Sjors Roeters

s1462105

MA thesis

Dr. Yasco Horsman

The Philosophy of Form

A Genre Study of Svetlana Alexievich's *Second-hand Time* and its Implications for History, Literature and Time

Universiteit Leiden

Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia,

y si no la salvo a ella no me salvo yo.

– José Ortega y Gasset

Juist degene die zijn vaderland verliest wordt in een nieuwe betekenis vrij,

en alleen degene die met niets meer verbonden is,

hoeft nergens meer rekening mee te houden.

– Stefan Zweig

Svetlana Alexievich © Margarita Kabakova 1

Index

Introduction 9

1. Oral History 13

2. Storytelling 27

3. The Nonfiction Novel 41

Conclusion 55

Bibliography 59

Introduction

> We hebben onze hele geschiedenis nodig. Niet om erin terug te vallen, maar om te zien of we eraan kunnen ontsnappen. (Ortega y Gasset 132)

What we do with our past in the present and the future – how we deal with it, how we conceive of it – is pivotal for our history. As the Spanish philosopher and essayist José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) argues, the past is inescapable and will resurface again and again. The only way to free ourselves from it somehow is to deal with it head on, and absorb it. We need all of our history to see how to escape from it. Ortega y Gasset first published his most famous work *The Revolt of the Masses* (*La Rebelión de las Massas*) in 1929, twelve years after the October Revolution of 1917. In this book he agitates against the rise of the "mass-man", which he explicitly ties to Fascism and more importantly here, Bolshevism. It is inherent to the Bolshevik Revolution that they deny human history, they naïvely try to fight some element of the past, "in plaats van zich toe te leggen op het verteren van de geschiedenis, het verwerken ervan." (Ortega y Gasset 130). Communists saw communism as an inescapable force of history. The communist conception of the world and reality was bound at the core to the idea of history. The participants in the Soviet project were forced to live inside of history, partake in eventful history – it was the essence of their being. In a similar fashion the intrinsic tie of the revolutionary socialist project to this totalitarian idea of history has been argued by Susan Buck-Morss in *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (43-49).

But how can one write the history of the disintegration of this project? How to write the history of the disappearance of the belief in History? How to do justice to the historical experience that there is no 'History'? These questions are central to Svetlana Alexievich's *Second-hand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (2013). The Belarussian writer born in 1948 and who received the Nobel prize in literature in 2015 rushes to document the traces of the last of the New Man, the *Homo sovieticus*. Her seminal work *Second-hand Time* is about both living inside of history and being placed outside of it: "The people have lost their history…" (Alexievich 265). It is what is referred to in the title:

> "On the eve of the 1917 Revolution, Alexander Grin wrote, 'And the future seems to have stopped standing in its proper place.' Now, a hundred years later, the future is, once again, not where it ought to be. Our time comes to us second-hand." (Alexievich 34)

Whereas in Grin's time the future world full of hope finally arrived and thus the future became the present, the inverse seems to have happened for the protagonists of *Second-hand Time*, including Alexievich. The future is nothing new anymore, for the New Man has receded back into the past. The Soviet Union was the land of hope for human kind – the reinvention of a new way of life, a genuine renewal of humanity. But with the collapse of this prime time, it consequently turned into the old again. A time, again, of eternal suffering and injustice. As Alexievich also says in her Nobel lecture, "A time full of hope has been replaced by a time of fear. The era has turned around and headed back in time. The time we live in now is second-hand…" (Alexievich Nobel Lecture 19). Also, when the 'Red Empire' vanished, for the 'Red Man' it was almost as if history came to an end, here not acutely in the sense of the Western-centred perspective articulated most pronouncedly in Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* (1992), but in the sense of the historical forces of communism coming to a grinding halt. The participants in this history, the protagonists, were thus placed outside of it. They lost their historical participation and awareness while this was part of their essence as *Homo sovietici*: "They couldn't just walk away from History, leaving it all behind and learning to live without it" (24).

"It's a true achievement not only in material but also in form," said Sara Danius, permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy. Alongside its substance, *Second-hand Time* simultaneously and hence interestingly also has an intricate relationship with history on the level of form. The essence of history is how we deal with the past – how we think of, write and tell history. The content consequently leads also to questions of form, or rather, 'genre' - in what genre can this experience be best expressed? *Second-hand Time* is about the possibility of capturing something of reality on a textual level. So, how did Alexievich conceive new ways to deal with history, its writing, and its telling with *Second-hand Time*?

Second-hand Time has a different approach to writing history. Through it a different perspective on what history writing is or should be seems expressed somehow. It seems to counter conventional history books in both form, content and perspective. On her personal website Alexievich elaborates on her poetics:

> "But I don't just record a dry history of events and facts, I'm writing a history of human feelings. What people thought, understood and remembered during the event. What they believed in or mistrusted, what illusions, hopes and fears they experienced. This is impossible to imagine or invent, at any rate in such multitude of real details." (Alexievich *In lieu of biography*).

The 'realness' and objectivity of human emotions expressed here, seems to echo world-renowned psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Alongside the obvious subjectivity of human emotions, human emotions are paradoxically also one of the most objective contents of our mind, "want ons diepgewortelde gevoel, onze intuïtie, de emotie die wij ervaren wanneer wij verliefd, beschaamd, bang of gelukkig zijn, is voor ons vaak werkelijker dan de dingen die wij om ons heen zien of dan hetgeen wij van de wetenschap of de logica leren." (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi 27). In a way then, this "history of emotions" as Danius calls *Second-hand Time*, ventures to approximate capturing reality better than the at objectivity aimed conventional history books.

The question of form, of genre, concerns defining what the characteristics and nature of the object of interest are. The book ventures to develop new ways to deal with and write about the past and because of the originality and elusiveness of this form it has been very hard to use existing genres to pin the book down. Perhaps therefore, an aggregate of genres has been used to describe this work, such as documentary, testimony, reportage, oral history, novel, story and journalism. The goal of this thesis is to clarify how Alexievich has conceived of a new form, a new mode of writing by comparing the work to three other modes of writing, namely, oral history, storytelling and the nonfiction novel.

Obviously *Second-hand Time* deals with history and history writing and it does this through the oral histories of its protagonists. A portrait of the Soviet Union is painted through the personal stories told by its participants. Understandably then, the genre of oral history is oftentimes used to categorize Alexievich's book. However, if this were to be an oral history, why does she not provide any sources? And why does she select witnesses who have not witnessed any significant historical events in the conventional sense? Why does she ask them about love and death? Historians do not seem to be interested in these kinds of testimonies. And why does she use the word 'story', which is often used in opposition to history?

The prominence of the word 'story' reminds of Walter Benjamin's famous essay *The Storyteller* (1941). Already in the titles of the two chapters the word 'story' in the text sticks out: 'Ten *Stories* in a Red Interior'; 'Ten *Stories* in the Absence of an Interior' [emphasis added]. 'Story' has a less factual sound to it then 'history'. It appears Alexievich is looking less for factual information and more for some kind of stories. Asking why she would do this also gives rise to the question what the relationship is between history, storytelling and 'history-telling'. By looking at *Second-hand Time* through Benjamin's essay *The Storyteller* some feasible underlying conception of storytelling in the book will be explored. The traumatic experience of World War I (WWI) on society in its

entirety led Benjamin to question the viability of storytelling. A nexus between history and its events, and telling stories about it, writing about it, thus seems discernable in the essay. Similarly, Alexievich seems to deal with how to tell stories about, write history, of the post-Soviet world for the Soviet Man: "The "Red Empire" is gone, but the "Red Man," homo sovieticus, remains. He endures." (Alexievich Nobel lecture 6).

Yet, art has failed where the document has not, according to Alexievich. It is all the more compelling then, that she herself describes her work as "*novels* in voices" because the 'novel' is commonly designated as art. Because the book is composed of stories of real people, their actual names often included, and refers to historical facts, *Second-hand Time* will be specifically studied in relation to the *nonfiction* novel. Because of the inextricable relationship of form and content, Phyllis Frus McCord's article 'The Ideology of Form: The Nonfiction Novel' (1986) will be used to further go into the relation between *Second-hand Time* and the genre. For, as McCord argues, conceptions of reality inevitably shape the way we write – both history and literature. And is not the 'alternative' reality of the *homo sovieticus* what partly made Alexievich write this book?: "I reconstruct the history of that battle, its victories and its defeats. The history of how people wanted to build the Heavenly Kingdom on earth. Paradise! The City of the Sun!" (Alexievich Nobel lecture 5); "I sought out people who had been permanently bound to the Soviet idea, letting it penetrate them so deeply, there was no separating them: the state had become their entire cosmos" (Alexievich 24).

Concerning the genre and correspondingly the nature of *Second-hand Time* indeterminateness seems to reign. Alexievich is just as ambiguous and inconclusive on the matter as the Nobel Committee. This enigmatic work then, merits a study on the question of genre to entangle how it ventures to reinvent our conceptions of, and approaches to literature and history, its writing and its telling.

1

Oral History

Oral history is not confined to the academic discipline of historiography but is multidisciplinary. Disciplines ranging from ethnology and anthropology, to sociology and psychology make use of oral history. But what is it then? It is both a methodology, a practice of conducting research, as well as the outcome of that research, claims Abrams. Lynn Abrams (b. 1960) is Professor of Gender History at the University of Glasgow and an important scholar in the field of oral history theory and methodology. With *Oral History Theory* (2010) Abrams has provided a systematic and comprehensive theoretical overview of oral history and its practice, and this work will henceforth be used as the fundamental theoretical underpinning here. Other terms for oral history such as personal-testimony and life-story research can and are also used for this practice and its output. Historians, however, feel most comfortable with the term 'oral history'. It is both a growing practice and output inside the academic world as well as in the non-academic sphere, particularly in the legal environment. Take for instance the 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' (1995) in South Africa where through the practice of oral history the atrocities of apartheid were attempted to be overcome, thus trying to reconcile antagonistic forces in society – a society said to have been on the brink of civil war at the time.

"One of the most massive oral history projects ever undertaken" was also one of the first methodologically undertaken ones (Abrams 4). The New Deal Federal Writer's Project began to conduct oral history by documenting the life stories of thousands of people in the late 1930s during the Depression years. After World War II Columbia University had a 'Great Men' approach where they documented the oral histories of "those who 'contributed significantly to society or who were close affiliates of world leaders.'" (Abrams 3-4). In Europe, especially in the UK and Scandinavia, a very different approach to oral history re-emerged after years of favouring written records. This was particularly informed by the European tradition where tradition and history was passed on in spoken form. In the 1970s and '80s oral history

became a 'recovery history' for the emancipation of the by conventional historiography disregarded: labourers, women, gays and lesbians, minority ethnic groups. It was considered a rather politically motivated, reconstructive practice, and by most historians an unreliable one because it was subjective and relied on memory: "It was not an objective, social-scientific methodology which could be rigorously tested." (Abrams 5). After a time of defensiveness oral historians redefined their practice as an analytical practice rather than a method of recovery. As Abrams cites Passerini, one of the most important scholars to move oral history away from social science to cultural history:

> "we should not ignore that the raw material of oral history consists not just of factual statements, but is pre-eminently an expression and representation of culture, and therefore not only literal narrations but also the dimensions of memory, ideology and subconscious desires." (Abrams 6-7).

Second-hand Time, with the personal and subjective stories of the participants in the history of the Soviet Union, seems to echo this particular cultural historical approach to oral history. The move in oral history towards cultural history gave rise to specific attention for fundamental aspects such as subjectivity, memory and modes of communication in oral histories, which also figure prominently in *Second-hand Time.*

Fundamental to the book seems to be subjectivity. Alexievich documents the conversations she has with individuals about their experience living in the Soviet Union and the time thereafter. She states in her prologue: "I've always been drawn to this miniature expanse: one person, the individual. It's where everything really happens." (Alexievich 24). In the many different stories protagonists speak of their personal life, of love and death, envy and remorse during the existence and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Already interesting to note is that Alexievich refers to them as 'protagonists' instead of 'interviewees' or 'respondents' which is more common in oral history. It is not only on the author's instigation that subjectivity is considered to be of great importance. The permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, Sara Danius, described *Second-hand Time* at the announcement of awarding Alexievich the Nobel Prize in Literature "A history of emotions" (*New Yorker* 8 Oct 2015). Emotions are intrinsically subjective hence highlighting the importance of subjectivity in this book.

