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EXPLORING THE PAST AND FUTURE OF AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA IN THE BALTIC SEA REGION: ARCHIVES, DIGITAL PLATFORMS, RESEARCHERS AND SPECTATORS

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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://elokuvapolku.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.redzidzirdilatviju.lv/ and 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.

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PLATFORMS AND SPECTATORS

THE CURRENT STATE OF LATVIAN CINEMA IN THE STREAMING ERA

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse trends in the production and consumption of Latvian films and the impact of streaming platforms on the Latvian film industry, specifically regarding film financing and distribution within a broader context. Since the emergence of streaming platforms, significant adjustments have occurred in the ways films are financed, distributed, and consumed. This study seeks to map the new conditions affecting Latvian film production, distribution practices, and audience consumption.

Traditionally, film audiences have been assessed through statistical data on cinema attendance; however, there is an increasing need to analyse film audiences more comprehensively, tracking the entire lifecycle of the films – from cinema exhibition to linear television and streaming platforms. How has the introduction of both local and global streaming platforms altered the practices of Latvian cinema? Where is the audience for Latvian films concentrated – within cinemas, or do they prefer viewing on television or streaming services?

By analysing quantitative data on audiences for Latvian films across various platforms collected by the National Film Centre of Latvia, this article offers a broader and more nuanced examination of the lifecycle and audience of national films.

Keywords: *Latvian cinema, streaming platforms, video on demand, audience, series, fiction, cinema attendance*

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Introduction

Technological advancements, along with the rise of the internet and streaming platforms in the 21st century, have profoundly transformed the global film industry, reshaping both film production and distribution practices in Europe and Latvia. Online streaming platforms – such as OTT[1] services (e.g., SVOD, TVOD) – which provide on-demand access to films, have become a pivotal component of the global audiovisual landscape.

Companies operating various types of streaming platforms now integrate functions traditionally kept separate, serving as both film production entities and content distributors. For example, *Netflix*, the leading global media-services provider and production company that launched its streaming service in 2007, began creating its own original content in 2013, starting with the television series *House of Cards* [BBC 2018]. This allows companies managing diverse streaming platforms to distribute films directly to audiences, bypassing cinemas and conventional distribution companies. As a result, the classic film distribution cycle, once confined to theatrical releases and linear television, now encompasses streaming platforms as well. Both global and local streaming platforms have thus emerged as crucial channels for the dissemination of audiovisual content. Nevertheless, the impact of these platforms on national cinema, film distribution practices, and audience engagement remains underexplored and warrants further research.

Scholars suggest that the consumption of film remains under-researched within the main sociological approaches to cultural consumption, and there is a lack of distinction between the various media through which films are consumed, such as streaming platforms, television, and cinema [Hanchard et al. 2019]. However, pandemic has changed this a great deal and increased the interest among researchers [Budanceva & Svirina 2023].

Filmmakers across Europe must contend with the transformative impact of streaming platforms, often referred to as the *Netflix effect*. This term, introduced by McDonald and Smith-Rowsey in *The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century*, encapsulates not only the influence of *Netflix* as the leading global streaming service but also its role in reshaping film production, distribution, and consumption patterns worldwide. The authors argue that *Netflix* has disrupted

[1] OTT – Over-the-top media service (also known as over-the-top television, refers to a media service offered directly to viewers via the public Internet. SVOD (Subscription based video on demand). SVOD (video on demand) is a type of service where a user enters into a subscription agreement, which will grant the user access to the service type to watch until the user unsubscribes, which means watching with no limits. The best example of an SVOD service is *Netflix*. TVOD (Transactional based video on demand). Transactional (or Transaction) VOD (TVOD) payment amount is based on the content the user watches [Vodlix.com].

traditional distribution and exhibition models, realizing long-predicted scenarios where media content is accessible on-demand across multiple platforms [McDonald & Smith-Rowsey 2016: 2].

This phenomenon has gained even greater relevance following the COVID-19 pandemic, during which film distribution in cinemas was severely curtailed, and streaming platforms solidified their dominance. The pandemic has significantly strengthened the role of streaming platforms, expanding their influence not only in film distribution but also in production and consumption. As a result, many viewers in European countries now prefer to watch films at home via multiple streaming services rather than in theatres [European Audiovisual Observatory 2023/2024].

Recent data from the European Audiovisual Observatory highlights the continued growth of video-on-demand (VOD) services even beyond the peak pandemic years of 2020 and 2021. In 2022, the number of European households subscribing to OTT SVOD services increased by 22.6%, reaching 233 million, with a 23.8% rise in EU27 countries alone [European Audiovisual Observatory 2023/2024]. This trend underscores the enduring impact of the *Netflix effect* on viewing habits and the evolving landscape of audiovisual consumption in Europe. Cinema attendance figures in Europe did not return to pre-pandemic levels in the first post-pandemic years.

> *Despite the lifting of restrictions, in 2022 European cinemagoing continued to face many of the challenges seen during the pandemic, including audience reluctance to return to the cinema. Consequently, cinema attendance in the EU and the UK reached an estimated 656 million admissions in 2022, corresponding to 253 million tickets more than in 2021. While these results represent a 63% increase on the previous year, they remain significantly below pre-pandemic levels, accounting for only 67% of the average ticket sales recorded between 2017 and 2019.* [European Audiovisual Observatory 2023/2024]

European Audiovisual Observatory indicates a growing popularity of streaming services across Europe. For example, in Scandinavian countries, households typically maintain an average of two or more subscriptions to video-on-demand (SVOD) services. However, significant disparities exist between Western European nations and those in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) regarding subscription penetration. Specifically, Western European countries boast an average of 111.9 SVOD subscriptions per 100 households, whereas CEE countries have a markedly lower average of only 45.7 subscriptions per 100 households. In Latvia, the penetration rate is somewhat higher than the CEE average, with 36 out of every 100 households utilising SVOD services [European Audiovisual Observatory 2023/2024].

According to the European Audiovisual Observatory, Europe hosts approximately 3315 video-on-demand (VOD) services and video-sharing platforms. Notably, on-

demand services are predominantly centred around film and television fiction content; for instance, three-quarters of transactional video-on-demand (TVOD) services (73%) and nearly half of all subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) services (46%) in Europe offer film and television programming [Schneeberger 2023].

It can be concluded that Latvian audiences are likely to engage more actively with various streaming services compared to other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries in accessing the content they offer. The objective of this article, however, is not to analyse the popularity or competitive dynamics of specific streaming services in Latvia, nor their influence within the market. Rather, the focus is on the presence of Latvian films, particularly those that have received public funding, across multiple Latvian streaming platforms. This study primarily examines the availability of Latvian films, particularly those receiving public funding, across multiple Latvian streaming platforms. Additionally, it explores how these platforms influence financing and production within the Latvian film industry. Despite their growing significance, the presence and audience engagement with Latvian films on these platforms and their broader impact on film financing and production remain underexplored.

Streaming platforms curate a mix of films originally produced for theatrical release and content created exclusively for streaming, financed directly by the platforms. In Latvia, films primarily intended for theatrical release are typically funded by the National Cinema Centre and, in rare cases, by the State Culture Capital Foundation, which supports the production of low-budget films. However, since 2020, there have been exceptions: six multi-episode films or high-quality series funded by European foundations and coordinated by the National Film Centre were specifically produced for distribution on streaming platforms and television. This topic will be examined in greater detail in the following sections.

The topics of film financing and distribution on streaming platforms represent a new and complex area of research, presenting significant challenges, particularly due to the scarcity of publicly available and open data. For instance, no information is available regarding the contribution of local commercial streaming platforms to the production and support of audiovisual content, nor is there data on the popularity of specific films on streaming platforms.

This study will utilise quantitative data collected by the National Film Centre to explore shifts in both film production practices, distribution and consumption patterns. It will expand beyond the traditional cinema setting to examine the broader life cycle of films, including their distribution and consumption across various platforms. Nevertheless, the quantitative data collected by the National Film Centre in 2024 – detailing Latvian film audiences on streaming platforms and linear TV – provides valuable insights into emerging consumption trends. However, its use is subject to certain restrictions, as it can only be publicly shared in aggregated form.

To gain a deeper understanding of how video-on-demand services – streaming platforms manage Latvian films, closed interviews were conducted with representatives from two prominent services, *Tet* and *LMT*, both of which are registered in the National Electronic Mass Media Council's Register of On-Demand Audiovisual Services [NEPLP; Rietuma 2025; Rietuma 2025]. These interviews offered valuable insights into the platforms' approaches to financing and distributing Latvian films. However, it is important to note that the data collected reflect broader trends rather than providing a comprehensive analysis of this complex issue. The study does not include data from the *Go3* platform, which is part of the *All Media Group* alongside the TV channel *TV3* and *TV3Play*, as *Go3* is not registered in Latvia as a video-on-demand service and operates from Estonia. Cross-border video-on-demand services fall outside the scope of this study. This study also does not examine the financial contribution of Latvian TV, the public media, to the film industry due to the lack of publicly available data.

The presence of Latvian films on streaming platforms

The introduction of various streaming services into our daily lives has profoundly impacted the film industry. In Latvia, as in many other countries, this influence is evident in the financing, distribution, and exhibition of films.

In examining Latvian cinema within the streaming era, it is essential to focus on the distribution of Latvian films through local streaming platforms. This focus is warranted by the limited or non-existent engagement of global streaming services, such as *Netflix*, with the local film industries of the Baltic states, including Latvia. Several factors contribute to this gap, one of which is the relatively small market size.

Where do Latvian cinema and film production stand within the global streaming landscape? With rare exceptions, it remains largely isolated in the domestic market, as global streaming platforms seldom include films from Latvia – or the Baltic states – in their catalogues. Although companies like *HBO* have acquired numerous Latvian films, primarily fiction, platforms such as *Netflix* have yet to feature any Latvian films as of early 2025[2]. In January 2025, the Latvian company *Tet* announced a collaboration with *Netflix* to introduce new subscription options – program packages that offer a mix of content, including *Tet's* original productions, popular TV channels, HBO programming, and *Netflix's* extensive library of films and series [Kotian, 2025]. Some days later, another Latvian telecommunication company, *LMT*, announced a similar move [LMT 2005].

[2] Although some films have been purchased for the *Netflix* catalogue, they are not available on *Netflix* in Latvia. For example, *Netflix* has acquired the rights to *Jelgava 94* (2019) [Rieksta 2019].

However, it is important to note that this service bundle is designed to provide a more affordable alternative for subscribers compared to purchasing each service individually. Yet, it does not include Latvian films in the *Netflix* catalogue. Furthermore, global streaming services do not currently commission productions within Latvia.

Both leading telecommunications companies in Latvia, *Tet* and *LMT*, also function as streaming platforms. *Tet* created their OTT service *Shortcut* in 2016 and rebranded it as *Tet* TV+ in 2021. *LMT* established the TV and VOD streaming platform *LMT Viedtelevīzija* in 2017. *Go3*, the leading OTT service in the Baltics by *TV3* group, was launched in 2019 [TV3 2024]. A diverse collection of Latvian films is available on the non-commercial platform filmas.lv**,** maintained by the National Film Centre of Latvia [Filmas.lv]. However, it primarily features classic and restored Latvian films, which are accessible free of charge and do not include commercially active titles. Local streaming platforms offer a diverse selection of Latvian films. As of 31 December 2024, *LMT's* catalogue contains 225 Latvian films, including eight series (fiction). *Tet* SVOD's catalogue features 300 Latvian films, including co-productions, where a Latvian production company is among the minority co-producers, such as co-production with Lithuania *Invisible* [*Nematoma* 2019]. Currently, *Tet TV+* offers the most extensive selection of Latvian cinema, featuring both beloved classics and contemporary productions. Its catalogue encompasses masterpieces by renowned Latvian directors such as Aloizs Brenčs, Varis Brasla, Leonīds Leimanis, Rolands Kalniņš, Roze Stiebra, Jānis Streičs, Juris Podnieks, and Ivars Seleckis, created during the second half of the 20th century before Latvia regained independence in 1991. It also features films produced in independent Latvia, including the recent success of Latvian cinema – the animated film *Flow* (*Straume*, 2024) [Rietuma 2025].

Nearly all recent Latvian films that have received production support from the National Film Centre of Latvia – the primary financing body for films produced by independent producers – eventually become available on major commercial streaming platforms such as *Tet*, *LMT*, and *Go3*, following a period of theatrical distribution, whether brief or extended.

For instance, in 2023, a total of 14 Latvian fiction feature films were released in cinemas. Of these, eight were funded by grants from the National Film Centre, three received support from the State Culture Capital Foundation, and three were financed through other sources, including *Go3*, *Tet*, and Latvian Public Television (*LTV*). After their theatrical release, all 14 films were made available on streaming platforms, with 10 accessible on *Tet*, three on *LMT Viedtelevīzija,* and one on *Go3* [NKC 2024; TET; LMT]. The 2023 data indicates that 100% of the films produced in Latvia during the year were released on VOD platforms.

As of February 2025, the European Audiovisual Observatory published the study *How are Theatrical Films Distributed on TV and VOD in the EU?*, which explores the broader context of the film distribution lifecycle across several EU countries. However, Latvia is not included in this study. A key finding of this study is that theatrical films – those released in cinemas – are primarily distributed via VOD or benefit from dual TV/VOD distribution within the same year as their theatrical release [European Audiovisual Observatory 2025]. Furthermore, during the first year of a film's theatrical release, 80% of titles are exclusively available on VOD services, making VOD the primary distribution window for films released in cinemas [European Audiovisual Observatory 2025].

Representatives from both *LMT* and *Tet* assert that Latvian content is popular, particularly newer films. However, they note that it is uncommon for a film to sustain long-term, relentless customer interest. A notable exception is Latvian classical films produced by the Riga Film Studio (*Rīgas kinostudija*) during the Soviet occupation, which continue to attract viewers year after year.

For example, *LMT's* representative highlights *Limuzīns Jāņu nakts krāsā / A Limousine the Colour of Midsummer's Eve* (1981) as a prime example, consistently ranking as the most-watched Midsummer film for many years [Rietuma 2025]. Similarly, a *Tet* representative confirms that films produced by independent Latvian producers are among the most viewed on the *Tet TV+ SVOD* service, contributing to the platform's ability to attract new viewers [Rietuma 2025].

Impact of streaming platforms on production

Leading streaming platforms such as *Tet*, *LMT* and *Go3* not only acquire the rights to Latvian films for their catalogues but have also increasingly taken on roles as co-funders or even primary funders of films and TV series. This collaboration with independent film producers has become crucial for many, as it often represents a necessary means to secure financing for their projects.

The funding landscape for the Latvian film industry is shaped by both EU and national legislation, which regulate the extent of financial support film producers can obtain from public funds. In Latvia, the primary source of such funding is the National Film Centre, which oversees the allocation of public resources. According to Cabinet Regulation No. 975, public funding is capped at 60% to 80% of a film's total budget. As a result, financial contributions from private entities, particularly streaming platforms, have become increasingly vital for bridging the funding gap in film production [Ministru kabinets 2010].

Despite the growing importance of streaming platforms in the Latvian film industry, research on their financial contributions remains limited due to a significant lack of publicly available data. Independent producers, operating as private business

entities, treat the budgets and costs associated with their films and series as commercial secrets, making detailed financial information inaccessible. The only publicly available data pertains to state aid allocated to specific film projects, which is distributed through competitive programs managed by the National Film Centre [NKC]. Public data on funding for film projects is also available from the State Culture Capital Foundation, another source of public support. However, this fund is limited to low-budget films (with budgets up to € 120 000), short films, and small-scale film industry projects [VKKF].

Similarly, local streaming platforms do not disclose details regarding their investments or the extent of their financial contributions to Latvian films and television series. Although these platforms often support projects already receiving state aid, they refrain from publishing information on their funding allocations. As a result, it is impossible to conduct a comprehensive analysis of their role in financing original productions or co-financing state-funded projects. The absence of such data, which is treated as a commercial secret, significantly limits the ability to evaluate the full impact of streaming platforms on the Latvian film industry.

Platforms employ various approaches to working with independent producers, including co-financing, pre-sales, licensing, and licensing with marketing support. However, Anna Rozenvalde, the Head of TV Content Acquisitions of *LMT Viedtelevīzija,* emphasizes that it is crucial for a film or series to align with the company's values. This alignment serves as a key criterion when selecting projects for financial support or acquisition. In the case of co-financing, the compatibility of projects with *LMT* brand values – patriotism, events and personalities important to Latvia (e.g., *Dvēseļu putenis / The Blizzard of Souls*, 2019; *Janvāris / January*, 2022; *Zeme, kas dzied / The Land that Sings,* 2024), artistic excellence, potential for international recognition, use of new technologies, sometimes also films with commercial value and the potential to reach a wide audience are co-financed. (*Jumprava. Lielais notikums / Jumprava: The Big Event,* 2025) [Rietuma 2025].

Ilze Korjusa, Head of Content Strategy for Digital Media at *Tet*, points out that there are different models of cooperation with independent producers. It depends on the producer's chosen strategy for promoting the film. *Tet* has participated in projects as a minority co-producer (e.g., *Mātes piens / The Soviet Milk*, 2023), acquired the screening rights by investing in the production process (e.g., *Vecāku sapulce / Parent Meeting*, 2025) or negotiated the screening rights on the *Tet TV+* platform by watching the assembled footage before the film premieres or after it is distributed in cinemas (e.g., *Marijas klusums / Maria's Silence,* 2024). The amount to be invested depends on many elements, including the exclusivity factor, the length of the screening window, the exclusive window for VOD publication, etc. When assessing cooperation, *Tet* prefers projects that have received financial support from

the National Film Centre or the Culture Capital Foundation. Firstly, it is a guarantee of the quality and ambition of the finished work, and, importantly, it helps to ensure that the producer will have sufficient funds to complete the film. For *Tet* to decide on cooperation, it is crucial that both the authors and the producer have prior experience, and that the film's message, story uniqueness, and relevance to contemporary Latvian audiences are clearly demonstrated. Additionally, *Tet* requires that the producer has secured at least 70% of the necessary budget for the project, which helps mitigate the risk of the film being stalled due to a lack of funding [Rietuma 2025].

While streaming platforms have supported a range of Latvian fiction films as minority funders, the most significant investment has been in television series, which are regarded as highly valuable and appealing to audiences.

Historically, since the early 1990s, TV series in Latvia was a neglected format, primarily developed by television companies under conditions of limited funding. Until 2020, the National Film Centre was unable to financially support TV series despite a global revival of high-quality TV series driven by platforms like *Netflix*.

In Latvia, the resurgence of quality series became feasible due to additional funding made available to the National Film Centre during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. With support from various funds, including the European Regional Development Fund, the National Film Centre has financed six high-quality series since 2020. In 2020, the National Film Centre launched its first competition to produce high-quality TV series, with a total funding of EUR 1 million. This funding was awarded to two series: *Emīlija. Latvijas preses karaliene* / *Emily. Queen of the Press*, 2021) and *Kriminālliet a iesācējam* / *Crime Solving for Beginners,* 2022) [NKC 2020].

In 2022, the government, at the initiative of the Ministry of Culture, allocated € 5.1 million from the European Regional Development Fund REACT-EU funding and € 0.9 million from the state budget to support the Latvian film industry in mitigating the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The total funding of € 6 million was distributed through a competitive process to nine projects, including four high-quality TV series: *Pansija pilī* / *Pansion at the Mansion,* 2024*, Padomju džinsi* / *The Soviet Jeans*, 2024*, Dumpis* / *Mutiny,* 2024, and *Asistente* / *The Assistant*, 2024. The highest levels of support were received by *Pansion at the Mansion* (€ 1 123 308.29) and *The Soviet Jeans* (€ 1 027 021.53) [KM 2022; NKC 2023; NKC 2024].

These series, produced by independent Latvian companies, were primarily financed by the grants distributed by the National Film Centre and funded by REACT-EU, with local streaming platforms contributing with minority co-financing (typically around 20% of the budget). Notable examples include the series *Emily. Queen of the Press*, which received funding from the National Film Centre, *Tet*, and *LTV*, and *The Soviet Jeans*, financed by the National Film Centre and *Go3*.

The Soviet Jeans, which tells the story of a young Latvian man dreaming of freedom, rock and denim trousers twelve years before his country's independence, achieved significant acclaim as the first internationally recognized Latvian series, selected for participation in the 2024 Berlin International Film Festival's European Film and co-production market, and awarded two prizes at *Series Mania*, Europe's largest event dedicated to television series, held in Lille, France [Cineuropa 2024; Berlinale 2024].

Ilze Korjusa from *Tet* emphasizes that cooperation between independent producers – film production companies, the National Film Centre, and *Tet* is essential in series production due to the high production costs. *Tet* produces 4–5 TV series annually. To ensure the quality of the Latvian-language series content, the support of the state, as a primary financial backer, is crucial. This partnership is vital for producing high-quality series and ensuring the continued availability of quality content. Korjusa highlights that *Tet* has successfully collaborated on projects that are financially supported by the National Film Centre. These projects have been among the most-watched series on the *Tet TV*+ platform, including *Emily. Queen of the Press*, *Mutiny*, and *The Assistant* [Rietuma 2025].

It is common for projects that receive partial support from local streaming platforms to be marketed as the exclusive original content of those platforms. A notable example is the television series *Emily. Queen of the Press*, a seven-part series about the independent Latvian press magnate Emīlija Benjamiņa. While the series was funded through a combination of grants from the National Film Centre, *LTV*, and *Tet*, it was marketed as an original production exclusive to the *Tet* platform prior to its premiere, despite *Tet* being a minority funder of the project. Information regarding the public funding by NFC of *Emily. Queen of the Press* can be found in the relevant sources [NKC 2020]. The financial contribution of *Tet* to the film's budget is not publicly available.

It is noteworthy that *Emily. Queen of the Press* marked an unconventional trend in the distribution of TV series in Latvia. In 2021, the series was screened in Latvian cinemas, attracting 18 276 viewers [NKC 2022]. Several years later, the NKC-supported series *Pansion in the Mansion* and *The Soviet Jeans* continued this trend. In 2024, *Pansion in the Mansion*, a screen adaptation of Anšlavs Eglītis' popular novel set in 1930s Latvia, attracted 46 614 viewers in cinemas before transitioning to the streaming platform *Tet*. These admissions enabled *Pansion at the Mansion* to secure a spot in the top ten most popular Latvian films of the year, placing ninth [NKC 2025].

It should be noted that *Tet* has started to produce original series independently. For example, the crime series *Bezvēsts pazudušās / Missing Persons*, 2020 and *Nelūgtie viesi / Uninvited Guests,* 2023; 2024, commissioned by *Tet* and produced between

2000 and 2022, illustrates this trend. According to Korjusa, *Tet's* series *Uninvited Guests* has also been the most watched content on *Tet TV+* for many years, and *Missing Persons* is still a much-watched series. In addition, crime dramas and action comedies are popular with *Tet TV+* viewers. *Tet TV+* has successfully produced series with less investment, especially comedies [Rietuma 2025].

Improvement of statistical data gaps

Although cinemas are no longer the sole platform for distributing Latvian films, statistics have traditionally focused exclusively on the number of viewers within theatrical space. One of the key functions of the National Film Centre, as outlined in regulatory enactments, is to compile statistics on the audience for Latvian cinema. The data collected and published annually in the *Facts & Figures* edition has primarily provided a quantitative overview of the Latvian cinema audience [NKC 2006–2025].

