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Olena Saikovska

Memory Through Media: The Functions of Photographs in Sofiia Andrukhovych's Novel "Amadoka"

Abstract: This article is dedicated to the analysis of the functions of photographs in bridging the broken continuity of Ukrainian memory in Sofiia Andrukhovych's novel *Amadoka*. Using a character's war-induced amnesia as a metaphor, the novel connects the contemporary Russian-Ukrainian war with previous catastrophes: the Holocaust, the Stalinist repressions and the destruction of Ukrainian culture – the "Executed Renaissance". Drawing on Aleida Assmann's distinction between memory as Ars (collecting and storing) and as Vis (recalling and reconstructing), the article demonstrates how photographs preserve, activate and transform memory and function as mediators between past and present, as archives of trauma and as ethical sites of witnessing. The article analyses how questions of memory falsification, memory softening or memory replacing are challenged in the novel. Photography is shown to be a dynamic space where memory is preserved, reinterpreted and ethically shared between the one who remembers and the one who looks.

Keywords: photography, cultural memory, trauma, witnessing, Ukrainian literature

Introduction

> Mute at its inception, the photograph maintained its silence. Such silence, which can sometimes scream to the heavens, attests to the fact that it is our historic responsibility not only to produce photos, but to make them speak. (Azoulay 2008: 114)

Memory is among the most sensitive and urgent issues in contemporary Ukrainian literature. Over the last fifteen years a remarkable number of literary works have been devoted to examining its various facets, e.g. Oksana

Zabuzhko's[1] *Muzei pokynutykh sekretiv (Museum of Abandoned Secrets*, 2009), Iurii [Yuri] Vynnychuk's *Tango smerti* (*Tango of Death*, 2012), Tania Maliarchuk's [Tanja Maljartschuk] *Zabuttia* (*Forgottenness,* 2016), Vasyl′ Shkliar's *Troshcha* ("The Reeds", 2017) etc. Cultural memory (A. Assmann 1999; Ja. Assmann 1992; Erll 2005; Erll/Nünning 2008; Sontag 2003) functions as a mean of 'bridging' the disrupted continuity of Ukrainian history, a task that is central within postcolonial discourse (Blacker 2024; Chernets′kyi [Chernetsky] 2007; Hundorova 2005, 2012, 2015; Ivanyshyn 2005; Morenets′ 2006; Pavlyshyn 1996; Shkandrii [Shkandrij] 2001). As Peter Barry argues in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, "the first step for colonized people in finding a voice and an identity is to reclaim their own past" (Barry 2009: 186).

The novel *Amadoka* by Sofiia Andrukhovych (2020) is a contribution to the reconstruction of Ukrainian history of the twentieth century and is one of the most significant works devoted to Ukrainian collective and cultural memory. The focus on memory in the novel is not accidental. Sofiia Andrukhovych underlines the most important challenges she faced while writing the novel:

> Працюючи над *Амадокою* і шукаючи додаткового розуміння в джерелах про Другу світову війну, Голокост чи сталінські репресії 30-х років, я зіткнулась із усвідомленням безвиході: більшість із тих історій назавжди залишаться розверзтими, несправедливими, неугавно болючими, неосягненними. […] єдине, що можна було вдіяти з цією безвихіддю – це спробувати її висловити, перетворювати у слова. […] Це роман не так про події, як про переповідання подій […]. В ньому важливі не історичні факти, не достовірність, а намагання виявити, яким чином ми поводимося з власними і чужими спогадами про обставини і пережиття […].
> (*Amadoka* Sofiï Andrukhovych, 2020)

> While working on *Amadoka* and looking for additional understanding in the sources about the Second World War, the Holocaust, or the Stalinist repressions of the 1930s, I realized that there was no way out: most of those stories would forever remain open, unjust, unrelentingly painful, incomprehensible.

1 Author names are transliterated in accordance with their official English translations to ensure consistency and recognizability for the reader. – O. S.