However, not only in these extra diegetic instances (if 'Remarks of an Accomplice' is formally considered to be a prologue, thus not fully being part of the text itself) but also in the text itself fundamental elements

of subjectivity are touched upon: “So much happens inside each one of us. Inside. Within ourselves. There’s an entire cosmos in there. But we barely pay any attention to it. We’re all too busy with the surface, the external stuff…” (Alexievich 506); “The things happening all around us were very different from what was happening inside of us… Radically different.” (Alexievich 458). The difference between the external and internal worlds is emphasized in these fragments. Also, they could be read as hinting at the difference between conventional history writing (on events, dates, historical figures and generalized accounts of larger developments) and writing history as is being done in *Second-hand Time*. Alexievich is not looking to write about facts like historians do, but about that which is left out the most in history writing: emotions (Alexievich 29). As one protagonist puts the difference: “But this is Big History. I have my own little history…” (Alexievich 341).

It is, however, not only in this book that attention is being paid to the subjective experience of history of ‘ordinary’ individuals. It can be seen as part of a larger trend away from information-gathering and a shift towards subjectivity to grasp the experiences of, and thus giving a voice to the ‘common people’. Oral history seems to be at the forefront of this in the larger field of historiography. Abrams on the developments in the oral history field:

> “Indeed, subjectivity has not only become something that must be acknowledged in the interview but it has become part of a bigger agenda, that of liberating voices and validating experiences and understanding how people construct retrospective versions of their lives.” (Abrams 63)

Letting voices be heard which are normally absent from the pages of history books – except in the statistics – is what *Second-hand Time* also seems to be about. As one protagonist illustratively states: “Who am I? We’re just people… nothing faces in the crowd. Our life is mundane, insignificant, though we do our best to live. We love, we suffer. It’s just not that interesting to anyone else, no one is going to write a book about us. The crowd… The masses.” (Alexievich 517-8). Besides the interesting aspect of performativity in this quote, upon which will be elaborated later on, this fragment states that history is not interested in the mundane masses. Alexievich begs to differ the relevance and value, stating in ‘Remarks of an Accomplice’: “It never ceases to amaze me how interesting everyday life really is. There are an endless number of human truths. History is concerned solely with the facts; emotions are outside of its realm of interest.” (29). Alexievich seems to be interested exactly in that which conventional history writing does not seem to have been

interested in until the recent developments in oral history. After 'Remarks', many diverging versions of the past, different voices ensue: "My final wish is that you record the truth. But my truth, not yours, so that my voice may live on…" (265). The remaining of *his* voice is what matters for the protagonist. As in the recent developments in oral history, a shift in focus to subjectivity, with the liberating of voices and validating experiences, seems, then, to also be an important foundation of *Second-hand Time.*

Intrinsic to subjectivity is difference in experiences. It differs from person to person how events and periods are experienced, even when they are befriended and live similar lives, as for example is the case in the first story of 'Ten Stories in a Red Interior'. Two friends both relate their life story to Alexievich, but it becomes clear that both have experienced the (formally) same period in (formally) the same country very differently. Throughout the book Alexievich abstains almost entirely from commenting on the stories she documents, but sometimes she indeed comments, albeit in a very limited way: "*Their stories had nothing in common except for the significant proper nouns: Gorbachev, Yeltsin. But each had her own Gorbachev and her own Yeltsin. And her own version of the nineties*." (Alexievich 73). What follows are two entirely different and mostly opposing versions of the past. For the one socialism was a blessing and perestroika a disaster, while for the other perestroika marked the end of a horrific era and the beginning of a grand new one of freedom. By placing this inherently polyphonic story, wherein subjectivity is highlighted, at the very start of part I a clear tone is set for the rest of the book: there is not going to be closure for you, the reader, in reading this book. More on the performative elements further down.

Additionally, just as important an aspect of subjectivity in *Oral History Theory* is the interrelated inter-subjectivity. For, as Abrams convincingly argues, a person's subjectivity, the private experience, can only be articulated by drawing upon public discourses:

> "A focus on subjectivity requires that we not only be aware of the fact that our respondent is constructing a subjective version of the past in a dialogue with the interviewer but that in doing so he or she is drawing upon discourses from wider culture." (Abrams 63)

In *Second-hand Time* certain sets of ideas and symbols seem to recur in different stories. One of the most prominent among them is 'salami' which seems to be the symbol of the prevailing capitalist society that has emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Throughout the book it is a recurrent symbol in the discourse: "There's loads of salami in the shops, but no happy people." (Alexievich 268); "We believed

salami was spontaneously generated by freedom." (Alexievich 427); "But heaps of salami have nothing to do with happiness. Or glory." (Alexievich 83); "What is our national idea now besides salami?" (Alexievich 94); "Salami is a benchmark of our existence. Our love for salami is existential…" (Alexievich 247); "Take a look around… There's one hundred different kinds of salami! What more freedom do we need?"' (Alexievich 682); "There's tons of salami here, and it's not a symbol for anything at all…" (Alexievich 563). A most fervent member of the communist party since 1922 speaking on the history of the Soviet empire and its demise even states: "We had a great empire – stretching from sea to sea, from beyond the Arctic to the subtropics. Where is it now? It was defeated without a bomb. Without Hiroshima. It's been conquered by Her Majesty Salami! The good chow won! (Alexievich 254). The symbol of the salami is here ironically used as an analogy for capitalism. Not a nuclear bomb but achingly something as banal as a sausage has beaten the sublime and grandiose ideals of communism. Considering the frequency and consistency of the recurrence of the symbol of the salami to describe the weighty matters at hand, it seems fair to say that this is an important symbol drawn from public discourse. Hence it serves as an example of intersubjectivity used to convey the subjective matters of the private life.

Another important recurrent example of a symbol drawn from public discourse is the kitchen:

> "The Russian kitchen…The pitiful Krushchyovka kitchenette, […] For us, the kitchen is not just where we cook, it's a dining room, a guest room, an office, a soapbox. A space for group therapy sessions. In the nineteenth century, all of Russian culture was concentrated on aristocratic estates; in the twentieth century it lived on in our kitchens. That's where perestroika really took place. 1960s dissident life is the kitchen life." (Alexievich 40).

Just as the salami the symbol of the kitchen recurs many times in the book: "We lived in our kitchens… The whole country lived in their kitchens." (Alexievich 239); "You won't refashion Russia in a Moscow kitchen." (Alexievich 645); "It was like we were still in our Moscow kitchen." (Alexievich 48). Oftentimes the kitchen is cited to describe public debate and considering the historical reality it is in several instances used to describe a sense of abstinence from public debate, or sometimes the futility of the discussions that took place in the kitchens. Just like the salami the kitchen is an important symbol which outside the cultural and historical context, and thus in a different public discourse, makes little to no sense. But the protagonists in *Second-hand Time* have an important common characteristic, namely, all being to a lesser or greater extent

a *homo sovieticus* (Alexievich 23-25). The intersubjectivity in this shared public discourse from which is drawn is observable in the recurrent symbols such as the abovementioned salami and kitchen.

Seen through the lens of these recent developments in oral history, with a shift in focus towards subjectivity and intersubjectivity, *Second-hand Time*, then, on the surface appears to be part of a larger trend in oral history and can thus perhaps be seen as an emblematic example of it.

However, on a closer look, where the book seems to differ concerning (inter)subjectivity, is what subsequently is to be done with it. Abrams seems unambiguous on the matter: "The oral history interview is a three-way conversation: the interviewee engages in a conversation with his or herself, with the interviewer and with culture. The challenge for the historian is to analyse and decode these conversations, bearing in mind that each influences the other." (Abrams 76). Part and parcel of oral history is the subsequent analysis and decoding of the materials. But this is well-nigh absent in *Second-hand Time*. Alexievich sometimes indeed comments on the preceding or ensuing stories. Those comments, however, are limited to simple observations. Alexievich does not try to analyse or decode the stories as should be the case in oral history. It is free from explanation on the subjectivity and intersubjectivity present in the book and instead lets the stories speak for themselves.

Another pivotal element to both oral history and *Second-hand Time* is memory and the process of remembering (Abrams 78). For any analysis of *Second-hand Time* as oral history memory must be studied and elaborated upon. In her work Alexievich asks protagonists about their past. They subsequently have to rely on their memory to talk about the years in the Soviet Union and the life after its fall. As touched upon above in the case of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, the relation between the private and the public is of great importance for memory and remembering.

> "… an oral history source based on memory offers up insights into the interplay between the self and society, between past and present and between individual experience and the generalised account" (Abrams 81)

Several examples seem to adhere to this line of reasoning. Take for instance the manifold mentioning of Stalin when protagonists speak of a strong and powerful Russia: "You can't build a Great Russia without a Great Stalin." (Alexievich 64); "People will once again acknowledge Stalin's greatness." (422); "You know that people speak more kindly about the USSR these days than they did twenty years ago. I recently visited

Stalin's grave, and there were mountains of flowers there." (432); "The devil knows how many people were murdered, but it was our era of greatness." (432). Stalin is not only one of the apogees of Russian might, but also one of the faces and instigators of its atrocities. He has ordered to kill millions and put millions in labour-camps under terrible conditions. This ambiguity of (collective) memory is pungently captured by one of the protagonists: "They've shaken up our entire history… Thousands of revelations, tons of truth. For some, it's a trunk of flesh and a barrel of blood. For others, it's a great era." (422).

One of the most interesting aspects of memory is the important element of deformation in all remembering, as is also invoked by one of the protagonists: "But the only things that will go down on paper are my words… There won't be anything else: no neighbour, no phone calls… Things I didn't say but which flashed through my memory, making their presence felt. Tomorrow, I might tell this story completely differently." (354). Following up on this ambiguity of memory it is important to note that it is intrinsic to memory and the process of remembering that it is as much about the present as it is about the past (Abrams 82). In the second part of the book, 'The Charms of Emptiness', there is more distance in time from the collapse of the Soviet Union and hence a different relationship between past and present. A new Russia seems to emerge and the way Russia's history (and along with it that of the Soviet Union, for the Soviet Union is more and more being equated with Russia, which points to other compelling tendencies which would lend themselves for further interesting research, unfortunately not here however) is perceived is likewise changing. This is discernible in the following protagonists' stories stating that, "These days they say we used to have a mighty fortress and then we lost it all." (693); "Russia doesn't need democracy, it needs monarchy. A strong and fair Tsar." (433); "Half of the country is dreaming of Stalin – and if half the country is dreaming of Stalin, he's bound to materialize, you can be sure of it." (434); "Russia has gotten up off her knees. Now is a dangerous time because Russia should have never been humiliated for so long." (434). These statements seem to make evident that the present has a great influence the way the past is perceived and remembered. Russia's humiliated position is of influence on the perception of history and likewise the perception and appreciation of Stalin. The period when the Soviet Union was a superpower seems to be glorified and so in a longing for that period there is a greater appreciation for the ruler and face of one of its most important periods, Stalin. And this sentiment is equally well captured by one of the protagonists in

the book: “The only thing they remember about Stalin is that back when he was in charge, they were victors…” (651).

Contrary to the proud and patriotic view of Soviet history, or the focus on the atrocities committed, the following protagonist has, with distance in time, a rather different memory of the period: “Today they write about the Soviet Union being one big penal colony, a communist ghetto. A world ruled by cannibalism. I don’t remember anything scary… I remember that it was naïve, that world, very naïve and clumsy.” (498). Alongside the glorification of Soviet history, the preceding and following fragments hint at the existence of the vilification in Soviet memory of the past: “But what’s left of our past? Only the story that Stalin drenched this soil in blood, Krushchev planted corn in it, and everybody laughed at Brezhnev. But what about our heroes?” (384). The ambiguity, deformation and even unreliability of memory seems to have found its apex in the following protagonist’s statement which importantly ties into the larger question of history that *Second-hand Time* tries to deal with:

> “We’re accustomed to thinking that while our future is a mystery, the past is something that we can explain. It either happened or it didn’t… For me, everything came into question… what if none of it had ever really happened? Like it was all just a film reel turning and then it stopped…” (Alexievich 559).

This fragment touches upon cogent questions that are not only relevant to history writing or literature, but to politics, culture and society in general. How much of what we know of the past is true? What is the truthfulness of the memories we have, the history we read, the histories we write? The passage suggests that our understanding of events is determined by our frame of reality. Despite the fact that this particular passage is about love and its inextricable connection to death, it is nonetheless an apt example of how a sense of reality forms and transforms, or even completely debunks conceptions of the world and history. The magnetic manifestation of love changes the protagonist’s entire cosmos. It takes hold of his world, his conception of it, and also the way he conceives of history, even though, as he also points out, we generally think that it is a fixed entity of which we can make sense. In short, a new reality gets everything of the old reality into question. The transformation and reconstruction of reality that love in this story instigates, seems to parallel what socialism did to the *homo sovietici* of the book. As one of the protagonists describes it “Socialism is alchemy. It’s an alchemical concept.” (407). It, too, altered the notion of reality people had, transformed their understanding of the past, present and future. The transformation of the sensation, the

conception of reality, induces new ways of dealing with, thinking of and telling about that reality, about the world. The collapse of the Soviet reality has provoked effects on the way reality, in all its facets, is perceived and dealt with. They are good examples of how our circumstances deeply influence and structure us and the way we perceive and deal with our surroundings. Events and things lose their sense of 'reality' and become in retrospect implausible. Alexievich's project is to make visible this 'fall out' of reality. For her it is not about sharing with the world the experiences of the witnesses, but particularly about the experiences themselves losing their value, their significance. That is why their stories have become so complicated to tell.

