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## **The Image of Lesia Ukrainka in the Modern Urban Cultural Space of Ukraine: On the Issue of Various Forms of Keeping the National Memory on the Way to European Integration**

### **1. Introduction**

The strategy of Ukrainians' national self-identification and the processes of European integration in the twenty-first century stimulate the growing interest in the figure of Lesia Ukrainka (Larysa Kosach-Kvitka) – a Ukrainian poetess, playwright, author, translator, and social activist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – whose works had a considerable effect on the integration of the European literary experience into Ukrainian culture. Her literary works are studied using the latest

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theoretical and methodological tools – their impact is investigated for the peculiarities of plot and image transformations made by modern authors, and they are examined as regards their adoption in popular art as well as in terms of the system of European values. Although the latter aspects are topical today, they are covered insufficiently since they require a thorough understanding of various and complicated processes of “modernization” of classic works which take place in numerous fields of urban culture.

The objective of this article is to determine the key trends in the visual “modernization” of Lesia Ukrainka in twenty-first-century urban culture against the ideological and political background of Ukraine as a state undergoing European integration (taking into consideration the transformations in the axiological orientation system of the modern Ukrainian person). This approach allows emphasizing the significance of her figure for reflecting (and, consequently, understanding) the Ukrainians’ moods, and indicates the prospects of applying attendant “techniques” for popularizing ideological/political concepts, values, and points of focus in terms of the worldview. Moreover, in our opinion, the material of these studies can be used to research the specificity of “modernizing” the well-known images of other cultural figures in the urban culture of other European countries (in terms of comparative studies, on the basis of the axiological approach, etc.).

The theoretical basis and methodology of the article are determined by its subject matter and objective. Therefore, we use the techniques of social and cultural analysis (since the research is carried out at the crossroads of cultural studies, sociology, and political science), comparative method (to differentiate the means of “modernizing” the figure of Lesia Ukrainka), contextual analysis (for the purpose of systematic re-consideration of the essence of the corresponding phenomenon and the factors behind it), and axiological analysis (to present the processes of change of the value system in modern Ukrainian society, and to investigate how these processes are reflected in the change in the canons of perceiving the image of the classic writer). The latter applies the theoretical achievements of post-structuralism which allow characterizing the nature of deconstruction of traditional axiological principles, and which allow investigating peculiarities of experimental “modernization” (play and simulacrazation in mass culture). The interaction of postmodern culture and historical past is understood with consideration of the theoretical achievements by Jean Baudrillard (*Simulacra and Simulation*), Jacques Derrida (*Deconstruction and Philosophy*), Linda Hutcheon (*A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*), Fredric Jameson (*Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*), and others.

## 2. The significance of Lesia Ukrainka's image in modern Ukrainian society

Studies devoted to revisiting and “exploiting” the heritage of the Ukrainian writers of the past (in different spheres: from literature and language to advertising and computer games) are consistently pursued following the ideas of European postmodernism and reveal some of its typical features: ironic play, kitsch, parody, focus on the breaking of canons and stereotypical perceptions, etc. Today, at the time of worldview transformations, the general public and popular art create new forms of perception of canonical figures, which reflects the changes in axiological and ideological paradigms.

Describing the nature of these processes, A. Sazhyna claims that “modern popular culture is a peculiar and active literary space, whose principal parameters need to be explained. One of the key features of modern popular literary culture is that it exploits the images formed on the basis of classic heritage” (Сажина, 2014, p. 24).<sup>1</sup>

V. Aheieva seems to be the first to pay attention to that:

The Soviet politicized literary studies cared mainly about squeezing the classic writers into certain ideological formulas which should be well-understood by the general public. Shevchenko's *Kobzar* was about the people and for the people; Lesia Ukrainka, “the daughter of Prometheus”, was “a friend of workers”, who glorified the heralding lights of the revolution. (Агеєва, 2001, p. 9)

Despite the topicality of studying the forms of such popularization, most research works are devoted to clarifying the specificity of “modernizing” the Ukrainian writers' *literary works* rather than their cultural figures or purely *verbal* means of representing the corresponding images by art.

