

Invented Images: Photography, Experience, and History in Sofi Oksanen's Novels

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Abstract

The supposed referential power and testimonial value of photographs often becomes suspect in (post)modernist fiction or historiographic metafiction. On the one hand, invented or fabricated photographs are often used for propagandistic purposes when the “official” history is being written and documented. On the other hand, personal and family photos may only be mental images and part of traumatic memories in narrative fiction, but they still tell individual experiential stories beyond those official histories. In her novels *Purge* (2008) and *When the Doves Disappeared* (2012), Finnish-Estonian author Sofi Oksanen represents the history of twentieth-century Estonia as constructed in textual documents and in visual materials such as photographic images. In addition to discussing the use of photographs in her narrative fiction, this essay focuses on the production of the meaning of photographs in Estonia's specific historical, social, and cultural contexts.

Résumé

Le pouvoir référentiel supposé des photographies et leur valeur de témoignage sont souvent remis en question dans la fiction (post)moderne ou la métafiction historiographique. D'une part, les photographies inventées ou forgées sont souvent utilisées à des fins de propagande lorsque l'histoire « officielle » est écrite et documentée. D'autre part, les photos de famille personnelles peuvent être de simples images mentales et faire partie de souvenirs traumatiques dans la fiction narrative, mais elles n'en racontent pas moins des histoires individuelles vécues au-delà de ces histoires officielles. Dans ses romans *Purge* (2008) et *When the Doves Disappeared* (2012), l'auteure finno-estonienne Sofi Oksanen met en scène l'histoire d'une Estonie du vingtième siècle telle qu'elle est construite dans les documents textuels et dans les matériaux visuels tels que les images photographiques. En plus d'interroger l'utilisation des photographies dans sa fiction narrative, cet essai se concentre sur la production de la signification des photographies dans les contextes spécifiques à l'Estonie d'un point de vue historique, social et culturel.

Keywords

history, fiction, narrative, experientiality, Estonia, Sofi Oksanen

Family photo albums depicted in narrative fiction may not have any factual basis, but they tell individual experiential stories that exist beyond official histories. At the same time, invented or fabricated photographs are often used for propagandistic purposes in the writing and documenting of these official histories. These two uses of photographs that highlight the (un)truthfulness of photographic images are often painfully dramatized in the work of Finnish-Estonian author Sofi Oksanen (b. 1977).

Oksanen's novels *Purge* (*Puhdistus*, 2008) and *When the Doves Disappeared* (*Kun kyyhkysed katosivat*, 2012), which are discussed in this contribution, contain actual photographs only in their paratexts. By contrast, narrated photographs play a crucial narrative role within their fictional worlds. In both novels, Oksanen shows how the history of twentieth-century Estonia is constructed in textual documents as well as in visual materials such as photographic images, film, and advertisements. In *Purge*, the traumatic history of the main character's family is partly told through photographs, some of which may exist only as mental images constructed in (post)memory. Strong suggestions of photography's untruthfulness are present in *When the Doves Disappeared* as well, in which an Estonian writer working for the Soviets takes part in fabricating historical texts, photographs, and other documents in order to reinvent his personal history and frame the state's enemies. Especially in the latter novel, fake documents are powerful enough to create a new, alternative reality and destroy people's lives. In this sense, invented images become new truthful documents.

Oksanen's novels can be described as postmodernist historiographic metafiction, in which the referential power and testimonial value of photographs becomes suspect. As Linda Hutcheon specifies, the use of or the reference to photographs in postmodern fiction works to "make us, as readers, aware of our expectations of both narrative and pictorial interpretation, including our naïve but common trust in the representational veracity of photography" (10). In what follows, I will discuss the complex relationships between interpretation, imagination, and photographic truths and untruths in Oksanen's fiction, which makes us to pay attention to the tension between the culturally fabricated nature of the photograph and its fundamental indexicality, its status as "a trace of the real" (Hughes and Noble 4). In a rhetorical and dialogical sense, it is important "to navigate a grey zone in an antipodal debate between those who have insisted that photography is an absolute construction and those who long maintained its ontological referentiality" (Kriebel and Zervigón 2-3).

