupt change. *Voices from Chernobyl* follows the avant-gardists' writing strategies which 'subordinates time (or models of historical linearity) to space (or spatializing models of history)'. (Elias 2001, xii) Amy Elias' analysis can help us to understand this better. In her book *Sublime Desire*, she points out that contemporary historical fiction, which she calls 'metahistorical romance', combines reflection of its own procedures with a desire for the historical sublime. Avant-gardist meta-historical romances extend 'the modernist technique of spatialization into the realm of history' (Elias 2001, 118) as a way to redefine the Western narrative form with its insistence on teleological or linear histories. This defamiliarization with modern concepts of temporality is succeeded, of course, through the disruption of the event, but also through the use of the *parataxis*, which Elias identifies as the remarkable rhetorical strategy in these novels. The grammatical function of parataxis

happens not only at the formal narrative level but also at the thematic one. Elias points out that 'Rather than juxtaposing narrative or plots segments, paratactic metahistorical romances juxtapose past and present'. (Elias 2001, 125) And exactly as we can observe in the case of *Voices from Chernobyl*, she remarks that parataxis allows the appearance of many different voices in the narrative. By adopting such techniques, therefore, *Voices from Chernobyl* reject the dialectical conception of history in favor of heteroglossia: characters and ideologies are juxtaposed or may even diverge one from another without any synthesis.

Hayden White was the first one that considered parataxis as the cornerstone to a practice of historians, mainly because novels that support a paratactic construction of history can provide a rebirth of disciplinary history, even if in uncanny ways. He highlights that '... the rebirth of parataxis in art and thought in this century does not represent the fall back into myth or the advent of a new totalitarianism so much as the demand for a change of consciousness that will finally make a unified humanity possible'. (White and Doran 2010, 69) His earlier analysis of the chronicle acquire, through this reconceptualization of the parataxis as a form of historical figuration, a new dimension; the chronicles were also following a paratactical connection, but this 'return of parataxis' will this time come with all the narrativistic tools with which historical discourse is nowadays equipped. It is this returning of this old style of understanding the past that made Elias claim that the paratactic history seems, in White, 'an odd attempt to create a communal style, one that reflects the historical consciousness of its time' (Elias 2001, 141). However, both White and Elias stop their analysis before considering how it can help historians or literature writers use this technique to practically capture the new temporalities which they seem so concerned about. This is where Alexievich efforts and her understanding of scale comes into play.

The concept of scale has a long and complex history that expresses mainly a number of different proportional relations from physical phenomena to the comparative size of objects and their representation. According to Anna McCarthy 'Scale as proportion allows an observer to grasp something's significance simply by comparing it to other things, without reference to external standards of judgment'. (McCarthy 2006, 12) Alexievitch's book considers scale as a proportional figuration of time and it has clear implications for the production of the historical meaning of the event, specifically in relationship to the empiricism of her research. In proportional representation, relations between the referent and the

sign are quantified to remark the uniqueness of the event as a graduate ranging of values forming a standard system for measuring the consequences of the event. Although scale is a process of calculating, it is not exclusively cognitive mainly because the process depends on the modes of historical representation. *Voices from Chernobyl's* focus does not only show the testimonies in the book but specifically situate the unprecedented event through a process of scalar conversion. The process happens both at a spatial and at a temporal scale mainly because the book provides less a reconstruction – a commonsense yet limited understanding of testimonials of the event – than a narrative on the presence of the past and the interrogation about the future of the planet. ‘More than twenty years have passed since the accident, yet I have been asking myself ever since: what was I bearing witness to, the past or the future?’ (Alexievich, 2016a, 21) Different views of time and space have been used to highlight the pluralization of time and space focusing on the political complexity of the entanglement between humans and the planet. ‘Life’s continuity. With Chernobyl, man imperilled everything, the whole divine creation, where thousands of other creatures, animals and plants live alongside man’. (Alexievich, 2016b, 38) or when she talks about the new heroes. ‘They had an entirely different understanding of death, encompassing everything: from the birds to the butterflies. They were already living in a completely different world – with a new right to life, new responsibilities and a new sense of guilt’. (Alexievich, 2016b, 38)