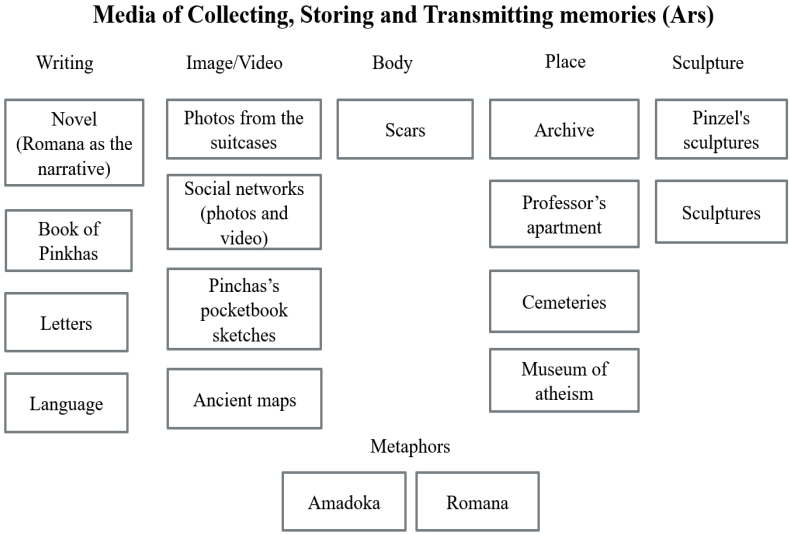
> […] the only thing that could be done with this hopelessness was to […] turn it into words […]. The novel is not about events but about the retelling of these events […]. Neither historical facts, nor authenticity is important, the most important is an attempt to find out how we deal with our own and other people's memories about circumstances and experiences […].[2]

Sofiia Andrukhovych's novel explores the processes of memory and oblivion through the metaphor of a vanished and forgotten lake called Amadoka. The plot centers on a contemporary Ukrainian soldier (the Man) who loses his memory and gets his face scarred as a result of an injury during the Russian-Ukrainian war in Donbas; and on a woman, Romana, who claims to be his wife and who attempts to reconstruct his identity through family stories. The author intertwines the most painful tragedies and events that happened to Ukrainian families and destroyed generations and entire cultures – the Holocaust, the "Executed Renaissance" and the Russian-Ukrainian war in Donbas – into a single canvas where photographs, archives and testimonies become tools for restoring broken continuity, challenging the reader to consider whether it is possible to heal a nation whose history has been intentionally distorted or erased. Sofiia Andrukhovych focuses on how the memory of events and experiences exists in a certain cultural environment and operates on individual, collective, and cultural levels.

According to Astrid Erll, "<c>ultural memory is based on communication through media" (Erll 2008: 389). A media-cultural approach to memory studies is also utilized in Aleida Assmann's *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*. Assmann operates with concept of memory as 'Ars' and as 'Vis', referring to two different modes or dimensions of memory: 'ars memoriae' and 'vis memoriae'. This idea draws on classical rhetorical and philosophical traditions while providing a contemporary lens for understanding the complex dynamics of memory. The author understands 'Ars' as encompassing the functions of collecting (Assman 2011: 35) and storing as an action (ibid.: 36); memory as 'Vis' involves recalling as a process (ibid.). Assmann's theoretical conclusions can be effectively applied to the novel *Amadoka*, where different media have various capabilities for collecting and storing memories (as Ars), shaping how memories are constructed, transmitted and preserved

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine. – O. S.

over time. The main media that preserve and transmit memory in the novel *Amadoka* can be presented as follows:



Photography as an Archive and Mediator

On the level of narration, the development of the novel's plot is guided by the processes of looking at the photographs that Romana (she-narrator) shows to the injured Man (she calls him Bohdan Kryvodiak) and of listening to the stories that she tells – the story of his family, starting from his great-grandmother Zena and great-grandfather Vasyl′ Frasuliak, their daughters – Uliana, Nusia, and Khrystia; the love of Uliana's grandmother with the Jewish boy Pinkhas; the deaths in the shochet family; the acquaintance of Uliana with Matvii Kryvodiak; the birth of his father – the Professor; finishing with Bohdan himself. The photographs perform the function of an archive on not only an individual, but also a cultural level. In this article I focus specifically on photography as a medium of memory in the novel, as the photographs provide a tangible, visual and 'immediate' representation of the past, "a transparent account of reality" (Sontag 2003: 81), bridging personal and collective memory. In *Amadoka*, photography serves as a mediator between temporal layers, creating the

effect of the presence of the past in the present and so materializing memories. When characters look at a photograph, they do not simply recall – they enter into dialogue with the past, transcending the boundary between personal experience and historical trauma.