In this contribution, I participate in navigating that grey zone between constructivist and referential conceptions of photography by exploring the ambivalent status of photographs in Oksanen's fiction. I will elaborate on the storytelling potential of photographs in these two novels that stems from the photograph's alleged referentiality and complex truth value. Through my analysis of photographic discourses in Oksanen's novels, I aim to capture the duality of the status of photographs in terms of authenticity and a multiplicity of meaning. In what follows, I will also discuss Oksanen's novels in relation to well-known modernist and postmodernist novels by Marguerite Duras, Milan Kundera, and George Orwell, who have likewise used photographs as ekphrastic images in their narratives to accentuate the value of photographs as invented images, hypothetical constructions, and fabricated documents.

Narrated Photographs and Hypothetical Images

Conventionally, photographs have been incorporated into literary narrative in an illustrative role that renders their own complex textuality, as well as their potentiality for storytelling, quite invisible (see Hughes and Noble 6). As Emma Kafalenos argues from a narratological viewpoint, more than other visual representations of a single scene, photographs lend themselves to being interpreted as an event in a number of different stories

(429). It follows that readers can read stories, places, events, and human experiences *into* photographs, and think about and even invent the past, present, and future of the people photographed.

When we think of photographs from the vantage point of narrative theory, we can recognize their potential storytelling dimensions, as photos may hold a number of stories. Such a methodology brings us to reflect on how the uniqueness of photographic textuality resides in the very referential nature of the photographic entity. In other words, it allows for the need to acknowledge that the photographic image's material link to reality distinguishes it from other forms of visual representation. Indeed, "it is the photograph's mechanical production" and its "indexical quality that makes it the most realist of images and links it to the real world" (Horstkotte and Pedri 12). This specific quality of the photograph as an indexical and iconic image gives it its authoritative status as documentary evidence.

It has been argued that in realist and modernist literature, photography served as a model for various narrative techniques, including framing, zooming, and detailing objects (e.g., Armstrong; Entin). Sofi Oksanen's fiction dramatizes how photography--a technological and socio-political phenomenon--has influenced our ways of perceiving reality, arguably not only providing us with new ways of seeing but also limiting (through framing) our sense of the world. John Tagg, in his book *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (2009), turns his attention from the ontology of the photograph to the historical, social, and cultural contexts in which the *meaning* of photographs has been and continues to be constructed. According to Tagg, the status of the photograph as record is not technologically guaranteed; rather, it needs to be discursively produced (14). Consequently, photographs are often considered to have evidential power, but readings of them can vary dramatically depending on the historical, social, and cultural situation as well as one's subjective viewpoint and intention.

Referring to an opening scene in Marguerite Duras's *L'Amant* (1984), with its ambiguous image of a photograph that was probably never taken but which the narrator nevertheless recalls in her memory, Marianne Hirsch asks "[w]hat function does this hypothetical, imagined photograph play in the progression of the novel, in its construction of character, the setting of its scene, its focalization, and its plot?" ("Visual Culture" 211). As Hirsch notes, *ekphrasis* typically evokes existing images, including concrete, recognizable visual texts, and thus grounds the telling in extratextual reality. In Duras's autofiction, although invented, the photograph, hypothetically depicting the fifteen-and-a-half-year-old narrator-protagonist on a boat crossing the Mekong River, nonetheless participates in the narrative construction of identity, memory, and trauma. In Hirsch's reading, it "enables the narrator to present several temporalities and perspectives at once," and constructs her as "both actor and spectator of the scene, as both subject and object of the look" (212). Thus the photograph--even an imagined and hypothetical one--is given a powerful significance as evidence, testimony, and memory. In her employment of purely fictional and hypothetical "prose pictures," Duras "points to the indexicality and hyperreferentiality of photography" and "demonstrates the predominance of the visual in the process of memory and life writing in the second half of the twentieth century" (Hirsch, "Visual Culture" 213). Because even invented photographs have a referential force, their use in narrative fiction prompts readers to examine precisely the supposed reality reference and truthfulness of photographs that were--or were not--taken in some particular historical and cultural instance.