Arriving at performance and performativity in the analysis is arriving at where the tension between the genres of chapters one and two is most apparent. For it is here that oral history and storytelling overlap most pronouncedly. In oral history there is a clear aspect of performance present, the storytelling, as Abrams aptly states: "oral history is a performance by a narrator for an audience." (130). In her analysis she subsequently divides the performance aspect of oral history up into the 'doing', the performativity of telling "Now I am going to tell you about…", and the 'done', e.g. the performance of narrating itself (136).

The performative 'doing' recurs several times in the book, albeit in different forms: "I'm telling you how it happened in real life, not how they write about it in books." (Alexievich 310); "[*She laughs.*] You're still writing? Go on, keep writing. I'll tell you my stories…" (134); "Oh! That's not what I'm talking about… that's not what I want to talk about… I want to talk about other things…" (451); "I hate them all: gorbachev, shevardnadze, yakovlev – don't capitalize their names, that's how much I hate them all." (46); "Who else will you find to tell you the truth? All that's left are the archives. Pieces of paper. And the truth is… I worked at an archive myself, I can tell you first hand: paper lies even more than people do." (262). These are engaging fragments all with an important performative element in it. The last citation is particularly compelling, for it is a remark on the truthfulness of storytelling supposedly in contrast to the canard of what is on paper. A rather ironic reflection given the fact that the statement is included in this book, primarily published on paper (although there are quite a few e-books out there, but then, archives in this age are increasingly digital as well, so 'paper' is perhaps best interpreted here not as its material category per se, but more likely for its 'bureaucratic status', either on paper or digital).

This 'doing' establishes a clear relationship between the protagonist, the storyteller, and the reader, the audience. It is furthermore made clear that the protagonist is going to tell about something that happened in the past; it is being derived from experience. But, as noted earlier, the book also plays with this performativity, as is also the case in the following (earlier annotated) passage: "Our life is mundane, insignificant, though we do our best to live. We love, we suffer. It's just not that interesting to anyone else, no one is going to write a book about us. The crowd… The masses." (Alexievich 517-8). The statement that no one is going to write a book about the mundane masses is ironically a performative reflection on the fact that this statement is included in this published book.

Interestingly, witnesses are often driven by some kind of necessity to tell the world of their experience, as Zweig articulates: "Een getuigenis te geven van dit leven van ons, […] voel ik als een plicht" (13). It is to learn from history, or that the new generation takes note of what has happened; "Maar als wij met ons ooggetuigenverslag ook maar een splinter waarheid uit dat ineengestorte bouwwerk kunnen overbrengen naar de volgende generatie, dan hebben we niet helemaal tevergeefs gewerkt." (13). Similarly, this is argued by Soshana Felman and Dori Laub in their theoretical work on the subject, *Testimony* (41, 153). In *Second-hand Time*, the opposite appears the case. Nobody wants to hear their stories, the protagonists think, because they feel their stories have no significance. Their stories lost significance when the Soviet frame of reality collapsed. It is this despondency that constitutes part of the post-Soviet experience that Alexievich wants to make visible. They are stories without moral, without any purpose.

Concerning performance, with *Second-hand Time* the 'done' primarily lies in the book before us, and not in the interviews, for those are inaccessible now. It is the book the reader is reading that both constitutes and refers to the performance. It is the outcome of innumerable conversations Alexievich had, the stories she has been told, which she recorded and subsequently selected, edited and recomposed into *Second-hand Time*. In several ways the many aspects of the performance of the interviews are recorded and included in the book. As Abrams states on the performance of storytelling:

> "The storytelling tradition relies upon performance. A good storyteller knows that his or her communicative power derives not simply from remembering and retelling the stories but from knowing *how* to tell the stories to produce the desired effect." (137)

The performance is very much about how it is being told – about the emotions, the gestures, the expressions. This is observable, for instance, in the story of Anna M., the 59-year-old architect. There are 41 bracketed descriptions in italics in her story conveying her movements, gestures and emotions: "[*She stands up and walks over to the window.*]; [*She is silent.*]; [*She falls into thought.*]; [*She falls silent in the middle of a word.*]; [*She looks out the window for a long time.*]; [*Suddenly, she smiles*]". These all convey not content per se but gestures and emotions and add to the performance of the book. It is about how the architect says what she says that is emphasized. The descriptions on how it is being said seem to enhance the emotional weight of the content and add to the dramatic force of the text. The statement "I'm afraid of anyone in military uniform" is melodramatically emphasized by the description "[*Through tears.*]" which makes clear the emotional state Anna M. was in stating this.

The italics, however, do not solely seem to function as the conveyors of gestures and emotions, but have a significant additional effect. The following passage gives room for thought on the matter: "[*He laughs like a young person. I notice how handsome he still is.*]" (Alexievich 261). In this, not only the emotion and activity of laughing of the protagonist is being described, but Alexievich also describes something of her own perception, namely, that she notices how handsome he still is. The idea here seems to arise that the italics are not merely used to describe how it is being said, but form some in-between-space; a text outside of the main body of text. The following passage is suited for further elaboration on this line of reasoning: "I grew up in the same country as you. I believe you! [*And both of us cry.*]" (Alexievich 471). This is a very interesting and relevant passage here, for it is not one of her protagonists that speak, but Alexievich herself. This happens only around three other times, besides the prologue, in the book and is thus a very rare occasion. In this fragment Alexievich lets herself participate in the conversation and performance by recording her participation in normal lettering, and not italics. The function of the italics now seems to become better distinguishable: everything that is not literally being said in the conversation between the persons involved, but only comes after, is written in italics and thus somehow placed outside of the main body of text. The entire main text is first and foremost a recording of things physically said in the past. The main text, excluding the italics, constitutes a clear reference to and, more importantly, engenders a resurrection of the performance. Everything in italics has come after and has not physically been articulated, and thus not performed, until the moment it got onto paper. This distinction between the main body of text and the

more placed outside italics, adds to the performance of the book and gives an extra dimension to it. It seems to provoke a most interesting effect; it is not the 'breaking up of the fourth wall' but the reconstruction or resurrection of something outside of the text, the performance of the storytelling.

Apart from this it is furthermore important to note that both Anna M. (and naturally the other protagonists) and Alexievich are the storytellers. Anna M. being the one telling her story to Alexievich and Alexievich in her turn relating her experience of listening via the book to the reader. The bracketed descriptions in italics are one of the important instruments used in the book to convey the experience of listening to the story. By both the performative and performance aspects of the book the reader is reminded that the text is the outgrowth of conversations that took place somewhere in the past. Although it is indeed a book written by a solitary person, it is also an (edited) recording of conversations between multiple persons and thus the reader is in some way in companionship of those people – the reader reads with them, shares a version of their experience.

In extension of the conveyance of the performance of the storytelling, is Alexievich the author who conducted, selected and edited the raw materials, the conversations she had, thus further shaping the performance of the book. Naturally, the process of selection, which stories to include and which to leave out, is of considerable influence on the (reading) experience of the book. Likewise, the order in which the 'snatches', 'noises' and stories are arranged, the composition, is one of the tools of the author which has great clout over the performance of the book. As the Swedish Academy states, Alexievich has been awarded the Nobel Prize, amongst others, "for her polyphonic writings" (*Guardian* 8 Oct 2015). By selecting the many divergent and often opposing stories and arranging them in a certain order a sense of polyphony, and not of closure, comes to the reader. In the many stories protagonists seem to almost explicitly contradict each other, as for instance in these fragments where one protagonist impels, "Don't write this down… It scares me…" (Alexievich 607), while one further on states, "So write down the truth, who should be scared of that?" (Alexievich 640). This type of almost explicit contradictions is recurrent throughout the book.

An even stronger illustration of this technique of polyphony comes at the very start of part II, which seems to constitute some kind of literary Matryoshka Doll, wherein the very first paragraph seems to give a preview of what's to come in the preview, 'Snatches of Street Noise and Kitchen Conversations (2002-

2012)', which gives a preview of what's to come in the rest of part II, 'Ten Stories in the Absence of an Interior'. Consequently, it is a very concentrated polyphonic paragraph:

> "Yeltsin's nineties… how do we remember them? They were a happy time… a crazy decade… terrifying years… the age of fantastical democracy… the fatal nineties… hands down, a golden age… the age of self-denunciation… mean and hard times… a bright dawn… aggressive… turbulent… that was my time… it wasn't for me!!" (Alexievich 427).

All the varied perspectives on the past that ensue are all juxtaposed in one single paragraph of only a few lines. It gives an immediate and almost vertiginous sense of polyphony that seems to adequately capture the kaleidoscopic experience that reading this book can give. Furthermore, the titles of the parts, paragraphs and stories are rather more poetic, and thus more focussed on experience, than clearly descriptive and methodologically serving: 'The Consolation of Apocalypse'; 'On the Beauty of Dictatorship and the Mystery of Butterflies Crushed Against the Pavement'; 'On the Cruelty of the Flames and Salvation from Above'. Furthermore, *Second-hand Time* is the outcome of "thousands of tapes" (Alexievich Nobel Lecture 6); "I compose my books out of thousands of voices, destinies, fragments of our life and being. It took me three-four years to write each of my books. I meet and record my conversations with 500-700 persons for each book." (Alexievich *In lieu of biography*). It is then more than fair to assume that there has been done a considerable amount of polishing and streamlining the tapes and transcripts of the stories told into this fine-tuned text that the book, arguably, is. Alexievich documents and subsequently and emphatically takes care for *how* it is being said instead of merely for what is being said.

All things considered, *Second-hand Time* seemingly possesses characteristics commonly ascribed to oral history. Alexievich indeed asks people about their pasts and documents them, and in this (loose) sense the book could be defined as an oral history. Elements of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, memory and performance are both in oral history and *Second-hand Time* prominent components. *Second-hand Time* indeed gives voice (to the emotions) of the conventionally unheard voices and focuses on the details of everyday life, just as oral history endeavours to do.

However, subtle differences in key phrases such as 'protagonists' instead of 'respondents' or 'interviewees' might indicate the distinct nature of the book. Likewise, the contingency with which certain paragraphs are inserted into the text does not quite testify to rigorous academic methodology: "*She is called*

into the next room, 'Gafkhar Kandilovna, someone is here to see you.' I wait for her return. I have time. I think about the things I heard in Moscow apartments." (Alexievich 582). What ensues is a seven-page interlude of fragments from conversations in the paragraph 'In Moscow Apartments'. Alexievich does not seem to consider herself a staunch and formal researcher. She instead travels through other people's worlds: "*It took me a long time to find a 'guide' into this story, a narrator or interlocutor – I don't even know what to call the people who lead me on my travels through people's worlds. Through lives.*" (Alexievich 643). The book seems to adhere to a different objective, execution and structure; the stories speak for themselves instead of being imbedded in a formal framework, accompanied by a critical reflection on it. The virtual lack of interpretation, explanation, analysis and formal methodology seem to 'disqualify' it as oral history, even though, as Abrams makes clear, it is the "task of the oral historian to figure out how the interaction between personal and public occurs." (100). Along this line of reasoning, no oral historian has seemed to have a hand in *Second-hand Time*, for no attempt whatsoever at figuring such things out has been made in the book. Stories are simply related; the subsequent analysis remains absent. *Second-hand Time* thus on the one hand resembles oral history, but on the other does not because first of all, Alexievich appears not interested per se in the stories people tell, but actually in the impossibility of telling stories when the framework, the reality, the Soviet cosmos which provided a foundation of meaning for their stories, has disappeared. It is about the impossibility of describing the historical experience by the disintegration of the Soviet-Union.