Considering issues in focus of this study, we can find some guidelines in works whose authors also pay attention to *visual* means of “modernizing” the figures of famous writers. For example, the greatest “demand” is for the figure of Taras Shevchenko – his image in painting and graphic arts of the twentieth century (Чуйко, 2016), his modern “interpretational portrait” in mass-media format (Сажина, 2014), his image in the context of the Maidan (Гранчак, 2014).

The “modernized” portraits of Lesia Ukrainka can also be frequently found in so-called “urban painting/murals”, political placards, advertising posters, and others. Lesia Ukrainka and other Ukrainian classic writers are perceived as cultural symbols that continue to influence the development of national consciousness, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, are interpreted from the perspective of the new reality, along with all its challenges and new values created due to European integration.

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<sup>1</sup> This and all subsequent quotations from Russian and Ukrainian resources have been translated into English by the authors of this article.

T. Hranchak aptly states as follows:

Every nation, like every person, experiences in its development certain moments which determine its fate and goes through so-called points of no return, leading to a variety of scenarios which are entirely different than the previous ones. [...] In this context, it is natural to refer to those commemorative images that have become an essential part of the national memory and are perceived similarly by different national social and cultural groups. These are “the constants” that consolidate the nation, and the people’s attitude to them indicates the differences between “us” and “them”. (Гранчак, 2014, p. 234)

Modern methods of creating objects of urban art presuppose an interaction between components whereby a well-known image is overlapped by seemingly incompatible elements of the modern world, which opens prospects both for original interpretations of the canon and for reconsiderations of certain modern phenomena. Such experiments stimulate associative thinking and make one reflect on “cultural dialogues”.

The emergence of numerous “modernized” images of Lesia Ukrainka in twenty-first-century urban art proves the willingness of their creators to maintain contact with the past of their nation by offering unusual perspectives of their creative perception, and to accentuate the concordance with the challenges of today: to involve this concordance in the life continuum of the Ukrainian community, to correlate it with today’s social and political problems, and to reconsider the national canon in the system of European axiological and cultural perspectives.

In general, it is possible to distinguish several main techniques of transforming or “modernizing” the image of Lesia Ukrainka in urban culture. They involve the use of computer technologies or traditional means of depiction (paintings/drawings of different styles, scale, and forms).

### **3. Adding symbolic attributes as a means of “modernizing” the figure of Lesia Ukrainka in urban culture**

First of all, it is the stylistic depiction of Lesia Ukrainka that creates particular ideological meanings in the context of current social and political phenomena and events. Conceptually significant are certain attributes as well as famous quotations from her works.

One of the most impressive examples is her graffiti portrait on the wall of a building in Hrushevs’kyi Street in Kyiv. It has become a symbol of the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity of 2014, which is known to have defined the beginning of Ukraine’s active European integration (Тищук, 2014). Painted in black, the canonical portrait additionally features a respirator – an unmistakable attribute of the revolutionary reality – and a famous quotation from one of her works: “One who breaks free will be free” (*Khto vyzvolyt’sia sam, toi bude vil’nyj*). The call to fight for freedom

reflects the Ukrainian society's longing for changes in the country's course (European integration), which triggered the events in the Maidan. This portrait is still called the Icon of the Revolution. This is not accidental since its message is deeply emotional and sensitive as well as axiological and ideological. The graffiti in question is an efficient tool of ideological influence and it performs the function of a simplified translation of complex ideas that must transform the worldview of the general public. The interpretation of this graffiti is extremely laconic and effective owing to its maximum visualization and preciseness of details: yellow-and-black Molotov cocktails framing the figure, a black respirator with huge filters; the face is also black, as if covered in soot. Lesia Ukrainka becomes transformed into a person who lives at the time of the events: a woman revolutionary who actively participates in the political battles, becomes a witness and inspirational ideologist of the fight for European integration, and, at the same time, demonstrates the connection with the axiology of the past (a contrasting yellow-and-blue bead necklace – Ukrainian national colours).