As the example of Duras suggests, narrated photographs or instances of photographic ekphrasis often impact the narrative's spatial and temporal parameters by disturbing the narrative flow. In distinguishing narrated photographs from hypothetical images, I draw on John Hollander's helpful distinction between 'actual' ekphrasis, in which existing images such as paintings or photographs are described, and 'notional' ekphrasis, in which the object is a purely fictional image brought into being by the poetic language itself (4).

Photographs are *hypothetical* when their “ontological status is uncertain or counterfactual”; they are fictive--if not fictional in the literary sense--because they are invented, fabricated, and constructed (Karttunen 12; see also Fludernik 39). A central aspect related to hypothetical images is so-called denarration, in which the narrative erases or negates that which it states or visualizes. The process of denarration produces indetermination on an ontological level, “where fact and allegory, history and fiction, and the literal and the metaphorical regularly slide into one another” (Richardson 171).

In what follows, I discuss various kinds of fabricated, imagined, or hypothetical photographs that are referred to in narrative fiction to propose that they have their specific forms and functions in given works. More specifically, I will analyze hidden or forgotten family photos in Sofi Oksanen’s *Purge* and traumatic memories they evoke, and the invented and manufactured photographs that help to produce distorted official histories in her novel *When the Doves Disappeared*. In Oksanen’s fiction dealing with the history of Soviet Estonia, both personal memories and collective experiences are erased, as if the process of denarration was expanded to concern a whole nation. Despite the destruction of both family photos and historical documents, there still remains a hope that ordinary people in their everyday lives may be able to use existing or imagined photographs to work through traumas and rewrite their personal histories, and this is where the cultural relevance of fictionality--as in the form of historiographic metafiction--comes into play.

Family Photographs and Traumatic Experiences

As Jens Brockmeier formulates it, modern thinking about memory has tended to “conceive of our memories as a series of family pictures; as if they were snapshots from the past stored in the photo album (or, to be more up to date, the digital photography archive) of our minds” (8). In *Purge*, one specific family photograph works as a motif connecting characters, time, and space. The central drama focuses on the meeting between Aliide, an elderly woman living in the Estonian countryside in the early 1990s, and her sister Ingel’s granddaughter, Zara. In the traumatic past of the late 1940s, Aliide was an informer, who gave false evidence to the Soviets about Ingel in order to save her own life. This resulted in the deportation of Ingel and her daughter Linda (Zara’s mother) to Siberia for several years; presently they live in Vladivostok far away from their now independent homeland Estonia. In the present time of the narrative, Ingel has given a photograph to Zara and told her to find her way to Aliide. An old photograph picturing Aliide and Ingel that Zara carries with her is a painful trace of the past that remains otherwise hidden or is destroyed; its full meaning is not available to Zara, and Aliide does not want to recognize the picture at first.

Aliide, however, feels that she cannot “brush away” Zara’s physical presence in her kitchen, not as easily as she has removed some photographs from her home in an attempt to delete them from memory: “[The fear] seeped in between the wallpaper and old wallpaper paste, into the gaps left behind by the photographs that she had hidden there and later destroyed” (79). Photographs and the traces of the past they relate are not so easily effaced: “Aliide couldn’t understand how the photo of her and Ingel had appeared in Zara’s hand. [...] She had destroyed all her photos” (227). Indeed, the existence of this one photograph activates Aliide’s memory: “[I]n the photograph Ingel was eternally beautiful. Aliide remembered the day they had gone to have it taken, at the B. Veidenbaum Modern Photography” (228). Knowing the context in which the photograph was taken, Aliide sees in it a reminder of her act of betrayal.