The dynamics of cinema attendance, including fluctuations in viewer numbers, have largely depended on various factors, such as the funding available to the cinema sector during different periods, the number of films produced, their popularity, and broader societal trends.

The peak in cinema attendance and interest in Latvian films occurred in 2018 when these films accounted for 22.07% of the total market share. This was followed by similar levels in 2019 (20.16%) and 2020 (19.90%). The significant decline observed in recent years can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions (2020–2021), as well as shifts in audience habits, with many opting to watch films on streaming platforms where Latvian content is also available. Positive trends emerged in 2024, when Latvian films regained a significant market share (19.54%), attracting 409 145 viewers to cinemas, thanks to the success of the animated film *Flow* as well as other popular Latvian films [NKC 2025].

year	LV films screened in the cinemas	admissions	market share (%)
2018	48	556 832	22.07
2019	54	548 938	20,16
2020	41	178 963	19,90
2021	52	79 407	15,77
2022	75	188 352	10,98
2023	64	167 149	8,24

Data: National Film Centre of Latvia, 2024

Figure 1. Films, admissions, market share

One of the most significant factors influencing the collection of data on national cinema audiences is technological change, which has reshaped both film distribution practices and viewing habits. In response to regulatory amendments introduced in the Cabinet of Ministers regulations in 2024, electronic media providers that produce television programs and/or on-demand audiovisual services are now required to submit annual reports on the number of viewers of Latvian films broadcast on television and/or made available on streaming platforms [Ministru kabinets 2017].

In 2024, for the first time, the National Film Centre was able to collect comprehensive data on the consumption of Latvian films, not only in cinemas but also across streaming platforms and linear TV. Prior to these regulatory changes, statistics on viewership for Latvian films aired on Latvian Television were available for institutional use, providing a preliminary understanding of audience engagement following their theatrical screenings. However, data on the consumption of Latvian films on streaming platforms was previously unavailable. Additionally, Latvian films continue to maintain a stable audience on television, which serves as a crucial distribution channel, especially considering that Latvia has the fewest cinema screens among the Baltic states [NKC 2024].

Combining data, it can be concluded that in 2023, 12 002 169 viewers watched films produced in Latvia with public funding between 2019 and 2023 across cinemas, television, and video-on-demand (VOD) platforms. Notably, only 165 055 viewers (1,39% of the total audience) watched these films in cinemas.

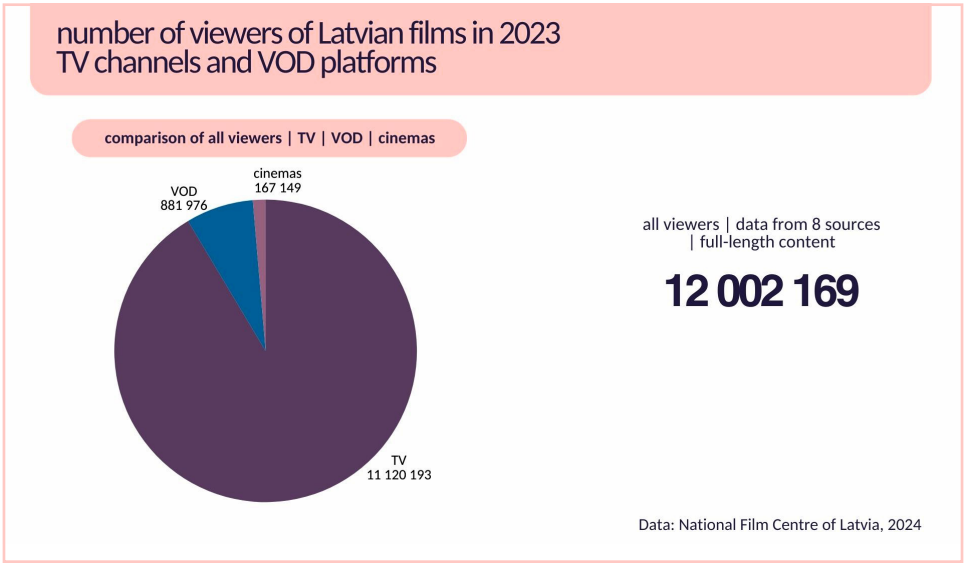

Figure 2. Number of viewers of Latvian films in 2023.
On TV Channels and VOD platforms

The data collected in 2024 reveals a clear trend: the primary distribution channels for Latvian films are now linear TV and video-on-demand (VOD) platforms rather than cinemas. Analysing the audience and viewership data of films produced with state aid across various platforms – cinemas, video-on-demand (VOD), and television – it becomes evident that distribution through both linear TV and VOD substantially enhances audience reach and film accessibility. In contrast, cinemas have become the least prominent platform for film exhibition.

For instance, the feature film *The Soviet Milk*, one of the highest-grossing films in Latvian cinemas in 2023, attracted 55 873 viewers in theatres. However, the film reached a significantly broader audience across other platforms, with a combined viewership of 118 731 on linear TV and the *TET* streaming service, more than double its cinema admissions. Notably, the largest audience segment, approximately 100 000 viewers, was achieved through traditional linear broadcasting on *LTV*.

Similarly, the film *January* garnered 45 727 admissions in cinemas. In contrast, it was viewed by 77 084 people on TV and VOD platforms. Overall, *January* reached a cumulative audience of 122 811 viewers across all distribution channels in 2023. This data underscores the critical role of multi-platform distribution in maximising the reach of publicly funded films.

Data collected by the National Film Centre reveals that the availability of films across multiple platforms, including television, greatly enhances viewership and broadens the audience for both feature films and, in particular, documentaries, which typically attract smaller audiences in Latvian cinemas. For example, the documentary

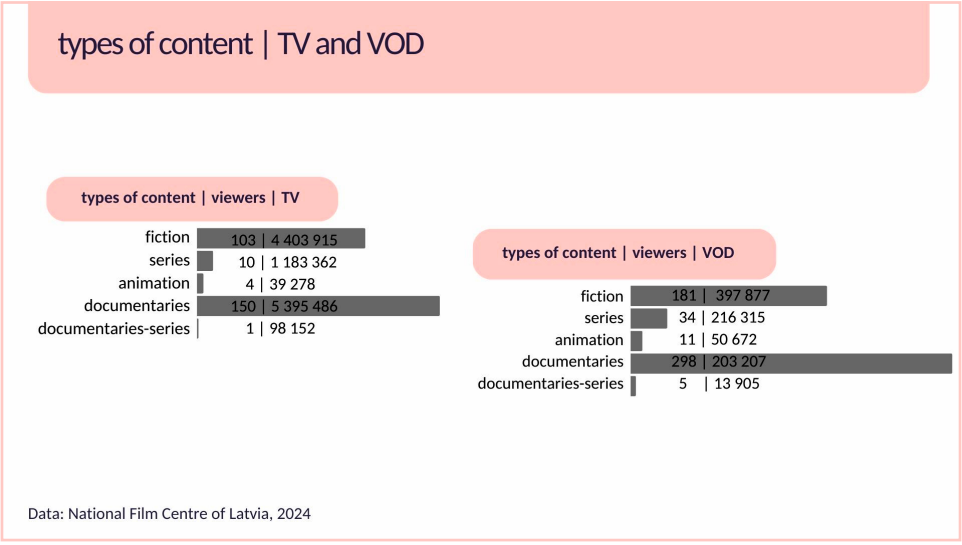

Figure 3. Types of content on TV and VOD

Zemnieki / *The Land*, 2022, recorded just 2080 admissions in cinemas, yet its total audience grew to 80 898 through TV and VOD platforms. The majority of this viewership was reached via Latvian television broadcasts. It is noteworthy that documentaries are the most popular category of content on VOD platforms, followed by feature fiction films, TV series, and animation. These trends are consistent with the distribution of viewership across television, highlighting similar content preferences on both mediums.

In 2023, the most widely viewed film supported by public funding on VOD and TV was the high-quality TV series *Emily. Queen of the Press*, produced with financial support from the National Film Centre and co-financed by the streaming platform *Tet*. The series garnered a combined audience of 203 835 viewers across Latvian television and *Tet*.

Conclusion

The distribution of films through both VOD platforms and television significantly extends the reach of Latvian films, providing broader and more sustained audience engagement compared to the limited screening times available in cinemas. Notably, VOD platforms allow films to remain accessible over extended periods, thus increasing their potential viewership.

The data collected by the National Film Centre in 2024 clearly indicate that the primary audience for Latvian films prefers viewing them on linear television, specifically on (*LTV*). It is also worth noting that films broadcast on *LTV* are accessible for a limited period on the *LTV* platform replay.lv, further enhancing their availability.

These findings underscore that Latvian films are more likely to be consumed in home settings (via TV and VOD) rather than in cinemas. Given that professional film production in Latvia is predominantly supported through public funding, comprehensive viewership data across various platforms – not just cinema admissions – provides a more accurate and nuanced assessment of the total audience reached by publicly funded films. This, in turn, offers valuable insights for evaluating the impact and accessibility of national film productions.

The increasing involvement of streaming platforms, like *Tet* and *LMT*, in the financing and producing of Latvian films and TV series highlights a significant shift in the Latvian film industry. These platforms are not just acquiring the rights to films. However, they are also playing a pivotal role as co-funders or even primary funders, which has become essential for many independent producers to secure the necessary funding for their projects. Additionally, platforms also produce and finance content specifically intended for distribution on their own platforms, with *Tet* being the most active in this regard.

However, the lack of publicly available financial data on the contributions of streaming platforms to independent producers limits a comprehensive understanding of their full impact on the industry. Despite this, the continued success of co-financed projects and the growth in original content production suggest that streaming platforms are integral to the evolution of the Latvian film and TV sector, providing essential financial backing, as well as ensuring the visibility and sustainability of local content in the competitive global entertainment market.

Undoubtedly, the changes in the audiovisual ecosystem – particularly the production, distribution, and exhibition of films in the era of streaming platforms – represent a complex subject that demands further in-depth and ongoing data monitoring. A promising direction for future research is the European Audiovisual Observatory's efforts to conduct a more comprehensive analysis of the life cycle of various film types, including national, European, and U.S. productions. This analysis would trace their distribution from theatrical exhibition to TV and VOD platforms, thereby encompassing the full cinema-TV-VOD lifecycle [European Audiovisual Observatory 2025]. Moreover, Latvian cinema, along with its distribution and consumption practices, merits further investigation within the broader context of European film industry trends.

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CINEMA AUDIENCE HABITS IN TRANSITION: MORE *NETFLIX*, LESS CINEMA?

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Abstract

The author investigates the evolving habits of Latvian cinema audiences amid increasing digitalization and the growing prominence of streaming platforms. The research addresses key questions about whether streaming services are drawing audiences away from cinemas or complementing the traditional cinematic experience. It 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. Using a quantitative survey method, the author analysed data from 650 respondents, gathered through face-to-face interviews in nine cinemas across Latvia. Grounded in theories of cultural consumption and audience mobility, the results indicate a dominant hybrid consumption model among cinema audiences. The findings reveal that heavy cinemagoers also frequently use streaming platforms, which expands their access to diverse genres and film experiences. This suggests that digital platforms serve as a complementary, rather than competing, medium for film audiences. The study concludes that, while digitalization has significantly impacted cinema attendance practices, cinemas retain a unique role by providing immersive, high-quality, and social experiences, particularly for Latvian films. Cinemas with a focus on local content continue to play a culturally significant role. These insights provide a new understanding of cinema audiences in Latvia, underscoring the need for cinemas to adapt to an increasingly hybrid consumption landscape to meet the evolving demands of an active and diverse audience.

Keywords: *Latvian contemporary cinema, streaming services, cinema audience, audience research*

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CULTURE
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Introduction

In 2023, The Institute of Culture and Arts at the Latvian Academy of Culture conducted a study *Cinema Audiences in Latvia: Practices of In-Person and Digital Film Consumption* [Vinogradova 2025]. This research was carried out as part 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).* An important focus of the *CERS* project concentrates thematically on the manifestations of digital technologies across various phases of the cultural and creative ecosystem's production cycle and their impact on cultural consumption habits. One of the key objectives of this thematic direction is to generate new knowledge about the influence of digital technologies on citizens' cultural consumption patterns, as well as on the processes of cultural content creation, distribution, and preservation. The film industry has been identified as a sector where the differentiated impact of digital technologies is being explored in greater depth.

Regarding film audiences, researchers began addressing questions about whether streaming services are drawing audiences away from cinemas or complementing the traditional cinematic experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a period when consumers were compelled to adapt to a reality in which newly available digital alternatives became the only option for film viewing outside of cinemas. This situation coincided with a pre-pandemic crisis in the cinema industry [Hanzlík 2024; Smits 2024; Vidackovic, Zigo & Naglic 2023]. Additionally, a key question for both researchers and the film industry is the future of cinephiles—those passionate, frequent cinemagoers [Taillibert 2024] — and whether they will continue their cinema attendance practices or replace them with new digital alternatives.

In the post-pandemic period, cinemas in Europe, including Latvia, experienced a significant decline in attendance and revenue, raising concerns about the sustainability of cinemas in the future. The data from the European Audiovisual Observatory [2024] indicate that cinemas across Europe have been able to recover from the post-pandemic effects, with an increase in cinema attendance observed both in Europe as a whole and in Latvia [National Film Centre of Latvia 2024]. It should be noted that, although this growth has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels, it is still considered an achievement after the dramatic decline during the COVID-19 pandemic, which coincided with the rise of online streaming platforms [European Audiovisual Observatory 2024].

The digitalization of cultural consumption has become a defining feature of the post-pandemic landscape, significantly altering how, when, and where audiences engage with culture. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift from traditional

offline consumption to online platforms, as restrictions on in-person events led to a surge in digital engagement. This change fostered a growing preference for streaming services, virtual events, and online platforms for accessing films, music, theatre, and other cultural experiences [UNESCO 2022; AudienceNet 2020; Budanceva & Svirina 2023; Bonel, Capestro & Maria 2023]. Researchers have also observed that the boundaries between online and offline experiences have increasingly blurred as people now embrace technology's convenience, integrating it seamlessly into their cultural consumption habits [Dey, Yen & Samuel 2019].

The data on film consumption habits in Latvia, gathered in the 2022 *Cultural Barometer* study, capture a transitional period as cultural institutions and society adjusted to post-pandemic habits. This data reflects both the lingering effects of the pandemic and the rise of new consumption patterns. Researchers have noted that Latvia's declining population suggests an inevitable reduction in cultural consumption overall [Cultural Barometer 2022]. It should be noted that at the beginning of 2024, Latvia had only 1 million 872 thousand inhabitants. Over the past 34 years, it has decreased by almost 30%. Moreover, the majority of the population (70%) lives in cities, with 32% of the total residing in the capital city of Riga [Centrālais statistikas birojs 2024].

Although cultural activities generally subsided after the pandemic, digital cultural consumption has notably increased since 2018, with residents showing a strong preference for digital over in-person activities – particularly impacting the film industry. Digital film-watching has surged in recent years, while cinema attendance has declined: viewing foreign films online rose from 34% in 2018 to 55% in 2022, and Latvian films – from 16% to 45% over the same period, whereas cinema attendance dropped from 29% to 18% [Cultural Barometer 2018, 2022].

Notably, a decline in cinema attendance is not solely attributable to the pandemic; a slight decrease was already observed in 2018, with 34% of residents visiting cinemas in 2016. Qualitative research links this post-pandemic decline to an established preference for streaming services and home-based viewing options [Cultural Barometer 2022]. The struggle of cinema attendance to fully recover has raised questions about the sustainability of cinemas, as consumer needs and habits increasingly align with digital options due to the integration of digital technologies and the prevalence of streaming platforms. Despite this shift, cinema audience habits in Latvia remain understudied, though the ongoing move from in-person to digital cultural consumption highlights the need for further research. A deeper understanding of current cinema audiences and their consumption patterns – including in digital spaces – would provide valuable insights into the interaction between in-person and digital film consumption and inform future scenarios for cinema development with a specific focus on the cinema-going audience.

The **aim** of the article is to explore how cinema attendance has evolved in the streaming era and how audience habits have shifted, as well as to investigate whether online streaming platforms are diverting audiences away from traditional cinemas. Several tasks were carried out to achieve the aim. Firstly, a comprehensive literature review was conducted on cinema audience behaviour in the post-pandemic era and in the rise of online streaming platforms. Secondly, quantitative data from cinema audience research in Latvia were collected and analysed, covering sociodemographic characteristics, cinema attendance patterns, and digital film consumption habits. Thirdly, the habits of heavy and light cinemagoers were compared to evaluate how streaming platforms have impacted different audience groups and to provide conclusions on the current state and future prospects of Latvian cinema in the streaming era.

The article includes a literature review on post-pandemic film audience consumption habits, examining why digital practices dominate and their advantages over in-person cinema experiences. It also provides an overview of the methodology, presents cinema survey results, and concludes with a discussion on contemporary cinema attendance patterns and their interaction with the digital environment.

Film audience habits in the post-pandemic era

Audience behaviour research in recent years, particularly under the influence of the pandemic and advancements in the digital environment, reveals several fundamental changes in film consumption that may reshape cinema attendance patterns. Streaming platforms have redefined traditional film distribution models, transforming how audiences access and engage with films. The digital environment provides on-demand access to a vast selection of films, far exceeding traditional options like cinemas or linear television. Unlike cinemas, which often rely on popular blockbusters, streaming platforms offer a broad range of content spanning diverse genres, countries, and niche productions [Coavoux & Aussant 2024; Vidackovic, Zigo & Naglic 2023; Smits 2024]. These platforms use varied release strategies to make films accessible across multiple devices, such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, televisions, and gaming consoles, thereby shaping audience perceptions and experiences [Smits 2024; Capalbi, Fabbry & Ierverse 2021; Vidackovic, Zigo & Naglic 2023]. Personalised recommendations further enhance the viewing experience, guiding audiences toward new and diverse content [Coavoux & Aussant 2024].

This increased accessibility offers numerous benefits, enriching the cinematic experience and allowing viewers to explore a wider range of perspectives. Streaming platforms are designed with a strong focus on user satisfaction; for instance, *Netflix* promotes inclusivity and fosters loyalty, engagement, and satisfaction through its open infrastructure. Practical features, such as language options and on-demand subtitles, enable global audiences to access content instantly, while digital media

has expanded access to niche productions worldwide. Additionally, streaming has influenced viewing habits, popularising practices such as binge-watching and at-home movie nights [Vidackovic, Zigo & Naglic 2023; Capalbi, Fabbry & Ierverse 2021].

Despite the growth of digital viewing, cinema attendance retains unique appeal. Cinemas offer a sense of anonymity, temporary community, and an escape from daily life – experiences that are challenging to replicate at home or on digital devices [Hanchard, Merrington & Wessels 2022]. Nevertheless, a significant segment of the audience that has expanded or altered its viewing practices has undergone a shift in viewing habits, reflecting broader transformations in viewer identity.

This evolving identity is marked by film audiences increasingly becoming active participants in their viewing choices, deciding what, when, where, with whom, and how to watch [Capalbi, Fabbry & Ierverse 2021; Hanchard, Merrington & Wessels 2022]. This shift aligns with established theories in cultural audience studies [Fiske 1989] but has developed into a new form of engagement in the digital era. The concept of audience "mobility" has emerged with streaming, allowing viewers to fluidly transition between diverse viewing environments [Hanchard, Merrington & Wessels 2022]. Urry [2008] describes this mobility as multidimensional, encompassing physical travel to venues, social interactions where audiences share film experiences, and virtual interactions through digital technologies like shared logins, remote viewing, and online discussions. Integrative mobility also occurs as audiences watch films while performing other tasks, such as commuting. Hanchard, Merrington, and Wessels [2022] identify five "articulations" of film viewing: (1) in cinemas; (2) on home television; (3) on a laptop or tablet in bed; (4) on a smartphone while on the go; and (5) on in-flight entertainment systems. They argue that navigating these settings through diverse mobilities is essential to understanding modern film consumption.

This mobility in film consumption allows audiences to construct a personalised "cultural diet" through their choices of platforms, devices, or cinemas. Sociologists underscore the importance of "cultural capital" – the knowledge and skills required to make informed choices in this landscape [Mihelj, Leguina & Downey 2019]. Today's film audiences are considered more "skilled" than ever due to the broad array of films available across multiple formats [Capalbi, Fabbry & Ierverse 2021]. Yet, debate continues over whether digital access has genuinely diversified audiences and enhanced cultural equity [Van Deursen & Van Dijk 2014; Weingartner 2020; Mihelj, Leguina & Downey 2019]. Greater cultural diversity is anticipated to foster "cultural omnivores" – individuals who engage with both high and popular culture forms, reflecting versatility in cultural tastes [Coavoux & Aussant 2024; Weingartner 2020; Peterson & Kern 1996]. A more omnivorous audience signals broader tastes, illustrating the benefits of diverse cultural products and the flexibility of moving between sources. It should be noted that while digital platforms are

often seen as beneficial for expanding cultural tastes, several weaknesses have also been identified in this area. Concerns have also emerged regarding the influence of digital technologies on audience preferences, with researchers identifying several ways algorithms may narrow or shape viewing tastes. Coavoux & Aussant [2024] introduce the concept of "filter bubbles", in which algorithmic recommendations limit audiences to personalised content based on viewing history. Similarly, Capalbi, Fabbry & Ierverse [2021] discuss "participation bubbles", where users primarily engage with like-minded individuals, reinforcing existing preferences, as well as "geographical bubbles", which restrict content access based on location, resulting in varied viewing experiences across regions.

Overall, digital film viewing has offered both benefits and unprecedented competition for cinemas, significantly enriching audience experiences. Viewers now have broader access to a diverse range of content, including niche, global, and local productions across multiple languages and devices. This mobility enables flexibility in film-watching that was previously unimaginable. Audiences can now be more active and "skilled" in their viewing choices – something impossible with the fixed offerings of linear television or traditional cinemas. However, these shifts in consumption have raised new questions about how consumers navigate the extensive offerings and cultivate their own tastes, particularly as researchers note the increasingly blurred boundaries between online and offline experiences [Dey, Yen & Samuel 2019], fostering a more hybrid approach to film consumption. In the ambiguous conditions of mobility created by the digital environment, it is essential to clarify the role of cinemas and the unique benefits they bring to the film consumption experience.

Methodology

Statistical data and analyses of Latvian residents' cultural consumption alone do not provide a comprehensive understanding of cinema attendance experiences, such as frequency, habits, motivations, preferences, and other influencing factors. Therefore, the study employed a quantitative methodology, specifically using a survey method through face-to-face interviews in cinemas. This approach was selected to gather deeper insights into the behaviours and preferences of cinemagoers that existing data could not fully capture. Additionally, this is the first large-scale cinema audience research conducted in Latvia, offering a unique and in-depth perspective on Latvian cinemagoers. The questionnaire focused on three main topics: cinema attendance habits, film consumption at home, and Latvian film consumption habits. These topics were chosen to measure the dynamics of film-watching practices both at home and in cinemas, as well as the role Latvian films play within this broader context. The study examined nine cinemas in Latvia, a selection based on the following criteria: 1) locations in Riga (four cinemas) and regional areas (five cinemas);

2) inclusion of both single-screen and multi-screen complexes; 3) a diverse range of film programmes offered. Additionally, a selection of film programmes was created for each cinema, with the exception of multi-screen cinemas. This selection included premieres, low-budget and niche films, animations, and documentaries, among others. Interviews were conducted at various times of the day and on different days, including weekends and public holidays. The fieldwork for the survey took place in November and December 2023, which coincided with the holiday season in Latvia, potentially influencing the results. 50 students from the Latvian Academy of Culture were involved in conducting the survey. Respondents were selected using a random sampling method. The final sample comprised 650 respondents ($n = 650$).