Second of all, what *Second-hand Time* further distinguishes from oral history is the absence of an authorial voice, of coherence, of closure. The questions explicitly and implicitly raised in *Second-hand Time* – How much of what we know of the past is true? What is the truthfulness of the history we read, the history we write? – are paramount questions, but no authoritative answers appear to be offered whatsoever. The book lets the stories speak for themselves without an authorial voice offering critical interpretations or explanations. Why does Alexievich not want to conclude or comment on the different stories, voices? This has perhaps to do with her project of capturing something of this experienced reality through new, perhaps more adapt, more 'realistic' modes of writing. She does not want to streamline the polyphony of the stories, of the multifarious past, into another coherent historical narrative. She does not want to construct a new History with the historian's authorial voice, providing closure for its readers, society. It is part and parcel of her project to precisely *not* 'solve' this tension between the stories on a 'higher level' to construct another

coherent History, exactly because of the disintegration of the Soviet's History and reality by its collapse – and by the subsequent explosion of polyphony because of this. The realities of these histories are not coherent and offer no closure, so why would a mode of writing strive towards (dis)solving this?

Nonetheless, the oral tradition of transmitting stories from the past is still fundamental to *Second-and Time*. It is then no coincidence that *New York Times* journalist Alexandra Alter stated that Alexievich has explicitly said that "her practice of blending journalism and literary flourishes was inspired by the Russian tradition of oral storytelling." (Alter, *New York Times,* 8 October 2015). And *Second-hand Time* appears to explore new ways of doing this. Therefore, it will be interesting and productive to look into the storytelling tradition in relation to *Second-hand Time*.

2

Storytelling

As I argued in the previous chapter Alexievich is trying to find new ways to approximate reality, exploring if it is even possible to tell stories of the past. In the paragraph *In lieu of biography* on her personal website, she argues that a search for new ways of writing has become necessary since reality itself has become so complex that the received narrative modes cannot seem to capture it. She writes:

> "Today when man and the world have become so multifaceted and diversified the document in art is becoming increasingly interesting while art as such often proves impotent. The document brings us closer to reality as it captures and preserves the originals." (Alexievich *In lieu of biography*)

The old ways of writing about history have proven inadequate in like manner. Conventional histories are often structured as a coherent narrative, held together by the authorial voice of a historian. As theoretical historian Hayden White (b. 1928) has convincingly argued, the "value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary." (White 27). The narrative story that historians tell about the events of the past are only created afterwards; the coherence and structure of history is not intrinsic to the events themselves, but are artificially imposed upon them by narrativization (White 5-27). As White explains, the sense of an ending is very important in conventional history writing. A quick look at *Second-Hand Time* already shows how it differs from traditional history writing as analysed by White. Instead of offering a sense of closure, of coming to terms with the past in a more or less coherent way, *Second-hand Time* offers polyphony and open-endedness, with a plurality of divergent stories.

Instead of modelling her book's style after that of a professional historian, Alexievich's style seems to want to capture the narrative style of storytellers. Abrams also briefly discusses storytelling in *Oral History Theory*. The connection between this genre and *Second-hand Time* already seems apparent in the subtitle, *The*

Last of the Soviets, for Abrams storytelling almost always coincides with efforts to save the tales of a disappearing culture or group of people (138). Alexievich also explicitly states this effort in 'Remarks': "The Soviet civilization… I'm rushing to make impressions of its traces, its familiar faces." (28). This gives rise to the question of what the differences are between these narrative modes of story and (oral) history are. And how does *Second-hand Time* relate to this? To answer these questions, I will read *Second-hand Time* in relation to an essay by Walter Benjamin that reflects on very similar issues.

Walter Benedix Schönflies Benjamin was born in Berlin in 1892 and is considered one of the most important German literary critics in the first half of the 20th century. He studied German literature, psychology and philosophy at the universities of Berlin, Bern, Freiburg and Munich. In 1919 he received his doctorate with his dissertation *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*, which was published in 1920. In his failed attempt to escape the 1940 Nazi invasion of Paris to which he fled after Hitler came to power in 1933, Benjamin took a lethal dose of morphine at the Franco-Spanish border. It was only after 1955 when his friend Theodor W. Adorno edited and published the first collected edition of his work, that Benjamin gained recognition. The essay concerned with here, 'The Story-Teller: Reflections on the Works of Nicolai Leskov', was first published in *Orient under Okzident* in 1936 (Hale 361-2).

Benjamin argues that storytelling is in a slow but steady process of decline due to several developments. Concretely chief among them are the rise of the novel which is the story's proclaimed nemesis, and the spreading and domination of information in modern society (364-5). The novel is a wholly different thing from the story because it is very solitary, whereas storytelling is done in companionship per definition. According to Benjamin "A man listening to a story is in companionship of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship." (372). Except for the prologue *Second-hand Time* constitutes of stories and 'street noise' that have been told to Alexievich. And although the book is written by the author Alexievich it constitutes of a polyphony of voices. It is an (edited) recording of conversations between multiple persons and thus the reader is in some way in companionship of those people; the reader reads with them, shares a version of their experience. Making one's way through the book is like paying visits to several storytellers. Another difference between the story and the novel lies in the lessons that can be drawn from them. The "meaning of life" is what the novel is essentially about, whereas storytelling is rather about the "moral of the story", two opposite principles according to Benjamin (372). The moral of a story is not

something to be explained but to be distilled from it. It is about the lessons that stories can teach, although the protagonists in *Second-hand Time* precisely doubt the value of the counsel their stories could provide. The storytelling seems to oftentimes fail, 'who want to hear this?', because the stories seem to have lost significance because of the collapse of the Soviet framework.

There are multiple aspects that render it viable to relate *Second-hand Time* to storytelling in Benjamin's conception of this distinct genre. As abovementioned the titles of the two main chapters seem to highlight the connection of the book to the genre: 'Ten *Stories* in a Red Interior'; 'Ten *Stories* in the Absence of an Interior' [emphasis added]. Moreover, chapter one of the book begins with protagonist Elena Yurievna in the very first sentence posing the question: "Is it really already time to tell the story of socialism?" (73). Storytelling is explicitly noted in the text and constitutes part of its foundation. As expounded upon earlier, the performance of storytelling is an essential part of the book, as is also the being free from explanation, which according to Benjamin is imperative to storytelling too: "it is left up to him [the reader] to interpret things the way he understands them" (366). Likewise, the importance of memory in *Second-hand Time* is both echoed in oral history, as also in storytelling: "Memory is the epic faculty *par excellence*." (Benjamin 370); "It [memory] starts the web which all stories together form in the end." (371). In addition to these characteristics which are already discussed earlier, there are more fundamental similarities between the genre and *Second-hand Time*.

An important parallel is that both Benjamin and Alexievich are interested in the relationship between storytelling and major historical changes and events. The profound changes that, respectively, WW I and the fall of the Soviet Union have brought about are a foundational element in both 'The Storyteller' as also in *Second-hand Time*. According to Benjamin WWI has deeply affected the experience and perception of the world of men, which has catalyzed a further demise of storytelling, that is, "the ability to exchange experiences." (362). Benjamin argues that experience has fallen in value partly because of the major event of WWI that has caused "overnight changes which were never thought possible." (362). A mixture of fundamental developments has caused this. There was a different, 'externalized' experience of death – in hospitals, out of sight. The radically different tactical warfare; a thoroughly changed economic experience by hyperinflation; mechanical warfare which deeply influenced bodily experience and the moral experience of those in power who were physically far removed from battle: these developments influenced human

experience to the incredible extent that the ability to exchange experiences, whether in writing or telling, was profoundly and negatively influenced.

The experience and feeling of radical and unalterable changes that the event of the fall of communism brought about likewise forms a major theme in *Second-hand Time*. At the start of her prologue Alexievich states that

> "Communism had an insane plan: to remake the 'old breed of man', ancient Adam. And it really worked… Perhaps it was communism's only achievement. Seventy-plus years in the Marxist-Leninist laboratory gave rise to a new man: *Homo sovieticus*. [….] we have our own lexicon, our own conceptions of good and evil, our heroes and martyrs. We have a special relationship with death." (23).

Alexievich explicitly "sought out people who had been permanently bound to the Soviet idea, letting it penetrate them so deeply, there was no separating them: the state had become their entire cosmos, blocking out everything else, even their own lives." (24). The fall of the Soviet Union was a moment when the entire way of life, world view, conception of reality and of history of this *Homo sovieticus* seemed to have come crashing down. The acuteness of the deep change that resulted from the collapse is markedly made clear in the following passage:

> "And they…all of them were like me, they were Soviets… Completely Soviet people. One hundred per cent! And proud of it. Then suddenly, it had all been taken out from underneath them. Gone! They woke up one morning, looked out the window, and there was a new flag. Suddenly finding themselves in another country. They became foreigners overnight." (163)

Throughout the book many protagonists express how radically their world and the experience of it had changed, and emphasize the incomprehensibility of it for them: "We had to relearn how to live from scratch…" (55); "I grew up in a deeply Soviet time. Totally Soviet. Born in the USSR. But the new Russia… I don't understand it yet." (523); "God forbid you were born in the USSR but live in Russia." (528); "I used to understand our way of life… The way we lived used to make sense to me… But now, I don't understand anything any more… None of it makes sense at all…" (641).

However, although Benjamin and Alexievich both tie storytelling to profound historical changes and events, they seem to stem from two different types of events and so they have very different ways of relating to storytelling. Where Benjamin sees the disappearance of storytelling, Alexievich registers a reflourishing.

So the way storytelling is influenced and complicated is fundamentally different. Benjamin mostly sees a loss of storytelling accelerated by the trauma of WW I. The traumatic experiences, together with modernity, cannot be grasped by telling stories any longer. Alexievich, on the other hand, seems to actually see the opposite happening. Because of the collapse of the Soviet project, the ideological and signifying framework, people's reality, disappeared. It is not that the experience cannot be grasped, but the 'sense of it all' completely vanished overnight causing the vocabulary in which the stories were told to defect. On the one hand, after the collapse of the Soviet Union the ground fell from underneath the Soviets because they were not part of the Big History of Soviet communism any longer. The essence of their being seemed to dissolve which made their lives feel meaningless and so jeopardized storytelling, somehow rendering their stories meaningless – not being able to provide any lessons. On the other hand, however, because of the disintegration of the master narrative of communism, space opened up for all sorts of small stories to be told and heard. Stories not about the heroism of communism and the decimation of the individual, but actually the contrary. There is room for stories of not the grotesque and magnificent but the daily and mundane – for the emotions of the individual. The collapse of the Soviet Union, contrary to the event of WW I, made storytelling possible once again, yet it seems without providing the counsel Benjamins conception of storytelling did.

The end of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the new Russia has also for Alexievich been a deeply changing event. She is personally very much involved, for she also feels very much Soviet, stating, "I am this person" (23), constantly speaking of "we", and also protagonists recognize her as one of their own: "Only a Soviet person can understand another Soviet person. I wouldn't have talked to anyone else…" (207). She is very much rooted in the people about which she writes and whose stories she tells, which is another important aspect of storytellers being rooted in the ordinary people (Benjamin 373). As she explicitly states in the prologue:

> "I don't ask people about socialism, I want to know about love, jealousy, childhood, old age. Music, dances, hairdos. The myriad sundry details of a vanished way of life. It's the only way to chase the catastrophe into the contours of the ordinary and try to tell a story." (28-9)

Alexievich's interest lies with the ordinary. And an orientation towards the ordinary and to practical interests tied to a 'way of life' is characteristic of many born storytellers, according to Benjamin (364).

Correspondingly, all through *Second-hand Time* protagonists speak of their 'mundane' lives and tell stories, not about the major events of History, but about their everyday preoccupations: "I'm proud of the Soviet era! It wasn't 'the good life', but it was regular life. We had love and friendship… dresses and shoes…" (90); "Everything was mundane and simple, and that's what made it truly lofty. And sad." (353); "We want something on the human scale. Normal. Mundane… you know, everyday stuff!" (408-9); "You don't have to be a cosmonaut, an oligarch, or a hero, you can just be happy and experience everything there is to experience in a regular two-bedroom apartment" (560); "These days they say we used to have a mighty fortress and then we lost it all. But what have I really lost? I've always lived in the same little house without amenities - no running water, no plumbing, no gas - and I still do today. My whole life I've done honest work." (693).

To understand the intimate relation between stories, everyday practices, and daily life, it is important that Alexievich visits people, and listens to their stories in their daily environments. Alexievich is, in the book, in the first place a traveller. This makes her also a typical storyteller in Benjamin's description. A storyteller is someone who has travelled far to both distant places and distant times (Benjamin 363). Just as Benjamin's ultimate storyteller Nikolai Leskov (1831-1895), Alexievich has travelled all through Russia and beyond: "For a number of years I travelled throughout the former Soviet Union – [the] *Homo sovieticus* isn't just Russian, he's Belorussian, Turkmen, Ukranian, Kazakh." (Alexievich 23). This way storytellers gain a crucial understanding of both the organization of the countries as well as the conditions of it, which subsequently provides them with stories, and influences them (Benjamin 363).