Zara’s perspective differs, corresponding to the reader’s ignorance of the true nature of the past events due to the withholding of information in the narrative:

In the photograph, two young girls are standing side by side and staring at the camera but not daring

to smile. [...] And as Zara looked at the photo now she saw something that she hadn't understood before. There was something very innocent in the girls' faces [...]. The expression of someone unacquainted with reality. The expression of a time when the future still existed and anything was possible. (102-103)

To Zara, the picture conveys a universal message of the lost innocence even as it opens a window to a past full of promises and possibilities. Although Aliide doesn't want to reveal to Zara that she recognizes the girls in the photograph and she tries to destroy it (and the memories it evokes), the photograph and the time of its taking still live clearly in her mind.

Despite her attempt to destroy the family photographs with Ingel and herself in them, Aliide is ultimately unsuccessful at eliminating the strong mental images of the past. Ingel and Linda's harsh experiences in prison camps are now evoked in Aliide's mind as traumatic images that take on an almost concrete visual form:

A frost spread from [the cement kitchen floor] into the soles of her feet, into her bones. It must have felt the same way in the camps at Archangel. Forty below zero, heavy fog over the water, dampness that seeped into your core, frozen eyelashes and lips, holding ponds full of logs like dead bodies, working in the ponds in water up to your waist, endless fog, endless cold, endlessness. (313)

These are cold and clear images that are embedded Aliide's memory (cf. Hartman 357). Whether the memories are preserved in photographs or merely influenced by the photographs of Soviet prison camps, they activate the workings of "postmemory," according to which later generations experience the traumatic events of the earlier generation (Hirsch, *Generation of Postmemory* 18-25).

As it has been suggested, trauma fictions simulate and imitate the symptoms of trauma through indirect images, recurring motifs, specific locations, and fragmentary narration as well as through intertextual allusions (see Whitehead 83-84). This sudden traumatic memory springs to Aliide's mind because of the presence of another photograph in the narrative, one that finally reveals to her that the girl in her house is actually Ingel's granddaughter, Zara. It is a photograph of Zara as a prostitute, allegedly taken in Tallinn, and presented by the evil pimp Pasha to Aliide as undisputed evidence about Zara's corrupted nature. This photograph is mostly hypothetically "seen," as if imagined in detail by Zara. Its physical existence thus remains doubtful:

Pasha wasn't showing her [Aliide] those photos, was he? But what other photos would he have of [Zara]? [...] And then Aliide would tell [Pasha] about her--of course she would tell him, she would have to tell him, because once she saw the photos she would hate Zara. [...] The photographs were printed on Western photo paper; they had a Western sheen. Zara's bright red lips shone dim against the oilcloth. Her stiff eyelashes spread like petals against the pale blue pearlescence smeared on the skin around her eyes. (304-305)

In Zara's mind, the reference to reality of a photograph that *might* exist is stronger than any authentic story she could tell Aliide about her shameful past as a sex slave. The truthfulness of the photographs that *frame* her negatively is always more powerful than any oral or written account of her complex and difficult situation.

Still, there is some hope at the end of *Purge*. The title of the novel also has other dimensions besides Stalinist cleansing or purification: when Aliide meets Zara, she must once again come to terms with her past (see also Lehtimäki). It becomes a story of her personal purgatory and about her progression towards being a moral

and responsible character, as she finally decides to help Zara to find a better life for herself. Doing this, she accomplishes the task given to her by Ingel: “Clean your face” (182). As a cathartic reading experience, the novel simulates the process of traumatic experience, showing a possibility for healing.