A methodological limitation to note is the target group of the survey. The results reflect the experiences and opinions of cinemagoers, and therefore, conclusions drawn about digital film consumption patterns are applicable to cinema audiences rather than film consumers in a broader sense. Consequently, there is a lack of data on individuals who consume films exclusively in digital formats. Future research should focus on in-depth studies of consumers who prefer digital film viewing. Given the current limitations in data availability and scope regarding these viewers, a detailed investigation into Latvian residents' cultural and film consumption habits is recommended.

Results

The survey results provide a clear picture of how cinema attendance and film-watching habits have evolved among Latvian audiences in the streaming era. One of the key findings is that regular cinemagoers are also active consumers of films on streaming platforms, suggesting that these two forms of film consumption are not mutually exclusive. Among the respondents, those who frequently attend cinemas tend to engage more heavily with streaming services as well, indicating that regular cinemagoers are expanding their film consumption beyond traditional theatres. This finding challenges the assumption that streaming platforms are solely responsible for the decline in cinema attendance, as it shows that dedicated film audiences are capable of consuming content across multiple platforms. The following analysis explores changes in cinema attendance frequency and its correlation with film-watching habits, the demographic profiles of different types of audience members, the platforms where films are watched, and the factors influencing cinema attendance.

Frequency of cinema attendance

Survey data indicate that cinemagoers watch films, either at home or in a cinema, nearly once a week on average (see Figure 1). Most respondents reported going to the cinema one to three times per month (30%) or three to five times every six

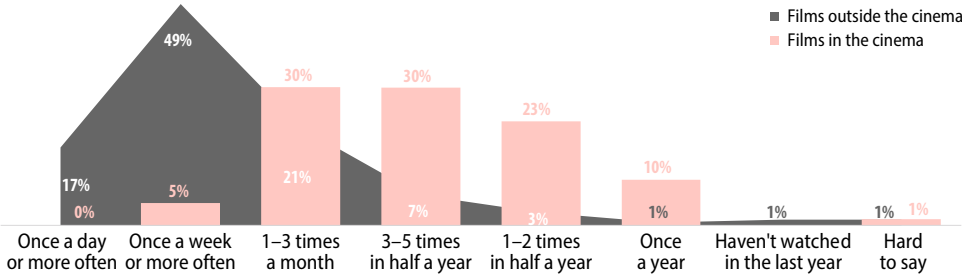

Figure 1. How often have you watched in the past year films outside the cinema and in the cinema? (n = 650).

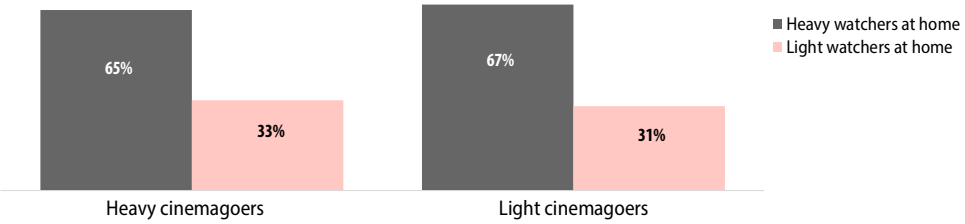

Figure 2. How many heavy and light cinemagoers have watched films at home? (n = 650).

months (30%), with smaller percentages attending once a week (5%) or only once a year (10%). Outside the cinema, nearly half of the respondents (49%) watch films at home at least once a week or more, while a third (30%) watch one to three times per month, and a smaller portion (17%) watch films daily or more frequently. This indicates that watching films is a regular activity for cinemagoers, though their habits vary, revealing distinct patterns in both cinema attendance and home viewing. Based on these findings, two types of cinemagoers were identified: heavy cinemagoers (66% of respondents), who attend the cinema at least three times in six months, and light cinemagoers (33%), who visit between one and four times a year. Despite the overall decline in cinema attendance, a core group of dedicated moviegoers continues to frequent cinemas regularly. Interestingly, the same proportion (66%) of heavy cinemagoers are also heavy home viewers, suggesting that frequent cinemagoers are also active on streaming platforms or TV, reflecting a hybrid consumption model where dedicated film fans enjoy content both in theatres and at home. Light home-viewers comprise a smaller group (32%), with a notable overlap from the midst of light cinemagoers, reinforcing the idea that those who visit cinemas less frequently also tend to watch fewer films at home. However, there is minimal difference in home viewing frequency between heavy and light cinemagoers: 65% of heavy cinemagoers and 67% of light cinemagoers report watching films at home regularly (see Figure 2).

This suggests that, regardless of their cinema attendance frequency, audiences are equally inclined to watch films at home, indicating that streaming has become a widespread practice. This trend highlights a complementary relationship between cinema-going and home viewing rather than one practice simply replacing the other.

Demographic profile of the audience

The study successfully captured a diverse range of cinemagoers aged 15 to 90, with an average age of 48. Women made up 69% of respondents, and 52% had higher education, suggesting a link between education and cinema attendance. The most common occupations were public sector employees (26%), private sector workers (29%), and students (22%). Additionally, 37% of respondents had children under 18. The survey was conducted in Latvian, with limited participation from non-Latvian speakers, with 87% speaking Latvian at home, 9% Russian, and 1% English. Household income was divided into five levels for analysis. The typical cinemagoer is a woman aged 25–34, with higher education, working in the private sector, without children under 18, speaking Latvian at home, and with a household income of € 801–1000 per person. The sociodemographic profile of cinemagoers reveals several notable trends. The data suggests no significant correlation between cinema attendance and variables such as gender, employment status, or the number of children. However, the need for more in-depth analysis remains.

Heavy cinemagoers are more likely to be from Riga and belong to the age group 15–19, typically school-aged individuals. This suggests that younger audiences in urban areas, particularly the capital, engage more frequently with cinema. Conversely, **light cinemagoers** are more likely to reside in regions outside Riga and tend to have lower levels of education, indicating a possible divide in cinema access or interest based on geographic and educational factors. When analysing home viewing habits, heavy home watchers are predominantly women aged 45 and older, commonly employed in state or municipal institutions. This demographic may prioritize home viewing due to lifestyle factors such as work schedules and household responsibilities. On the other hand, light home watchers (those watching films three times a month or less) are more likely to be school-aged individuals (15–19 years old) and residents of Riga, suggesting that younger audiences may prefer the cinema experience over home viewing or engage with films less frequently overall.

Platforms and places for watching films

The survey data provide valuable insights into the preferences of cinema audiences regarding their choice of film-watching platforms, allowing for several important conclusions (see Figure 3).

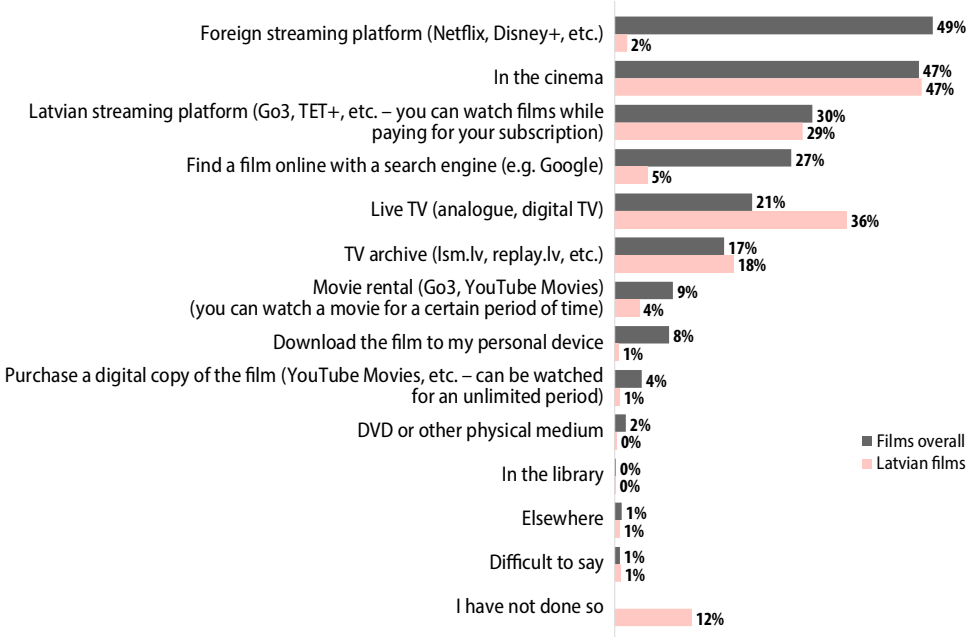

Figure 3. Where did audiences most often buy or watch films in the last year? (n = 650).

Firstly, the nearly equal preference for foreign streaming platforms (49%) and cinema attendance (47%) suggests that both mediums play a significant role in film consumption among Latvian audiences. While streaming platforms and television offer the convenience of low-cost, on-demand viewing from any location, cinemas continue to attract audiences, likely due to the immersive experience they provide. Secondly, the use of Latvian streaming platforms remains limited, with only 30% of respondents using them, indicating they are less popular compared to foreign platforms. This could be attributed to the broader variety of content available on global streaming services, which may offer a more diverse selection than local platforms. Thirdly, reliance on search engines (27%) and live TV broadcasts (18%) as primary sources for watching films is low, suggesting that audiences are shifting away from traditional or indirect methods of accessing content. This reflects a broader movement toward direct, on-demand viewing via dedicated streaming platforms. Fourth, the use of physical media (2%), digital copies (4%), online rentals (9%), and unidentified downloads (8%) is relatively uncommon. This indicates that physical and transactional forms of film consumption have largely been replaced by streaming services, where films are easily accessible without the need for purchasing or storing content.

Regarding Latvian films (see Figure 3), the majority of viewers prefer watching them in cinemas (47%), live TV broadcasts (36%), or on Latvian streaming platforms (29%). This suggests that Latvian films remain closely tied to traditional media and

local platforms, as they are not widely available on foreign streaming services (only 2%). The relatively high percentage of Latvian film viewership in cinemas implies that these films may be perceived as cultural events or special experiences, encouraging greater attendance in cinemas compared to international films. However, the survey data on viewing Latvian films are not entirely conclusive. The general impression of the audience is that films produced in Latvia over the past five years are more commonly watched outside of cinemas through different channels. This implies that a portion of the audience waits for opportunities to watch new films for free on TV or at a more affordable price on streaming platforms. The most typical frequency for watching Latvian films in cinemas is once a year (27%) or one to two times every six months (22%). Overall, the dominance of streaming platforms in both film and series consumption reflects a broader global trend where audiences prefer on-demand content for convenience and variety. Despite this, cinemas still play a vital role in film-watching, particularly for Latvian films, which suggests that local content has a distinct place in the cultural landscape. These trends underscore the evolving nature of film consumption in Latvia, where streaming is becoming the preferred method for accessing both local and international content; however, the cinema experience remains a strong competitor, especially for national productions.

The difference between the habits of heavy and light cinemagoers regarding the use of cinema as their primary source of film viewing is substantial: 60% of heavy cinemagoers, compared to only 21% of light cinemagoers, report using cinemas as their main means of watching films. Both groups profoundly rely on foreign streaming platforms, but heavy cinemagoers (52%) use them slightly more than light cinemagoers (44%). Light cinemagoers (34%) rely more on Latvian streaming platforms compared to heavy cinemagoers (29%). To sum up, heavy cinemagoers prefer the immersive experience of cinemas but also supplement their film-watching with foreign streaming services. Light cinemagoers are more inclined to use streaming services, especially local Latvian platforms, indicating a preference for convenience and regional content over the cinematic experience. Both groups show similar usage patterns when it comes to finding films through search engines or watching films on TV broadcasts, demonstrating that these are common secondary methods for accessing content.

Finally, we observe an interesting trend in the number of streaming platforms used by cinema audiences (see Figure 5). Many cinemagoers use multiple platforms for film consumption, with nearly half (48%) having used three or more platforms in the past year, while only 7% do not use any platforms. Heavy cinemagoers tend to use more platforms, with 32% using four or more, compared to just 19% of light cinemagoers. In contrast, light cinemagoers typically use fewer platforms, with 32% relying on two platforms and 20% using just one. This indicates that heavy cinemagoers engage

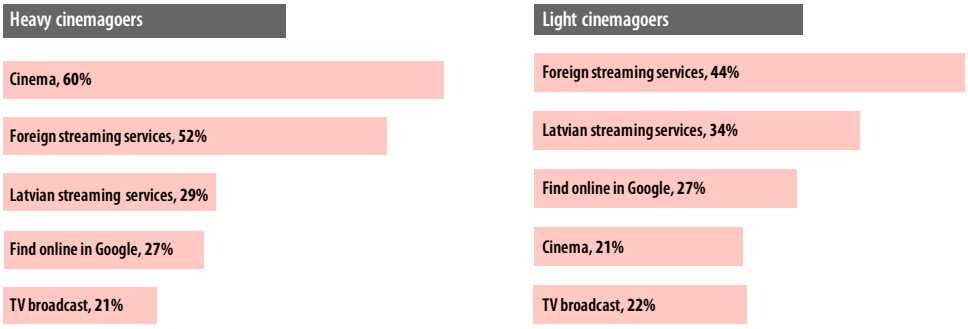

Figure 4. Where have cinema audience watched films in the past year? (n = 650).

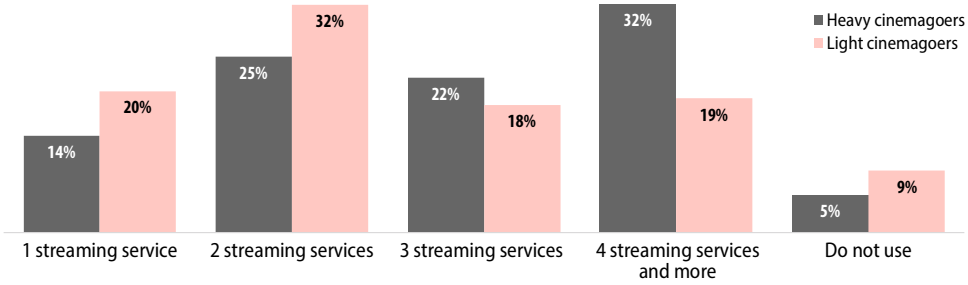

Figure 5. How many streaming platforms (foreign and Latvian) have respondents used in the past year? (n = 650).

with a wider range of content sources, while light cinemagoers stick to fewer options. When asked which digital platforms they had used the previous year, it became clear that *Netflix* was the most preferred platform among cinema audiences. Heavy cinemagoers tend to consume *Netflix* more (73%) than light cinemagoers (58%). Two local platforms, *Go3* (43%) and *Tet+* (29%), are also popular, and there is no significant difference in their usage between heavy and light cinemagoers. However, heavy cinemagoers show more interest in other foreign platforms, such as *Disney+*, while light cinemagoers slightly favour Latvian platforms. Overall, the data suggests a trend toward hybrid consumption, where frequent cinemagoers are also active on digital platforms. This shows that traditional cinema attendance and digital viewing complement each other rather than being mutually exclusive.

Cinema experience: Artistic value and social engagement

The study revealed two significant dimensions for audiences when attending the cinema: the artistic experience of films and the social aspect of leisure activities. For cinema audiences, the most important factors in their experience are film quality (average rating: 4.4 on a 5-point scale), diverse repertoire (4.4), and new releases (4.1). Additionally, the cinema experience is highly valued as a way to relax,

enjoy time with others (4.4), and spend time with loved ones (4.1). Secondary factors include ticket prices and discounts, atmosphere (e.g., cinema size, seating comfort), and specific film offerings. The least important factors are proximity to public transportation, parking availability, snack and drink options, and additional educational elements like lectures or meetings with filmmakers. Differences emerged between heavy cinemagoers, who prioritize diversity of the film repertoire, educational elements, atmosphere, and quality and are more likely to attend the cinema alone, and light cinemagoers, who place greater emphasis on convenient parking. Those who prefer watching films at home tend to prioritize comfort, indicating this as a key reason they may avoid cinemas. Survey data also highlight the social nature of cinema visits, with most people attending with friends or acquaintances (52%), partners (32%), family members (27%), or children (20%). Only 14% visit the cinema alone, a choice more common among heavy cinemagoers, people over 65, retirees, those without children under 18, low-income individuals, and visitors to niche cinemas in Riga. The main reasons for not attending the cinema more often include a lack of interesting films (50%), particularly for light cinemagoers and those living in regional areas. Competing entertainment and lifestyle choices are also relevant, as 35% report not having enough time, and 34% prefer other cultural activities. Additionally, high ticket prices are a significant barrier, especially for audiences in regional areas. Film selection is influenced by several factors, including actors (58%), with directors also important for a third of respondents (35%), especially for audiences from Riga.

In choosing certain films, personal recommendations remain crucial for 54% of the audience, while genre is a key factor for 51%. Audiences are also interested in new releases (50%) and societal interest in films (43%). Despite the large influence

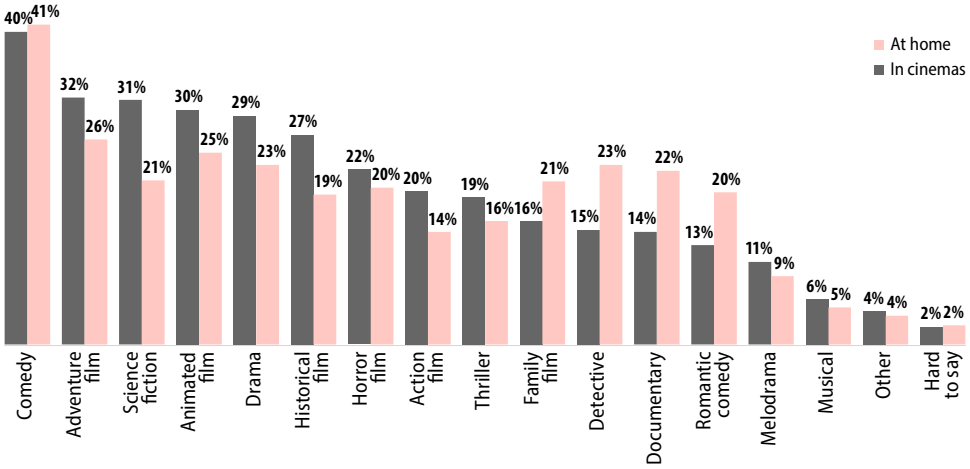

Figure 6. What types of films or genres cinema audiences most frequently choose to watch? (n = 650).

of streaming services, only a few rely on algorithmic recommendations (15%). There are notable differences in genre preferences between films watched in cinemas and at home (see Figure 6). Comedy stands out as equally popular in both settings. However, audiences prefer watching adventure, science fiction, animation, historical films, action, thrillers, and dramas in cinemas. In contrast, at home, they favour family films, documentaries, romantic comedies, and detective stories. Genres like melodramas and musicals are less popular in both settings.

Overall, cinema attendance is driven by both artistic factors and the socialization aspect. There are distinct differences between heavy cinemagoers, who seek diversity in film selection and atmosphere and often attend alone, and light cinemagoers, who value comfort and the social experience. Personal recommendations, genre, and new releases play a significant role in film choice. While the influence of streaming platforms on viewing habits is growing, cinemas continue to offer a unique experience, as evidenced by the differing genre preferences between films watched in theatres and at home.

Conclusion

The study's findings indicate that Latvian cinema audiences exhibit a hybrid film consumption model, where even regular and dedicated cinemagoers actively use streaming platforms and other digital film-viewing options. One of the most significant insights from the research is that heavy or regular cinemagoers actually consume more streaming content than light or irregular attendees. This suggests that digital viewing options broaden the audience's access to films and enhance their overall experience. This conclusion highlights that cinemas are unique places for frequent and dedicated visitors, offering distinct experiences, such as high-quality screenings, immersive viewings, and social interaction opportunities. Latvian cinema audiences appear interested in diversifying their film-viewing experiences, with digital platforms allowing access to genres not typically screened or watched in cinemas. This observation indicates that for active cinemagoers, streaming services like *Netflix* are not competing alternatives but complementary sources of film content. Another important aspect is that cinemas remain a key venue for viewing Latvian films, particularly for the significant portion of the audience that values early access to new releases and exploring the latest offerings. Here, linear TV poses more of a competitive challenge to cinemas than streaming platforms. Therefore, cinemas with a strong focus on Latvian film content serve a culturally significant and locally unique role. The analysed data also show that sociodemographic factors – especially education and location – are significant in determining cinema attendance. Interest in cinemas is partly based on educational and geographical factors, with a potential divide in attendance due to location: in regional areas, there is far less access to cinemas and film repertoires compared to the capital city. Active cinemagoers with a greater

variety of film-viewing options tend to have higher levels of education. Additionally, lifestyle factors like household responsibilities can limit cinema attendance frequency. In today's busy world, cinemas and the film industry must also compete with other leisure and cultural consumption options.

In summary, while the influence of streaming platforms and digital options on cinema-going habits is substantial and will inevitably alter traditional attendance practices, cinema-going will remain a unique cultural experience as long as cinemas continue to offer exclusive experiences and adapt to the demands of an educated, active audience seeking a rich, diverse, and current repertoire. Overall, this study provides a singular and unprecedented perspective on Latvian cinema audiences as a whole. While cinemas vary in type and priorities, this was the first time the cinema audience was analysed as a unified entity and its habits examined at a national level rather than in the interests of individual cinemas. A more profound statistical analysis of the data would offer a more precise understanding of the sociodemographic characteristics of cinema audiences. Additionally, further in-depth research into lifestyle and other life course aspects would allow for an analysis of the broader set of habits influencing cinema attendance.

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REPRESENTATION OF HISTORICAL FILMS ON STREAMING PLATFORMS

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Abstract

The digital transformation of the audiovisual sector in recent years has not only reshaped the production and distribution of films but also largely transfigured the reception of films and audience engagement. This also calls for re-evaluation of the representation and promotion of historical films and classical films on digital streaming platforms. As a film producer and researcher of film reception and the paratexts of historical films, the author of the current article aims to examine how historical films and classical films (produced during the Soviet occupation period) are presented in the catalogues of Latvian streaming platforms, as well as the potential lack of contextual information and supplementary promotional materials for audiences.

The author explores 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.

There is a striking difference in the way and means local and global platforms create the so-called viewing lists for viewers. However, an improved audience experience could be achieved by collaborating with historians, film critics, and experts in curating the catalogues and providing cultural and historical contexts for films for a contemporary audience.

Keywords: *historical films, classical films, film distribution, audience reception, digital streaming platforms, film curation, gatekeepers*

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Introduction

Changes in the audiovisual sector as a result of digitisation technologies are bringing transformation into the audiovisual culture as a whole, which also calls for a rethinking of existing filmmaking and reception formats, distribution strategies and techniques, as well as the audience's viewing habits [Koljonen 2024]. American film historians and scholars Janet Staiger [Staiger 2021] and Barbara Klinger [Klinger 1997: 107–128] have extensively covered the importance of promotional activities towards audience reception. As the British film scholar Keith Johnston writes:

> *Since the earliest days through to digital marketing techniques of the 21st century, the production, distribution, and exhibition of promotional materials has run in parallel with the film industry, the elision of promotional materials and their status as an ancillary text (or paratext) is not a new phenomenon: advertising discourse did help to condition audience expectations and to establish the terms by which a film would be judged.* [Johnston 2019: 643–662]

Everything that constitutes the audiovisual sector is subject to this process, including restored and previously made films that started to reappear in the distribution space – namely, the catalogues of the commercial digital streaming platforms. The arrival of restored films in the catalogue of commercial streaming platforms now follows a trend that has also emerged in all European countries in recent years, with major global sales agencies offering classics to the market.