There are two groups of photographs in *Amadoka* that are stored and named[3] differently depending on the time they are captured. The text does not contain the images themselves, but Sofiia Andrukhovych provides descriptions of them to enable the readers to 'see' them.

The first group of photographs is stored in four large suitcases that are brought to the archive where Romana works by the archaeologist Bohdan Kryvodiak, the son of the Professor. These four suitcases with family photographs are now "trash" (Andrukhovych 2020: 52), but they are valuable to individual carriers of memory:

> Описував їх Романі – десятками, навіть сотнями, з найменшими подробицями: ця має фігурну облямівку і тиснення, ця – пляму від темної рідини, у цієї немає нижнього лівого кутика. На цій – відбиток офіційної печатки. На одній позаду сфотографованих – темно-зелене плюшеве тло. На іншій – розбуялий сад, де на найближчому дереві видно гілку, з якої він у дитинстві впав і пошкодив собі кісточку на нозі. Вона досі болить, і дедалі сильніше. І має неправильну форму, крізь шкіру видно щербинку […].
> (Andrukhovych 2020: 88)

> <The Professor> described them to Romana – by dozens, even hundreds, with the smallest details: this one has a decorative border and embossing, this one has a stain from a dark liquid, this one has no bottom left corner. On this one – an imprint of an official stamp. On the one behind the photographed – a dark green plush background. On another – a lush garden, where on the nearest tree you can see the branch from which he fell in childhood and injured his ankle. It still hurts, more and more. And it has an irregular shape, through the skin you can see a little dent […].

3 'Photo cards' for the those took in the twentieth century and 'photos' for contemporary ones.

The photography preserves his individual memory as the Professor underlines that, for these photographs his «старечий, поїдений часом мозок – останній їхній прихисток»[4] (ibid.: 87). His son by stealing the suitcases with photographs from home and bringing them to the archive, by deciding that his father has no right to memories, is «[…] недостойний того, щоби відчувати свій зв'язок із людьми з фотографій»[5] (ibid.: 88).

There are 79 photo cards in the novel, and each photo card echoes the plotline, depicting different scenes of the life of the individual, the family or the particular generation, e.g. "photo card: sisters in the garden", "photo card: family feast", "photo card: wedding photo of Zena and Vasyl′ Frasuliak" or landscapes: "photo card: panorama of the city through a veil of clouds", "photo card: sunflower field", "photo card: rain". These photo cards are presented as titles followed by the parts of the story that Romana tells the Man in order to reconstruct the family history and activate his memory.

Sometimes the names of the photo cards contain direct images that can be easy traced in the part of the story beneath the title, e.g.: after the title "photo card: swallows over the Strypa river" there is a story about the tragic death of the shochet's wife, Pua, who went to find her husband and son but instead was killed on the bridge over the river; the image of «[…] ластівки [що] торкаються крилами поверхні Стрипи, розбризкуючи краплини води […]»[6] (Andrukhovych 2020: 283) is directly referenced in the title of the photo card. This photo card can be described as externalization (cf. Ruchatz 2008: 372) because it provides a symbolical reading that connects the story to the tragedy of Holocaust and addresses collective as well as cultural memory.

While most of photo cards construct visual images, "photo card: the sound of rabbit skin being torn by a wolf's jaws" generates an auditory effect rather than a visual one. Its impact is intensified through the use of hissing, whispering, and rolling consonants, which create a sonic texture of violence. The episode under this title recounts a story filled with pain and despair:

4 "[…] senile, time-eaten brain is their last refuge […]".
5 "[…] unworthy to feel his connection with the people in the photographs".
6 "[…] swallows […] touching the surface of the Strypa with their wings, splashing drops of water […]".

> Лють, ненависть, розпач і жах, які охопили Пінхаса, коли він почув про Фейґу, наповнили його нелюдською силою, але ось ця сила почала його покидати. Уляна ніби висмоктувала її з нього[…]. Вона шепотіла щось таке, що не було схоже на людську мову. Це було зміїне шипіння, павучине прядіння, шумування болотяної води у ставку, звуки намулу[…]. Це було скрипіння старого порожнистого дерева, пугикання сови, звук роздирання кролячої шкіри вовчою пащею.
> (Andrukhovych 2020: 423)

> The anger, hatred, despair, and horror that engulfed Pinkhas when he heard about Feiga filled him with inhuman strength, but now this strength began to leave him. Uliana seemed to suck it out of him […]. She whispered something that did not resemble human language. It was a snake's hiss, a spider's spinning, the rustling of swamp water in the pond, the sounds of mud […]. It was the creaking of an old hollow tree, the hooting of an owl, the sound of rabbit skin being torn by a wolf's jaws.