Erasing Photographs, Rewriting Histories

Whereas *Purge* mainly deals with family photographs and the experiences attached to them, Oksanen’s next novel *When the Doves Disappeared* expands the questions surrounding photography to considerations of collective visual memories and their distortions. As Lubomír Doležel argues, when speaking of a “distorted history,” “[t]otalitarian historiography is historical relativism turned into the praxis of history writing” (796). According to Doležel, “totalitarian historiography applied itself studiously to permanent rewriting of history” and one of its “frequently used devices is to create gaps by erasing every historical agent who became *persona non grata*” (797). Referring to a Soviet photograph from the 1930s with Stalin and his henchman Yezhov and to the retouched version of the same photograph with Yezhov, fallen in disgrace, now deleted from the photo, Doležel writes that “history can be gapped, but it necessarily leaves traces” (797). He continues by saying that totalitarian power creates gaps in the actual, historical world by erasing facts of that actual past; in an Orwellian gesture, “[t]otalitarian historiography is not so much a rewriting of history as an attempt to remake the actual past” (799).

To take a classic example in order to highlight the processes of totalitarian historiography and their production of photographic documents in *When the Doves Disappeared*, in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) the use of false photographs as evidence and actual photographs as falsity is especially striking. As stated in the narrative, “All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and re-inscribed exactly as often as was necessary” (42). Orwell’s main character, Winston Smith, tries to recollect and remember fragments from the real past, such as an authentic photograph in a totalitarian situation in which history is constantly being rewritten and mechanically reproduced. In this, he resembles Roland Simpson, the writer of wartime diaries in Oksanen’s novel—a doomed character who tries to preserve valuable fragments from the past. In the Records Department imagined in Orwell’s novel, “[t]here were the huge printing shops with their sub-editors, their typography experts and their elaborately-equipped studios for the faking of photographs” (45). It is not only that disgraced people are erased from photographs as well as from history; new, fabricated heroes also come into existence through invented images in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and a similar practice is going on in Oksanen’s fictional account of Soviet Estonia in the 1960s. Orwell’s classic dystopia therefore provides certain story models for Oksanen’s fiction. It is a question of faking and fabricating texts, documents, and photographs, and thus controlling the past on *When the Doves Disappeared*’s story level. On its discourse level, however, the novelist—or the novelist’s fictional representative—might employ the powers of literary imagination as an antidote to the totalitarian systems and their anti-human “double talk.”

The narrative of Oksanen’s novel is divided between first-person narration of Roland and third-person narration about his opportunistic cousin Edgar, who fabricates Roland’s war-time memoirs for his own personal reasons as well as the state’s propagandistic purposes. Here is Roland at the beginning of his narrative:

I had my own plans: where I used to carry Rosalie’s photo I now keep loose-leaf notebook paper [...]. I wanted to collect evidence of the destruction wreaked by the Bolsheviks. When peace came, I would turn the documents over to someone who was good with words, someone who could write the history of our fight for freedom. [...] I planned to get a camera, but I wouldn’t be taking any group photos.

Spies' eyes glittered everywhere, greedy for the gold of dead Estonian's dust. (15)

The novel's main character, Edgar Parts, is supposedly modeled after a real historical person Edgar Siegfried Meos, who famously fabricated his personal history as an airplane pilot and retouched photos of himself. Edgar Parts' fluid identity is a collage of invented stories, fabricated photographs and passports, and imitations of the gestures of others. His subsequent discovery of his cousin Roland's wartime diary helps him to frame Roland as an enemy of the state and transfer his own war crimes as a Nazi sympathizer to evil deeds that Roland, nicknamed "Mark," did at the end of war. While Roland tries to preserve texts and photographs that document his personal history and which contain his eye-witness accounts of the war, Edgar wants both to destroy all traces of his past and to fabricate a new history with the help of narratives, images, and other documents.

It may also be illuminating to read Oksanen's fiction in relation to Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979), which resembles historiographic metafiction in its attempt to give voice to those who have been forgotten or marginalized in official histories. In a style similar to that used by Oksanen, in Kundera's novel official history is intermingled with individual experiences in complex ways. Mirek, the main character of the first part of the novel, tries to destroy photographs that remind him of his individual life. Still, a larger vision of history is focalized through Mirek as well: "The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past. They are fighting for access to the laboratories where photographs are retouched and biographies and histories are rewritten" (31). What *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* proposes is that "'memory' cannot be easily opposed to 'forgetting' since the former also involves selection, erasure, and elision for ideological purposes" (Berlatsky 3). In Eric Berlatsky's reading, Kundera's novel "initially depends on the ethical necessity of referencing historical 'reality,' but then 'withdraws' any comfort we may have in doing so, reminding us both of the manipulability of supposedly referential technology (the photograph) and of the inevitably ideological nature of all histories" (3).