Since the distribution of films requires an integrated reception and context, the principles of current cinema distribution strategies are also applicable to classical films. This raises the question of how these catalogues are made, selected and represented to audiences and whether curators and owners of these catalogues need to have a certain amount of knowledge and skills to provide a new context for these films to reach their audiences more accurately.

Global streaming platforms usually develop communication methods that reach their audience by creating new and personalised visual codes for each film – this is also the pattern for reviewing and analysing the representation of classical films within digital distribution. For the purpose of this paper, a case study methodology was employed to analyse how films produced during the Soviet occupation era, as well as contemporary historical films, are presented on contemporary commercial streaming platforms, focusing on specific examples of *TET Plus*[1],

[1] *Tet Plus* https://tet.plus/ is a film and smart TV streaming platform in Latvia owned by SIA *Tet*, a technology and entertainment operator in Latvia, owned by the Republic of Latvia (51%) represented by SIA *Publisko aktīvu pārvaldītājs Posessor* and *Tilts Communications A/S* (49%), a wholly owned *Telia Company* entity. https://view.news.eu.nasdaq.com/view?id=b197ccff0575d427eb264e13ed58f3d32&lang=en (viewed 09.03.2025.)

Viedtelevizija.lv[2] and *Go3*[3], furthermore, examining the catalogue of historical films of the global streaming platform *Netflix*. This methodology included analysing film texts available on these platforms and conducting interviews with their representatives of the Latvian streaming platforms to gain insights into the curation and contextualisation of these films. In the context of this paper, **historical films** are understood as *a fiction film showing past events or set within a historical period* [Kuhn, Westwell 2012: 205], whereas the term **classical films** refers to films produced and released during the Soviet occupation era. This classification follows the approach adopted by Latvian film researchers and historians, particularly as described by Inga Pērkone [Pērkone 2011], who draws on the concept of *classical cinema* from David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* [Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson 2006]. In this framework, Latvian classical cinema is understood as a distinct aesthetic system and stylistic direction shaped by the production modes and ideological constraints of the Soviet occupation period.

Representation of Soviet occupation period films on Latvian streaming platforms

Considering the description and synopsis of how films made during the time of the Riga Film Studio (Latvian: *Rīgas kinostudija*, the state-owned enterprise governed by the state structures of the USSR, one of the largest film production entities during the Soviet occupation period 1940–1991) are represented on the commercial streaming platforms in Latvia, there are pronounced differences in the reception of the original text that comprises the idea of the film and changes in the meaning of wording of synopsis. Since filmmaking during the Soviet occupation period was subject to the language of Soviet ideology and commissioned by *Goskino* – the State Committee for Cinematography of the USSR and the Central Television of the USSR, the descriptions of some films represented on the Latvian commercial streaming platforms still contain the ideology of the Soviet occupation period, that denigrates the society of the 1930s, particularly in the context of pre-Soviet occupied Latvia when the so-called **capitalist oppression** and **class struggle** were some of

[2] Film and smart TV streaming platform www.viedtelevizija.lv is owned by *SIA Latvijas Mobilais Telefons*, a mobile network operator in Latvia, that is owned by *Telia Company AB* (24.5%), *Sonera Holding B.V.* (a subsidiary of TeliaSonera) (24.5%), the State Joint Stock Company Latvian State Radio and Television Centre (VAS Latvijas Valsts radio un televīzijas centrs) (23%), *SIA Tet* (23%), Republic of Latvia (5%) represented by *SIA Publisko aktīvu pārvaldītājs Posessor* https://company.lursoft.lv/lv/latvijas-mobilais-telefons/50003050931 (viewed 09.03.2025.)

[3] *Go3* https://go3.lv/ is a film and smart TV streaming platform operated by *SIA All Media Group*, which is owned by the Lithuanian enterprise *UAB All Media Group* (*TV3 Group*). *Go3* streaming platform is operating in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia https://company.lursoft.lv/lv/all-media-group/40203071116 (viewed 09.03.2025.)

the themes represented in the films – for example, – the plot description of the film *Agrā rūsa / Early Rust*, Gunārs Cilinskis, 1979, states: *"In the early 1930s in Latvia, Elza, a poor country girl, arrives in Riga and becomes an intelligent unemployed woman"* [Tet.plus (a)].

Similarly, the streaming platforms *Go3* and *TET Plus* in Latvia offer another film made in 1969 at the Riga Film Studio – *Pie bagātās kundzes / My Wealthy Mistress*, Leonīds Leimanis, 1969, where the description of the main character states: *"The intelligent unemployed Oļģerts Kurmis, together with his friend, tramp Frīdis, seeks work with the Kalnkāja and his wife"* [Tet.plus (b), Viedtelevīzija]. The description does not indicate a period of time when the film's story takes place. However, this is a film about the unemployment of the 1920s–30s, and the term **intelligent unemployed** is a term that would require explanation within the context of the era and the context of the making of the film itself.

Another example is the still widely popular classical TV drama *Ilgais ceļš kāpās* (*Long Road in the Dunes*, Aloizs Brenčs, 1981), which was produced as a Soviet propaganda seven-part series. The narrative constructs a demeaning portrayal of pre-occupation Latvia as an independent state while simultaneously altering historical facts to align with Soviet ideological perspectives. However, the English synopsis of this film, as included in the catalogue of the digital streaming platform, does not contain any reference to these facts and is worded, as follows: *"Love and betrayal in a small fishing village in Latvia from 1930s until the Soviet time. Time before WWII, during WWII, punishment in Siberia, Soviet Union, returning home, and above all that – undying love, that still survives no matter what. And, on top of that, Marta and Arthur share their love"* [Tet.plus (c)]. The Latvian synopsis of the film, as included in the catalogue, is longer and more descriptive; the following is author's translation of it:

> *Arthur is a simple fisherman; Marta is the daughter of a rich family. Love blossoms between the two, but a misunderstanding leads Marta to marry Rihards, the son of an industrialist. Although fate tries to separate them, sending each to a different part of the world – Arthur to the frontline and Marta and her husband to Germany – they keep looking for each other and their hearts long to meet again. Thinking that Arthur has fallen in battle, she stops looking for him, but one day she learns that the man she has always loved is alive.* [Tet.plus (d)]

Audience reception and the need for historical contextualisation

These films from the 1970s and 1980s are, in a way, films about Latvian history. However, they were solely made following the ideological order and reasons – to produce films with negative narratives about the era preceding Soviet occupation.

A viewer unversed in the history of the Latvian cinema of the Soviet occupation period, without an extended context and knowledge of the film, might not know and understand the context of these films as they are currently presented in the catalogue of the streaming platform.

All these restored classical films are catalogued as *Latvian film* by the algorithm or curator of the streaming platforms, which would not be misleading as such, but the problem here is rather to understand whether films made in the 1970s as **modern dramas** of their time would already qualify as historical dramas in the perception of the contemporary viewer. Usually, the contemporary catalogues and descriptions of films on digital streaming platforms are developed in a very generalised manner, and it is the lack of the descriptive and contextual part of the film that, in a way, distorts the contemporary reception.

With the passage of time, these films have transitioned into documents that need recontextualisation, particularly for contemporary audiences and younger generations that lack direct experience of the Soviet occupation period. Modern audiences need contextual information to fully understand the historical aspects of these films. Therefore, promotional strategies could incorporate educational elements that explain the historical background, the socio-political environment of the Soviet occupation, and the specific events depicted in the films [Miķelsone 2024]. This could be achieved through more detailed promotional materials – synopses, behind-the-scenes documentaries, and expert commentaries available on streaming platforms.

Alongside doctoral studies and research on the reception of historical films and paratexts, the author of this paper has been working in the film industry for over twenty years as a producer of documentaries and fiction films, with a particular focus on the production and representation of historical narratives on screen (e.g., *Melānijas hronika / The Chronicles of Melanie*, Viesturs Kairišs, 2016; *Emīlija. Latvijas preses karaliene / Emily. Queen of the Press,* Andis Mizišs, Kristīne Želve, Dāvis Sīmanis 2021; *Janvāris / January,* Viesturs Kairišs, 2022; *Marijas klusums / Maria's Silence*, Dāvis Sīmanis, 2024). In addition to production, responsibilities related to the marketing and distribution of these films to Latvian audiences have also been frequently undertaken by the producer. As part of distribution planning, a key aspect of strategy has been the development of targeted paratexts – marketing communication messages and materials as well as the organisation of events aimed at curating the film's presentation and providing historical and thematic context, e.g., discussions with historians and lectures on the historical themes, protagonists and events described in the films, production of accompanying documentaries, curation of an exhibition, etc. This process plays a crucial role in shaping audience reception, illustrating how film distribution tools – such as advertising and marketing

strategies – actively contribute to the interpretative framework through which viewers engage with historical cinema.

To make classical historical films relevant to today's viewers, contemporary promotional messages should draw connections between the past and present, highlighting themes that could resonate with contemporary audiences who may find parallels with current global events. The communication strategies employed in the promotion of these films play a crucial role in shaping their contemporary cultural reception. Like the paratexts used within the theatrical marketing and distribution process, catalogue owners of digital streaming platforms should carefully consider the messages they want to convey and how these messages align with contemporary societal values. To better understand the possible technological and cultural principles and perspectives for a new presentation of classical films, it is useful to look at the practices introduced by digital platforms in global markets. In a study devoted to the current circulation patterns, Roderik Smits writes:

> *Online video-on-demand (VOD) platforms are reshaping the ways that films circulate in national and international markets, how they are introduced and promoted to audiences in those markets, and how audiences engage with them. Netflix, Amazon, MUBI, and many other VOD platforms are part of an online market with far-reaching implications for the breadth of films that audiences can watch. [...] There is also emerging research on the circulation of audiovisual works and the way they are introduced and promoted on VOD platforms. Such studies revolve around business strategies, cross-border circulation, platform interfaces, and audience recommendations through human curators and algorithm technology.* [Smits 2022]

Gatekeepers in film distribution: Human curators and algorithms

The issues outlined above represent the fact that the way and form in which classical and historical films are represented in the catalogues of digital streaming platforms is highly dependent on their developers – the so-called gatekeepers. The contextualisation of both historical and classical films for their placement in the catalogues of digital streaming platforms could be the responsibility of these gatekeepers. Gatekeepers are important if we want to discuss and look at what kind of historical films are reaching contemporary audiences today, how, why and according to what criteria they are selected for inclusion in the catalogues of commercial digital streaming platforms. As per the Cambridge Business English Dictionary – gatekeeper is a term used in sociology, journalism and communication science to refer to a person or institution that controls the flow of information, resources or opportunities to the general public.

In the field of reception of cinema, such a gatekeeper position until recently was held by film critics, who formed lists of recommendations and reviews of films. They were concrete people, usually known by name and occupation, usually representing a media outlet. Nevertheless, alongside this format of criticism, which surely still exists today, the place of the gatekeeper of film reception is beginning to be occupied by the catalogue developers of commercial streaming platforms, who, in combination with AI-generated algorithms, are becoming the determinants of the reception fields of audiences. Unlike traditional gatekeepers in the field of film criticism or journalism, these new gatekeepers are anonymous, and the recommendation algorithms are designed in such a way that the viewer is, as if involuntarily, the compiler and recommender of their own *film list*; the anonymous gatekeeper creates a seemingly personalised approach to what is being watched, raising concerns that traditional film criticism is beginning to lose its role.

The film scholar Mattias Frey, in his extensive study on *Netflix* audience profiling and recommendation systems titled *Netflix Recommends: Algorithms, Film Choice, and the History of Taste*, poses questions about whether recommender systems could endanger the careers of film critics, arts and culture journalists. He asks:

> *Could computers and robots usurp some of the trusted critic's and the learned professor's traditional functions? Will arts criticism become more or less a hobby, a boutique industry of human-touch curation thriving only among the monied classes, patronized by the one-percenters*? [Frey 2021: 206]

He also suggests an answer to this almost rhetorical question:

> *Higher vistas remain for criticism. It is clear from this study that users still hunger for criticism's third-stage purpose: to deepen engagement after the film, to test opinions, to enter into an imagined dialogue about cultural value. But quick-tip listings, an important informational service that critics have long provided, may well yield further to aggregators and algorithms.* [Frey 2021: 206]

The role of promotional paratexts and marketing

As marketing, publicity and critical reception have long been recognised as influencing factors of the film reception by wider audience, in the time of subscription VOD triumph over other distribution channels – it is important to implement wider studies exploring the ways how platforms, while acting as gatekeepers in the choice of selection and differentiation of their catalogue, offer films to audiences.

Descriptive synopsis, trailers, posters, or selected stills of the film are the main tools used for promotional activities on platforms. The gatekeepers of VOD platforms, combined with AI-generated algorithms, now constitute a field of audiovisual culture

that leaves the choice, evaluation, self-sufficiency or lack of knowledge to the viewers themselves and, at the same time, raises the question of whether and how putting classical historical film unit in a new context gives the films a new meaning and context. Thus, it can be argued, that the collaboration between critics working in traditional media and the vast catalogue field of digital platforms creates untapped opportunities for film historians and critics as new distribution strategies force a new restructuring of the context. If we want the content of local streaming platforms to be competitive with global players, it is essential to direct this vector not only towards increasing the number of film titles in the catalogue but also towards creating reception tools that shape and create context, and that demands an increasingly personalised approach.

Lists and cultural patterns – insights from Umberto Eco

The catalogues of films developed by streaming platforms that act as gatekeepers also allow us to talk about this cultural-historical phenomenon of **lists**, which the writer, philosopher and semiotician Umberto Eco discusses in his book *Infinity of Lists*. What are these visual lists? Like a **painting**, revealing certain images to the gaze, they also allow us to guess what lies behind it all. These personalised lists of film visuals, in the form of film catalogues, are most often presented in photographs, adapted to the consumer by an algorithm known only to the streamer. The catalogues of films on streaming platforms are in line with the Western cultural tendency, described by Umberto Eco, to systematise and create lists, which leads us to assess whether there is any comprehensible regularity in these lists produced by the algorithms of streaming platforms. Lists encapsulate this desire of culture to strive for orderliness, even if its creation is and remains the sole responsibility of platform developers.

In the chapter devoted to Mass Media Lists, Eco calls the Internet the ruler of the world's lists:

> *The World Wide Web, which is both web and labyrinth, not and ordered tree, and which of all vertigos promises us the most mystical, almost totally virtual one, and really offers us a catalogue of information that makes us feel wealthy and omnipotent, the only snag being that we don't know which of its elements refers to data from the real world and which does not, no longer with any distinction between truth and error.* [Eco 2009: 360]

The personalised catalogues of films that streaming platforms offer "just for you" are in line with this model of cultural perception of Western civilisation that Umberto Eco talks about, which gives us the illusion of infinity, that beyond these few images of films, posters, descriptions of films, you click on a film, i.e.,

another world, and, after watching it, the algorithm generates an infinite list of films again.

Algorithmic recommendations on streaming platforms

An online *Netflix Technology Blog* that holds a post published on 30 January 2023, by multiple authors stating the following:

> *When members* [meaning subscribers] *are shown a title on Netflix, the displayed artwork, trailers, and synopses are personalized. That means members see the assets that are most likely to help them make an informed choice. These assets are a critical source of information for the member to make a decision to watch, or not watch, a title. The stories on Netflix are multidimensional and there are many ways that a single story could appeal to different members. We want to show members the images, trailers, and synopses that are most helpful to them for making a watch decision*. [Tang, Vartakavi, Badonie, Segalin, Iyengar 2023]

Netflix offers lists called *We think you will love this*, based on what you have watched before, categorising and taking the lists to ever greater infinity, offering a *Netflix* section called *Retro TV*, categorising historical films as *Romantic Historical Films*, *European Historical Films*, as *Award-winning Historical Films*, *Korean Historical Films*, *Documentary Historical Films*, and even further down the listings are made when entering the keywords World War I or World War II into the *Netflix* search engine. The algorithm offers us the choice between colour or black-and-white films about the World Wars, and documentaries. Words such as "Holocaust" are subject to a categorisation or listing algorithm, which gives you films like *The Pianist* (Roman Polanski, 2002), *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1994), etc. Similarly, *Cold War*, *Communism*, *Democracy*, *Berlin Wall*, and *Putin* are subject to a categorisation or listing algorithm. The pages of streaming platforms are a kind of "shop window" described by Umberto Eco, which is becoming more and more detailed. Hence, the audience is also becoming more and more detailed and fragmented. The digitisation of films and images has not only facilitated this culture of list-making but has also taken away the viewer's desire to search for his or her own film. Instead, a digitisation algorithm developed by a gatekeeper does it for him or her. These facts allow us to look at the question of the crisis of film criticism, as already said before, when AI takes the place of these gatekeepers of criticism.

The logic of the lists offered by these streaming platforms is mostly unclear; these lists have some internal logic that is known only to AI. If a film historian or critic were to offer you films about the Cold War or the Holocaust, they would have

to justify their criteria for including one or the other in the list, but AI does not allow such criteria.

Promotional text in the reception of films is also important, which, similar to categorisation, is offered by a two-to-three-word description of films, a characteristic indicative of the film catalogues on digital streaming platforms. For example, on *Netflix*, the most common descriptors for historical films are words like "Violent", "Dark", "Emotional", "Intimate", "Suspenseful", "Heartfelt", "Tearjerker", and "Period Piece". The visual representation of each film in the *Netflix* catalogue includes the following two-to-three-word description. For example, the 2022 year film *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Edward Berger, is identified as "Violent", "Dark", *The Pianist* and *Schindler's List* are characterised as "Violent", "Dark", "Tearjerker".

Categorisation and framing techniques

Another global streaming platform *MUBI* is a more advanced framing and contextualisation example – the platform offers a different framing method for the films – there are specifically curated lists of films, and each of the films is catalogued using the traditional promotional tools – stills of the film, trailer and synopsis offering also a specifically written description of the film – *MUBI* take on the film that provides the context and also highlights achievements of the film.

It could be said that the film's three-word signifiers frame the audience in a way that is consistent with the theory of framing developed by linguist George Lakoff [Lakoff and Johnson 1980], where that metaphor is the way people perceive and experience the world. From this theory of metaphor, Lakoff developed the theory of framing, which argues that people's reactions to a process or phenomenon are determined by the angle from which the phenomenon is presented. Words, according to Lakoff, are given a certain interpretative frame that orients thinking in a certain direction and determines the opinion of a society or community on various problems and phenomena; G. Lakoff considered framing as a mental structure that words can evoke in our consciousness. When a word (e.g., holocaust, deportation) is read out, certain frames of ideas are activated in the mind of the viewer. According to Lakoff, framing steers thinking in a certain direction. This means that with the help of such lists of streamer's digital catalogues it is possible to direct thinking, including the reception of a work of art, in a particular context or direction, so that we are framed to cry watching a film or that it will make our emotions arise.

Compared to global streaming platforms, local Latvian streaming platforms – *TET Plus*, viedtelevizija.lv and Go3 categorise film lists more modestly, sorting them and selecting keywords only by genre – for example, *TET* selects 3–4 genre

names – e.g., *Chronicles of Melanie* – "Historical", "Biography", "Drama"; *Dvēseļu putenis / Blizzard of Souls* (Dzintars Dreibergs, 2019) – "Action", "Drama", "Historical", "War", *Sutemose / In the Dusk* (Šarūnas Bartas, 2019) – "Drama", "Historical".

Conclusion

To conclude, it is evident that global streaming platforms are advancing in the development of reception and framing perspectives for audiences. By using algorithm-driven categorisations, personalised and targeted promotional materials (visuals) and descriptions of films – global streaming platforms such as *Netflix* and *MUBI* contribute to shaping audience reception of historical films. Partly, these strategies provide more context of historical films for contemporary viewers. In contrast, local streaming platforms in Latvia, such as *TET Plus*, Viedtelevizija.lv and *Go3*, are currently more limited in these categorisation methods and contextualisation of descriptions and promotional materials. The lack of historical context within this limited approach possibly provides an inadequate differentiation between historical films and classical films produced during the Soviet occupation period, thereby potentially undermining the reception of these films and leaving audiences ambiguous. It would be beneficial for these platforms to invest in technological advancements and engage film scholars and historians to develop materials that would provide contextual insights and paratextual resources (e.g., detailed film synopsis, historical context descriptions, documentaries, expert commentaries and curated discussions). Implementing a more refined categorisation that distinguishes between classical and historical films would improve audience reception, comprehension and critical engagement with historical content. Collaborations with film scholars, film critics and historians would ensure a more curated and in-depth reception, thereby educating the audience and providing context. An integrated approach connecting the algorithmic AI recommendation systems with human curation would improve audience engagement, contextual understanding, and overall viewing experience. The greatest challenge of the digitisation era remains to ensure that the context of past texts is not lost but is comprehensibly communicated to contemporary and future audiences in accordance with accurate historical reality.

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ARCHIVES

THE ANACHRONISM MACHINE

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Abstract

The appropriation and reuse of archival documents always involves the dialectical interaction of multiple gazes to produce meaning: the gaze associated with the original document and the gaze of the appropriationist who places the document within a new context. These gazes may be quite disparate in both their intention and effect, but until recently, they could both be assumed to be associated with and, at least in theory, traceable to a human agent. With the advent of AI imaging, the gaze of the appropriationist is no longer guaranteed to be human. Nor is such an AI appropriation necessarily even legible as an appropriation. Indeed, AI imaging has the potential to seamlessly rearrange and stitch together elements of existing images in such a way that the original images may be fractured, combined within the frame, and (re)constituted into a new configuration – an archival refraction, as it were – that originates in a nonhuman agency. What kind of historical evidence or archival practice, if any, can resist this refractive process, and what will be its epistemological and historiographic consequences? This essay argues that AI, in its appropriation and reuse of existing images and sounds, is an anachronism machine. In other words, AI images that appear to be *archival* introduce the threat of imperceptible anachronism into the historical record in ways that may collapse distinct historical times (and places) into an AI chronotope to which there is no exterior.

Keywords: *artificial intelligence, archive, appropriation, anachronism, historiography*

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CULTURE
CROSSROADS

Introduction

With the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, our relation to the archive is fundamentally changed. AI-content generation threatens to undo any coherence that we – by which I mean archivists and scholars attempting to speak to one another across time and across generations – have been able to provide for an endlessly complex and confusing world. The study of history is an Enlightenment project containing the hope that the empirical study of the traces left by the past may offer us in the present some guidance, some chance of charting a better-than-entirely-random course into the future. Yet, the part that lends any rational authority whatsoever to history is its empiricism, its basis in evidence, in records, in documents, in demonstrable and verifiable facts – in other words, in the archive. Historical knowledge is always metonymic since the past, by definition, is gone. All we ever have are tiny fragments left by a disappeared era from which we try to extrapolate a whole – another world, another chronotope and its accompanying cultural paradigms. As partial and tentative as our sense of this lost world may be, our ability to imagine a temporally other world is precisely what allows us to recognize the contingency of our own social structures and most basic assumptions – and to thereby recognize the possibility for change.