This photo card complicates the relationship between memory and visuality, suggesting that some traumas exceed the visual frame and can be registered only through sound, sensation, or bodily reaction.

In the novel, there are also photo cards that refer to images which cannot be visually examined; they function instead as signs of disrupted visuality, e.g. "photo card: overexposed", accompanied by a very brief story: «Такої тиші просто не могло існувати. До того моменту ніхто у всьому світі не підозрював, що буває така тиша. А тоді будинок затрясся. Долинув удар, другий, третій. Нусю підкинуло догори. Ляда відчинилася навстіж»[7] (ibid.: 420). Just as an overexposed photograph is created by an excess of light, this photo card marks a flash of overwhelming emotion: the sudden, explosive moment when Pinkhas learns that his younger sister Feiga – whom he had long believed dead – is actually alive. Here, the technical metaphor of overexposure underscores the intensity and instability of memory, suggesting

7 "Such silence simply could not exist. Until that moment, no one in the whole world suspected that such silence could exist. And then the house shook. There was a blow, then another, and another. Nusia was thrown up. The door opened wide."

that certain emotional experiences exceed the capacity of the visual image to contain or represent them.

The "photo card: darkness" that concludes the second part of the novel functions as a visual metaphor for the limits of memory and the impossibility of full restoration of the past: «Три старі жінки – твоя бабуся і двоє її молодших сестер – схиляються і зазирають у чорний зяючий простір, у порожнечу, що розверзлася під ними»[8] (ibid.: 430). The image of the three elderly women bending over a "black gaping void" symbolizes an encounter with an unrepresentable trauma, a point where memory reaches its boundary. The "emptiness that opened up beneath them" evokes not only a literal darkness, but also the historical void created by loss, repression, and silence.

In the third part of the novel, photographs of the "Executed Renaissance" serve as visual anchors of cultural and collective memory, reintroducing into the narrative the lives and identities of writers whose biographies were violently interrupted and often erased. The descriptions of well-known images, such as the photograph of Sofiia and Mykola Zerov's son Kostyk, or the group portrait of the neoclassicists in Baryshivka, function not merely as illustrations, but as acts of reconstruction and reanimation. Through detailed verbal 're-description' the text restores vitality, agency, and emotional presence to those depicted.

The detailed rendering of the neoclassicists' group photo revives a 'frozen' historical moment, transforming a static archival image into a dynamic scene:

> У мить, коли фотоапарат клацає, якраз дме легкий вітерець, вивертаючи листя внутрішнім боком назовні. Кілька розмитих плям над головою Зерова римуються з правим черевиком Рильського: він, видно, нервово посмикує ногою. У правій руці в нього напіввикурена цигарка, рука нерухомо лежить на лівій, але помітно, що вона готова зметнутись уже наступної миті і піднестися до енергійного рота, схованого у пишних вусах. Обличчя Рильського справляє враження активности: він або щойно закінчив говорити, або збирається кинути репліку. Про це свідчить блиск і нетерпіння в його очах. Погойдується нога, губи пожадливо, з легким сичанням впиваються в сигарету.
> (Ibid.: 604)

8 "Three old women – your grandmother and her two younger sisters – bend down and peer into the black gaping void, into the emptiness that opened up beneath them."

> At the moment the camera clicks, a gentle breeze blows, turning the leaves inside out. Several blurred spots above Zerov's head rhyme with Ryl′s′kyi's right boot: he nervously twitches his leg. In his right hand, he holds a half-smoked cigarette, his hand resting motionless on his left, but it is noticeable that it is ready to dart up in the next moment and rise to the energetic mouth hidden in his lush mustache. Ryl′s′kyi's face gives the impression of activity: he either just finished speaking or is about to throw a remark. This is evidenced by the shine and impatience in his eyes. His foot sways, his lips eagerly, with a slight hiss, cling to the cigarette.