Kundera's novel begins with a description of a speech that Premier Klement Gottwald gave in February 1948 at the brink of the new communist government. This important piece of Czech history was preserved in a much circulated photograph of Gottwald standing on a balcony next to the foreign minister Vladimír Clementis, who, in a gesture of solidarity, placed his wintery fur hat on Gottwald's head. Clementis was subsequently charged with treason and hanged in 1952. After that event, history was rewritten and the famous photograph was retouched in order to eliminate any memory of Clementis' presence beside Gottwald. The narrative refers to a real photograph that also exists beyond Kundera's fiction, thus, for its part, challenging the distinction between history and fiction. As Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri suggest, "[i]n a paradoxical movement, photographs, when taken out of their original contexts and included in a fictional narrative, become fictional themselves" (8). Furthermore, Kundera gives an interpretation of the photograph that serves his own narrative and ideological purposes. It may be interesting to note that the photograph picturing Clementis and Gottwald was later reproduced in its original form in a Czech journal. In the photograph, both Clementis and Gottwald are wearing their own hats. Clementis was actually erased from the photo, but his hat was also erased, finally leaving no trace of the former minister (see Píchová 102; Berlatsky 16). Therefore Kundera's--and Doležel's--almost hopeful idea that "gapped" history always leaves "traces" becomes complicated.

When the Doves Disappeared also puts into motion attempts to eliminate both official and personal histories, especially by disposing of photographs that carry evidential power and (in a pessimistic note) across whose disposal the erasure of the past can be complete. During the Nazi occupation of Estonia from 1941 to 1944, Edgar Parts works for the Germans under the pseudonym Eggert Fürst, and during the period of Soviet Estonia, especially in the years that the narrative focuses on (1963-1966), Edgar, again opportunistically, works for the

KGB as a paid fabricator of documents. In the latter role, he can never be sure when he will become an object of rewriting and erasure himself:

He wasn't supposed to know the whole picture--just his own small part--he wasn't supposed to go out of bounds. Maybe they were writing a report on him right now, pasting new pictures onto cardboard, recording his personal information, his file bulging; maybe they were considering the best tools to use based on the descriptions in that file, Postal Control already activated, and home surveillance. (266)

Here, Oksanen's fiction echoes Orwell's surveillance systems as well as Kundera's notion of distorted history; Edgar Parts is becoming a victim of his own tricks in the age of photography and its power of creating invented truths and rewriting the past. Informed by Michel Foucault's philosophy of history, John Tagg argues that panopticism and disciplinarity are always also effects of special material apparatuses and techniques, presenting photographic documents as a telling example (18).

In the totalitarian regime of Soviet Estonia in the 1960s, Edgar finally finds his way to success (and his own salvation) by framing his cousin Roland and inventing a horrendous war criminal "Mark," based on Roland's character. Edgar's propagandistic fiction of the Nazi occupation and the Soviet liberation of Estonia, published as a factual documentary book entitled *At the Heart of the Hitlerist Occupation* (1966), becomes officially approved by the State and widely circulated. With fabricated documents and manipulated photographs, Edgar succeeds in projecting the present Soviet ideology onto the past, making Estonian freedom fighters such as Roland villainous associates of the Nazi Germany and, consequently--if these "bandits" are still alive--dangerous enemies of the Soviet Union, which, as the Soviet history books tell it, liberated Estonia from "nationalist Fascist murderers" (227).

