

## INTRODUCTION

**PhD Inga Pērkone-Redoviča**

*Latvian Academy of Culture*

**PhD Zane Balčus**

*Vilnius University, Latvian Academy of Culture*

At the core of the special issue of the journal *Culture Crossroads* are the papers presented at the IX Baltic Sea Region Film History Conference *Exploring the Past and Future of Audiovisual Media in the Baltic Sea Region: Archives, Digital Platforms, Researchers and Spectators* that took place in Riga on 6–8 June 2024. The conference was organized by the Latvian Academy of Culture, Baltic Audiovisual Archival Council, and LAC Riga Film Museum in cooperation with the Film Archive of the Estonian National Archives, the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, as well as media education and research centre *Meno avilys*. The conference had a dual, interrelated focus: the histories of audiovisual collections within the region, and the burgeoning impact of digital technologies on facilitating access to these collections.

In the wake of digital technologies, films from diverse historical periods and regions, as well as contemporary cinema have become globally accessible to an unprecedented extent. This digital turn has significantly influenced the operations of archives, museums, and libraries – traditionally the custodians of (national) audiovisual collections. From the perspective of access, it has transformed these repositories from entities with specific physical and administrative boundaries into increasingly open digital platforms, serving researchers, filmmakers, the media industry, and general audiences alike. While heritage institutions' access strategies often exhibit similarities shaped, for example, by online commercial film distribution, they also vary due to the distinct historical structure and content of different collections. Moreover, custodians of audiovisual collections in the Baltic Sea Region countries have historically worked within diverse cultural, institutional, and legislative frameworks determined by shifting political and socio-economic factors, which has had a major impact on what is collected, preserved, and hence – available for accessing on the emerging digital platforms. Finally, the questions of copyright significantly affect what can be distributed online, and under what conditions (e.g., free of charge or for a fee), making the relationships between the preservation and production industries even more crucial.

The digitisation and platformization, as well as datafication of contemporary cinema and audiovisual heritage presents challenges but also opportunities. For heritage institutions, the challenges include the introduction, management and funding of new workflows, tools and competencies related to digitization, digital preservation, metadata creation, etc. At the same time, digital availability of cinema fosters new forms of engagement, exhibition, evaluation, interpretation, and contextualisation. Importantly, the digital environment necessitates media literacy, including audiovisual heritage literacy, and the development of specific educational tools. Several film heritage platforms in the Baltic Sea Region have responded by introducing dedicated sections targeting the education sector and young audiences, exemplified by platforms like <https://filmcentralen.dk/> in Denmark, <https://elokuvalopolku.kavi.fi/> in Finland, <https://edu.arkaader.ee> in Estonia, and <https://filmwissen.online/> in Germany. Moreover, platforms intended for general audiences typically incorporate an educational component – films are supplemented with educational information, grouped into specific collections, categorized, and searchable according to various parameters. Examples include <https://www.redzidzirdilativju.lv/> and [www.filmas.lv](http://www.filmas.lv) in Latvia, <https://www.e-kinas.lt/> in Lithuania, <https://www.filmarkivet.se/> in Sweden and <https://ninateka.pl/> in Poland.

The journal is divided into two parts: **Platforms and Spectators** and **Archives**. However, both parts are closely linked and form an important thematic crossroads – today's digital streaming platforms have, to a certain extent, also become film archives, while many classical archives that have made their collections available on digital portals have, in a way, become cinemas, making archives democratic and unusually widely visited institutions. Film archives as classical film repositories are faced with the challenge of preserving digitally produced audiovisual works, whilst having the opportunity to take advantage of the growing possibilities of modern technologies for film preservation and research.

The journal opens with the article **The Current State of Latvian Cinema in Streaming Era** by **Dita Rietuma**, a film scholar and (since 2014) the head of the institution that implements the state policy in the field of cinema – National Film Centre of Latvia. Together with co-editor Inga Pērkone, Dita Rietuma has been the editor of the collective scientific monograph *Latvijas kinomāksla. Jaunie laiki (Latvian Cinema: Recent History. 1990–2020)* (2021). This monograph summarised and, at the same time, symbolically completed research on Latvian film industry based on analogue technologies and film exhibition in cinemas. On that occasion, it became clear to the film scholars at Latvian Academy of Culture (Zane Balčus, Inga Pērkone, Dita Rietuma) that further research on contemporary Latvian cinema would be impossible without new data about changes in production technology and film demonstration/viewing habits.

The aim of Dita Rietuma's article is to analyse trends in the production and consumption of Latvian films, and the impact of streaming platforms on the Latvian film industry in the 2020s. The study seeks to map the new conditions affecting Latvian film production, distribution practices, and audience consumption.

Data relevant for Dita Rietuma's article and other recent research of Latvian cinema were obtained in the sociological study *Cinema Audiences in Latvia: Practices of In-Person and Digital Film Consumption* (2023) organised by the Latvian Academy of Culture. The survey, its findings and conclusions are discussed in **Līga Vinogradova's** article **Cinema Audience Habits in Transition: More Netflix, Less Cinema?** Vinogradova's research aims to examine the interaction between digital and in-person film consumption, with a particular focus on how audience habits have adapted to hybrid viewing models. The author concludes that, while digitalization has significantly impacted cinema attendance practices in Latvia, cinemas retain a unique role by providing immersive, high-quality, and social experiences, particularly for Latvian films.