The relationship between unprecedented events and human life exceeds the range of applications of human standards of judgment posing an ethical claim about historical representation. *Voices from Chernobyl* intend to represent the discontinuity beyond the ‘Apocalyptic’ affirmations, thinking about the human impact that this ‘unseen’ event has on the earth and its future. In this sense, the book presents the ‘event as a never seen before’ and its event pre-figures the emplotment and also the literary strategies to represent temporality. ‘They were already living in a completely different world – with a new right to life. . . Their stories continually featured the idea of time. They were constantly saying, “the first time”, “never again”, “forever”’. (Alexievich 2016a, 36) On the last page of the book, Alexievitch considers that ‘They all had different fates and professions and temperaments. But Chernobyl was the main content of their world. They were ordinary people answering the most important questions’. (Alexievich 2005, 236) Her book focuses on feelings, not worried about the event itself: ‘I often thought that the simple fact, the mechanical fact, is no closer to the truth than a vague feeling, rumor,

vision. Why repeat the facts – they cover up our feelings’. (Alexievich 2005, 236) She seems to deny the representational approach to the event to not repeat the facts in favor of emotions. She is interested in these feelings: ‘The development of these feelings, the spilling of these feelings past the facts, is what fascinates me. I try to find them, collect them, protect them’. (Alexievich 2005, 236) To reach her goal, she must deal with temporality asking something like that: How does an unprecedented event perturb the order of time? She intends to connect past/present testimonies with a question about the future: ‘These people had already seen what for everyone else is still unknown. I felt like I was recording the future’. The book remarks a specific modality of historical future situating future modality within the unprecedented event and it highlights the different registers of time that enable us to identify different temporalities that make up a highly complex temporality. The whole book intends to make a time register that entails the complex relationship between short-term and long-term poles. Although the event of the Chernobyl power plant explosion happens in a specific place, the future is imagined as a kind of planetary-scale always in contrast with human temporality. The time register happens by different scales as a temporal form to conceptualize time beyond the frame of their own lifetimes. The destruction of the immediate past of the Chernobyl power plant implies a breakdown with the temporality of an old past that no more exists. The *scale* as a temporal form is stretched between the poles of small and large scales of past and future. The book develops an innovative narrative approach for performing such temporal scale figuration of time over a time-causal and time-retrospective temporal domain to modeling our historical perception. The new kind of future is no more the future that came from modern historical thinking but another one that oscillates between the poles of the uncertain outcome and the influence of the recent past of the Chernobyl power plant accident.

That is why we would like to highlight that *Voices from Chernobyl* is a monumental work. Monumental in the sense of the scale, but also monumental because she wants to make a monument of the unknown people and not about collective identity. The scale is at the cornerstone of this ‘monument’ about the unknown lives that have no name and that share this unprecedented change. Svetlana Alexievitch has sought to work precisely opposite to talk about great lives but talk much more about the common human beings that name as something similar to commemorative gravestones. She chooses to use the scalar procedure to talk about the materiality of the past not to make the past copresent but

instead for making the scalar destruction some kind of advice to the future through the projection of our body's spatial and temporal onto book and narrative. She makes the scalar procedure as a temporal and spatial strategy by many times when the book affirms the relationship between the human body and planetary or human body and the micro-organisms. Alexievitch's work explores how History and Literature make comprehending the past a matter of scale. *Voices from Chernobyl* play with issues of the scale at its thematic and formal registers and its entanglement with the human, the geologic, and the planetary to bring the corporeal implications of scale-out and its relations to temporality.

Scale is at the cornerstone of practical procedures of films, mainly war movies as this chapter from *Voices from Chernobyl*. The artistic practices of the book reduce scale to focus firstly on the earth worms and afterwards on the contamination of the ocean's water. All the time the book suggests that to comprehend the planetary or cosmic, one must also apprehend the microcosmic. In her remarks, Svetlana Alexievitch's book establishes two scalar factors: the Belarus unit as a unit of distance and the planetary epoch as a unit of time. The scale is also an attempt to make the abstract planetary devastation concrete by the commentaries about radionuclides and also an attempt to make abstract the concrete writing about the destruction of the power plant and the slow contamination of Chernobyl and its menace to the world.

The scalar procedures help to understand better what is considered as 'unthinkable' or 'unseen' or maybe unprecedented event as Zoltán Boldizsár Simon suggests in his book *History in Times of Unprecedented Change: A Theory for the 21st Century*. We could make some questions: 'How do we know what is unprecedented because it has never happened before, and how do we know what is unprecedented because it exceeds our ability to grasp it?' By turning to *Voices from Chernobyl*, a book that aligns the glance of the writer and her doubts about the end of the world with the material project of the documentarian, we explore less the unprecedented characteristics of the events in relation to the past than the assumptions about the unthinkable that the historical epistemology supposes. By articulating history and novel, we could propose a framework to think the unprecedented differently: less what has never happened before than an outcome of scalar conversions. The intersection of history and novel suggests a particular road for positing and answering these questions about the past and the dissolution of the totality of the world to events 'unseen'.