The attention to small gestures – Ryl′s′kyi's impatient eyes, the movement of his foot, the cigarette in his hand – animates the men who would later be silenced/broken by political terror. By breathing motion, intention, and personality into the photograph, the novel counters the erasure caused by Stalinist repression. These photographs operate as sites of resistance to forgetting. They preserve what history attempted to destroy, enabling the narrative to reclaim the suppressed cultural memory of the "Executed Renaissance" and reintegrate it.

The second group of photos is preserved through contemporary media, as Romana shares these photos on her Instagram page. In this way, the third part of the novel, namely its final section "Reality", is archived. Romana creates an alternative reality on social media, describing her life with the Man/Bohdan after she recognized him only by his lips on an image. She constructs her own diary on Instagram as she restores the Man's memory and revitalizes herself, creating a life for display in 42 posts. Romana publishes photos and uploads seven videos under the name "amoromality". The Instagram page "amoromality" does exist, but the page is empty, as noted in the final text of the Instagram in the novel: «amoromality. Сторінки не існує. Будь ласка, поверніться на головну сторінку сайту»[9] (ibid.: 823).

The publications in the novel include photos of Romana and her husband – often repeated – portraying intertwined palms, sweaty or cracked mirrors, and other intimate or symbolic motifs. The posts display the number of views

9 "amoromality. The page does not exist. Please return to the site's main page."

and comments, among which appears the user "jkoxana"[10], who occasionally clarifies or questions the images. Several photos are reproduced literally, that is, re-photographed or re-mediated: "Return of memories. Returning home", "photo: darkness", "photo: lake Amadoka on a copy of Ptolemy's map of Europe in the variation of Nicolaus Laurentius (1480)", "the shadow on the face of the man". These images turn the novel into a palimpsest, as the Instagram layer reactivates and reframes materials already present in earlier parts of the text. The function of photography thus shifts from simple archiving to linking, referencing, and recontextualizing – creating a network of images that collapses temporal boundaries and blurs the line between memory, fiction, and digital self-curation. The last two photos, "the first photo of a black hole in history" and "the grave of Victor Petrov and Sofiia Zerova", are taken at the Luk′ianivs′ke Military Cemetery in Kyiv. After visiting the cemetery, the Man remembers who he is (his real name is not Bohdan, but Viktor and the whole story that Romana had told him might have been fake), and the "amoromality" page disappears.

Photographs as Witnesses: Memory, Trauma and the Ethics of Remembrance

Through photographic images, the novel explores responsibility for memory – not only on the part of the author or protagonist, but also on the part of viewer and reader. In this way, Andrukhovych expands the concept of "testimony": testimony becomes a mutual act of trust between the one who remembers and the one who watches. Recollection functions as a form of restoration: «те, що вицвіло, фарбується наново, втрачене – відновлюється в правах, наболіле – стихає»[11] (ibid.: 103).

There are photo cards in the novel that serve as symbolic visualizations of layered and traumatic memory, revealing how individual recollections interact with collective historical trauma. The "photo card: mnemosyne butterfly" underlines the act of remembering itself: by invoking Mnemosyne – the god-

10 Jkoxana consists of 'j' – probably shortening from transliterated 'ja' (I) and 'koxana' – from Ukrainian 'кохана' ('I am beloved').

11 "what has faded is painted anew, what has been lost is restored to its rights, what is sore – subsides."

dess of memory – it links an ordinary natural image to the persistence of traumatic recollection. The juxtaposition of the butterfly with Vasyl′ Frasuliak's involuntary return to scenes of violence underscores how memory remains active, intrusive, and inescapable: «Василь безуспішно переносив себе думками в цю мить […]. Серед борід і чорних капелюхів він побачив вузьке обличчя Авеля Бірнбаума»[12] (ibid.: 272).

The following "photo card: bony dark man, whose face is half hidden in dense shadow" visualizes the moral duality and historical ambiguity of individuals implicated in collective violence. The Janus-like portrayal of Vasyl′ Frasuliak exposes the coexistence of guilt and compassion: his passive involvement in the destruction of the city's Jews contrasts with his efforts to save Abel" s children. Through this fragmented, shadowed image, the novel shows how memory preserves not only heroic or victimized identities, but also morally complex ones.