With cruel historical irony, Roland's attempt to record the Bolshevik terror of the Estonian people is transformed into Edgar's counterfactual revision. At the end of the novel, Edgar is completing his own book, based on Roland's notes, even adding a heroic photograph of "himself" in the text--a photograph of an Estonian prisoner shot in the back, but left alive. Edgar thus creates a gap in the real past in which he shot the prisoners:

Comrade Parts laid his wrists on his knees. The last chapters were starting to come together. Work was like child's play now that he had his days to himself. The photographs for the book had already been chosen. He'd picked one of them to be a portrait of the author in the days of fascism. To their credit, the Red Army had photographed the Klooga camp as soon as they arrived, and among the photos of prisoners shot in the back Parts had found one to call his own. Luckily for him, emaciated people on the verge of death and those already dead bear a strong resemblance to each other. (287)

This self-reflexive narrative instance, in which Edgar's book finds its completion on the story level just as Oksanen's novel reaches its conclusion on the textual level, also creates a critical juxtaposition between these two works. In a gesture quite similar to Orwell and Kundera, the oppressive totalitarian systems and their technical languages are contrasted with literary imagination and the idea of the novel as a democratic arena of multiple voices and free speech. It is not always so that a photograph is worth more than a thousand words.

Conclusion: Reconstructing the Visual Memory of Estonia

In her essay "Dekolonisaation ajasta" ("On the Age of Decolonialization," 2009), Sofi Oksanen writes about the photographic exhibition in the Art Museum of Estonia, held in 1998 on the first floor of Rotermann Salt

Storage, which focused on the forgotten photographs in the history of twentieth-century Estonia. Oksanen argues that in addition to presenting the history of Estonian photography, the exhibition took part in the reconstruction of “the visual memory of Estonia” (“Dekolonisaation ajasta” 533-534). According to her, the long and painful history of the Soviet occupation resulted, among other things, in “gaps and emptied pages in Estonian family photo albums” (534). She continues by reminiscing that images of twentieth-century Estonia had been “formed in [her] mind through oral narratives” or by those “few images that had remained in a randomly emptied family photo album, such as a couple of pictures about weddings” (534). As in her novel *Purge*, these personal photos of small everyday things and happenings convey their own message of truth not only because of the indexical nature of photography but because of their meaningfulness in people’s lives. In her own project, it is precisely the novel, and especially subgenres such as historiographic metafiction and trauma fiction, which contribute to this cultural work of reconstructing the visual memory of Estonia.

In a later essay, “Outoa puhetta” (“Strange Talk,” 2014), which is about defamiliarization in Soviet rhetoric, Oksanen writes about her fictional attempt to “construct the visual history of Estonia from fragments,” because, as she argues, a totalitarian state such as the Soviet Union is “able also to eliminate the visual memory of another nation” (79-80). She believes that a nation’s memory consists of pictorial narratives, symbolic resources, and storied lives, and that the age of Soviet Estonia produced a specific mental state, “a pictorial amnesia” (80). In this historical situation, only some misplaced or forgotten photographs from family albums could tell stories about the everyday human experience in a social reality otherwise filled with the falsity and untruthfulness of propagandist films and newsreels. As I have suggested above, Oksanen’s novel *When the Doves Disappeared* constructs a powerful and disturbing interpretation of the reality of Soviet Estonia in which invented or fabricated photographs were used for propagandistic purposes in order to rewrite the past and make way to the utopian future.

While Sofi Oksanen’s essays and novels may sometimes read as black-and-white representations of the complex history of Soviet Estonia (1940-1991), they also speak loudly about the unspeakable traumas of that history. In this sense, they participate in an important memory work. Here, the cultural relevance of the novel is emphasized; much like other authors discussed above, Oksanen utilizes the resources and possibilities of literary fiction in order to give voice to human experiences and everyday lives in the midst of official histories and oppressive powers. As I have suggested in this contribution, Oksanen’s novels *Purge* and *When the Doves Disappeared* painfully dramatize how photographs can be a means of working through personal traumas and how those photos are fabricated, but still serve as evidence in specific historical and political situations.

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