The journal's first section concludes with an article **Representation of Historical Films on Streaming Platforms** by researcher and experienced film producer **Inese Boka-Grūbe**. The author herself has produced several films and TV series connected to the historical genre, arguably the most popular type of films in Latvia. The article examines the presentation of historical films in the catalogues of Latvian streaming platforms, as well as whether and how films find their audience. The author highlights the notion of gatekeepers and the shift from human curation towards AI-generated algorithm technology that curates the catalogues and frames potential viewers, thereby making an impact on the audience reception.

The second section of the journal, **Archives**, is proportionally more extensive, confirming the seemingly paradoxical phenomenon: in an era of rapid technological development, interest in and theoretical appreciation of film archives is growing significantly, likewise, the theoretical literature on film archive-related *effects and affects* (to quote one of the volume's authors Jamie Baron) is multiplying rapidly.

**Jaimie Baron**, the author of highly timely and thought-provoking books *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (2014) and *Reuse, Misuse, Abuse: The Ethics of Audiovisual Appropriation in the Digital Era* (2020), in the article **The Anachronism Machine** focuses on the phenomenon of the "archive gaze", analysing its present changes. Previously, the gaze associated with the archival document has been mostly human, but the emergence of AI is fundamentally transforming the situation. "*What kind of historical evidence or archival practice, if any, can resist this refractive process, and what will be its epistemological and historiographic consequences?*", asks Jaimie Baron in her article.

Yuliia Kovalenko's article **Digital Preservation of Ukrainian Audiovisual Heritage During Wartime: Challenges and Institutional Practices** is particularly relevant in the context of the ongoing Russian invasion and war in Ukraine. Broader theoretical generalisations are yet to come, but the Ukrainian researcher's article summarises first experiences, actions, conclusions about saving Ukraine's cultural heritage and protecting archives under extraordinary circumstances. The study focuses on the role of digital technologies in safeguarding cultural identity, recording historical events, and addressing challenges Ukrainian archives face during the war.

While film archiving is approaching its centenary in terms of global principles and institutions, for those arts that are essentially about the moment and direct contact with the viewer (e.g., theatre, dance, performance) the archival situation theoretically and in practice is still a challenge. In her article **Convergence of Performance Art, Photography, and Archival Practices**, the performance researcher **Laine Kristberga** explores this issue using several examples of the work of Latvian modernist artists during the Soviet occupation period. Through historical analysis and archival exploration the article aims to enrich the study of genealogy of performance art in Latvia and open new pathways for understanding its formative years.

The theoretically profound study **A Semiotic Typology of Documentary Film According to Peirce's System of 10 Classes of Signs** of the Latvian culture semiotician Sergei Kruk, is largely based on the new situation of film archives, which started with COVID-19 pandemics. The author points out: "*At that time, Latvian State Archive of Audiovisual Documents had provided free access to all digitalised documentaries produced in Latvia in the twentieth century.*" The researcher's empirical material was the Latvian newsreels from 1946–1990, which Kruk categorised using the sign system proposed by the American scientist Charles Sanders Peirce.

The three concluding articles in the section **Archives** explore specific films in a broader historical, cultural and political context.

**Zane Balčus**, whose research interests mainly encompass Baltic documentary films, in her article **Autobiographical Family Narratives about Historical Trauma in Recent Documentary Cinema in Baltic Countries** links the question of the archives with autobiographies, describing the ways in which the micro-histories of private individuals are revealed in the documentaries from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. These autobiographical, mostly traumatic narratives are conveyed through a diverse mix of audiovisual materials from both private and public archives, using a variety of cinematic techniques, including animation.

Drawing on several concepts of contemporary film theory, in particular Jaimie Baron's concept of *dated film*, film scholar and critic **Elīna Reitere** in her study **Tava laime / Your Happiness by Ada Neretniece: Ideologically Dated Films and Epistemic Imperialism of Discursive Fields** focuses on one of the most

criticized Latvian feature films during the Soviet occupation – *Your Happiness* (1960). The author’s article is based on her belief “*that now, sixty years later, we can reassess this particular film without the Soviet ideological overtone.*”

**Samantha Bodamer’s** article **Temporal Assemblages: Filmmaking and Archival Recontextualization in *January*** focuses on one of the relatively recent films – feature film *January* (*Janvāris*, 2022), which presents a nuanced portrayal of Latvia’s 1991 independence struggle, merging personal and political narratives. The author explores the ways how *January* recontextualizes archival material within a fictional framework, engaging viewers in a multidimensional encounter with the past.

*The conference was organized and the special issue was published in the framework of the project “Cultural and creative ecosystem of Latvia as a resource of resilience and sustainability” / CERS (No. VPP-MM-LKRVA-2023/1-0001), funded by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia in the framework of the State Research Programme “Latvian Culture – a Resource for National Development” (2023–2026). The State Research Programme is administered by the Latvian Council of Science.*