Because she visits people, she does more than listening to the stories of her protagonists; she seems to share the experiences that are embedded in the stories. A storyteller does not merely tell stories but transmits experiences. As Benjamin puts it, he "takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale." (Benjamin 364). Alexievich listens to the stories told to her and she in turn relates and conveys her experience of listening via the book to the reader in several ways – as is elaborated upon in chapter one. Important here is also that the transmittance from person to person of stories is not obscured in the book but made explicit, both by protagonists in the stories themselves – "I don't actually remember this, but my mother told me this story…" (245), "He didn't read much. More often, he'd tell me stories…" (337) – as also by Alexievich by

way of descriptive subheadings of stories: "AS TOLD BY HIS NEIGHBOUR, MARINA TIKHONOVNA ISAICHIK" (127); "AS TOLD BY HER DAUGHTER" (473); "AS TOLD BY GAFKHAR DZHURAYEVA, DIRECTOR OF MOSCOW'S TAJIKISTAN FUND" (575)

What follows up on both the earlier biographical argument and the way in which Alexievich processes the stories she has been told, is the craftsman's relationship of the storyteller to the material. She endeavours to convey the experiences of the stories via her craft, writing. As Benjamin also points out, writing can indeed be considered a craft: "This craftsmanship, storytelling, was actually regarded as a craft by Leskov himself. "Writing" he says in one of his letters, "is to me no liberal art but a craft."" (367); "it [storytelling] is an artisanal form of communication." (367). The storyteller is the craftsman with the "task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way." (377). With *Second-hand Time* the author Alexievich, as a craftswoman, documented, streamlined, polished, structured, edited, composed and conveyed the emotions of the stories told by the protagonists.

Another constitutive part of the storyteller and resemblance between the genre and *Second-hand Time* is the authority that the storyteller derives from death. Benjamin: "Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death." (369). Along this line of reasoning, because death has been pushed further and further outside of the perceptual world in modern times, the decline of storytelling is deepened (368). However, in *Second-hand Time* death is very much present: "We have a special relationship with death." (Alexievich 23); "After Stalin, we have a different relationship to murder… We remember how our people had killed their own… The mass murder of people who didn't understand why they were being killed… It's stayed with us, it's part of our lives." (61); "*They spoke about death the same way they spoke about life.*" (290); "I'm going to die soon. [Silence.] I want my love to live on. I won't be here any more, but people will be able to read about it…" (311); "He was always happy whenever his life changed. First, it was the camps, then it was exile, then freedom, and now this… Death was just another change of circumstances…" (336); "The only thing is, I can't stop thinking about it… about death." (358); "I always film stories, and every story has everything in it. The two most important ingredients are love and death." (645).

Death seems to be a source of authority in many stories. It is most effective to establish authority right from the start. The following stories immediately start of with a reference to death in the first paragraph: "I

was five, and it had made me realize that I was going to die and everyone I knew was going to die, too." (541); "I know so much about death. Some day, the things I know will drive me insane…" (575); "What's there to say? Death doesn't scare me…You shouldn't have come, and you shouldn't stay. Won't do you any good!" (595); "… You already know everything… But what can we say about death? Nothing intelligible… It's unknowable!" (402); "First, I dreamt that I'd died. I saw a lot of people die when I was little, but later on I forgot about it all… [*She wipes her tears.*]" (375);

> "It was morning. I was on my knees, begging, 'Oh Lord! I'm ready now! I want to die right now!' Even though it was morning… and the day was just beginning… Such a powerful desire… to die! So I went down to the sea. Sat down on the sand. Tried to talk myself into believing that there was no need to fear death. Death is freedom…" (357)

> "A friend of mine killed herself… She was a strong and successful woman. Tons of friends and admirers. We were all in shock. Suicide? What is that? Cowardice or an act of courage? A radical transformation, a cry for help, or self-martyrdom? An exit… a trap… a punishment... I want to… I can tell you why I'll never kill myself…" (497)

Due to the atrocious history of the Soviet Union, with its apogee in Stalinism, death had become a constituent element of Soviet life. It has made its comeback in at least some of the public spheres in modern times, so to speak. Perhaps this is even not only because of the bloody history of the Soviet Union, but also the inherent connection between the revolutionary communist project and death: "And yes! Yes! Yes! My greatest dream was to die! To sacrifice myself. Give myself away. The Komsomol oath: 'I am prepared to give up my life if my nation should need it.'" (153); "You have to live for others… for a higher purpose… throw yourself under a tank, go down in an aeroplane for your Motherland. The rumble of the Revolution… Heroic death… We were taught that death is more beautiful than life. That's why we grew up to be monsters and freaks." (223); "We all grew up with it. Art loves death, especially our art. The cult of martyrdom and death is in our blood. Life for aortic rupture…" (228). Heroic death is one way in which to become eternalized, and the idea of eternity has had its strongest source in death, as Benjamin argues (368). The changing idea of eternity and death, together with the decline of it in public life, has turned out identical with the diminishing of the communicability of experience – storytelling. On the contrary, however, death, heroic death, is part and parcel of the revolutionary spirit of communism, which most of the Soviets Alexievich spoke to completely internalized. Hence death, unlike in the modern times Benjamin speaks of,

has not only been introduced back into the public sphere, but even became a cornerstone of it: "For us, it was victory or death! Let us die as long as we know what we are dying for." (266). In these circumstances it is more likely for storytelling to revive. Yet where for Benjamin death had lost its significance in modern times after WW I, in the Communist History death had too much significance, although only in light of this History. Sacrificial 'Stalinist death' thusly could appear in the history books, but could not end up in the 'stories'. Consequently, death has actually been retracted from the lived world of those involved. In post-Soviet world the storytellers seem profoundly insecure that the lessons, the counsel, of their stories are of any value. Every time the question arises: who wants to hear this? So the act of storytelling time and again seems to fail.

With the end of Communism and its totalitarian view of History and reality, the dead and death itself are freed from their role in the Stalinist historical narrative. They are liberated for 're-signification', as it were. That is why all the abovementioned passages on death are so divergent. Death drives people mad. Or it scares people. Or it does not scare them at all. Death is inescapable, yet death simultaneously is freedom. Ambiguity reigns with the disappearance of the signifying framework of the Stalinist History. Set free from the communist framework they are being unconstrainedly (re)interpreted and (re)given meaning. That is why the aggregate of stories is so much characterized by polyphony and open-endedness. Besides the stories of 'heroic death' there are also other, wholly different stories about dying. Due to the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the consequent collapse of the framework of reality it provided for its participants, *homo sovietici* could not make sense of the world and their lives in it in relation to the Big History of Communism. As a result, one sees an explosion of little (hi)stories. In addition, a concomitant effect of the collapse is a changing relation to death. The 'sacrificial death' for the greater cause has disappeared. Nevertheless, death is still a central element in daily life. This follows Benjamin's line of reasoning, but perhaps has a special meaning in the context of the Soviet Union. Death for the individual had become meaningless under Stalin; one simply dissipated into the masses. In like manner, but the inverse, sacrifices for communism now, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, have become meaningless. Consequently, there are new attempts to find a 'meaning' of death and thus also attempts to tell new stories about it. Death is at the same time totally knowable and unintelligible; the act of suicide is with questions ambiguously interpreted as an act of courage,

or cowardice, or a cry for help, or self-martyrdom. Yet the attempts seem to fail because of the storytellers' ideas of the insignificance of the counsel their stories could provide.

Alexievich's *Second-hand Time* indeed has many characteristics of storytelling. It, however, seems to transcend this tradition, evolving it into something other than the traditional storytelling, into something new. The components of storytelling taken aside, considering the enormous upheavals of history, one cannot simply copy earlier narrative traditions and completely ignore the intermediate period with all its developments, complications and implications for modes of writing. One cannot simply emulate and insert an old tradition into a new context. With *Second-hand Time* Alexievich rather probes what storytelling is and means in this day and age and what its relationship with this specific historical period is, by citing a multitude of stories and reflecting on the act of and writing of storytelling. How then, does this relate to the effort to capture reality? How does it tie in with history writing? Storytelling is inherently tied to history writing, so it seems: Benjamin raises the question "whether historiography does not constitute the common ground of all epic forms." (369). The telling of stories about the past has been a greatly important epic form of dealing with history. For Benjamin, anyhow, it does not seem to matter if the storyteller communicates his stories in written or spoken form – "even a man reading one [a story] shares this companionship." (372). Modes of writing are not simply ways of human communication, but drive at something more profound. Writing is an expression of the way we structure and construct our realities, of wisdom and our truths. Thus modes of writing touch upon ways of thinking about, and perceiving the world, dealing with life and hence history,

> "In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers. But if today "having counsel" is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing. In consequence we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others. After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. […] Counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom. The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out. This, however, is a process that has been going on for a long time. And nothing would be more fatuous than to want to see in it merely a "symptom of decay", let alone a "modern" symptom. It is, rather, only a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing." (Benjamin 364)

Benjamin here expounds upon subterranean tectonic plate shifts, to use his analogy, that affect storytelling and cause its decline. It not only has to do with form, but touches upon truth and wisdom, and forces of history. Storytelling is one of the ways to deal with life and history in all its facets; it provides moral counsel. The end of the art of storytelling is near, because wisdom is dying out, because experience is being valued less and less. Notwithstanding the gloomy tenor, Benjamin claims not to be a culture pessimist. He asserts not to see the decline of storytelling as a "symptom of decay" or a "modern" symptom. Rather, he calls it 'only' a "concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history". In this way, it appears an entirely inescapable linear process on which humans have no influence whatsoever – which, even more than a culture pessimist, makes him seem like a defeatist. It is all the more intriguing then, that *Second-hand Time,* as a work that thinks about storytelling, is about, deals with and de facto emanated from the Soviet project of communism. Compelling because being a force of History is the essence of communism. What is to be made of this then? How can Benjamin's conception of the storyteller be unified with the manifestation of *Second-hand Time*? As it may be, the way humans deal with and perceive the world around them and, even more of interest here, with their history, is not only influenced but even shaped by the time they live in – by their circumstances, as Ortega y Gasset aptly points out. The protagonists in *Second-hand Time* were remoulded into *Homo sovietici*. They were the product of their time. But in the same way, Benjamin could be considered to be a product of his time, and hence his conception of the storyteller as well. In like manner Alexievich and her *Second-hand Time* are the outcome of a specific time, one in which both the remoulding into the New Man, as well as the collapse of this same entire cosmos and conception of reality have taken place. This has required, or catalysed, different ways of thinking and dealing with the world and the past, of history writing. And so in response, it appears, a path has opened up again for the art of storytelling and is in a new way taken up again; a genre wherein the stories told by the protagonists, the historical eye-witnesses, form the basis of the documents with which Alexievich is endeavouring to tell stories about history. This is for Alexievich the way to cope with the past and approximate reality in the closest possible way:

> "In my books these people tell their own, little histories, and big history is told along the way. We haven't had time to comprehend what already has and is still happening to us, we just need to say it. To begin with, we must at least articulate what happened. We are afraid of doing that, we're not up to coping with our past. In Dostoevsky's Demons, Shatov says to Stavrogin at the beginning of their conversation: "We are two creatures who have met in boundless

> infinity… for the last time in the world. So drop that tone and speak like a human being. At least once, speak with a human voice."" (Alexievich Nobel lecture 8)

Rather than simply *being* a work of storytelling, *Second-hand Time* reflects upon this genre, it plays with it, explores what it does to the value of the counsel of stories, what it does to writing both history and literature. However, although the tradition of storytelling is a constitutive part of *Second-hand Time*, it appears not limited to just this. It is reflecting on instead of emulating storytelling. The enigmatic amalgamation with, among other things, the sheer polyphony of the book and the fact that Alexievich herself calls it a work of "novels in voices", arouses thoughts of it being something more intricate than merely storytelling.

3

The Nonfiction Novel

> "Ms Alexievich's work fits into a longstanding literary tradition of deeply reported narrative non-fiction written with the sweep and the style of a novel. Practitioners include luminaries like Truman Capote, Norman Mailer and Joan Didion… Her most recent book, *Second-hand Time*, is her biggest and most ambitious." (Alter, *The New York Times,* 8 October 2015)

Art, according to Alexievich, has failed where the document has not; it is not capable (any longer) of bringing us closer to reality. It is, when identifying the novel as an art form, all the more interesting then that in *The New York Times* Alexievich is compared to novelists like Capote, Mailer and Didion. Her work indeed 'reads like a novel' and she herself calls her books "novels in voices". What is more, it seems logical to label a book that is hard to pin down with the genre that is most in development, for it is likewise yet to be defined. As Bakhtin states: "Among genres long since completed and in part already dead, the novel is the only developing genre." (4). Although Bakhtin published his essay 'Epic and the Novel' in 1941, he had a rather extensive time scale in mind – several millennia – and it still seems legitimate today. *Second-hand Time* is composed of stories of real people, their actual names often included, and refers to historical facts. Therefore, without going too far into the lengthy debate on fiction and nonfiction, if one is to study this book as a novel it should specifically be as a *nonfiction* novel. How then, can relating *Second-hand Time* to this particular genre enhance our understanding of the nature of the book and its implications?