In the early days of digital media, there was much excitement about the potentials of online archives – specifically, digitized archives – providing historical information to many more people than previously possible. Certainly, digital archives have offered easier access to a vast quantity of historical information and documents to far more people than ever before. This has, however, sometimes come at the expense of material archiving practices. Some archives and libraries have digitized their old newspapers and then thrown the originals away, happy for the additional storage space. Many families have digitized their old Super8 home movies and thrown away the film reels, thinking their inscribed memories safe forever in digital form. Moreover, many new writings that are published and recordings produced never see hard copy. These words, sounds, and images – moving and otherwise – exist only in digital code. Indeed, so many of the traces of our most recent cultural memory is now strictly digital. Which is also to say, as Lev Manovich pointed out years back, easily rearranged, recombined, and reconfigured [Manovich 2002].

What, then, happens when the metonymic object on which our historical understanding is based – the archival document – is subject to potentially undetectable transformation and distortion? The historical world we extrapolate becomes ever more of a fiction while maintaining its (false) epistemic authority. This is precisely the threat I see AI posing to our digital (including digitized) archives. Certainly, beyond the basic concern about formats becoming obsolete and their contents therefore becoming inaccessible, it is becoming exceedingly clear that the traces of the past may themselves be transformed.

Perceptual realism in the era of AI

Of course, forgery and historical misrepresentations have always been with us. Yet, crucially, while manipulation of historical evidence was always possible, it used to be more difficult both to do and to conceal. Now, our digital technologies can instantly, seamlessly reconfigure any image or sound while maintaining what Stephen Prince has called "perceptual realism." He writes:

> *Perceptual realism ... designates a relationship between the image or film and the spectator, and it can encompass both unreal images and those which are referentially realistic. Because of this, unreal images may be referentially fictional but perceptually realistic.* [Prince 1996: 32]

Prince developed this term to account for CGI images that are perceptually persuasive even if we know that their subjects are referentially fictional: for instance, the orcs and other fantastical creatures in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Peter Jackson, 2001–2003). However, the term is also useful in accounting for images that appear archival – here meaning that they generate what I have elsewhere called the "archive effect" – but are in fact not.[1] While this could be done before the advent of AI, algorithmic technologies have both automated this process and intensified its perceptual persuasiveness.

It is worth noting that even when no one is actively trying to produce false information, the correlation between verifiable history and the perceptually realistic representations made possible by AI becomes increasingly tenuous. We have fed a great many traces of our cultural history – our collective archive – into AI datasets, and the linked algorithms are now producing remixed versions of this content. Yet they do so without regard for provenance, for the specificity of the temporal and social contexts from which historical traces derive. Indeed, what I want to argue here is that AI is poised to become an "anachronism machine" armed with the epistemic weapon of perceptual realism.

Anachronism refers to "*an error in chronology; the placing of something in a period of time to which it does not belong (esp. one which is earlier than its true date)*" [Oxford English Dictionary 2023]. Jacques Rancière has made the important point that this notion of anachronism relies on a unitary and totalizing conception of epoch.

[1] Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (Routledge, 2014). The book reformulates the "archival" as an experience of the viewer watching a particular film rather than as a stable object. The experience of the archive effect is constituted through the viewer's perception of a "temporal disparity" and an "intentional disparity" between different elements within the same text.

In his essay *Anachronism and the Conflict of Times*, Rancière argues that in modern historiography, the notion of the epoch

> *is no longer a sequence of time located at a certain point, between a past and a future. It is an organic totality defined by its self-identity. And this understanding of the epoch precludes anachronism. Within this framework, anachronism is not the misplacement of an event in the chain linking earlier to later facts. It is a detail, a shade of color that clashes with the whole painting. Anachronism shows itself as not belonging to the picture, not belonging to its epoch. People cannot not resemble their time, and time is both the rule of coexistence that works as a global necessity for those who live in it, and also the bell that rings every hour of the day and accompanies all events of individual and collective life ... And this identity determines what people can do, feel, and think.* [Rancière 2020: 117]

He contends that anachronism is regarded as a problem not simply because it mixes up chronology but because it risks *disidentification in forms of life* [Rancière 2020: 117]. He further notes that

> *the core of the problem is untimeliness ... Anachronism ultimately means 'impropriety;' it is a sin against time as location, against the social distribution of positions, occupations, identities, and capacities.* [Rancière 2020: 118]

Rancière argues that this conception of history forecloses the possibility of emancipation, which he defines as "*changing one's manner of inhabiting time*" [Rancière 2020: 122]. Hence, in Rancière's conception, the liberatory potential of anachronism lies in its ability to disrupt our sense of the unity of an epoch, to demonstrate the heterogeneity of temporalities that coexist within a given epoch, thereby allowing us to imagine changing our own "manner of inhabiting time".

What seems to me to be at stake in Rancière's argument is the idea that many temporalities coexist and have equal value – that the time of kings and business titans is no more meaningful than that of serfs and fast-food workers, for instance – within a given time period and, moreover, that anyone has the potential to change their manner of inhabiting time, which is to say, change their position in society. What I would maintain is lost in his discussion of anachronism, however, is the horizon of possibilities that does, in fact, subtend any given epoch. Indeed, while I agree with Rancière's assessment that every epoch involves a heterogeneity of temporalities, there are nonetheless certain possibilities that are foreclosed in any given period. Once these possibilities are opened, that foreclosure becomes nearly impossible to imagine. This is particularly so in relation to new media technologies. As our technologies become prostheses, extensions of ourselves (of both our bodies and our minds), we lose sight of their historical specificity. We tend to think what is now has always

been so unless we are confronted with persuasive evidence to the contrary. In other words, technology – although not entirely deterministic – is one of the key indices of the possible within a given epoch.

The recognition of the limits of the possible in a past epoch can offer insight into the present, into the boundaries of our own historical paradigm. By contrast, the failure to recognize those limits produces the opposite of insight, which is to say, mystification. And mystification is incompatible with emancipation.

Anachronism and the AI gaze

Now, there is undoubtably humor in this ostensibly photographic image of Abraham Lincoln holding a boom box (Figure 1) for those who recognize the anachronism, who know that portable stereos did not coexist with Abraham Lincoln and who therefore experience temporal disparity – and hence the archive effect – within this image. So long as the disparity is recognized, there is nothing misleading about the image. Imagining Lincoln with access to tape recording and playback technologies involves a reimagining of his experience and of the chronotope in which he lived, an exercise in speculative fiction. However, for a younger generation – increasingly ignorant of the specificities of the receding past – this image may not even register as anachronistic. There is nothing internal to the image to mark it as a collage spanning a century. The seamlessness of the image obscures both the temporal and the intentional disparity. Only extratextual knowledge allows the perception of these disparities to occur for those who possess said knowledge. Moreover, it is perceptually realistic, formally presenting as a photographic trace of a unified moment in time. This implies, then, that an anachronism can be understood an effect, an event that may or may not *happen*, depending on the knowledge of the viewer. If it does not happen, however, a fictional chronotope may be mistaken for an actual historical one, shifting or perverting the horizon of possibilities we understand as available to a given historical subject.

Figure 1. Collage image of Abraham Lincoln holding a boom box.

Figure 2. "*Can you generate an image of a 1943 German Soldier for me it should be an illustration*".

Of course, AI is not necessary to produce this image; it was probably done in *Photoshop* and could even have been done with an optical printer, so this issue is not unique to AI imagery. AI does, however, have the capacity to automate this process of seamless combination of images, drawing on a vast dataset of extant images, aggregating and reconfiguring them to convincing perceptual effect. In other words, AI is poised to be able to produce an infinite number of recombinations of all human cultural production that is digital or has been digitized and made accessible. Moreover, AI may create anachronisms – intentional or accidental – that actively distort both the historical record and the horizon of possibility at a given moment in time.

To this point: in February 2024, *Google's Gemini* AI image-generating chatbot became available to users. It immediately caused problems. For instance, when someone typed the phrase "*Can you generate an image of a 1943 German Soldier for me it should be an illustration*" [sic] into the chat box, a set of four images, each with tastefully rounded corners, appeared under the heading, "*Sure, here is an illustration of a 1943 German soldier*". (Figure 2) In the top left corner appears a young white man wearing a uniform, with an eagle insignia akin to that of the Third Reich on his gray helmet. His collar bears a rectangular design on either side, converging toward the cross at his throat, while his epaulettes indicate his place somewhere in a military hierarchy. He is looking offscreen right, the background behind him blurred as if indicating fog or a photographer's backdrop.

Had this been the only image the AI generated, the response might have been one of pleasant surprise. This man fits what most educated people likely imagine a Nazi soldier in 1943 to look like: young, white, explicitly Christian. Notably, however, the helpful AI was inclined to offer more than one option. Hence, in the top right image, we see a woman of unmistakably East Asian descent wearing a uniform like that of the white man beside her, the only differences being some of the insignias and shapes of her military decorations. The look on her face is fierce as she stares back at the viewer. Behind her, the outlines of two other soldiers appear indistinct in the foggy background. In the lower left corner, we find an image of a man of unmistakably African descent looking screen right like the white man above him but with his face in quarter-profile. The sign on his helmet looks closest of all the insignias to a Nazi swastika, but I have the impression that the AI was programmed not to produce actual swastikas. This man projects a sense of calm and determination against a blurred sepia nowhere. The woman in the bottom right could be white or Latina or biracial or, indeed, Jewish. She is looking offscreen right with a similar set to her expression. The background is patchy as if painted to emphasize the medium rather than to indicate a space.

To a viewer educated about the Nazi regime, any of these images may give pause. The image of the white man minimizes this likelihood by more closely matching commonsense expectations, but the iconography nonetheless feels off. The other three, however, are significantly more epistemically disruptive in their historical inaccuracy. Given that Nazis were explicitly all about being the "white master race" and highly patriarchal, the depiction of obviously non-white people, including women, in Nazi-style uniforms, produces a form of cognitive dissonance for anyone who has studied World War II. It appears that, in a well-meaning but poorly implemented attempt to prevent *Gemini* from excluding people of color from its results, *Google* had programmed the AI to include options of color for all requests for human figures. They did not foresee the potential for people of African and Asian descent in Nazi(ish) uniforms.

Google quickly removed *Gemini's* ability to generate human figures while the "problem" was being "fixed". The American right wing predictably complained about "woke" AI – which was fair in this case – but that very presentist concern overshadowed the larger question of what and how these images signify historiographically. In particular, they constitute a form of anachronism, imagining and imaging a reality that was simply not possible in 1943. Although this anachronism was quickly caught, it nevertheless indicates AI's propensity for producing hybrid temporalities that may nonetheless appear perceptually realistic and epistemically persuasive, particularly to those without certain extratextual knowledge.

Yet, it is worth asking, what exactly are we looking at here? One of the key contentions of my previous works on found footage is that even though we cannot know

Figure 3. "*Make me a film still from a piece of archival footage*".

the actual intent behind the image (we must not fall into the intentionalist fallacy, assuming that we can somehow divine the author's "true intent" or that the author's intent *is* the meaning), we do project one.[2] We imagine a body, a look, an intentionality *behind* the image, however vague our sense of that being is. In the past, we have been able to understand perceptually realistic images – ones that look indexical – as attached, if not to a literal human gaze, at least to a human intentionality. The historiographic power of the archive effect – its evidentiary power – lies in both our sense of the relative datedness of the archival document and its grounding in an intentionality distinct from that of the appropriationist. In the archival document, we perceive (or project) at least two intentionally discrete gazes, in other words, the layered gaze.[3] But how can we understand the AI's intent – its gaze – as well as the gaze (or gazes) of its sourced materials – its archive or dataset – and the relation between the two?

To investigate this question, I asked *ChatGPT4* (also known as *DALL-E*) to "*Make me a film still from a piece of archival footage*". (Figure 3) We see here a black-and-white image with sprocket holes at the edges, though they appear on the wrong edges if the image is to be upright. A large crowd is gathered before a raised platform on which some other people appear to be conducting an unspecified ceremony.

[2] See Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (Routledge Press, 2014) and *Reuse, Misuse, Abuse: The Ethics of Audiovisual Appropriation in the Digital Era* (Rutgers University Press, 2020).

[3] For instance, in *Reuse, Misuse, Abuse*, I discussed a variety of gazes that we might project onto archival documents and their reuse: accusatory, attentive, camp, cartographic, clinical, colonialist, counter-, critical, defensive, dehumanizing, denigrating, dialectical, disclosing, dislocating, discriminatory, endangered, exploitative, extractive, hateful, hermetic, humane, illicit, judgmental, male, malevolent, maternal, memorial, mocking, murderous, objectifying, occluded, playful, preservationist, professional, propagandistic, protected, queer, reformative, reparative, responsible, revelatory, satirical, secluded, straight, threatening, tourist, vengeful, violent, white.

The architecture suggests a European city sometime before the 20th century, but both the time period and location are nebulous. This nebulousness is reinforced by the varied garb visible in the crowd, particularly the head-coverings, which include a straw hat, what might be a keffiyeh, and several skullcaps as well as many bare heads. Notably, no faces are clearly visible.

The temporalities and intentionalities embedded in this image can initially be divided into that of the AI and that of the dataset. In a sense, the AI's temporality and intentionality can be clearly defined. The AI speaks from the moment of its prompting (in relation to the moment at which the dataset was constituted), and its intent is aligned with its algorithmic parameters and the given prompt. If I were to attempt to define the intentionality of its gaze, I would call it: a literal, undiscerning, amalgamating gaze. It seeks the information requested from its dataset according to a literal interpretation of its instructions and then amalgamates what it deems relevant; however, it can only make limited distinctions about relevance.

The other layer of the gaze – that of the dataset – is much harder to define. Because *DALL-E* draws on a massive, heterogeneous dataset scraped from the Internet, its temporality and intentionality are likewise plural and heterogeneous. Yet, these heterogeneities are amalgamated and condensed into a single image in the process of their appropriation. Notably, what is lost in the process are the specific temporalities and intentionalities embedded in each discrete document in the dataset. These become indistinguishable from one another in the process of amalgamation. However, traces of this heterogeneity persist in the image's odd juxtapositions and in its very vagueness.

To further explore how the AI intersects with the notion of archive, I attempted to make it generate a more explicit archive effect, asking it to "*Create a then-and-now set of two images*" with a dated image "*contrasted with the same scene in 2024*". In response, it produced this next set of images along with the text:

> *Here is the then-and-now set of images. The first image shows a black-and-white scene from a piece of archival footage, while the second image depicts the same scene in 2024, highlighting the changes in architecture, fashion, and technology over the years. I hope you find this comparison interesting!* [Fig. 4]

In both images, we see a street scene, the perspectival lines converging toward a building in the distance as a crowd of people gathers as if for some kind of presentation that has yet to begin. There are clear distinctions between the two images: the lefthand image is black and white and the spectators in the image are wearing long coats, some of them also sporting top hats or bowler hats. Early automobiles appear on the street and the building in the distance is a clocktower sporting a flag. In the righthand image, which is in color, the spectators are wearing a variety of clothing including suits and

Figure 4. "*Create a then-and-now set of two images*" with a dated image "*contrasted with the same scene in 2024*".

hoodie sweatshirts. The buildings on the sides are the same as those in the other image but the buildings in the further distance are composed of reflective glass rectangles.

Again, what are we looking at? The archive effect here, if it occurs at all, is very much attenuated. There is, certainly, a sense of then and now, but as in the previous image I discussed, the "then" of the lefthand image is vague. The clothing and architecture suggest sometime in the late 19th century, but the image is too crisp and the positioning of the figures in the middle of the street is perplexing. The image on the right does feel contemporary but it is likewise "off". Where is this? Who are these people? What are they looking at and why are some of them facing a different way? Without the ability to perceive or at least reasonably project a temporal location and a more precisely intending gaze, the archive effect does not function except, perhaps, on a purely aesthetic – rather than evidentiary – level.

This is odd, in that the archive subtends these images, in that everything here is derived from the archive (in the most expansive sense of that word), but its dataset combines fact and fiction, truth and lies, and seems to put everything into a blender. Maoist propaganda films, Super8 home movies of a family gathering, Marvel blockbusters: all are swirled together to the point that the specific temporal and intentional origins of the source documents are completely obscured. Although the AI "looks" from the moment of its prompting, this moment can only be contrasted with a vague pastness combining both factual and fictional sources. So temporal disparity falls apart. Meanwhile, originating intentionalities are likewise obfuscated; for instance, there is no legible delineation in the dataset between fiction and nonfiction. We cannot ascertain the provenance of the source documents the AI is drawing from or what might have been meant by them. The archive effect, if there is one, is not so much faked as made meaningless.

Mutant image, recombinant past

I have been trying to find the right metaphor for the generation of these AI images that indicate an "historical" past that never happened as such, but which nevertheless derives from our collective cultural archive and is – or soon will be – perceptually persuasive. I have settled on refraction and recombination. Refraction means, at its core, to "break" or to "break open" as in the splitting of white light into the colors of the rainbow.[4] Meanwhile, to combine means "*to bring into such close relationship as to obscure individual characters*".[5] Yet, the adjective *recombinant* is most often used to describe the mixing of DNA to produce new hybrid genes. I think often of Alex Garland's 2018 science fiction film *Annihilation*. In this film, an unexplained phenomenon called the Shimmer has taken over a section of the Pacific Northwest of the United States. Scientists are studying this place, but anyone who goes into the Shimmer ceases communication and does not return. The film follows a crew of only women who, each for their own semi-suicidal reasons, decide to go into the Shimmer. Within the Shimmer, the experience of time becomes strange but more importantly, there are odd plants that none of the scientists have ever seen before and then strange animals that appear to be bizarre hybrids of extant species, both animal and vegetal. For instance, we see a pair of deerlike creatures with flowers growing from their antlers, moving in perfect synchronization. Indeed, they not only incorporate multiple species' morphology but also absorb aspects of behavior. At one point, one of the scientists disappears, dragged away by a snarling, unseen predator. A bit later, the remaining scientists hear the lost one screaming and charge out only to find a bizarrely mutated bearlike creature shrieking for help in the dead woman's voice. Slowly, they realize that everything – including DNA, sound, and perhaps even consciousness – is refracted by the Shimmer and then recombined into previously impossible new forms. It is a kind of prism that mixes all manner of things that we think of as physically and physiologically distinct forms, producing an endless set of hybrids.

The Shimmer feels like the most apt metaphor for what AI threatens to do to our sense of history, to the documentation and attempted narration of our collective human past: to annihilate it through pervasive refraction and recombination. AI refracts and recombines our archive – at least, potentially, everything we ever put online – like recombinant DNA, producing mutant images and sounds. Already, our machines can speak in our voices without our presence, intentionality, or consent.

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[4] Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "refract (v.)," March 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1096739292.

[5] Merriam-Webster Dictionary online, "combine (v.)." Available: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/combine (viewed 05.12.2024)

As in the film when the dead woman's screams are produced from the throat of a monstrous bear-creature, the voices of the dead now speak to us from strange sources. In fact, they have done so ever since the invention of the gramophone, but now the voice is further detached from its origin since the specific words may never have originated in the body – or intentionality – to which the voice belongs.

Yet, AI does have the potential to generate useful historical knowledge and experience if its dataset is limited and its parameters carefully defined. For instance, the Shoah Foundation at the University of Southern California is currently engaged in a project of recording extensive interviews with some of the few Holocaust survivors who are still alive, recording their answers to many questions related to their lives and their experiences during the Shoah. From these recordings of body and voice, the Shoah Foundation will create a dataset from which a future AI-generated hologram may answer new questions posed in the future.[6] In this case, the dataset is notably limited to interviews at a particular time with one subject – as opposed to being a product of vast, undifferentiated Internet scrapes. Indeed, it seems that the dataset – alongside the algorithm – is becoming a crucial term for archives and archivists. Which documents will be placed into a given dataset? What limitations will be placed on how that dataset can be used? To answer these questions responsibly, we must also ask questions about the historical moment from which the contents of the dataset emerged and about the intent embedded in those contents: their temporalities and intentionalities. If we do not do so, we will allow anachronism and imprecision to infect our understanding of history. And, intended or no, this is a form of archival abuse. At the same time, however, AI reminds us of the importance of the material archive as a form of corroboration. Given their extreme susceptibility to modulation, digital traces will never – should never, at least from now on – have the epistemic authority of photographic and materials ones.

"*Time is only a word to designate a set of conditions of possibility*," writes Rancière [Rancière 2020: 118]. He seems to mean this ironically, ventriloquizing those he criticizes for their totalizing view of epoch. However, I think that is precisely what time is even if there are multiple horizons for different subjects in any epoch. Furthermore, although the horizon of possibility is always moving, any given moment in human history or civilization is characterized by its own limits of the doable and thinkable. In its current state, AI's amalgamation of epochs and modes muddies the unique possibilities within each era. If AI is to have emancipatory potential, we must at very

[6] Joseph Berger, Long After Surviving the Nazis, They Use A.I. to Remind the World, *New York Times,* 2 August 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/02/arts/design/museum-of-jewish-heritage-ai-holocaust.html.

least organize archival datasets along the horizons of possibility of a given moment or epoch. Otherwise, we end up with nothing but archival mystification and ever greater historical confusion.

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DIGITAL PRESERVATION OF UKRAINIAN AUDIOVISUAL HERITAGE DURING WARTIME: CHALLENGES AND INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES

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Abstract

This article is dedicated to investigating the impact of the war in Ukraine (Russian-Ukrainian War, from 2014, full-scale invasion – 2022) on the preservation of audiovisual heritage and the documentation of wartime events. The study focuses on the role of digital technologies in safeguarding cultural identity, recording historical events, and addressing challenges Ukrainian archives face during the ongoing conflict. It examines the practices of digitization and archiving by state and civic institutions, including the Central State Archive of Film, Photo, and Audio Documents named after Pshenychnyi, the Dovzhenko Centre, and the Center for Urban History in Lviv. The research highlights the implementation of international archiving standards, innovative technologies, and ethical considerations, particularly in documenting war crimes. Results demonstrate how digital archives preserve historical memory, foster humanitarian awareness, and facilitate global cultural exchange. The article concludes with recommendations for enhancing Ukraine's digital preservation framework, emphasizing collaboration with global organizations, adopting advanced technologies, and aligning with international standards to safeguard cultural heritage long-term.

Keywords: *digital preservation, audiovisual heritage, wartime archives, archival standards, historical memory*

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CULTURE CROSSROADS

Introduction

The Russia's war in Ukraine since 2014 has led to the widespread destruction of cultural sites, historical landmarks, architectural monuments, and national museum collections. This has placed the nation's cultural heritage – the cornerstone of its identity, historical memory, traditions, and values – under significant threat of irreversible loss. During wartime, the preservation of this heritage has become a crucial instrument for national unity, pride, and resilience, evolving into a cultural mission, as well as a political and social imperative.

Audiovisual heritage plays a unique role in preserving historical narratives, encompassing films, photographs, and sound recordings. Unlike textual records, audiovisual materials provide an immediate and emotionally compelling connection to the past, offering highly authentic evidence of cultural achievements and historical heritage. This form of documentation is particularly essential for capturing the human experience during conflict, documenting not only events but also emotions, expressions, and surrounding circumstances. In Ukraine, where the war has disrupted traditional archival practices, audiovisual documentation has become vital for safeguarding national memory for future generations.