These photographs operate as ethical frames that make the reader confront uncomfortable pasts. They make visible the ambivalence of human actions during historical cataclysms and demonstrate how cultural memory records trauma not as a stable narrative but as a set of conflicting, often painful images.

Some characters experience forgetting caused by physical injury, as in the case of the Man wounded during the war. Others develop emotional self-protection, where consciousness attempts to shield itself by erasing or softening unbearable experiences: «Хіба не повинна була його свідомість подбати про себе одразу, постиравши найжахливіші тортури, найнестерпніші приниження, підмінивши їх на видозмінені спогади – більш округлі, бодай трохи заспокійливі?»[13] (ibid.: 379).

The third form is deliberate, voluntary forgetting, chosen as an ethical or psychological strategy: «Цими спогадами нікому не допоможеш, зробиш тільки гірше. Цього не було»[14] (ibid.: 337). The novel also depicts secondary or fabricated memories, created to make traumatic events bearable:

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12 "Vasyl′ unsuccessfully transported himself in his thoughts at that moment […]. Among beards and black hats, he saw the narrow face of Abel Birnbaum."

13 "Shouldn't his consciousness have taken care of itself immediately, erasing the most terrible tortures, the most unbearable humiliations, replacing them with modified memories – more rounded, at least a little soothing?"

14 "You will not help anyone with these memories, you will only make it worse. Nothing happened."

«Насправді ж ти розумієш, що твоя прабаба підмінила власний спогад, підтасувала свідоцтво. Перетворила смерть п'ятьох людей на казку, бо так виявилося легше її витримати»[15] (ibid.: 310).

Finally, Andrukhovych engages with Freud's concept of "screen memory" (Freud 1899), in which attention shifts from the traumatic core to vivid but irrelevant details. The characters' recollections reveal how much they have forgotten, overlooked, or unconsciously replaced with other stories – memories so deeply internalized that they recount them with confidence, arguing over the «[…] деталі, запахи, найдрібніші обставини»[16] (Andrukhovych 2020: 274).

In these layered forms of remembering and forgetting, the novel shows how memory becomes both a fragile psychological mechanism and a shared ethical responsibility.

Conclusion

In *Amadoka*, Sofiia Andrukhovych demonstrates that memory is neither stable nor singular, but instead emerges as a dynamic and multi-layered process. The descriptions of photographs in the novel mediate between past and present, between individual recollection and collective trauma, creating a mosaic of interconnected stories that resist erasure. The first group of analogue photographs stored in suitcases functions as an archive of personal and family history, embodying cultural memory anchored in material traces. These images reveal how memory survives despite displacement, repression, and the physical decay of carriers. The second group, mediated through Instagram, transforms memory into a curated digital presence, exposing how contemporary media reshapes remembrance. This digital layer does not simply reproduce earlier photographs but it reframes and recontextualizes them, showing how modern memory operates through circulation, repetition, and self-curation. The vanishing of the "amoromality" page further underscores the instability of digital archives and the fragility of constructed identities.

15 "In fact, you understand that your great-grandmother changed her own memory, falsified the evidence. She turned the death of five people into a fairy tale, because it was easier to bear it that way."

16 "[…] listed details, smells, the smallest circumstances".

Across both media, photographs act as ethical sites of witnessing. They expose the limits of representation, especially when faced with the horrors of the Holocaust, Stalinist repressions and the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. The novel foregrounds the tension between what can be shown and what exceeds the visual frame – overexposed, darkened or purely auditory "photo cards" mark the boundaries of perception and the inexpressibility of trauma. The narrative also demonstrates that memory is shaped not only by what is remembered but also by what is forgotten, suppressed or intentionally altered. Amnesia, psychological defence mechanisms, "screen memories" and transgenerational silences reveal remembrance as a fragile and ethically charged process.

Photography is positioned as a space where the past becomes visible yet remains open to reinterpretation. It shows that memory is never complete but continually rewritten through new media, new traumas and new attempts at understanding. By giving voice to suppressed histories and reanimating both personal and collective pasts, Andrukhovych's novel offers a model of how literature can participate in the ongoing process of reconstructing Ukrainian cultural memory. In this sense, photographs in *Amadoka* serve as active agents of remembering – linking generations, restoring silenced narratives and resisting the forces that seek to erase them.

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