The term 'nonfiction novel' is said to have been originally coined by Truman Capote for his book *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences* (1966). It is about an extensively researched event, a brutal murder of an innocent family, which is integrated, according to David Lodge, "into a gripping narrative that in style and structure was indistinguishable from a novel." (202). This type of writing, however, appears to be much older than the coinage of this specific term. Before the institutionalization of historiography as a science in the nineteenth century, the boundaries between literature and nonfiction genres such as historiography and journalism were very much blurred. Lodge states that "the novel itself as a literary form evolved partly out of

early journalism." (203). Along the same lines of reasoning Terry Eagleton points out that in the eighteenth century literature was considered to be the whole body of writings in society, including nonfiction such as philosophy, history and essays (15). As John Lukacs more markedly argues in his essays 'Re-Cognition of History as Literature' and 'History and the Novel', history and literature have many more affinities and similarities than generally assumed (81-138). Interestingly, he even goes as far as to argue that historiography *is* literature.

One of the most prominent and influential literary movements in the twentieth century in which the cross pollination of the literary notions of fiction and nonfiction took place was New Journalism, originating in the United States (US) in the 1960s and '70s. This 'cross-pollinating tendency' is particularly characteristic of the American literary tradition which started with essays, pamphlets and documentaries (Konolovalova, Nesmelova 177) and is therefore a literary field which can provide productive and relevant theories here. Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer and Truman Capote are identified as some of the important figure heads of the movement and many of their works are good examples of this fusion of journalism and literary techniques, often considered as nonfiction novels. As David Lodge describes the genre(s): "In the nonfiction novel, new journalism, "faction", or whatever one calls it, the novelistic techniques generate an excitement, intensity and emotive power that orthodox reporting or historiography do not aspire to" (203). Scholars have tried to provide a theorized description: "An artistic, creative, literary reporting form with three basic traits: 1) dramatic literary techniques; 2) intensive reporting; 3) reporting of generally acknowledged subjectivity." (Konolovalova, Nesmelova 180). Regarding a 'novelistic reading experience' as an insubstantial argument, distinguishing these three basic traits of new journalism/the nonfiction novel – dramatic literary techniques, intensive reporting, reporting of generally acknowledged subjectivity – in *Second-hand Time* is perhaps a more competent way of formally establishing *Second-hand Time* in relation to the genre.

The first of the formal characteristics of new journalism/nonfiction novel is dramatic literary techniques. *Second-hand Time* has an own, distinct pathos. It takes the reader along and entrains him, through these narrative techniques. In the divergent stories dramatic scenes are narrated, with both love and death being the two most important elements in the book: "Why are love and death so close?";

> "We were taught death. […] We were taught to love people with weapons. […] Evil kept a watchful eye on us. I have written five books, but I feel that they are all one book. A book about the history of Utopia… […] I reconstruct […] the history of how people wanted to build the Heavenly

> Kingdom on earth. Paradise! The City of the Sun! In the end, all that remained was a sea of blood, millions of ruined human lives." (Alexievich Nobel lecture 3, 5)

Considering the eventful history of the Soviet Union and the complete focus on writing a history of emotions through the personal experiences of its participants (Alexievich Nobel lecture 7-8), it almost goes without saying that the book has potent emotive power, with the conveyance very much relying on dramatic literary techniques. Correspondingly, the second characteristic, namely intensive reporting, could also be said to be present, for they are by-and-large first-person reportages/narrations of tragic and thrilling scenes:

> "I remember the big field on the edge of the forest… They selected the strongest men [captive Jews] and ordered them to dig two big pits. Deep. While the rest of us stood there and waited. First, they tossed all the little kids into one of the pits… they started burying them… And their parents didn't even weep or beg. Everyone stood there in total silence. […] The Germans looked down into the pit and laughed, threw sweets in it. The Polizei were dead drunk… Their pockets were stuffed with wrist-watches… They buried the children alive…. Then they ordered everyone else to jump into the pit. We stood there, my mother, my father, my little sister and I. Our turn came… The German in charge noticed my mother was Russian and gestured to her: 'You're free to go.' My father shouted, 'Run!' But she grabbed onto him, clutched at me: 'I have to be with you.' All of us pushed her away, we begged her to leave… but she was the first one of us to jump into the pit…" (Alxievich 300)

Perhaps needles to say, the stories are all personal accounts of people's experiences and emotions, hence bringing us to the third formal characteristic of the nonfiction novel being intrinsically subjective. In addition, one of the main principles of the genre is the participation and direct involvement of the author in the described events (Konolovalova, Nesmelova 180). With regard to Alexievich and *Second-hand Time* this seems particularly relevant: "I feel like I know this person [*homo sovieticus*]; we're very familiar, we've lived side by side for a long time. I am this person." (Alexievich 23). Furthermore, *Second-hand Time* can convincingly be considered as a document, for it is composed witness testimonies of their own histories, "and big history is told along the way." (Alexievich Nobel lecture 8).

Now that through the formal argumentation which places *Second-hand Time* in a clear relation to the genre has been established, one can look to another, 'higher' level of resemblance with which we can perhaps delve deeper into the nature of *Second-hand Time*'s genre and its implications. These are not necessarily found on this structural level, but rather on the level of the belief systems and world views that underlie and are somehow expressed in these forms of narration.

Phyllis Frus McCord is assistant professor of English at Vanderbilt University and wrote her dissertation at New York University on the theory of the nonfiction novel. In her article 'The Ideology of Form: The Nonfiction Novel' (1986) she elaborates on the genre and more importantly its ramifications. She does this chiefly through juxtaposing the two most famous outgrowths and distinct forms of the genre: Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Mailer's *The Executioner's Song: A True Life Novel* (1979). McCord not only goes into the nature of the genre, but explores the implications of certain forms and narrative techniques, of which these two novels appear representative for opposing world views or belief systems. From here on her article will therefore be central along which the genre will be studied in relation to *Second-hand Time*.

A first thesis to attempt to explain the development of the genre is that of the 'absurd reality'. It is one of the most important truisms by which the documentary basis of the nonfiction novel is "supposed to answer the need for credibility that the realistic novel can no longer take for granted after literary modernism." (McCord 62). Art has supposedly failed to capture the 'preposterousness' of reality in the twentieth century and thus these writers turn "toward documentary forms which do not attempt to recreate the world but only to record the data it offers to the observer." (McCord 62). David Lodge likewise uses this argumentation in his essay 'The Nonfiction Novel' and concludes that "This kind of writing thrives on the old adage that truth is stranger than fiction." (205). Alexievich seemingly works from this same idea. In her Nobel lecture she states that "content ruptures form." (7), and correspondingly on her personal website explains that, "After 20 years of work with documentary material and having written five books on their basis I declare that art has failed to understand many things about people." (Alexievich *In lieu of biography*). Indeed, the stories told in *Second-hand Time* seem too extraordinary, horrific, spellbinding and multifarious to be wholly imagined by a novelist writing fiction – examples abound in *Second-hand Time*. The following fragment is preceded by the dreadful story that an innocent mother is deported to Siberia because an informant reported her to the authorities as an enemy of the state. A friend of hers offers to raise her son while she is away. When she comes back after years in the Gulag "She kissed her friend's hands and feet in gratitude. If this were a fairy tale, this is where the story would end, but in real life, the ending is very different. Without a 'happily ever after'." (Alexievich 114). As it turns out, during Perestroika when the archives were unsealed and she could see who reported her to the authorities, it was that same neighbour and friend who kindly raised her son. After this discovery the mother "went home and hanged herself." (114). Another example, with scenes from the ethnic violence in the Caucasus after the collapse of the Soviet Union, is graphically even more horrific:

> "They took my mother out into the courtyard, stripped her naked, and threw her on the fire! And then they forced my pregnant sister to dance around the fire… Then, after they killed her, they dug her baby out of her with metal rods…' 'Shut up! Shut up!' 'My father was hacked to pieces with an axe… My relatives only recognized him by his shoes…'" (459)

Indeed, it appears stranger than fiction and "the guarantee that the story is "true" gives it a compulsion that no fiction can quite equal", as Lodge claims (203). The scope and force of the suffering seems to be best captured by this documentary form, as Alexievich herself also defines her work. Along the same lines of reasoning she states:

> "My teacher, Ales Adamovich, whose name I mention today with gratitude, felt that writing prose about nightmares of the 20th century was sacrilege. Nothing may be invented. You must give the truth as it is. A "super-literature" is required. The witness must speak. Nietzsche's words come to mind – no artist can live up to reality. He can't lift it." (Alexievich Nobel lecture 7)

But is this 'absurd reality' contention the whole explanation? Is it even adequate? The proposition of the constructedness of reality strongly contests it. McCord is certainly right when she aptly points out that "deplorable situations have always been part of the human condition." (63). If some kind of 'uniqueness' of the twentieth century is the only argument or explanation for the need for credibility and therefore the resorting to nonfictional narratives, the previous ages have not been studied enough – for they too are filled with completely unimaginable horrors. And it must be acknowledged that every historical period is unique, with one not being 'more unique than others'. Not the absurdity of the reality of the age, but the *awareness*, or, *illusion* of reality, whether that comes through newspapers, TV, radio, etc., has become absurd and incomprehensible (63). Through these textual forms and other cultural practices, imagined social realities are created which seem more real than reality itself and consequently the 'reality' they display seems too bizarre to comprehend (63).

While McCord reasons and argues in the context of the mid-twentieth century US. But it can also be applied to the world of the Soviet Union, for there too 'reality', as everywhere, comes to people through a highly culturally structured locus where the world is perceived through 'objectifying' sources whose realism is so transparent that one misguidedly takes it for truly transmitting the 'real' (64). The Soviet Union held sway over all aspects of public life mediating and producing practically all information and knowledge there was about the world for the participants in the Soviet project: "People who have come out of socialism are both like and unlike the rest of humanity – we have our own lexicon, our own conceptions of good and evil, our heroes and martyrs." (Alexiviech 23). As McCord makes clear, "with time and familiarity, ubiquitous images become naturalized"

(65). The (imagined) universe of communism turns into the reality of the people. McCord further elaborates by citing Bill Nichols: "Ideology appears to produce not itself, but the world. It proposes obviousness, a sense of 'the way things are', within which our sense of place and self emerges as an equally self-evident proposition." (65). Notwithstanding the 'extraordinariness' of this project, what is of more importance is that this Soviet endeavour to "remake the 'old breed of man', ancient Adam" (Alexievich 23) has led to an entirely distinct cosmos and reality, history and culture, structures and truths. Surely reality itself is

> "not something that in the twentieth century has changed to the incredible extent that the only way to assure that a reader would credit a realistic account of it was to reproduce it with a fidelity to facts, data, relentless observation; reality is created by the observer who constructs the instrument with which he observes (who is himself structured by his culture) and by the medium in which a representation is embodied." (McCord 66)

Rather than the exceptionality of reality, it is the conception of it that people have that causes the idea of 'truth being stranger than fiction', particularly when that reality vanishes overnight. The consequences of the disintegration of the communist project are immense when people thoroughly feel that "Life, in the meantime, changed genres…" (545); "It's like life's not for us any more, it's not intended for people like us; it's somewhere else." (526); "Too much about our lives had changed, and these weren't things that you could read about in books. Russian novels don't teach you how to be successful. How to get rich…" (57); "In the blink of an eye everything became worthless." (154). An entire reality proved imagined, ephemeral, and became non-existent in a heartbeat. This highlights that the self-evident obviousness of what reality is, is all in the eye of the beholder, as is also discussed by protagonists in the book: "We lived in our dreams, our illusions." (645);

> "We made everything up, and, as it later turned out, everything we thought we knew was nothing but figments of our imaginations: the West. Capitalism. The Russian people. We lived in a world of mirages, The Russia of our books and kitchens never existed. It was all in our heads." (42)

What 'truth' is being referred to then, when stating 'truth is stranger than fiction'? The resorting to nonfiction narratives has less to do with reality itself, and more with the reality people create in their minds. However, the nonfiction novels that seem to have come about because of the sensation that 'truth is stranger than fiction' are not merely innocent cultural products, they have comprehensive implications. These are best illustrated by the juxtaposition of Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Mailer's *The Executioner's Song.*