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has made digital archiving and the documentation of wartime realities increasingly precise and accessible, positioning this war as one of the most extensively recorded conflicts in history. The experiences of previous wars and geopolitical conflicts have significantly expanded and intensified, highlighting the necessity of studying the role of digital media in historical and cultural heritage preservation amid the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The author analyses the impact of military events on the preservation of Ukraine's cultural heritage, emphasizing digital archiving and contemporary documentation. It aims to identify current trends in digital preservation and audiovisual documentation of war and cultural heritage, serving as a foundation for further research and practical initiatives. Additionally, the author assesses the effectiveness of digital archiving methods used for Ukraine's audiovisual heritage and evaluates the importance of these processes in wartime conditions.

The research methodology employs a comprehensive approach, integrating contextual analysis of materials related to the activities of Ukrainian archival institutions, utilizing academic sources – which remain scarce for various reasons at present – as well as media materials, official websites, and digital platforms. This is supplemented by a comparative analysis of digital preservation approaches adopted by Ukrainian organizations and international institutions. Furthermore, the case study method is applied to model future perspectives based on real-world examples of institutions engaged in digital archiving.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how digital technologies can support cultural heritage preservation in crisis situations and underscores the importance of continued investment in archival infrastructure to safeguard Ukraine's historical memory.

Challenges and innovations in wartime digital archiving

On the eve of the full-scale Russian invasion (24 February 2022), Ukrainian state archival institutions – approximately 35 across the country – were in the process of integrating into global digital archiving practices. The State Archival Service of Ukraine (*Державна архівна служба України*) has served as the central coordinating body, overseeing regional archival institutions and state audiovisual archives.

According to Anatolii Khromov, who has led the service since 2019, one of the key challenges at the time was the imperfection of archival legislation. Due to legal constraints, Ukrainian archives predominantly received official government records, which are now perceived as *irrelevant* in reflecting broader historical and societal realities [Ukraïner 2024]. The lack of diverse archival materials makes it difficult to reconstruct an accurate picture of life in Ukraine in past decades. To address this, one of Khromov's first initiatives was the establishment of a collection documenting the COVID-19 pandemic, marking a shift toward a more inclusive approach to archival preservation.

Prior to the war, the absence of standardized methodologies, coupled with insufficient state funding, a lack of financial and technical resources, as well as gaps in legislative regulation, posed significant barriers to systematic digital archiving [Didukh, Zaletok 2019]. Unlike Poland and Lithuania, Ukraine lacked a regulatory framework for the creation of digital archival collections. The registration and cataloguing of digital archives remained largely at the discretion of individual institutions, resulting in inconsistent approaches across the sector. Although initial steps had been taken toward standardizing digital archives and digitization processes, challenges related to long-term storage and preservation of digital copies persisted. The Ukrainian Research Institute of Archival Affairs and Records Management developed methodological recommendations for the creation, preservation, cataloguing, and access to digital archival collections [Didukh, Zaletok 2019]. However, several challenges persisted, particularly regarding the inconsistent use of digital formats, including TIFF, JPG/JPEG, PDF, and DJVU. There was also an absence of unified technical parameters, cataloguing standards, and storage methods. Many archival institutions continued to store documents on obsolete external media, such as optical discs, with only sporadic efforts to combine optical storage with external hard drives, or to transition entirely to server-based and network storage solutions.

At the time, only one-quarter of institutions implemented regular backup procedures, and only one-third followed the practice of creating multiple copies of digital archives across different storage media. This lack of standardized preservation strategies posed a significant risk of losing substantial portions of Ukraine's digital archival heritage. The absence of adequate material, technical, and human resources, coupled with a lack of clear regulatory frameworks for the creation and management of digital archives, further exacerbated these vulnerabilities [Korzhyk 2022].

Thus, even before the full-scale invasion, Ukraine's archival infrastructure faced serious limitations, leaving a substantial portion of its documentary heritage at risk of deterioration or permanent loss. This period of institutional development was abruptly disrupted by the full-scale invasion, further complicating the already fragile landscape of Ukrainian digital archiving.

Since the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, various institutions and individuals have actively engaged in archiving documentary evidence of wartime events, creating chronicles and video diaries as forms of resistance and humanitarian support. Nearly all state archival institutions, under the directive of the central archival service, began compiling collections of documents, photographs, and video materials related to the war. The Central State Audiovisual and Electronic Archive named after H. Pshenychnyi (*Tsentralnyi derzhavnyi kinofotofonoarkhiv Ukrainy im. H. S. Pshenychnoho*, or TsDKFFA) now receives submissions from citizens for state preservation, ensuring that copyright and related rights are formalized before materials are archived [Ukraïner 2024]. This approach allows for adherence to ethical standards regarding the distribution of private information, particularly concerning individuals affected by Russian aggression.

These large-scale digital documentation efforts have significantly increased the workload and responsibilities of archival institutions. In addition to pre-existing challenges, such as fragmented digitization practices and inconsistent methodologies, new threats have emerged, particularly the risk of document loss due to destruction and physical damage. A particularly critical issue is the assessment of the informational value of materials submitted to archives, as institutions must distinguish between historically significant records and general documentation.

Another pressing priority for Ukrainian archives is the retrieval of collections looted by Russian forces since 2014 from occupied territories. According to Anatolii Khromov, Ukraine has lost the collections of four major state archives – the Crimean, Sevastopol, Donetsk, and Luhansk archives – amounting to 8% of Ukraine's National Archival Fund [Ukraïner 2024]. In contrast, since the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, archival losses have been limited to 0.3%. To mitigate further damage, Ukrainian institutions have implemented various preventive measures, including

the evacuation and relocation of collections, as well as the acceleration of digital archiving efforts to ensure long-term preservation.

Despite numerous challenges and emerging risks, Ukrainian archives have continued to implement new technologies and international archival standards, largely facilitated by the support of global organizations. The digitization processes initiated before the Russian invasion, as well as the principles of open-access archives and enhanced communication through online platforms and social media, have significantly expanded during wartime [Korzhyk 2022]. The extensive network of Ukrainian state archives has accumulated substantial experience in creating and distributing electronic archival resources.

One notable initiative is the *Archive of Ukrainian Silent Cinema* project, launched by the Head of the State Archival Service of Ukraine, Anatolii Khromov, in September 2021. By the start of the invasion, this unique online resource for documentary cinema contained 189 digitized film records [History.rayon.in.ua 2023]. Through joint efforts with international partners, Ukrainian archival institutions are ensuring long-term preservation and accessibility of audiovisual heritage. Institutions such as the Central State Audiovisual and Electronic Archive named after H. Pshenychnyi have adopted frameworks like OAIS (Open Archival Information System) and ISO 15489 to structure and manage archival data. Additionally, new online platforms for accessing digitized materials are being developed, aligning with global trends observed in initiatives such as Europeana.

Both Ukrainian and international archives share the goal of preserving national and global cultural memory, with collaboration playing a key role in advancing digital preservation efforts. The Baltic Forum on Archival Innovation and Restoration underscores the importance of international cooperation in developing effective archiving strategies [Emelyanova 2018]. The integration of digital tools that comply with international standards is crucial for safeguarding Ukraine's cultural heritage in post-conflict conditions [Moskvyak 2023].

A significant milestone in this cross-border collaboration has been the publication of the *Practical Guide for Emergency Digitization of Paper Archives* by the International Council on Archives (ICA), with financial support from the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH). This manual, developed by Ukrainian archival experts, including specialists from the Central State Audiovisual and Electronic Archive, has been made publicly available [International Council on Archives 2023]. It serves as a valuable resource for small regional archives, particularly those located in frontline areas, providing clear instructions on rapid response strategies for emergency situations.

The relentless efforts of Ukrainian archival specialists in digital preservation under constant Russian shelling have resulted in unparalleled expertise, drawing

significant attention and interest from international colleagues. In November 2024, an Estonian delegation, led by Minister of Justice and Digital Affairs of the Republic of Estonia, Liisa-Ly Pakosta, visited the State Archival Service of Ukraine to gain insight into the country's digitization strategies and archival preservation efforts [Ukrainian Archives Initiative 2024].

Ukrainian archives continue to operate under extreme wartime conditions, facing the risk of physical destruction of both materials and infrastructure. Many archival institutions have been forced to evacuate their collections, while limited funding hinders the implementation of advanced technologies and large-scale digitization projects. Despite these challenges, Ukrainian archives actively document wartime events in real time, leveraging social media, war crimes databases, and video and photographic records of destruction.

During the Estonian delegation's visit, officials were informed that Ukraine has emerged as a global leader in digitization efforts. In 2023 alone, Ukrainian archives produced over 21 million digital copies of documents [Ukrainian Archives Initiative 2024]. According to Anatolii Khromov, approximately 50 operators currently work in Ukraine's state archival institutions, each producing around 2000 copies per day.

In other words, the crisis of war and destruction has triggered an opposing force – an accelerating trend in Ukraine's digital archiving efforts. The new challenges and demands posed by wartime conditions are being met with rapid responses and proactive initiatives, solidifying Ukraine's role as a key player in global archival digitization.

International archival institutions primarily focus on preserving historical materials and cultural heritage, engaging less in the documentation of ongoing events. In contrast, Ukrainian archives actively document contemporary history, while maintaining their traditional role in heritage preservation. Although Ukrainian archives collaborate with international counterparts, adopting scanning and restoration technologies, they face unique challenges due to limited access to advanced tools such as artificial intelligence (AI) for automated classification and restoration.

Global archives, including digital repository Europeana, extensively utilize AI to automate and accelerate restoration and archiving processes, offering a valuable model for Ukraine. While Ukrainian institutions are gradually integrating into the international archival community – evidenced by the Dovzhenko Centre's (*Національний центр Олександра Довженка*; *Довженко-Центр*) membership in FIAF – the implementation of cutting-edge technologies and standards remains in its early stages [FIAF, n.d.].

Beyond the broader crisis and the struggle for survival during wartime, Ukrainian archives face additional ethical challenges in preserving and disseminating sensitive

materials, particularly those related to war crimes or personal privacy concerns. Despite these obstacles, they fulfil a dual role, serving both as custodians of traditional heritage and documentarians of contemporary history.

Greater integration with international standards and enhanced collaboration with global organizations would provide Ukrainian archives with the necessary support to overcome these challenges and achieve significant advancements in archival preservation and digitization.

Modern digital technologies in the preservation of audiovisual heritage during wartime

Modern digital technologies play a crucial role in processing and preserving video materials in Ukraine, particularly during wartime, when the digital preservation of cultural heritage and the documentation of ongoing events are of critical importance. Transformative tools are being implemented to safeguard audiovisual materials, helping archives overcome the physical vulnerabilities associated with traditional formats. High-resolution scanning, metadata tagging, and cloud storage enhance accessibility and longevity, while advanced film scanners not only digitize but also improve quality through colour correction and defect removal. AI further optimizes archiving by automating classification, keyword tagging, and restoration, making archives more user-friendly. The development of digital access repositories by Ukrainian archives reflects a growing commitment to modern archival practices [Didukh & Zaletok 2019].

An example of the implementation of cutting-edge digital tools and the creation of digital archives across various cultural and academic institutions is the activity of the Digital Country organization (*Цифрова Країна*), which focuses on preserving and promoting national cultural heritage through digitization and the development of electronic resources [Digital Country, n.d.]. The company employs state-of-the-art technology for digitization and data preservation. It utilizes specialized industrial equipment for document scanning, ensuring high-quality digital copies. Moreover, the organization has developed, certified, and continuously improves the FOLIUM software, designed to facilitate efficient work with digitized data. Key procedures include the use of open file formats (e.g., MXF, AVI, MOV) and codecs (e.g., H.264, ProRes) for long-term accessibility, systematic metadata organization, and the maintenance of three copies of data on local, remote, and cloud platforms. Regular audits and data migration are essential to counter technological obsolescence and ensure the integrity of files over time.

During the ongoing conflict, Ukrainian archives face significant challenges related to limited infrastructure, specialized servers, cybersecurity technologies, and funding. International standards such as OAIS (Open Archival Information System)

and METS (Metadata Encoding and Transmission Standard) provide frameworks for systematic preservation, yet their implementation is hindered by resource constraints and the impact of war. Ethical considerations are particularly relevant, requiring victim anonymization and the secure handling of sensitive materials related to war crimes.

The work of many institutions, such as the Pshenychnyi Archive and the Dovzhenko Centre, has been significantly slowed due to the war. At the same time, grassroots initiatives such as the Center for Urban History of Lviv (*Центр міської історії*) have played a prominent role in preserving audiovisual heritage. However, resource limitations in remote regions exacerbate the risk of data loss due to military actions, underscoring the urgent need for strategic solutions and sustainable policies.

Digitization of audiovisual heritage has become a leading technology in Ukrainian institutions, contributing to the preservation and protection of numerous cultural achievements and values by converting film, photo, and sound documents into digital formats [Menska 2023]. Digitalization efforts remain a cornerstone of Ukrainian institutions' strategies for protecting cultural assets. The transformation of audiovisual materials into digital formats has become a key approach to preserving and sharing national heritage, despite the challenges posed by the ongoing conflict.

Challenges and case studies of Central State Archive of Cinema, Photo, and Audio Documents (Pshenychnyi Archive)

The Pshenychnyi Central State Archive of Cinema, Photo, and Audio Documents plays a crucial role in preserving Ukraine's audiovisual heritage [Yemelyanova 2016]. Established in the 1930s, the archive houses materials dating back to 1896, serving as a repository of the nation's historical memory. In 2023, the archive created a digital user fund comprising 414 film documents, utilizing modern scanners funded by international organizations [Central State Archive of Cinematic, Photographic and Sound Documents of Ukraine, n.d.]. This initiative underscores the potential of digitization to safeguard cultural heritage and highlights the urgent need for expanded digitization programs, as only 10% of Ukraine's archival materials have been digitized.

The archive's efforts extend beyond digitization to include the development of electronic catalogues and accessible digital platforms, ensuring historical materials are preserved and shared with global audiences [Yemelyanova 2016]. Recent initiatives focus on integrating advanced metadata systems, enabling improved searchability and retrieval of content. Modern technologies, including artificial intelligence, optimize film restoration processes, such as removing image defects, restoring color, and

enhancing contrast and detail. These advancements significantly enhance the quality and accessibility of the archive's materials.

As part of the Program for the Digitization of Archival Information Resources for 2022–2025, approved by the State Archival Service of Ukraine, the archive has accelerated its digitization processes by acquiring advanced scanning technologies supported by the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas [Central State Archive of Cinematic, Photographic and Sound Documents of Ukraine, n.d.]. These efforts are complemented by regular collection presentations on the archive's website and social media platforms, which feature thematic exhibitions and film and video documents to engage a wider audience.

Preserving digital moving images requires a systematic approach integrating technological solutions with ethical and organizational measures. The Pshenychnyi Archive's specialists digitize historical film, photo, and audio documents, including materials documenting wars, while ensuring long-term accessibility through electronic cataloguing and implementing global best practices in archival preservation.

Initiatives and approaches of the Oleksandr Dovzhenko National Centre

The Oleksandr Dovzhenko National Centre is vital in preserving and promoting Ukrainian cinema. As the largest film archive in Ukraine, it houses a collection of over 7000 titles of Ukrainian feature, documentary, and animated films, along with thousands of archival documents on the history of Ukrainian cinema [National Oleksandr Dovzhenko Centre, n.d.]. Since its establishment in 1994 during Ukraine's independence, the Centre has aligned its work with European standards, integrating restoration, digitization, and international distribution into its practices as a member of the International Federation of Film Archives [FIAF, n.d.].

The Centre's dual role as a preserver and promoter of cultural heritage makes it a unique institution in Ukraine [Біла, Акварельна 2019]. Its policies and strategies focus on preserving, researching, and promoting national film heritage while creating a cultural space for contemporary society. Unlike traditional archives like the Pshenychnyi Archive, the Dovzhenko Centre emphasizes innovation, aligning its activities with European counterparts. Restoration work is coupled with public engagement through curated projects like the *Silent Nights* festival and the *Ukrainian Re-Vision* DVD collection. These initiatives revive and disseminate Ukrainian film heritage, breathing new life into restored works.

The Centre also serves as a hub for academic and cultural activities, bridging the gap between archival work and public awareness through conferences, workshops, and film screenings. Its international distribution efforts further integrate Ukrainian

cinema into global cultural networks, reflecting its commitment to digital archiving standards and fostering international collaboration [Біла, Акварельна 2019].

Despite financial crises and challenges securing stable income sources, the Dovzhenko Centre has maintained positive economic performance and sustained its role as a cultural and research hub. This resilience underscores the Centre's importance in safeguarding Ukraine's cinematic legacy and ensuring its accessibility to diverse audiences.

The Dovzhenko Centre exemplifies how innovative archival practices can sustain and celebrate a nation's cultural heritage by integrating restoration, digital preservation, and public dissemination.

Examples and case studies of the Center for Urban History in Lviv

The Center for Urban History in Lviv plays a significant role in digital archiving and researching audiovisual materials, focusing on creating digital collections and preserving often-overlooked historical sources. This grassroots initiative provides unique insights into local histories and has become a leader in community-based archiving efforts.

The Center's notable projects include the *Urban Media Archive* and *Lviv Interactive Map*, which utilize digital technologies to visualize historical narratives and provide public access to cultural resources [Center for Urban History of East Central Europe, n.d.]. The *Urban Media Archive* collects, preserves, and promotes materials related to urban history, covering diverse aspects from multiple perspectives. A prominent example is the online encyclopedia *Lviv Interactive (LIA)*, an interactive map presenting the modern city within its historical context.

One innovative project involves digitizing personal collections from residents, capturing everyday life during the war. This approach preserves unique perspectives and fosters community ownership of historical documentation. Through interactive platforms, the Center ensures accessibility for both local and international audiences.

The Center also engages in academic activities, including research projects, conferences, and seminars. Under the global initiative Home Movie Center, it organizes the *International Home Movie Day* in Lviv, further promoting audiovisual heritage.

Today's specific focus of the Center's digital archiving is documenting the everyday realities of the Russian-Ukrainian war [Center for Urban History of East Central Europe, n.d.]. The *Most Documented War* symposium, organized by the Center, unites various initiatives to collect and archive materials about the conflict, emphasizing its importance for future research and historical preservation.

By integrating digital technologies with community-driven approaches, the Center for Urban History exemplifies how innovative archiving practices can uncover and preserve urban and wartime histories, ensuring they remain accessible and relevant for future generations.

Ethical and technical framework for digital preservation

Preserving digital materials during wartime presents ethical and technical challenges that require careful consideration. Archiving sensitive materials, such as footage of war crimes, necessitates strict adherence to ethical protocols, including anonymizing victims, obtaining consent for the use of personal images, and ensuring the secure storage of sensitive data. Simultaneously, maintaining the integrity of digital files over time is a significant technical challenge. Regular audits, data migration, and adherence to international standards like OAIS and METS are essential for ensuring the longevity and accessibility of archival materials. Integrating AI technologies can streamline processes such as metadata creation and file restoration; however, their effective implementation requires substantial investment and specialized training.

To address these challenges, several key steps are recommended. First, adopting and adapting international standards such as OAIS and METS is essential for ensuring the systematic preservation of digital materials. Of equal importance is the development of national programs to support digitization and equip archives with modern technologies so that digitization initiatives can be expanded to preserve intangible cultural heritage in the aftermath of war [Moskvyak 2023]. Collaboration with global platforms like *Europeana* can further integrate Ukrainian heritage into international cultural networks, amplifying its reach and significance. Additionally, establishing specialized training programs for archivists in digital preservation techniques will ensure that staff have the necessary skills to manage advanced technologies. Public engagement through digital platforms and social media can raise awareness and foster a shared sense of responsibility for preserving cultural heritage. Finally, sustainable archiving policies must be developed, with frameworks for consistent funding and regular updates to technical infrastructure, to guarantee the long-term accessibility and reliability of digital archives.

Conclusion

The digital preservation of audiovisual heritage during wartime is not only a cultural and historical priority but also a matter of national security. The war in Ukraine has posed immense challenges for archival institutions, including the threat of physical destruction, the evacuation of collections, and limited resources for digitization. Despite these difficulties, the process of digital archiving has significantly

intensified due to governmental and civic initiatives, international support, and the application of modern technologies such as AI, cloud storage, and blockchain solutions. By implementing international standards, fostering collaboration, and addressing ethical challenges, it can be ensured that the invaluable collections of Ukrainian archives survive and remain accessible for future generations. These efforts contribute to the preservation of national identity, facilitate global cultural exchange, and deepen the understanding of the impact of war.

Strategic investments in technology, ethical frameworks, and international cooperation are crucial for building a resilient digital preservation system that safeguards Ukraine's cultural heritage and enriches the global historical narrative. The adoption of standards such as OAIS and METS is essential to provide for the long-term accessibility and reliability of archives. Additionally, collaboration with global platforms like Europeana can integrate Ukrainian materials into the international context, expanding their reach and significance.

Of equal importance is the development of a national training program for archival professionals in the field of digital preservation. Equipping archivists and cultural managers with the skills necessary to manage advanced technologies will enhance the efficiency of preservation efforts and ensure the sustainability of archival practices.

Today, the preservation and actualization of audiovisual collections in Ukraine occur within a multidimensional digital space, which includes state institutions responsible for heritage preservation, civic organizations, and individual Ukrainians documenting ongoing events. These collective efforts highlight the need to refine verification methods, organizational strategies for digital archives, and specialized training in audiovisual documentation.

The dissemination of digital documents and documentary films contributes to global awareness of the consequences of war, fostering a shared humanitarian consciousness. Digital archives and social media serve not only as repositories of historical records but also as platforms for media literacy, critical reflection, and international solidarity. These tools are crucial to ensuring that the lessons of today are preserved and shared for the benefit of future generations.

The digital preservation of Ukrainian heritage stands at a pivotal juncture: on the one hand, the war has created unprecedented challenges; on the other, it has driven innovative approaches to archiving. Future research should focus on developing regulatory frameworks, implementing cutting-edge digital solutions, and establishing a resilient infrastructure for archives in the post-war period. Only a comprehensive approach to these challenges will guarantee the long-term preservation of Ukraine's national audiovisual heritage.

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CONVERGENCE OF PERFORMANCE ART, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND ARCHIVAL PRACTICES

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Abstract

This article explores the intricate relationships between ephemeral, performative actions, their visual documentation, and their preservation within institutional and personal archives. The author will identify key archives and data repositories that contemporary art historians can access to explore this cultural heritage further. Through this dual approach – historical analysis and archival exploration/mapping – the article aims to enrich the study of genealogy of performance art in Latvia and open new pathways for understanding its formative years.

One of the key goals is to challenge and broaden the accepted timeline of performance art's origins in Latvia. While the history has traditionally been dated to the 1970s with artists like Andris Grinbergs and his contemporaries, the author argues that its roots can be traced back to the 1960s by examining the experimental work of photographers such as Gunārs Binde and Zenta Dzividzinska. These artists engaged with photography not only as a medium of representation but also as a performative process in its own right. Such early experiments, though often overlooked, suggest a more nuanced genealogy of Latvian performance art, one that is deeply interwoven with the medium of photography. Moreover, a theoretical framework will be developed to analyse the reciprocal influence between performance art and photography.

Keywords: *genealogy of performance art, experiments with photography, digital archives*

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Performance and archiving

For art historians whose work is mostly concerned with research in the field of performance art, the archive can offer a rich and multifaceted representation of the work. Sufficient contextual information, press reviews, feedback from audiences, interviews with the artists, diaries, letters, notes and other forms of information ensure that historians arrive at a more authentic understanding of the performance. Yet, the most crucial archival document is often the image – whether still or moving – because it grants visual access to the concepts, processes, and decisions that shaped the original work.