Chernobyl is both a groundbreaking event that resists representation and also a legacy that challenges the time of human life, and the book asks us to think about these temporalities. The tension between a time that flows in the present and its occurrences and a time that cannot be seen by human life in the future signs towards the synchronic and diachronic tension that structures historical temporality in the most common experiences of historical writing. Alexievitch's book uses scalar conversion to remark this connection when her testimonies consider that the legacy goes beyond the end of the menace of the 'atom bombs'. Reading the past, for Svetlana Alexievitch's work, supposes figuring the space as multiples scales that begin with the power plant and after go to the country and the planet. It is difficult not to relate this strangeness with this representation of time using scale and long duration, within the discussions on the Anthropocene, on the debates on future of humanity. It is a historical thinking that has as its epistemological basis the intertwinement between human and non-human existence, writing to build a sense of self-awareness (and of political agency) not only about the past but especially on the future of humanity after a groundbreaking event. Anthropocene does not only suppose a challenge for history (both as historiography and as the academic field) but also a way to rethink the cornerstone of its practice dealing with time and event.

## Conclusion

Alexievitch's long-standing interest in history and memory is projected onto the unseen event in *Voices from Chernobyl* mainly when she explores the passing of time in a novel where the personal extends beyond the national and onto a universal concern of humankind. Her book locates planetary images and 'the time of the earth' to suggest the long-term geological future as the time of the planet. It suggests that the order of time can be broken overnight and the effect blurs the relationships between present, past, and future with effects for many generations to come. When we think about the planetarium, the notion of the future seems to be questioned since the planet's time greatly exceeds that of human life mainly because *Voices from Chernobyl* highlights all the time temporal layers and the present cannot be seen isolated from the future. The book suggests that history is not characterized by a succession of instants in a sedimentary epistemic trajectory, but as a complex interaction between humans and non-humans and the effects of a groundbreaking event can be felt beyond the human life

In this way, Alexievich's approach can even be understood as an anterior involvement in the Anthropocene debate, a debate that entails conceptual traffic between world history and planetary history. The Anthropocene topic, which means the entanglement of deep planetary and human historical time, can be understood in *Voices from Chernobyl* as a trope that is the contrast between the ephemeral time of human life and the planetary. The trope signals an engagement with planetarity: an emerging worldview that posits earth as a character that suffers and acts after an unprecedented event, one that imbeds both human and nonhuman forces, while it desires a renewed attendance to the ethics of relationality. To develop something like a deep awareness about human life after an unseen event, Aleksievitch highlights that temporality must be understood as a matter of scale. She consciously selects the event on a vast scale mainly to provide insights about human agency in present and its consequences for the future of mankind. She selects testimonies in order to talk about human beings and their collective impact like those of very large-scale planetary forces using scale of destruction<sup>4</sup>. As Dipesh Chakrabarty mentioned, 'Both geological time and historical time are expressive of human categories, but they are tinged with different kinds of affect. It is, of course, only within the sense of time that informs world history that we can speak of hope or despair'. (Chakrabarty 2018, 13) Interestingly, we find no hope or despair in Alexievitch's historical writing. But her way of figurating scale in the experience of the witnesses shows us – without explicitly stating it – that the Chernobyl disaster was not just a humanitarian, but also an ecological catastrophe.

By presenting different scales to complicate the 'order of time' the book intends to answer the question of how to conceive time as multiple temporal layers after the discontinuity of the historical event. The answer must think time differently from modern historical thinking using scales of time against the present omnipresent or the idea that time is a chain of instants one after another. The book's discontinuity does not intend to make the past present, but to figure time as a temporal layer in order to create an artwork that is also a piece of advice to the human actions on the planet. The present is not exactly a preparatory step towards the new future, as it conceived in modern historical thinking but a discontinuity that exposes the multiplicity of time. We turn to the present to better understand the future. We do not have access to the historical event by itself; rather, we perceive the comments about the impact of the historical event in the life of common citizens and how they live with its discontinuity. *Voices from Chernobyl* combines political, ethical, and esthetical



yearnings recasting the scalar imagination to reconfigure the imagination of space and time in unpredictable ways and rethink event and temporality.

From a more distant past to a proximate past, from the near future to the more distant future, *Voices from Chernobyl* and its scale as esthetical procedure challenges us less to settle on what is past than to approach pastness and futurity. This could be better understood if we realize that it means writing history not of completed actions in the perfective aspect in general as a form of simple past tense but instead as events in the imperfective aspect in the present perfect tense. The imperfective aspect takes the form of a backward look that minimizes the present through an always active relationship with the past and the future. This is a history not in a retrospective mode or even prospective mode but it is a history in a heteroglossia mode. The result is a new understanding of temporality in a strong relationship with the geological time that represents the present just as a small moment. If the geographical scale is a form of spatial differentiation, Svetlana Alekxievitch's book tells us that the unseen event happens through a temporal differentiation dealing with the future and the past. Unlike documentaries working in the indicative, cataloging, and dating with precision past events, *Voices from Chernobyl* works in the imperfective temporal mode that relates time and its effects.