The nonfiction novel, because of its 'double realism' and considering the way reality is structured through a particular locus which is determined by the culture in which it came into being, demands a high level of

reflexivity. That is, the nonfiction novel is made up of supposed objective and hard facts, which are narrated in the transparent mode of realism "creating a highly naturalized world" (McCord 70). To counter this "positivist seduction" that there is a world 'out there' that is objectively apprehensible, the text should acknowledge the constructedness of the story, even of 'factual events', and both implicitly and explicitly demonstrate that it comes through an intervening viewpoint. Here McCord uses the juxtaposition of Capote and Mailer. For *In Cold Blood* seems to ignore the mediatedness of the perception of reality, of the middling consciousness. Capote's nonfiction novel has hardly any reflexive elements but has indeed an omniscient historical narrator which creates a highly naturalized realistic narrative. Thus a positivistic attitude is discernable which seems to assume a world of certitude, 'common sense' and closure; a world which is 'out there' and which it is possible to apprehend. This nonfiction novel attempts to represent reality in mimetic form without giving attention to the intrinsic element of human fabrication in the mind. *In Cold Blood* represses that "there is no reality except for our conception of it." (76)

Mailer, on the other hand, goes to great lengths to stress exactly this. Our own consciousness constructs our reality according to our culturally structured locus or make-up (73). His nonfiction novel *The Executioner's Song* reflects on this constructedness on three levels. It exposes its structured nature, its means of production, by expounding on how the text came to be and what the role of the author was. In addition, it emphasizes its mediatedness by often switching viewpoints, enunciating several accounts of the same events thus showing different subjective versions of the same 'facts'. Furthermore, it is in the implicit subject of the narrative: all the news of our world that comes to us, every narrative which we usually think of as transmitting 'reality' is actually entirely mediated (76). Thus, the implication of Mailer's nonfiction novel is that it makes no claim whatsoever to the real 'truth' or fidelity to facts because those are unattainable; "all we can know is what we create, primarily through language but also through other cultural structures and practices." (71).

Similar to Mailer's conception of the through language created reality which underlies his nonfiction novel, seems to be Alexievich's *Second-hand Time*. In a similar fashion, the reflexivity which stresses the mediatedness of the perception of reality does also in *Second-hand Time* take place on several levels. The book contains, as discussed earlier, many performative and performance elements which point to and reconstruct something outside of the text, the performance of the storytelling and conversations in the past, thus making explicit how the text came into being. And not only on this direct level there is being reflected on the constructedness of

reality. Also on the level of subject does *Second-hand Time* stress how reality is created by the observer: it consists entirely of explicitly mediated stories, for they are subjective stories told by the protagonists. The plurality and subjectivity of these stories and their divergent human truths is what Alexievich is interested in and seems to be crucial to her poetics:

> "It always troubled me that the truth doesn't fit into one heart, into one mind, that truth is somehow splintered. There's a lot of it, it is varied, and it is strewn about the world. Dostoevsky thought that humanity knows much, much more about itself than it has recorded in literature. So what is it I do? I collect the everyday life of feelings, thoughts, and words. I collect the life of my time. I'm interested in the history of the soul. The everyday life of the soul, the things that the big picture of history usually omits, or disdains. I work with missing history." (Alexievich Nobel lecture 7).

The idea of the subjectivity inherent to this missing history is further stressed by the very divergent and often contrasting experiences of people of the same historical events, as expounded upon earlier. For example, the way Perestroika is experienced ranges from one extreme to the other: "Perestroika… It was like war, it was no renaissance…" (203); "I consider us lucky… It was an important time… Perestroika! It felt like a celebration. Like any moment now, we would take off flying." (334). Even more than *The Executioner's Song, Second-hand Time* not only hints at the fact that there is no reality except for mediated reality: it wholly constitutes of explicitly mediated reality. The emotions, the stories and the experiences of people are explicitly structured by them in their minds and the stories they tell are left uninterpreted, unanalysed by some omniscient historical narrator – they are left to speak for themselves.

However, *Second-hand Time* is distinctly different from other nonfiction novels, for something more complex is going on. From Aristotle onwards, the underlying conception of 'truth being stranger than fiction' is that fiction relies on plausibility – in contrast to history writing –, e.g. it needs to 'fit into' our framework, our view of the world, our sense of reality. When this framework is contorted or even disappears completely, this has strong consequences for both the sense of reality and the credibility of modes of writing and representation. The centrality of the Soviet reality and its collapse not only reinforces the idea of the mediatedness of reality but perhaps even made it possible to write about it the way Alexievich does with *Second-hand Time*. This importance of the fabrication of reality is very much highlighted by *Second-hand Time* precisely by the disappearance of this reality. The protagonists used to have a very clear locus to make sense of the past, of the events of history, of contemporary reality. But with the crash of the communist project this cultural structure, this make-up,

completely vanished overnight, thus falling into a vacuum. Consequently, attention was drawn to the constructedness, the ideology, preceding and making possible the 'obviousness' and 'commonsensical' of a certain conception of the world and its reality. Retroactively this reality has become unbelievable by the disappearance of the Soviet framework.

However, no matter how subjective these stories and the mediatedness may be, the notion of the nonfictional associated with *Second-hand Time* points perhaps to these testimonies of the protagonists which are both objective and subjective simultaneously, rather than to the historical nature of the events described. For they really are the stories the protagonists have told, about the emotions and experiences that they truly (remember to have) felt. This is what Alexievich means by writing a missing history. Alexievich has written a different kind of history than conventional historiography by giving her full attention to the 'history of the soul' of the single individual, "In reality, that is where everything happens." (Alexievich Nobel lecture 6). Alexievich further goes into the matter when dealing with the question of genre and history, content and form. With *Second-hand Time* she seems to express the conception that the testimonial documents can and should be considered as literature too:

> "I am often told, even now, that what I write isn't literature, it's a document. What is literature today? Who can answer that question? We live faster than ever before. Content ruptures form. Breaks and changes it. […] There are no borders between fact and fabrication, one flows into the other. Witnesses are not impartial. In telling a story, humans create, they wrestle time like a sculptor does marble. They are actors and creators." (Alexievich Nobel lecture 7)

Correspondingly, McCord argues on the basis of the nonfiction novel that everything – even 'facts', 'truth' and 'reality' – is a fabrication of the human mind. The importance of reflexivity for 'doubly realistic' texts such as nonfiction novels to highlight their own fabricated nature, seems also to be discernable in *Second-hand Time*. Where *Second-hand Time* appears to diverge from McCord's conclusion is at the 'all-encompassingness' of this belief. Indeed, everyday we fictionalize when we tell each other stories:

> "we use phrases and patterns of thought that have become habitual to us because of accidents of reading and speaking – because we have been conditioned by our culture to use them, in short […] we are all products of a culture, subjects of structures – of language, of family patterns, derived from the mass media, etc. Our customary habits of language use are not uniquely ours but produce us, cause us to appear as we do." (75)

Sometimes it appears that *Second-hand Time* adheres to this same underlying principle: "I'm a slave of the word… I have an absolute belief in words. […] I am refining everything within myself. The paths, the labyrinths, the

burrows…" (344). Predominantly, however, *Second-hand Time* transcends this idea that we are entirely restricted to existing language structures and patterns of culture. It seems to counter McCord's panoptic, captive view that we are all caught and stuck in the bounds of our culture and habits of our language. Protagonists in the book allude to the inadequacy of the everyday lexicon and seem to imply that something lies in between or even beyond this habitual discourse: "Words are only a supplement to our emotional states. Our feelings." (343); "War is filthy and terrifying. I'm not sure any more, is it even possible to write about it? I'm not talking about trying to capture the whole truth, I mean writing anything about it at all? Talking about it…" (361); "But words… words… They don't mean anything, people hide behind them to protect themselves." (508); "You're a writer, you'll understand what I mean: words have very little in common with what goes on inside of you. Before, I was rarely in touch with what was happening inside me. Now, it's like I live down in the mines…" (533). Not only the inadequacy of words is underscored in these statements, but with 'words' the ordinary habitual language, produced by the structures of culture, seems implied. Engagingly, before and after these statements there are nonetheless endeavours abound to put their stories, feelings and approximations of truths into words. They depart from ordinary language for it feels inadequate, and instead venture to find a language outside of it. Crucially, in 'Remarks' Alexievich appears to imply that she is searching for a language that seems to precisely escape McCord's customary habits of language which produce us:

> "I'm searching for a language. People speak different languages: there's the one they use with children, another one for love. There's the language we use to talk to ourselves, for our internal monologues. On the street, at work, while travelling – everywhere you go, you'll hear something different, and it's not just the words, there's something else, too. There's even a difference between the way people speak in the morning and how they speak at night." (Alexievich 31-2).

But what then, is Alexievich looking for in language? As she does not search for historical truths, nor pursues some kind of credibility: what does she seek? Alexievich has on several occasions mentioned that this is neither a historical nor a journalistic project, emphasizing rather that this is a distinctly literary project. Despite the sheer polyphony which characterizes the book, there is a central moment – a moment where she uses the word 'literature'. It is one of the sparsely spread moments where Alexievich's voice enters the books. It is a pivotal passage, for it reveals the core of her poetics:

> "*Several years later, I once again found myself in the town of N – (I won't name the town, per my protagonist's request). We reconnected over the phone and decided to meet. He was happy and in love, so that's what he talked about. I didn't realize right away that I should turn on the tape recorder so as not to miss this transformation of life*

> *– everyday life – into literature. I'm always listening for it, in every conversation, both general and private. Occasionally, my vigilance flags – a 'fragment of literature' may sparkle into sight at any moment, even in the most unexpected places. Which is what happened here. We'd only wanted to get coffee, but life had handed us a development in the narrative. Here's what I managed to record…*" (Alexievich 557)

In her Nobel lecture Alexievich asks, "What is literature today?" In the story that follows the key passage on her poetics, she explicitly recognizes a spontaneous 'fragment of literature'. This key story is about one of the most written and talked about elements of (modern) human life and consequently the related lexicon is possibly the most chewed out, recycled and cliché: love. 'We Know Too Little About Love' is a story within the story of 'On the Old Crone with a Braid and the Beautiful Young Woman', and is preceded by the above cited passage of Alexievich's poetics. Engagingly, the story below attempts to find new ways of talking about and dealing with the subject with the most cliché of human lexicons. And Alexievich explicitly observes in this endeavour the transformation of everyday life into literature. What is it about this story that she recognizes a 'sparkle of literature' in? Why exactly does Alexievich consider this literature? Are death and love things that exist outside of time? If death and love are experiences which break through all narrative, historical, ideological frameworks, is literature then perhaps the invention of a new, universal language? The amorous protagonist strives to somehow explain or give impressions of love, without resorting to customary, cliché language. He is looking for the gaps in between the discourses, searching for new ways outside of the ordinary language as far as possible, to explore and tell about what love is, to somehow get to some truth about it. He does not try to 'be literary', thinking of metaphors to represent 'love' and fabricating 'poetic language', in short, resorting to the cliché love lexicon. He, almost as a scientist, is trying step-by-step to decipher what it actually is, venturing to get at some truth.

Thus, he comes to the analogy of death being made of the same material as love, somehow electrifying people in the same deeply mystifying and secretive way, while, paradoxically, also being one of the clearest sensations humans can have. "I found love… I understand what it is now. Before, I had thought that love was nothing but two fools running a fever. Madness… Really, we know too little about love. And if you start pulling on this thread… love and death seem to be of a piece, like they're made of the same cloth, woven from the same material. […] – it's all the same thing, the same magnetism and electricity." (Alexievich 557). In habitual discourse it is not conventional to equate love with death. Love is indeed, in customary language, approached somewhat as something light-footed – 'puppy love', for instance –, and represented as some kind of fever. Yet

the protagonist equates love with the most severe and heavy of human topics in common discourse, death. He lets them coincide, stresses their mutual dependency, or even: in essence being the same thing. Hence, the protagonist speaks about love – tries to untangle it, "Perhaps it's no good unravelling these riddles? You're not scared, are you?" (Alexievich 557) –, speaking in between or even outside the language that produces the everyday structures and its subjects of the time.