Archiving has always been a contested subject in the field of performance art. On the one hand, archiving performance art is essential for preserving cultural heritage. Archival material – still and moving images, written records, artefacts from performances – help to reconstruct the actual events and maintain the legacy of performance art. On the other hand, it can be questioned whether a document as a static and fixed form does not diminish and compromise the original intent. After all, no documentation can fully restore the live, in-the-moment experience or the immersive atmosphere, audience interaction, affective dynamics and temporal context that defined the original performance. As Matthew Reason argues:

> *We need to think about the exact relationship between seeing a documentation and seeing a performance, about what kind of knowledge of performance we can access through its representations, about the interpretations present within each act of representation and about the tension existing between documentation and the positive valuation of performative disappearance. In exploring such relationships we must consider whether we are thinking in terms of qualities of authenticity, accuracy, completeness and reliability (all particularly relevant in terms of historical research and knowledge), in terms of the evocativeness or beauty of the representation in its own right, or alternatively about emotional, artistic or social truths and appropriateness.* [Reason 2006: 2–3]

The question of shared temporal and spatial experience between the performer(s) and audiences/participants, in other words, "liveness", is a complex and contradictory issue in performance studies.[1] Witnessing a live performance is often regarded as a more authentic experience, than, for example, looking at a photograph that documents the same performance. Although the authenticity claims cannot be denied, the issues of perception, aesthetic experience and epistemological framework are open for further discussions. Since performance art as an interdisciplinary form of art is flexible and allows the integration of any other art discipline or medium

[1] Debates were first initiated by Philip Auslander and Peggy Phelan; see Phelan (1993) and Auslander (1999).

or technology, it can be paired with any of these components conceptually. Consequently, it is possible that performance can exist only in its mediatized or intermedial form, as for example, in the well-known American artist Cindy Sherman's creative practice. When performance art has been registered in the representational medium of photography in this conceptual and strategic way, performance art becomes a hybrid, which manifests both the medium-specific features of the live process and the reproduction. Although the audiences do not have access to the actual process when such hybrids works of art were made, that is, they cannot experience it simultaneously with the artist, the outcome does not deny access to aesthetic or epistemological experience.

In the context of Latvian performance art, photography has typically served as the key archival medium, since more advanced forms like film or video were prohibitively expensive and inaccessible for experimentation. Photography, by contrast, allowed for boundless creative exploration and experimentation. Given its importance, it becomes essential to develop frameworks for categorizing performance-related photography. The central research question, then, is: how can photography tied to performance art be systematically categorized?

It is possible to distinguish two modes of synergy between photography and performance. The first category is performative intervention in the medium of photography, where a photographer operates with photographic means to create the performance photographically, including, but not limited to, photomontages and collages, or photographically manipulated and processed images (performance **in** photography). The second category is performance for the camera, where performance is produced by the subject through the act of (self)representation before the camera (performance **for** photography). The second category can be divided further in two directions – documentary and tableau. The documentary approach is characterised by greater aesthetic fluidity since the camera is capturing a process, thus the resulting images can often be blurry or remind of snapshots. The tableau approach is the opposite – it has a carefully calculated and choreographed mise-en-scène, composition, the performer's body is not moving but still (as if frozen), and the overarching objective is to pose for the camera.

Subsequent sections of this article will explore how these categories manifest in the photographs of Zenta Dzividzinska and Gunārs Binde during the 1960s, as well as in the documentation and reinterpretation of Andris Grinbergs's performances by Jānis Kreicbergs and Atis Ieviņš in the 1970s. The article will also highlight the innovative photocollages created by *Pollucionisti* (*Emissionists*). Through these examples, the article will demonstrate how each artist or collective engaged with photography and event-based art practices, leading to performative interventions that transformed both the medium and the artistic discipline.

The 1960s: Zenta Dzividzinska and Gunārs Binde

The first intuitive experiments with synthesis of photography and performance in Latvia started already in the 1960s. Photographers such as Zenta Dzividzinska (1944–2011) and Gunārs Binde (b. 1933)[2] were instrumental in this trajectory. Although they never used the terminology related to performance art (it would be an anachronism in the 1960s), their attempts to distance themselves from straightforward documentary aesthetics associated with photojournalism resulted in performative interventionist strategies under both aforementioned categories: performance in photography and performance for photography. As photographers, their focus naturally gravitated toward the question of representation, emphasizing the relationship between the image and the medium itself, rather than engaging with theatrical processes as primary means of expression.[3] Their approach was intrinsically linked to the photographic process and the mechanism of the camera, making it difficult to classify these experiments as independent live performances in the traditional sense. Nevertheless, these experiments are undeniably part of the broader genealogy and history of performance art in Latvia.

The testing grounds providing the green light for experiments became the Photo Club Riga (founded in 1962). Binde became the member of the Photo Club Riga in 1963, whereas Zenta Dzividzinska – in 1965. According to Binde, the photo club attracted photographers who wanted to distance themselves from the so-called applied photography (working as photojournalists or taking passport photos) and be recognised as creative artists [Binde 2017]. Given the lack of educational opportunities in photography, the photo club fulfilled an educational role. Binde stated: "*For us, it was an academy, where collective self-teaching [was the key pedagogical method]*" [Binde 2017]. Another source of information came from Polish, Czechoslovakian, Hungarian, German, Yugoslavian, as well as English and American magazines [Binde 2017].

On the other hand, even though the photo club functioned as a platform for discussions and exchanging ideas, the photographs were captured and developed at photographers' own expense:

> *The photo club culture in the Soviet Union [...] was based on completely volunteer, self-financed, and self-commissioned activities, and the prints that circulated in the photo club exhibitions did not have any notable material value—no money exchanged hands.* [Tifentale 2022: 264]

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[2] Accompanied by stage designer and artist Arnolds Plaudis (1927–2008).

[3] For Binde, though, the combination of theatrical and cinematographical approaches was essential in achieving a "great image".

For example, "*Dzividzinska developed most of her film and printed most of her images in a makeshift darkroom in the kitchen, on a time borrowed from school and work*" [Tifentale 2022: 264]. Binde, in his turn, had a laboratory at the Riga School of Applied Arts, because he was teaching photography as an extracurricular course (1964–1975). In fact, Dzividzinska and Binde met at this educational setting, and Binde became her friend and mentor. Yet, their friendship did not last long. To Dzividzinska it seemed that Binde grew jealous of her success in international photo exhibitions. The mutual communication became caustic, and Binde even forbade her entry at the photo laboratory, without providing any reasonable excuse, shouting: "*Go away, now we are working here!*" [Dzividzinska 2009].

However, for both Binde and Dzividzinska, one of the most meaningful friendships and artistic collaborations evolved with the artist and stage designer Arnolds Plaudis (1927–2008). It seems, Plaudis was the actual driving force behind all the performative interventions. According to Binde, "*Plaudis was a true ball of fire*" [Binde, Hirša 2024: 103]. Coming from the field of theatre,[4] Plaudis was knowledgeable in creating the stage environment, including scenery, props, spatial dynamics, lighting, costumes and other elements contributing to the overall visual impact of a theatre performance. Besides, Plaudis's outgoing personality was important:

> *[Plaudis] was like a staffage, the props for me. He never had a strong image of his own, he tuned in to the situation and the environment surrounding him [...] Plaudis's face was not animated at all, his face was not expressive, but he was someone who could create an image. He was endowed with fantasy, he could conjure up scenes with stories, he could charm everybody, come up with all kinds of tales.* [Binde, Hirša 2024: 103–104]

Dzividzinska remembers how Plaudis used all kinds of metal scraps as ready-mades in his stage design and always had some props with him, for example, a rope [Dzividzinska 2009]. Being a "*theatrically inclined [...], playful [and] mischievous* individual [Ansone 2024: 49], who also had a *toned physique and well-trained body*" [Ansone 2024: 53], Plaudis frequently became a model/participant in both Binde's and Dzividzinska's photographs that can be categorised under the category performance for photography.

Plaudis and Binde also worked as an artistic duo, creating a series of staged, constructed images with dramatic narratives where the performative aspect was central and Plaudis was "*the generator of the idea as well as the person in the photo, or*

[4] Plaudis was a stage designer "*at the Valmiera and Liepāja theatres, as well as the Riga Operetta [and] the Daile Theatre*" [Ansone 2024: 49].

'photo actor'" [Tifentale 2024: 33]. Binde always included models as co-authors for the photographic tableaus, yet he remained open to improvisation and contributions from the models as well. Binde also reflects on the co-authorship between them, denying Plaudis's creative agency and yet reaffirming his role as a philosophical catalyst and driving force behind their collaborative work:

> *What was his relation to me? A co-author? Not at all. Nor a model, at least not the way it's really understood. The director – also no... He was a philosopher by my side, a thought- and action-provoking motor. He encouraged and gave me confidence to do creative work.* [Binde 2008: 14]

Art historian Elita Ansone wonders, "*whether it is possible to view a certain part of Binde's photographic archive as part of the happening movement; [...] by assuming this focus one can hope to reveal the avant-garde side of Binde's work from the 1960s–70s*" [Ansone 2024: 49].[5] She further argues:

> *Many of Binde's photographs have come about through the synthesis of chance occurrences, spontaneous play and performative improvisations. Everyone had an important role in the playful processes of the happenings, as all were both participants and spectators. [...] The happenings were held purely for enjoyment they sparked in them, and each participant was an equal contributor to the event. Nobody else but the participants actually saw these happenings. The fact that the happenings took place in a small circle without spectators, also ensured that they could take place without censorship.* [Ansone 2024: 51]

Although the process leading to the captured image was definitely playful and can be characterised as performative improvisations, the outcome in photography was too staged to be defined as akin to performance art. Binde's approach was grounded in the combination of theatre[6] and cinema. As Binde himself notes: "*My interest was developed and strengthened through theatre and photographic stagings. I take the real and subject it to my idea*" [Binde, Hirša 2024: 91].[7] Art historian Alise Tifentale agrees, stating that "*[Binde's] method synthesizes elements of theatre, acting, and the aesthetics of cinematic framing in order to realize the artist's creative intentions*

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[5] Ansone also points out that "*Binde's photographs have not been studied in this context*" [Ansone 2024: 49]; however, the author of this article wrote about Binde's performative experiments in her doctoral thesis in 2020 (available here: https://www.lma.lv/uploads/news/3144/files/disertacija-kristberga-pdf.pdf).

[6] Binde worked in the theatre for five years.

[7] "*For me, photography is equivalent to other art forms – music, dance, theatre, painting*" [Binde, Hirša 2024: 121].

in photography" [Tifentale 2024: 29]. According to Binde, the cinematic aesthetics was a deliberate choice:

> *Films can be staged. No one would ever reproach cinema for not being truthful enough. Why can't you have staging in photography. Photography is art to me. I don't need informative truth. Artistic truth is what's most important. Fine art photography lays no claims to being documentary. Though it remains documentary in its means of expression, it affirms my truth, my attitude towards the object and to life. The artistic image, not documentality, is what's most important.* [Binde 1967: 16]

Dzividzinska's photographs, however, reveal a closer symbiosis between photography and performance; her goal was not to produce images heavily infused with drama or theatricality. Like Binde, Dzividzinska often photographed her friends and acquaintances such as Laima Eglīte (b. 1945), Augustīns Delle (b. 1947), Anda Zaice (b. 1941),[8] and others. These individuals, born in the 1940s, represented a young, talented, and cultured generation in the 1960s, eager to experiment with artistic disciplines beyond their primary fields. For example, Laima Eglīte was a painter and a member of the *Riga Pantomime*, Augustīns Delle was a painter, whereas Anda Zaice was an actress. When Dzividzinska collaborated with them, the result was often a series of photographs marked by a fluid, unstructured process rather than any deliberate attempt to convey a specific meaning or feeling.[9] Her primary aim was to break from the aesthetic conventions prevalent in photo club culture. Often, a journey – such as a road trip or a walk – served as the central performative strategy, while on other occasions Dzividzinska and her subjects co-created carefully choreographed mise-en-scène and conceptual tableau performances specifically for the camera (performance for photography).

The outcome lacked the theatricality that was manifested in Binde's staged and highly constructed images. Instead, Dzividzinska's approach emphasized authenticity and spontaneity, capturing unfiltered expressions and interactions that conveyed a natural, unpretentious quality. Her photographs allowed the individuality of her subjects to emerge organically, often revealing subtle emotions, gestures, and relationships that might be obscured in more overtly dramatic or posed compositions. By focusing on real moments and intimate settings, her work bypassed the artificiality of traditional studio photography. In Dzividzinska's work, the concept of "non-

[8] And, of course, the already mentioned Arnolds Plaudis.

[9] This, indeed, resonates with Allan Kaprow's instructions for happenings: "*The situations for a happening should come from what you see in the real world, from real places and people rather than from the head. If you stick to imagination too much you'll end up with old art again, since art was always supposed to be made from imagination*" [Kaprow 1966].

acting" was central to her photographic approach. Unlike traditional models or actors who might perform exaggerated gestures or expressions, her subjects did not "act" in the conventional sense. Instead, they inhabited their natural state, allowing genuine emotions and unguarded moments to unfold. For example, when photographing Eglīte and Delle in a series of performative episodes for the camera, these processes seamlessly intertwined with intimate moments of motherhood, as Eglīte cared for her newborn child. This approach was rooted in Dzividzinska's desire to focus on authentic interactions and subtle gestures rather than dramatic poses or overt expressions.

As regards performance in photography, both Binde and Dzividzinska worked with this format. In fact, in 1965 their collaborative effort led to the creation of a life-size nude photogram portrait of Dzividzinska, merging embodied action with photographic technique in what can be described as a form of performance in photography. This photogram represents a synthesis between the body's physical presence and the photographic process, blurring the lines between live action and its captured image.

Binde, however, approached photography with a particular fascination for its technical possibilities. As art historian Santa Hirša observes,

> *in Binde's works, the experiments with photo technologies, optics, lights, darkness, copying, retouching, collage and other methods of taking and processing photos amount to attempts to probe the manifold technical abilities of photography. They also serve as a means to step away from the notion of photography as the literal replication of external reality* [Binde, Hirša 2024: 85].[10]

In contrast, Dzividzinska viewed photography less as a technical craft:

> *Photography was never about the cameras, lenses, filters, films, or techniques, contrary to most of the photo club members who were concerned with the sharpness, graininess, and other mechanical or chemical qualities of the photographic negative and print. For her, photography was just a tool to make images that were interesting (for a lack of better word) to herself. The images did not need to be pleasing or 'pretty'. [She was fascinated] with the various optical effects, fish-eye lenses, or distorting reflections instead of perfecting the skills to make 'good photography'.* [Tifentale 2022: 265]

[10] "*Binde would achieve unusual effects [...] by copying two negatives on top of one another. For other works, he would cut out an element from the photo, paste in a fragment from a different photo and then reshoot it as a single picture. Another important method for Binde was solarization, or tone reversal*" [Binde, Hirša 2024: 87].

In this way, while Binde sought mastery over photographic technology to explore its artistic potential, Dzividzinska used photography more intuitively and conceptually, favouring the personal and expressive over technical refinement. Their differing perspectives underscore the diverse approaches within Latvian history of performance and photography, with Binde embracing technical manipulation and theatrical drama and Dzividzinska challenging traditional – alas, patriarchal – aesthetics through experimentation and nonconformity.

The 1970s: Andris Grinbergs, Jānis Kreicbergs, Atis Ieviņš and Emissionists

During the 1970s, performance art in Latvia experienced a creative surge, spearheaded by Andris Grinbergs (b. 1946). Grinbergs ensured that his performances were meticulously documented by photographers like Jānis Kreicbergs (1939–2011), Atis Ieviņš (b. 1946), Māra Brašmane (b. 1944), among others. While Grinbergs's archive includes tableau performances staged for the camera, similarly to Binde and Dzividzinska, his overall aesthetic and conceptual strategies embraced a more fluid and documentary approach, with photographers capturing dynamic moments from happenings[11] that unfolded in real time and space.[12]

For Grinbergs, photography was the most essential medium having been a part of his performance:

> *How did I start making those photos? They are my unrealized paintings. I could not draw, write or express myself well enough in music, yet I had ideas.* [Grinbergs 1992: 2]

Grinbergs's performances were mostly photographed by Jānis Kreicbergs (1939-2011), who was a very well-known and established photographer in Latvia. Kreicbergs started his creative activities in 1958 as a freelance photographer in press periodicals *Zvaigzne*, *Dzimtenes Balss* and *Padomju Jaunatne*. In 1963, he graduated from the Moscow Institute of Journalism, whereas since 1964 he was an active member of photo club *Riga* (along with Binde and Dzividzinska). He also organized many international group shows, from which the most popular are *Sieviete* (*A Woman*, 1968) and *100 foto meistari* (*100 Photo Masters*, 1972).

In the 1970s Kreicbergs worked as a fashion photographer for *Rīgas Modes* (*Riga Fashion*), where he was introduced to Grinbergs. Starting from the mid-1970s Kreicbergs actively collaborated with Andris Grinbergs, photographing his

[11] The term used at the time.

[12] These were instances of *performance for photography*. Grinbergs himself created collages, too (*performance in photography*); however, much later – in the 1990s.

happenings, for example, *Dedication to Antonioni: The Red Dessert*, *The Last Liv*, *Terrorists*, *The Old House* etc. Kreicbergs quotes Grinbergs as his ideologue:

> *If Plaudis was the ideologue for Binde, Grinbergs was the ideologue for me. Grinbergs had great organizational skills. We both were looking for the moment of truth in it, not theatre. We wanted life.* [Kreicbergs 2009]

However, Kreicbergs did not join Grinbergs and his social circle merely to document the performances. In fact, together with Grinbergs they created hybrid works of art, which transformed from a process-based, one-time action into a fine art object. Kreicbergs appropriated the plots, characters and aesthetics from Grinbergs's happenings and presented the resulting images as a new and original work of art. He did so, because he never considered himself only a photographer invited to document the process-based events under a strict guidance of an authoritarian director. Instead, Kreicbergs saw performances as a collaborative project with an element of spontaneity and improvisation providing him with an opportunity to produce free creative expression:

> *It was not easy to collaborate with Grinbergs, because he was moody. But we could get on well. I liked his environment and characters; they were not empty, they had an idea in the background. But the very process was spontaneous: [the mutual interaction was very] inspiring, stimulating, provoking. I was looking for interesting plots. I was young and crazy, born revolutionist. I supported that they did something unacceptable to the regime. [...] My revolutionist spirit was manifested by implementing [artistic] agency and showing originality in my creative work. [...] During the day we worked and were busy, but [...] we felt great enthusiasm to participate in prohibited things. It was fanaticism for the sake of art. We believed that what we did would be useful for the future society. We believed that the system would collapse once, but not so soon. We thought that it would be around the year 2000. The oppression was so heavy, the [Soviet] Union so mighty, the ideology so powerful that only a few brave ones could stand against it.* [Kreicbergs 2009]

Kreicbergs captured images from Grinbergs's performances as dynamic, transient moments, unveiling an evolving approach to documentary aesthetics. His photographs do not merely record action but emphasize the fluidity and temporality of performance art. References to movements within these images – such as swinging in swings or horse riding – are conveyed not only through visual cues but also through blurred aesthetics that counter the precision and the static clarity typical of tableau formats.

Significantly, Kreicbergs applied a rigorous selection process to these images: after developing the photographs, he only showed Grinbergs the ones he deemed

successful, destroying the rest.[13] This act reveals Kreicbergs's creative agency and his role as a co-creator rather than a mere documenter. His decision-making shaped the visual record of Grinbergs's performances, dictating which images would survive and, by extension, how the performances would be remembered. Kreicbergs's choice of what constituted a great image thus had a lasting impact on the representation of Grinbergs's work, influencing future interpretations of these ephemeral events.

Yet, this process of selective preservation inherently compromises the archival integrity. By choosing only certain images, Kreicbergs not only shaped but also limited the archive, making it impossible to know which moments were omitted. This selective retention mirrors what Reason discusses regarding archival absences:

> *As it is possible to point to the sheer wealth and bulk of material in any archive, it is also necessary to acknowledge the even larger body of material not present. Indeed, it is also inherently impossible to say exactly what is missing and where the gaps might be, with such archival fallibility and emptiness inevitable.* [Reason 2006: 32]

Kreicbergs's process exemplifies the paradox of archives: they preserve, but they also omit. His selective approach reflects broader issues in archival practices where choices – whether intentional or circumstantial – shape cultural memory. This selective preservation, while preserving an intentional narrative of Grinbergs's performances, also imposes a certain erasure, where entire visual narratives may be lost. As such, Kreicbergs's decisions underscore the archive's role as a constructed and often incomplete record, inviting reflection on the gaps, biases, and subjectivities that underlie historical documentation.

Another photographer, who not only documented Grinbergs's performances, but also created new autonomous works of art using the performance documentation as raw material was Atis Ieviņš (b. 1946). From 1969 to 1974, Atis Ieviņš studied in the Textile Department at the State Art Academy of the Latvian SSR under the guidance of professor Rūdolfs Heimrāts (1926–1992). The Textile Department was known for its creative freedom, innovation and talent. In parallel, to earn a living, Ieviņš also worked as a press photographer. His interest in photography started in the late 1960s while serving in the Soviet army in Riga and fulfilling the duties of a postman and photographer. These positions secured him unlimited access to photographic resources and provided an opportunity to experiment with chemical processes in photography. After his time in the army, Ieviņš met the silk-screen specialist Aldonis Klucis (1935–2003) and started to work with serigraphy consistently

[13] From the interview with Andris Grinbergs on 25 October 2023.

producing silk-screened images in "*a range of psychedelic colour combinations*" [Svede 2004: 232]. Ieviņš emphasized the painteresque qualities over the photographic ones:

> *In special lighting conditions, a work made in silk-screen technique becomes enriched with the qualities that are not accessible to an ordinary photograph – diversity of colour combinations, self-shadow, the falling shadow, painteresque accidents and texture.* [Ieviņš 1977]

Indeed, Ieviņš himself defined his technique as painting.

By combining painting and photography, Ieviņš created a series of silkscreen prints that reinterpreted and incorporated elements from Grinbergs's performances. He colorized, cropped and superimposed the images "*reducing their straightforward documentary value in inverse proportion to a new synthetic, expressive force*" [Svede 2002: 227]. The outcome was presented as serigraphy, yet Ieviņš defined them as photo-silkscreens. The migration of performance art, which essentially is a body-based and live art, to the medium of photography and silk-screen, is an example of not only documentation of performance art, but also intermediality, since performance art is transformed and transposed to other media.[14] Furthermore, it represents a performative intervention within both photography and painting. Consequently, Ieviņš's work can be contextualized as hybrid. While he borrows documentation from processes before the camera that can be described as performance for photography (albeit documentary, not tableau style), the resulting works, along with the integration of his authorship and agency, can be characterized as performance in photography.