## Notes

1. We used the two different translations of Alexievitch's books on Chernobyl. The first translation, *Voices from Chernobyl* (2005), has not had some chapters which are added in the new translation *Chernobyl Prayer: a Chronicle of the Future* (2016). The most important change was the inclusion of the chapter 'The author interviews herself on missing history and why Chernobyl calls our view of the world into question'. The chapter is relevant because she discusses her method and writing choices about the Chernobyl event. She uses the concept of catastrophe and temporality without enclosing the future in a pessimistic view of the world.
2. Parataxis is a literary technique that favors simple sentences without conjunctions. It also favors heteroglossia. According to Mikhail BAKHTIN (1981), heteroglossia is a strategy to express the multiplicity of voices in novels. It consists of the confluence of several texts or discourses that accentuate the notion of the precariousness of the professional historiographical discourse due to the relativity that points to a multiple and plural past. Consequently, it favors the emergence of alternative histories. Heteroglossia lies in the fact that 'within the arena of almost every utterance an intense interaction and struggle between one's own and another's word is being waged' (BAKHTIN 1981, 354).

3. Pages noted with an asterisk are approximations, as the e-book version was used. We calculated the page based on the number of the pages of the book edition and the number of LOC of the e-book.
4. There are many example 'We already had thousands of tons of cesium, iodine, lead, circonium, cadmium, berillium, borium, an unknown amount of plutonium (the uranium-graphite reactors of the Chernobyl variety also produced weapons-grade plutonium, for nuclear bombs)-450 types of radionuclides in all. It was the equivalent of 350 atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima. They needed to talk about physics, about the laws of physics, but instead they talked about enemies, about looking for enemies'. Svetlana Alexievitch, *Op. Cit*, 208.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

The work was supported by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung [40.21.0.039GE]

## Notes on contributors

*Theodor Pelekanidis* is a theorist of history and historian of the modern period. He is currently a postdoctoral scholar at the Free University of Berlin and has previously been a visiting lecturer at the University of Oulu. Pelekanidis received his Ph.D. in history from the Humboldt University in Berlin in 2021, analyzing the implications of postmodern theory in historiography, with a special focus on the Holocaust and genocide. His work has appeared in *Clio: A Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History, Metascience and Historein*. He is also the author of the book *How to write about the Holocaust: Postmodern theory of history in Praxis*, Routledge 2022.

*Eduardo Ferraz Felipe* is a professor at Rio de Janeiro State University. He is a theorist of history, literary critic, and historian of the contemporary period. His work has appeared in many journals focusing on the writing of history, temporality, and Literature & History.

## ORCID

Theodoros Pelekanidis  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5116-6156>

## References

- Alexievich, Svetlana. 2005. *Voices from Chernobyl*. 1st. ed, Keith Gessen), Translated by. Normal: Dalkey Archive Press.
- Alexievich, Svetlana. 2016a. *Chernobyl Prayer. A Chronicle of the Future*. Translated and edited by Anna Gunin and Arch Tait. New York: Penguin. Modern Classics.
- Alexievich, Svetlana. 2016b. *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, Translated by Bela Shayevich. New York: Random House.
- Alexievich, Svetlana. 2017. *The Unwomanly Face of War. An Oral History of Women in World War II*. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, New York: Random House.
- BAKHTIN, M. 1981. "The Discourse in the Novel." In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, 259–422. Russian edition: 193435. . Russian edition: 193435. Austin and London: University of Texas Press.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2018. "Anthropocene Time." *History and Theory* 57 (1): 5–32. doi:10.1111/hith.12044.
- Elias, Amy. 2001. *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lorenz, Chris, and Berber Bevernage, edited by. 2013. "Breaking Up Time: Negotiating the Borders Between Present, Past and Future." In *Schriftenreihe der FRIAS School of History* 7. 113. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- McCarthy, Anna. 2006. "From the Ordinary to the Concrete: Politics of Scale Cultural Studies and the Politics of Scale." *Questions of Method in Cultural Studies* 2: 23.
- Ricœur Paul. 1992. "Le retour de l'Événement. In: *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Italie et Méditerranée*, tome 104." 1: 29–35.
- Runia, Eelco. 2014. *Moved by the Past: Discontinuity and Historical Mutation*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Simon, Zoltán B. 2020. *The Epochal Event: Transformations in the Entangled Human, Technological, and Natural Worlds*. *Palgrave Studies in the History of Science and Technology*. Cham: Palgrave Pivot.
- Tamm, Marek, and Peter Burke, (eds.) 2019. *Debating New Approaches to History*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- White, Hayden V. 1999. *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press.
- White, Hayden V., and Robert Doran. 2010. *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957-2007/Hayden White; Edited and with an Introduction by Robert Doran*. Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Whitworth, Michael. 2000. "Virginia Woolf and Modernism." In *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, edited by Sue Roe and Susan Sellers, 146–163. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.