Some other, more meaningful, depictions with emblematic (symbolic) attributes added are presented by experimental artists at various art events and are targeted at “modernizing” Lesia Ukrainka's image. At the same time, they show the willingness to reconsider her image in terms of European values related to the popularization of feminist ideas. It is evident that in Ukrainian popular culture she has been, for more than a century, presented as a strong and courageous woman fighting with her disease (she had osteoarticular tuberculosis). The perception of Lesia Ukrainka as one of the first representatives of Ukrainian feminism inspires numerous artists.

One such case was her image with deer antlers, which caused controversy. It was displayed in 2016 in the exhibition called *Lesia Ukrainka on Political Placards and Posters*, held in the city of Lutsk (The Lesia Ukrainka Museum, Eastern European University). The author of the portrait, I. Stronhovskyy, explained that his idea was to emphasize the courage, strength, “manliness” of the writer (Коляда, 2018). Therefore, antlers as a symbolic attribute of manliness indirectly – i.e. by neutralizing gender stereotypes – help to introduce the image of Lesia Ukrainka into the context of modern European feminist culture.

#### **4. Objectification and travesty as means of “modernizing” the image of Lesia Ukrainka in urban culture**

The transformation of easily recognizable image into kitsch and its objectification for the sake of commercial success is a widely spread advertising technique in the culture of Europe. It is worth noting, for instance, observations concerning the phenomenon of “Shakespeare brand” made by K. Rumbold (Rumbold, 2011). As it is today, similar trends are becoming more and more popular in Ukraine.

Lesia Ukrainka features on the Ukrainian 200-hryvnia banknote, and her presence on the national currency is a major irritant for public consciousness. On the one hand, it proves her obvious and absolute canonization and nationwide recognition. On the other hand, like anything over-serious and canonical, it triggers a certain opposition along with a desire to reject authority and break the canon. The portrait of the poetess on the Ukrainian money becomes an object of kitsch massification of her figure in urban culture, with the attendant neutralization of her spiritual and aesthetic meaning and her fetishization.

The most vivid example of “objectifying modernization” is the 2015 billboard campaign of PrivatBank advertising high interest rates on savings in the national currency. Designed using comics-style graphics, the billboards featured George Washington (US dollar) and Lesia Ukrainka (hryvnia) (Шершень, 2015). President Washington’s remark that “Your Lesia is pampered” is an allusion to the popular, and rather indecent, Ukrainian anecdote about a young lady called Galia. Even though the advertisement caused a wave of indignation and accusations of vulgarity and indecency, such shocking stylistics is still commercially attractive. When advertising a mobile app for currency exchange in May 2020, the marketing managers of another Ukrainian bank, Alpha Bank, resorted to the same provocative technique. Lesia Ukrainka from the 200-hryvnia banknote asks President Washington a straightforward question: “So, what? Are you coming to mine or am I going to yours?”. The dialogue is presented as a chat on a mobile device, and Washington answers with an expressive emoticon.

Thus, one can observe a lasting tendency for the popular culture kitsch reinterpretation of Lesia Ukrainka’s image. T. Hundorova explains this effect as follows: “such a play is enjoyable since it shifts the hierarchy, combines incompatible elements, laughs at serious and sacred things. At the same time, burlesque gets transformed into a total style, inherits Surzhyk, and uses substandard language. Obviously, there is euphoria derived from destruction and violence against ‘others’” (Гундорова, 2008, p. 254).