He is matter-of-factly attempting to give impressions – explicitly struggling to find the right words multiple times – how love influences both directly his senses as well as his conception of reality. "It was as though I had forgotten something, then suddenly remembered it… Do you understand what I'm getting at? No? We're not going to derive any formula here… It'd all be artificial […] I'm looking for the right words… It was as though I was remembering something that I had forgotten for a very long time; now it was all coming back to me. I reconnected." (Alexievich 558-9). Love is not some mad fever that somebody catches, as he reasons, but is inside of you all the time, even if dormant; it needs a catalyst, after which you reconnect and think, 'ah, I forgot about that, but now I remember again!'. He is trying to convey his understanding of love, but stresses there is a great chance of it being completely artificial. This 'artificiality' of talking about love points to the habitual language with which reality is being constructed and reproduced everyday. This formulating a 'formula of love' is the reproduction, the recycling of the lexicon of love of common discourse, and he is explicitly trying to avoid this.

In an attempt to decipher love he keeps hitting on paradoxes. While it is a spellbinding mystery and you feel like you're not there, as if past, present and future are all ephemeral, simultaneously "for some reason, everything appears very close, it has all grown claustrophobically close to you. Things like this only happen in dreams." (Alexievich 557). Your senses become hypersensitive, while at the same time you feel like you're in a dream.

> "While the mystery is happening, it's like you're not there. Do you understand what I'm talking about? […] I think it's like… what a person experiences after spending many days in a monk's cell. The world suddenly appears to you in all of its infinite detail. All of its contours. Its secret becomes as accessible as any other object – say, a vase" (Alexievich 557)

The magnetic manifestation of love changes his entire cosmos. It is a cogent example of how 'reality' is in the eye of the beholder, it is constructed in the mind. Humans are actors and creators, as Alexievich points out. The reality of love colours, forms and transforms the protagonist's perception and conception of the world. Through evading customary language and searching for another language, oscillating and enigmatically tying together

extremities which form these paradoxes – which are considered 'paradoxes' precisely because they are an anomaly to common discourse – the protagonist has somehow touched upon a human truth concerning love. In doing this, as Alexievich observes, he has spoken in a language of literature. Interestingly, the protagonist compares the experience of love which transforms his entire conception of reality, to coming out of a monk's cell after spending many days in it. That is – importantly –, cut-off from, or outside of, the constructed reality which builds and shapes the reality of the subjects which are (re)produced in the customary language that structures the everyday reality. This is crucial. It is in this analogy that the construction and reproduction of reality through common discourse is emphasized and made most concrete – is materialized, if you will.

The transformation of everyday life into literature seems for Alexievich to be one in which language transforms from customary language, by which everyday structures of culture and its subjects are produced, into a language that somehow stands in between or even outside of this, perhaps primarily by touching upon some unacknowledged – as Dostoevsky hinted at (Alexievich Nobel lecture 7) – human truths. For acknowledging that 'Real Truth' is unattainable does not mean that humans and their literature cannot enunciate any kind of true propositions. In contrast to McCord (77), in between competing discourses Alexievich encounters not a blank space but, fundamentally important here, the (spoken) language of literature.

Not simply recording the 'truth that is stranger than fiction', *Second-hand Time* explores the contructedness and mediatedness of realities and delves into human truths and the language of literature, as produced, as spoken, by ordinary people – and particularly them –, thus breaking down the hierarchy of who holds truths and produces literature and who does not. Alexievich believes that not only artists, maybe now especially not artists any longer, have the upper hand in holding or producing truths, but the common people themselves, as history calls them, who live life and through it find out, or experience, these truths. These human truths as expressed and woven into the stories people tell in everyday life, are for Alexievich the literature she encounters in the world. For literature is now particularly something to be *encountered* in the world by the author, according to Alexievich. This is what she calls the document: the recording of people's accounts which are both objective and subjective and are of a changing nature: "Documents are living creatures – they change as we change." (Alexievich Nobel lecture 10). They contain, or approximate the best to contain, the human truths as present in the stories told and which are literature. It is present in the minds of people, in their construction of reality, in the objective content of their minds which are their subjective emotions emanating from their experiences and

discoveries in life. It is not Alexievich but rather her protagonists articulate 'literary' sensations such as: "We'd just been butterflies crushed against the pavement…." (119); "If the water catches fire, how do you put it out? That's what Abkhazians say about war…" (357); " – Pitying the unfortunate is in our blood. Murderers and alcoholics. Some men kill but still have the eyes of a baby. You feel sorry for them." (656). This is what Alexievich appears to refer to when speaking about "novels in voices". *She* does not write the novels, but simply records the novels that voices utter.

> "Flaubert called himself a human pen; I would say that I am a human ear. When I walk down the street and catch words, phrases, and exclamations, I always think – how many novels disappear without a trace! Disappear into darkness. We haven't been able to capture the conversational side of human life for literature. We don't appreciate it, we aren't surprised or delighted by it. But it fascinates me, and has made me its captive. I love how humans talk… I love the lone human voice. It is my greatest love and passion." (Alexievich Nobel lecture 4).

By acknowledging that all people can produce literature, Alexievich eliminates the aristocracy of 'artists' and 'non-artists': literature as a carrier of human truths becomes democratized through the acceptance that everybody can produce and produces literature, even without intending to or noticing, with their own voices. The stories of *Second-hand Time* are an approximation of the reality of human truths which, perhaps unintendedly, are articulated in the language of literature. And these realities of human truths are the reality Alexievich is trying to capture, because they seem to be universal and independent from the constructed realities – such as the Soviet reality –, breaking through the frameworks which construct and form our realities through the customary language habits in which we are supposedly produced and confined.

Above all what distinguishes *Second-hand Time* and makes it such a notable work is Alexievich's conception, which underpins the whole endeavour, of literature as a distinct language which is, in fragments, present in everyday life, in the gaps of discourse. For Alexievich literature is that which is not the structured locus of the time, the culturally determined reality, the habitual language. She says she writes a history of the human soul, but in trying to reach the human soul, "the path is littered with that which supposedly structures our perception of reality: with television and newspapers, and the superstitions of the century, its biases, its deceptions." (Alexievich Nobel lecture 8). Thus she appears to believe, and through *Second-hand Time* implicitly expresses, that literature is not solely created by some artists, but to be encountered in the spoken language of everyday life, among ordinary people, exactly outside the structures of the ordinary culture and language.

Yet still the 'momentariness' of Alexievich's conception of literature seems to remain unsolved. Why is it always a momentary sparkle for Alexievich? And when exactly does this momentary sparkle of literature occur? Her emphasis on 'conversationality', on 'orality', is perhaps fundamental in answering this question. "We haven't been able to capture the conversational side of human life for literature. […] But it fascinates me, and has made me its captive. I love how humans talk… I love the lone human voice. It is my greatest love and passion." (Alexievich Nobel lecture 4). Just as much as one can neither breathe in the future nor in the past – but solely in the here and now – a word can neither be uttered in the past nor in the future. It is precisely the *speaking* of a *voice* that is a momentary flash of universality, of human truths transcending all frameworks. This aspect of the conversational side of Alexievich's conception of literature is important here, for it ties in with the crucial element of time – it is always in the here and now that people speak. This is pivotal to understanding Alexievich's conception of literature: "In telling a story, humans create, they wrestle time like a sculptor does marble." (Nobel lecture 7). Perhaps the literary sparkle is the moment wherein a new language connects the universal, the human truths, to the momentary. It is the 'momentariness' of speaking which is the glimpse that is that binding, that coinciding, of eternity and the eternal here and now. This is why for Alexievich literature is always a momentary sparkle, a fragment.

Conclusion

The way we perceive and think about the world influences the way we write about it, just as much as our writings influence our perception and thought. For Svetlana Alexievich, both conventional history writing and art have proven inadequate to capture, or approximate to capture, reality. She turns to the voices of the ordinary people, writing a work founded on oral stories. Similar to oral history *Second-hand Time* attempts a new kind of history writing, a history focussed on the subjective experiences of ordinary people and their everyday lives. Alexievich thus seems to believe that this kind of writing approximates capturing reality and its history better than conventional historiography. There is an inclusive, democratizing tendency in oral history which is not only confined to just this discipline but appears to be part of a larger trend, of which *Second-hand Time* is also a part. However, seeing in this concurrent characteristic and development reasons to undisputedly define *Second-hand Time* as oral history is a misconception. A certain reinvention and democratization of history writing may underlie both of the endeavours, but the execution is entirely different. Whereas oral history clearly abides to academic methodologies and objectives, Alexievich does not even tend towards these in the least, even though she also ventures to approximate some kind of truth.

Nevertheless, both endeavours stand in direct relation to the same fundamental and age-old tradition of storytelling. The oral tradition has for centuries been by far the most important source of knowledge, wisdom and history. However, as Benjamin has argued, the storytelling tradition has known a slow but steady demise across the centuries. Nonetheless, because of the disintegration of the master narrative of communism, a space opened up for stories to be told once again. In some sense, with *Second-hand Time* Alexievich seems to take the storytelling tradition up again, albeit in a different manner now, to agitate against the rise of coherent textual narratives representing reality with a sense of closure. History cannot be undone nor can it be ignored and so instead of simply imitating the art of storytelling, through its form and substance *Second-hand Time* reflects upon the tradition, exploring its boundaries in this day and age, and evolving it by using and moulding it in novel, hybrid ways. There is now room for stories of not the grotesque and magnificent, but the daily and mundane – for the emotions of the individual, which are the true objective content of the human mind and so in the end the real material of history. Through the way Alexievich has written a portrait of the history of the Soviet Union and its fall, she has expressed the belief that the real events of history are not the ones conventional

historiography deals with. Only the 'subjective' experiences of big history by its participants, their little histories, can capture some kind of true history. Writing the history of emotions, of the soul, can then actually be considered the sole type of history writing that deals with the real real. And because the history writing of human truths is actually, and perhaps primarily, a form of literature, Lukács' aforementioned claim that "historiography is literature" can now be reversed: literature is also history writing. Thus, not only has Alexievich with *Second-hand Time* appropriated claims on truths and literature back to the common people, but also their grasp on their history and its writing.

However, in the end, is it even history writing that Alexievich has as an objective? Is this what she wants to achieve? She appears not to be confined by these categorical boundaries, one moment speaking of history and another about the literature that every human voice contains, concerning the same stories. The documents that are more potent than art are the stories people tell, which Alexievich records and composes into books in her (co-) author-function. This is why the book is reminiscent of oral history, because the manners and patterns by which humans think and speak of the past naturally are also present in that genre. This is why storytelling techniques figure so prominently, for it is in the *spoken* language, in human *voices,* in the stories *told*, that Alexievich encounters literature. Resemblances to certain genres do not make it what it resembles. With *Second-hand Time,* she has created a new literary genre, which is perhaps still unidentified here. Irrespective of the question of genre, however, the book has explored new ways of dealing with the world and our conception of it, both past, present and future. Its form has pervasive implications for both history writing and literature – if the two must be separated. Not only historical knowledge and wisdom are to be gained from the substance of the stories told, but also an underlying idea, principle or world view appears to implicitly come to the fore, with important implications.

Through its form, *Second-hand Time* seemingly adheres to the same ideology as McCord in that there is no reality except for the reality fabricated in the human mind, thus agitating against the positivist seduction. However, Alexievich transcends McCord's 'ideology of form' and in the form of *Second-hand Time* implicitly expresses a philosophy on history, literature, language, human truths and, above all, their interconnectedness. In doing so she empowers the people by taking away the boundaries of language in which they are supposedly confined, ascribing them agency to speak in a language in between, or even outside of existing discourses on which they supposedly rely to produce them. Alexievich transcends McCord's ideological dogma that "Our

customary habits of language […] produce us", opening up the gates of McCord's human incarceration in the habitual language. The crash of the Soviet Union freed the *homo sovietici,* including Alexievich, from ideological dogmas, frameworks and the Soviet fabrication of reality. As Zweig pointed out, those who have lost everything are in a new sense entirely free. Through recording the spoken language of literature as such, Alexievich is writing back history, and with it autonomy. By the simultaneous elimination of the hierarchy of artists/non-artists she has democratized the production of literature, hence giving agency to the common people on multiple fronts. In doing so, she (re-)establishes the potential of the notion of literature from some elitist form of leisure, to an instrument or vehicle of agency. Moreover, she thusly expresses a belief that through different, novel modes of writing, wisdom, power, reality and truth are to be produced. Alexievich expresses a different idea of what literature is and makes clear that writing literature is more than the realization of literary imagination; it is the touching upon of human truths by any *voice.* When universal human truths uttered in a new language spontaneously appear in the conversational side of human life, fundamentally defined by its 'momentariness', a sparkle of literature occurs. In Alexievich's conception of literature the unattainable seems attained, namely, letting coincide eternity and the eternal here and now.

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Image

1. Kabakova, Margarita, featured in Gourevitch, Philip, "Stranger than Fiction", *Human Rights Watch*, http://human.hrw.org/alexievich/, accessed on 10 May 2017.