One more technique of “modernization” is “travesty modernization”. This trend can be viewed as fetishization, a replacement for high aesthetic perception, appeal to narcissism and infantilism of the public mind. Once again, it is about using a well-known image as an advertisement. In this respect, the figures of nineteenth-century Ukrainian writers, especially Taras Shevchenko and Lesia Ukrainka, are the most “exploited”. One can remember the exhibition of social placards *Shevchenko FOREVER*, where in addition to the traditional image of the prophet-poet there was Shevchenko with a piercing and in jeans Cossack trousers; there was also his picture in a trendy tracksuit and Lesia Ukrainka in a Nike training top (Коляда, 2018), part of D. Kryshovskyi’s project “Na Sportyvnomu” [At the Sports Ground]. According to the artist himself, “it is hard to imagine a world-known celebrity who would not be the face of some brand or fashion house. So, I thought – why can’t great people of the past be bright images of today?” (Одарченко, 2016).

Apparently, this example of “travesty modernization” is devoid of any serious ideological/political implications and performs an exclusively commercial function. On the other hand, however, the creation of such an attractive “image” of Lesia Ukrainka covertly undermines a biased perception of the classic author as a monumental figure and breaks obsolete stereotypes that often devalue her in the eyes of young people: the unexpected figure, who is sometimes travesty-burlesque at first, does not diminish but, on the contrary, increases the significance of the activity and creative work of the progressive poetess. The “modernization” technique analysed above is also an efficient method of “humanization”, a way to make the canonic figure closer to the public, which is entirely in accordance with the official policy and can be used to popularize Ukrainian culture. The associative link shaped in the mind of the potential recipient of such collages is “fashionable image” – “fashionable author” – “it is fashionable to know and read him/her”. Such a hidden message implicitly stimulates young people’s interest in the best achievements of our national literature.

A vivid example of using the image of Lesia Ukrainka in this respect is the 2017 campaign “Learn English”, organized by the Ministry of Information Policy and the “Go Global” initiative: the poetess becomes one of the most popular images of social advertising (Биденко, 2017). The advertising poster makes an appeal: “I knew more than 10 languages 100 years ago. And you?” It is noteworthy that it breaks old stereotypes existing in the public mind which link Lesia Ukrainka exclusively with the Ukrainian context (the average Ukrainian commonly associates her with the school course of Ukrainian literature rather than with Western culture). Her image is presented as a European ideal of an educated and cultured woman whose example the modern generation should follow if they want to build “European Ukraine”.

It is undeniable that despite the obvious tendency for pop-cultural simplification, kitsch massification, and commodification in urban culture, Lesia Ukrainka remains equally attractive to the mass consumer in the contexts of her real role (a poetess, an intelligent woman, and a civil activist) – an embodiment of high culture and a symbol of the nation, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, an example of a person who has European values and is worth following. The analysis of travesty as a means of “modernizing” the image of Lesia Ukrainka in the urban art of the twenty-first century facilitates understanding the politically-driven moods, ideas, and the system of values inherent in twenty-first-century Ukrainian society on its way to European integration.

Very illustrative examples of this kind are murals with social and political content, where Lesia Ukrainka, along with Taras Shevchenko and Ivan Franko, is depicted in present-day clothes and is transformed into a military woman, a nurse, etc. The mural “Heroes of the Maidan”, created by the artist Tetiana Kramar in Valova Street in the city of Ternopil (Турчак, 2018, p. 12), demonstrates the paradigm of her glorification. Here, Shevchenko and Franko share the mission of saving the nation



with her. The figure of the poetess, then, is placed along with men, which indicates the spread of European ideas of gender equality.

However, the portraits are not canonical but essentially simpler in style and more similar to a naïve child's painting (Shevchenko is in a Special Forces uniform and Franko is a war correspondent with a recording device). In addition, there is a characteristic background – fire, burning tyres, Molotov cocktails, and people in flames. Such interpretations simplify the figures of outstanding Ukrainians only outwardly, but in fact they “modernize” and sacralize them already in accordance with the new system of values. The military posture of Lesia Ukrainka is quite emblematic: she does not hold any weapon, but her posture indicates her confidence and determination – this is a figure of a winner. Traditionally, the triad of “authors-superheroes” is depicted against the yellow-and-blue background.

The portraits accentuate such conceptual dominants as “courage”, “readiness to fight”, “unbroken spirit”, and others; traditionally associated with the figure of Lesia Ukrainka, they are transferred onto the state and nation. The mind of the general public forms a logical chain: “strong figure” – “strong country” – “strong me”. It must be said that such “modernization” is devoid of ironic connotations or burlesque overtones (which are intrinsic to many literary forms of postmodernism, with their appeal to reject canons and perception stereotypes) – it is intended to carry a heroic rather than comical meaning.

It can be concluded, then, that the image of Lesia Ukrainka is intentionally used in the urban cultural space as an iconic embodiment of Ukraine and as a representation of European values (gender equality, democratism, feminism): a specific historical figure seems to be depersonalized using certain figurative and expressive means, and consequently transformed into a symbol and allegory.

## 5. “Lesia Ukrainka’s Quantum Jump”

Multiple unexpected and provocative images of Lesia Ukrainka are offered to the public by Lesia Mazanik, the illustrator of the group “The Devochki”, in a series of placards she created to support the project “Shevchenko’s Quantum Jump”. The Ukrainian poetess is presented as cult figures of the past and present: Frida Kahlo, Marilyn Monroe, Audrey Hepburn, Queen Elizabeth II, Harley Quinn, and others (Олейник, 2021). All of them are transformed into Telegram stickers and in this form they function in popular culture. Lesia Ukrainka perfectly fits in the gallery of images of famous women, many of whom are Europeans.

“Lesia Ukrainka’s Quantum Jump” is a bright example of modern popular art which undoubtedly has a conceptual character. The grotesque images, which at first may produce a provocative impression of “creative hooliganism” and ironic play,



convey a common message aimed at a peculiar figurative “reincarnating modernization” of the poetess by including her in the canon of classic figures. On the one hand, the combination of her recognizable face and portraits of famous representatives of different national cultures (in fact, “style icons” perceived in the public mind as emblematic figures-as-symbols) confirms a corresponding status of the Ukrainian poetess. On the other hand, such collages foster the ideas of permanent topicality and “the eternity” of the classic. Lesia Ukrainka “rises from the dead” in modern art as if confirming the prophetic words of one of her characters: “No, I’m alive! I’ll live eternally! / I have that in my heart which cannot die!” (Ukrainka, 1950, p. 237).

As can be observed, then, the prevailing majority of the techniques used to visually “modernize” the image of Lesia Ukrainka in urban culture are based on exploiting certain meanings which are traditionally associated with her figure as the author of *The Forest Song*. These meanings also clearly refer to the European axiological context: strength, courage, indestructible spirit, readiness to fight, intelligence, etc. All this is viewed as an embodiment of Ukraine in the past and Ukraine of today – with an appeal for a natural combination of its own, national, and European characteristics.

The change in the axiological perception of the figure of Lesia Ukrainka is confirmed by the fact of her visual “modernization”: she is perceived and presented as a modern woman with all inherent European ideals. Her depictions created with the general public in mind confirm the significance of this process in society. At the same time, we believe that despite the inclusion of her image in modern urban culture (kitsch, simulacration, and others), there is no danger of the profanation of the key constants of Ukrainian culture; on the contrary, there are powerful trends of their development thanks to the processes of European cultural integration.

## 6. Conclusions

The twenty-first-century public mind reconsiders and transforms national cultural figures in various ways, turning them into trendy images in social and commercial advertisements, murals, emblems, and visual slogans. The image of renowned Ukrainian female author Lesia Ukrainka is subject to numerous artistic experiments in the urban cultural space – from deeply conceptualized to marginally simplified and pop-cultural. Having analysed a number of her “modernized” depictions, we can conclude that people are more and more active at reconsidering common stereotypes created by education and media. These reconsideration processes take place by means of travesty, kitsch, play, breaking the axiological hierarchy, fetishization, simulacration, and others, which is in line with the traditions of European postmodernism. Moreover, the observed trends in the visual “modernization” of Lesia Ukrainka’s

image in urban culture indicate that her image is perceived both as one related to the national culture (symbol of Ukraine) and as one which evokes clear associations with European values, feminist ideas, and gender equality. The key means of this “modernization” are as follows: complementing her depictions with iconic attributes/quotations which reflect/convey social and political moods and ideas spreading in Ukraine in the 2000s and 2010s; double objectification and de-objectification; “travesty modernization”; and collage.

The above tendencies indicate that it is the visual means of “modernizing” the image of Lesia Ukrainka in the cultural space of Ukrainian cities that reflect the emergence of several social trends oriented at the average Ukrainian of the new generation – one who, when looking for forms of self-identification, is eager to connect aesthetic and axiological categories of the past with the demands of the present, to connect national identity with European identity.

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## **The Image of Lesia Ukrainka in the Modern Urban Cultural Space of Ukraine: On the Issue of Various Forms of Keeping the National Memory on the Way to European Integration**

### **Abstract**

This article is devoted to determining the key trends in visual “modernization” of the image of the renowned Ukrainian writer and poetess Lesia Ukrainka in the urban cultural space of twenty-first-century Ukraine as a state that is going along its way to European integration. The study examines the peculiarities of transformation of her iconic figure under the conditions of changing value paradigms which reflect the significant processes of renovation in the society’s art and ideology. The analysis conducted indicates that it is the visual methods of “modernizing” her image that reflect the emergence of several social trends oriented at the average Ukrainian of the new generation – one who, in search of the form of self-identification, is willing to connect aesthetic and axiological categories of the past with the demands of the present, to connect national identity with European identity. The transformation of Lesia Ukrainka’s image in urban culture is realized, on the one hand, by means of symbolization and sacralization, and, on the other hand, by means of kitsch, play, breaking the axiological hierarchy (de-iconization), fetishization, simulacrization, and others.

**Keywords:** Lesia Ukrainka; Ukraine; visual “modernization”; urban culture; post-modernism; kitsch; de-iconization; European integration

## **Obraz Łesi Ukrainki we współczesnej miejskiej przestrzeni kulturowej Ukrainy. O problemie różnych form zachowania pamięci narodowej na drodze do integracji europejskiej**

### **Streszczenie**

Artykuł jest poświęcony określeniu kluczowych trendów wizualnej „modernizacji” portretu słynnej ukraińskiej pisarki i poetki Łesi Ukrainki w miejskiej przestrzeni kulturowej Ukrainy XXI wieku jako państwa na drodze do integracji europejskiej. Opracowanie analizuje osobliwości przetwarzania jej ikonicznej postaci w warunkach zmieniających się paradygmatów wartości, które odzwierciedlają istotne procesy odnowy w sztuce i ideologii społeczeństwa. Przeprowadzona analiza wskazuje, że wizualne metody „modernizacji” jej sylwetki odzwierciedlają pojawienie się kilku trendów społecznych zorientowanych na przeciętnego Ukraińca nowego pokolenia – takiego, który w poszukiwaniu formy samoidentyfikacji jest skłonny łączyć estetyczne i aksjologiczne kategorie z przeszłości z wymogami teraźniejszości, łączyć tożsamość narodową z tożsamością europejską. Przetwarzanie wizerunku Łesi Ukrainki w kulturze miejskiej dokonuje się z jednej strony za pomocą symbolizacji i sakralizacji, z drugiej zaś za pomocą m.in. kiczu, gry, obalania hierarchii aksjologicznej (deikonizacji), fetyszyzacji czy też symulakryzacji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Łesia Ukrainka; Ukraina; wizualna „modernizacja”; kultura miejska; postmodernizm; kicz; deikonizacja; integracja europejska

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