When performance art intersects with a representational medium, multiple artists are often involved, raising complex questions around authorship of such hybrid works. During the late socialist period, performance art in Latvia could only thrive on the cultural and geographic periphery, among close circles of friends and family, allowing artists to create without direct oversight or censorship from Soviet authorities. This intimate environment fostered artistic freedom, but when performance was later documented in forms like photography, painting, or serigraphy, these records were often presented as independent artworks. Artists frequently chose not to reference the original performative act or the people involved, as acknowledging them could risk unwanted scrutiny from the Committee for State Security (KGB). This omission reflects the era's mechanisms of fear and self-preservation under a totalitarian regime, situating these works in a specific historical, social, and political context. Ironically,

[14] See more on this in: Kristberga, Laine (2018). Performance art in Latvia as intermedial appropriation. In: K. Cseh-Varga, A. Czirak (eds.). *Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere: Event-Based Art in Late Socialist Europe*. London: Routledge, pp. 138–150.

these examples of performance art underscore the regime's inability to fully silence artists' creativity, individuality, and initiative.

As regards performance in photography in the 1970s, an outstanding example can be seen in the project undertaken by the artist group known as *Emissionists*.[15] In 1978 they created a series titled *Savādotā Rīga* (*The Bizarred Riga*) that was commissioned by the newspaper *Literatūra un Māksla* (*Literature and Art*). In this one-off project, all members of the group walked in the streets of Riga, photographing a variety of locations that captured the essence of the urban environment. Afterwards the photographs were turned into playful photomontages – all together around 100 images, which could be seen as critique of socialist reality in which they lived. In these manipulated images, *Emissionists* highlighted the absurdities and contradictions of daily life under a regime that often suppressed individual expression and creativity. They utilized photography not just as a means of documentation but as a creative tool that enhanced the performative aspects of their work. By using photomontage and absurdity as a subversive approach, *Emissionists* created layered narratives that challenged linear storytelling and the objective truth of photojournalism. This technique not only emphasizes the playful aspect of their artwork but also questions the authenticity of the photographic medium. By doing so, they challenged the audience's preconceived notions of what art should be and how it should function.

Art critic Jānis Taurens has pointed out that this series can be considered an early example of conceptual art produced during the Soviet period. However, he also notes a significant limitation: the lack of a critical framework or theoretical context within which to situate this art phenomenon. As a result, Taurens refers to the series as "*the conceptualism that did not happen*", suggesting that, despite its innovative approach, the absence of art criticism and theory at the time hindered its recognition and potential impact on the art world [Taurens 2014: 205]. Nevertheless, the absence of open discourse in the 1970s does not diminish the significance of their work from today's perspective. The series *Bizarred Riga* should be situated within the broader history of experimental practices that synthesized photography and performative interventions in Latvia.

Moreover, the previously discussed examples – Dzividzinska, Binde, Grinbergs, Kreicbergs, Ieviņš, and *Emissionists* – each represent a pursuit of artistic concepts distinct from mainstream conventions and established traditions, reflecting innovations in their respective practices. For Dzividzinska and Binde, the quest lay in pushing the boundaries of photography itself. They experimented with style, representation, and meaning, treating photography not merely as a medium for

[15] Emissionists (in Latvian – Pollucionisti) were a group of contemporaries: Anda Ārgale, Māris Ārgalis, Jānis Borgs, Valdis Celms, Kirils Šmeļkovs, Kārlis Kalsers, Jāzeps Baltinavietis.

documentation but as a language of expression with its own aesthetic and conceptual potential. Grinbergs's contribution marks a departure into a new artistic discipline altogether: performance art. He reshaped the boundaries of art by emphasizing the artist's body, presence, and transient actions as integral components of the artwork. For Kreicbergs, the pursuit was one of authenticity and realness, as he prioritized capturing genuine, unstaged moments over artificial compositions. Kreicbergs's approach elevated the documentary image to something experiential, where the focus was on preserving the essence of an authentic moment. Ieviņš, on the other hand, explored the potential of photography as a hybrid medium. By synthesizing and manipulating photographic images through techniques like silkscreen and layering, he disrupted the straightforward documentary function of photography, turning it into a medium of expressive, synthetic force. His work embodied a quest to integrate different artistic forms, blending elements of painting, photography, and performance to create new, layered meanings and expand the scope of visual storytelling. For *Emissionists*, the photographic image became a vehicle for subtle social critique, highlighting the potential of manipulated photography as a tool to challenge and question socialist reality. Through photographic experimentation and event-based practices, each of these artists contributed to the genealogy of performance art in the 1960s–1970s in Latvia.

Access and (re)interpretation of archives

Working with photographic materials related to the history of performance art in Latvia presents significant challenges, as these materials are often sporadically scattered across numerous archives, both institutional and private. Contemporary art historians delving into this field encounter various obstacles that complicate their research efforts. One major issue is the incomplete digitization of photographic archives and collections. While some institutions have made strides toward digitizing their materials, such as the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art (LCCA), many archives remain largely inaccessible in physical form. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that numerous private archives have not been disclosed to the public, further limiting access to essential visual documentation.[16] Moreover, the absence of a centralized database for these photographic images poses a significant hurdle. Instead of being housed in a single, easily navigable repository, these materials are dispersed across multiple websites and institutions. As a result, researchers must possess a detailed knowledge of where to find specific images, which can be time-consuming and frustrating. This fragmentation not only hampers the ability to conduct

[16] For example, photography archives by photographers Māra Brašmane and Jānis Kreicbergs.

comprehensive research but also impedes the broader understanding of performance art's evolution and significance in Latvia. Without a cohesive system for accessing and cataloguing these photographic materials, the rich narrative of Latvia's performance art history risks being overlooked or underrepresented in academic discourse.

As regards digital platforms and open-access data repositories, the LCCA[17] offers access to its collection digitally via its website.[18] According to the website, "*the collection of the LCCA is one of the most significant resources for researching contemporary art in Latvia*" [LCCA]. Art historians "*can access the digitized collection and a vast trove of information on artists, exhibitions and processes in art and culture from the 1960s to the present day*" [LCCA]. For example, if we type in the search box the name of Andris Grinbergs, 18 images are offered. As soon as a user presses on the selected image, the system transfers the user to the website of National Library of Latvia, where it is possible to download the image and to see all the respective metadata, such as the title, author(s), the year the work was created, the owner or keeper of the original photograph.[19] The LCCA collection[20] provides access to the photographs related to event-based art, for example, there are 23 photographs from the series of the *Bizarred Riga*, 53 images from Andris Grinbergs's performances (defined as "actions"), and 19 images by Zenta Dzividzinska. Thus, for example, the collection of images related to Andris Grinbergs's woks is a bit wider at the website of the National Library Latvia than in the digital collection of the LCCA.

Another valuable yet somewhat outdated online resource in terms of design and navigation is www.meandrs.lv (a network of museum collections created in 2010). This site provides access to numerous artworks, including 115 photographs by Binde, 77 by Dzividzinska, and 16 by Atis Ieviņš, all held by the Latvian National Museum of Art. Notably, no works by Kreicbergs or *Emissionists* are currently catalogued on the site. Although the website's update history is unclear, it offers essential details for each piece, such as the date, dimensions, and photographic technique. The images are available for download, albeit in relatively low resolution – sufficient for research purposes. A particularly interesting point of cataloguing concerns Dzividzinska's

[17] Moreover, the LCCA stores a digitally accessible archival material of unpublished interviews with artists involved in performance art or related genres, such as pantomime. Since many of these artists have passed away over the years, the interviews as primary sources are of utmost importance for art historians. Although the activities of LCCA are valuable in various areas – research, exhibitions, conferences and publications – the monographs published by the LCCA, as well as their unpublished materials are of a particularly great value for the researchers focusing on the history of performance art in Latvia.

[18] https://lcca.lv/en/digital-collection/

[19] The collection of the LCCA is also paired with the EUROPEANA network, which provides access to Europe's digital cultural heritage.

[20] Metadata list: https://dom.lndb.lv/data/obj/761846.html

performative works alongside Laima Eglīte and Augustīns Delle, which have been identified under the *Riga Pantomime* series. These photographs, however, are autonomous works, independent of rehearsals or pantomime performances, and merit examination as distinct pieces within Dzividzinska's oeuvre, reflecting the performative experimental practices she pioneered.

The Digital Library of Latvia (www.digitalabiblioteka.lv) offers further opportunities to explore photographic images documenting the history of Latvian performance art. According to the website, the National Library of Latvia curates digital content from over 500 partner collections across Latvia and internationally. If, for example, we type the name of Andris Grinbergs (also spelled as Andris Grīnbergs in Latvian), 3558 entries are found.[21] This might seem like an enormous corpus of documents; however, only some of the available entries concern actually performance artist Andris Grinbergs. The researcher must refine the selection by pressing "avoid synonyms". As a result, the number of entries is reduced to 936. A unique finding among these is an image of Andris Grinbergs and Anna Romanovska.[22] In 2020, Anna Romanovska defended her doctoral thesis *A Subdued Palette of Subversion: Artistic Expression, Creativity, and Family Coping Strategies in Soviet Latvia* at the University of Toronto. In one of the subchapters, she also refers to Andris Grinbergs, providing details about how they met and sharing her first impression of him:

> *I met Andris Grinbergs on a train heading for Jūrmala. We sit across from each other on the stiff wooden seats. He looks at me and quickly turns his gaze towards the window. I do the same. For a while we scan each other with short quick glimpses and try very hard not to stare. We pretend to be indifferent to strangers. I am fascinated, smitten, head over heels, dizzy with a sudden crush for this artwork of a man. I can't pretend not to be smitten by Andris for much longer. Finally, we talk. [...] He just looks at me with his large, dreamy and seductive eyes. 'Try out my freedom playfully. It's safe; I have a playground,' I think Andris is telling me. And soon enough I find myself participating in his world.* [Romanovska 2020: 79–80]

This excerpt from Romanovska's thesis, which is a fragment of her memories, provides another piece of the puzzle in the genealogy of Latvian performance art. Along with the digitally available image on the website of the Digital Library, the history can be further reconstructed as a coherent narrative. However, this

[21] There are 149 entries under the name of Zenta Dzividzinska. See further: https://digitalabiblioteka.lv/?col=1549393

[22] https://digitalabiblioteka.lv/?id=oai:the.european.library.DOM:1149243&q=andris%20grinbergs&syn=1&of=15-876

information would hold little significance if the author of the article were unaware of Romanovska's identity and her connection to Grinbergs.[23]

Another digitally accessible and internationally recognized source is the Russian Art and Soviet Nonconformist Art Collection at the Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, which is one of the most extensive and important collections of unofficial or nonconformist Soviet art created between the 1950s and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It was largely due to the efforts of art historian Mark Allen Svede, who as a Latvian–American, made several trips to Latvia at the request of Norton Dodge (1927–2011) to acquire selected artists' works and bring them back to the United States. The Russian Art and Soviet Nonconformist Art Collection includes 3 images by Binde, [24] 31 by Andris Grinbergs (3 unavailable[25]), 40 by Dzividzinska, [26] and 21 by Ieviņš. [27] The catalogue provides sufficient bibliographic details for research; however, dates for some photographs are missing or broadly attributed to a decade, which can challenge the precise reconstruction of an artist's timeline.

However, the most comprehensive understanding of any archive is achievable only through access to the full collection, rather than to individually or institutionally selected images. Full collections provide a richer, more nuanced insight into the scope of an artist's work, revealing the subtleties of their creative evolution, stylistic variations, and experimental phases that selective viewing can obscure. For instance, following art historian Alise Tifentale's decision in summer 2021, her mother Zenta Dzividzinska's archive is currently housed and curated at the National Library of Latvia (NLL),[28] offering a structured resource for researchers, though accessibility may still depend on institutional permissions. As Līga Goldberga accentuates, "*The transfer of the archive to the NLL opens up new possibilities for interpretation and research, including on the circulation of the archive over different periods of time and integration into the art discourse*" [Goldberga 2022].[29] In contrast, Andris Grinbergs's extensive collection containing 392 works has entered the private collection of Jānis Zuzāns and is accessible by appointment through *Zuzeum*, Zuzāns's art center in Riga.[30] Atis Ieviņš's archive remains under his personal care, and can be accessed

[23] Romanovska's doctoral thesis was brought to the attention of the author of the article by Baņuta Rubess, a Latvian-born Canadian researcher.

[24] https://zimmerli.emuseum.com/search/Gunars%20Binde

[25] https://zimmerli.emuseum.com/search/andris%20grinbergs

[26] https://zimmerli.emuseum.com/search/zenta%20dzividzinska/objects/images?page=2

[27] https://zimmerli.emuseum.com/search/atis%20ievi%C5%86%C5%A1/objects/images?page=1

[28] At the art repository of Konrāds Ubāns Art Reading Room.

[29] Goldberga herself currently works on the doctoral thesis that focuses on Zenta Dzividzinska's archive.

[30] www.zuzeum.com

by approaching Ieviņš individually. In the case of Jānis Kreicbergs, his collection is held privately by his family, with no established public access. However, the absence of a formal archival structure may pose challenges in ensuring its preservation and accessibility to researchers.

Although referencing Michel Foucault and his work *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) might seem overly common in discussions of archives, it is important to recall that, from a Foucauldian perspective, the archive is far more than a physical repository of texts or documents. For Foucault, the "archive" is an abstract concept closely related to his notion of "discursive formations" – the rules and structures that make certain statements possible while excluding others:

> *By the archive, I mean first of all the mass of things spoken in a culture, preserved, valorised, re-used, repeated and transformed. In brief, this whole verbal mass that has been produced by men, invested in their techniques and in their institutions, and woven into their existence and their history* [Foucault 2014: 20].

According to this view, the archive is not merely a passive collection of material but an active, living entity that shapes the limits of knowledge, identity, and memory within a culture. By establishing what is to be included or excluded, remembered or forgotten, those in positions of authority – whether individuals or institutions – can shape discourses and, by extension, exert control over knowledge and cultural narratives. The Foucauldian archive, then, is as much about the silences and absences as it is about what is present. These decisions define the visibility and legitimacy of certain ideas, beliefs, or events while relegating others to obscurity.

When applied to photographic archives, such as those of Latvian artist Zenta Dzividzinska, Foucault's ideas illuminate how power and institutional practices intersect with memory and cultural representation. Some images from Dzividzinska's archives have been celebrated as significant cultural artifacts,[31] while others have been misinterpreted, dismissed, or entirely overlooked. This selective recognition is not always the result of overt political decisions but can also stem from subtler factors such as limited human resources in memory institutions, lack of in-depth research, or historical biases that shape curatorial practices.

A compelling instance of merging curatorial and archival practices is the exhibition *Sophie Thun: I Don't Remember a Thing, Entering the Elusive Estate of ZDZ* (*Sofija Tuna: Es neko neatceros, ienākot ZDZ izvairīgajā arhīvā*), curated by Zane Onckule. [32] This exhibition created a dialogue between artist Sophie Thun (b. 1985) and the legacy of the late Latvian artist Zenta Dzividzinska, specifically through

[31] The photo series "House Near the River" (late 1960s–early 1970s) or images with the *Riga Pantomime* group (1964–1965).

[32] https://kim.lv/en/dont-remember-thing-entering-elusive-estate-zdz/

Dzividzinska's archive. Thun's engagement extended beyond simply displaying her own work; she printed new images directly from Dzividzinska's negatives, interpreting them rather than merely reproducing them. As art historian Alise Tifentale notes, "*Thun's involvement [was] more than printing – she rather interpreted Dzividzinska's negatives*" [Tifentale 2023: 51].

According to Līga Goldberga, the materials for the exhibition included a diverse array of objects contained within thirteen boxes. These boxes held photographic prints, photocopies, books, newspaper clippings, Dzividzinska's design sketches, personal notes, family photographs, correspondence, small memorabilia, and even a makeup box, whose scent evoked a sensory bridge to Dzividzinska's era [Goldberga 2022]. The 13 boxes with photographic prints "*pointed to the invisibility of Dzividzinska's work, as most of her images had never been printed, or printed only in the format of a contact sheet, and very few images had been exhibited during her lifetime*" [Tifentale 2023: 51]. Following the exhibition, the archive, which was subsequently transferred to a library, was expanded with additional materials such as notebooks, documents, a manuscript, and personal items like her parents' prayer books, broadening the scope of Dzividzinska's *photographer's archive* to encompass her lived experiences and memories [Goldberga 2022]. Goldberga highlights the essential role of the archivist or curator in preserving the vitality of the archive, stating,

> *In order for the archive not to experience its social death, there must be someone that would be able to define the meaning of both the representations in the photos and the meaning of the other objects – whether it be personal memories, an aspect from the history of photography, or a reference to contemporary art* [Goldberga 2022].

This exhibition underscores how archival material, when accessed through performative interventions like Thun's, reveals layered dimensions of both archive and photography. An archive, traditionally viewed as a static repository, can become a living entity when artists or curators engage with it creatively, activating its latent narratives. Photography itself is uniquely positioned within this dynamic; as an indexical medium, it both records and transcends a singular moment in time. Thun's approach of reprinting Dzividzinska's negatives illustrates how a performative re-engagement with archival materials can blur authorship and temporal boundaries, transforming the photographic archive into a collaborative, even multi-generational artwork. This intervention transforms the archive from a static repository into an active conversation, where contemporary artists interpret, manipulate, and even redefine historical works. Consequently, the exhibition *Sophie Thun: I Don't Remember a Thing, Entering the Elusive Estate of ZDZ* emphasizes that archives, when approached through the performative lens of reinterpretation and appropriation, embody a fluid, evolving relationship with history.

Conclusion

Examining the intersection of performance art, photography, and archives underscores the essential role that capturing, preserving, and reinterpreting ephemeral artistic processes plays in historical analysis, especially as the time between the original performance and its analysis increases. Performance art, inherently transient, relies heavily on photography and archival practices to bridge the divide between the fleeting live event and its enduring historical memory. Photography serves as both a documentation tool and a creative extension of performance, providing a material trace that invites reinterpretation over time. When analysing processes before the camera, on the one hand, and the resulting two-dimensional images, on the other hand, one must consider both the performative dynamics unfolding in real time and the aesthetic captured in the final image. This dual focus allows for an understanding of how live, embodied actions are translated into static visual compositions, revealing the intentionality, spontaneity, or experimental choices made by the artist in bridging performance with photographic representation.

It is also essential to highlight the aspect of authorship in photography and performance. Some photographers, such as Zenta Dzividzinska and Gunārs Binde, were both behind and in front of the camera, directing the gaze toward photographic subjects while also becoming subjects themselves.[33] In contrast, in the collaborations among Andris Grinbergs, Jānis Kreicbergs, and Atis Ieviņš, the photographers consistently remained behind the camera, whereas *Emissionists* fully embraced the creative process – first of all, engaging in the psychogeographical walk in Riga and, secondly, creating a photo montage that added new layers of meaning through performative interventions in the medium of photography.

Archives, especially when activated through performative and curatorial interventions, evolve from static collections into dynamic sites of engagement. Such interventions turn archives into "living repositories", where each encounter can revive, redefine, and expand the understanding of the original work. For archives to serve these roles effectively, they must be digitally accessible, navigable, and thoughtfully designed to invite discovery. However, a pressing challenge arises with inaccessible archives, particularly those that remain private or restricted following an artist's death. Ensuring these materials reach broader audiences and scholars requires innovative strategies, including collaborations with contemporary artists who can bring fresh perspectives through performative or interpretive appropriations.

Additionally, in-depth research is vital for uncovering nuances and aspects of archival material that might otherwise be overlooked. Increased funding for

[33] Here, tensions emerge regarding the male gaze and the objectification of female subjects in Binde's case.

the humanities and social sciences is essential in this regard, as under-resourced memory institutions would benefit from partnerships with research institutions to ensure robust, high-quality scholarship. Only through these collaborative efforts can archives achieve their full potential, facilitating a fluid and interactive understanding of performance art and its place within a broader cultural memory.

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A SEMIOTIC TYPOLOGY OF DOCUMENTARY FILM ACCORDING TO PEIRCE'S SYSTEM OF 10 CLASSES OF SIGNS

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Abstract

Semiotic analysis of films is usually reduced to a trichotomy of signs invented by Charles S. Peirce in 1885: icon, index, and symbol. However, later he proposed two more trichotomies and systematised them into 10 classes of signs. In this article, a typology of documentary films based on this system is developed. The empirical material of the study is the newsreels produced by the Riga film studio in 1946–1990. As television took over the information function in early 1960s, documentary filmmakers engaged in bold experimenting with the means of cinematic expression. The experiments resulted in a stylistic diversity of the audiovisual information genre that can be systematised analytically with the help of Peircean semiotics.

Keywords: *semiotics, Peirce, documentary film, newsreels, communication in the Soviet Union*

Soviet documentary film: Ideology, history and pleasure

My interest in documentary film of the Soviet period developed during the COVID-19 pandemics. Due to restrictions on public life, online digital databases were the only source of primary information for the researcher. At that time, Latvian State Archive of Audiovisual Documents had provided free access to all digitalised documentaries produced in Latvia in the twentieth century. At first, I watched a dozen randomly selected newsreels of Soviet era to understand the basic principles of audiovisual propaganda. As a researcher, I discovered that this documentary

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genre was not homogeneous and far from dull indoctrination. The filmmakers experimented with visual and verbal narrative techniques, introduced uncommon persons and places. As an ordinary spectator, I was excited to see familiar places as they were decades ago; I found shots of familiar people and even of my mother. Sharing some newsreel segments on social media, I got an increasing number of subscribers who shared their memories about the recognised people, locations, and events. Films created for other purposes and not intended for posterity (who could have imagined then that once anybody would be able to find these shots in a few seconds?) are authentic documents of our private history now. With good reason, Bill Nichols wrote: "*Every film is a documentary. Even the most whimsical of fictions gives evidence of the culture that produced it and reproduces the likenesses of the people who perform within it*" [Nichols 2001: 1]. To make sense of the stylistic diversity and changing interpretation of what was considered boring audiovisual propaganda, I turned to Charles S. Peirce's system of 10 classes of signs. The aim is to develop a semiotic typology of documentary films that establishes principles of a research methodology.

In 1944–1990, the Riga Film Studio annually produced up to 48 newsreels. Each newsreel usually included 5–7 news segments, and the running time was close to ten minutes. A newsreel (or other documentary of the same duration) opened every cinema show, hence, besides the announced fiction film, the audience was obliged to watch the newsreel. The main newsreel was called *Padomju Latvija* / *Soviet Latvia*. Gradually, thematically specialised issues appeared under the original titles: *Pionieris* / *Pioneer* was addressed for school children, *Sporta apskats* / *Sports Review* covered sports events, *Māksla* / *Art* was dedicated to arts and culture, the target audience of *Karavīrs* / *Soldier* consisted of young men and army conscripts. Each of these titles was produced four times a year. The studio also produced documentaries, educational and promotional films of various durations.

In Marxist political philosophy, labour productivity and social cooperation are human goods par excellence [Canto-Sperber and Ogien 2017]. No wonder that the promotion of technological innovation and moral incentives for workers were crucial tasks of the Soviet press and television [Kruk 2015, 2023]. Content analysis suggests that documentary film was no exception. Eighty systematically sampled newsreels of *Soviet Latvia* include 538 news segments that cover industrial and agricultural production (31% of features), arts and culture (15%), ceremonial political events such as elections and parliament sessions (8%), commemoration of historical events, and persons (8%). The communicative purpose of these messages was to report achievements (32%), entertain (11%), portray outstanding workers and artists (10%), disseminate knowledge and skills (8%), and narrate the past (7%). The content looks routinised and dull indeed. Probably for this reason filmmakers avoided synchronous

sound until the mid-seventies. Rare interviews in the 1960s were sequences of stock phrases. Critics evaluated live sound as a failure [Ziemele 1967, Pauzers 1968]. Eventually, the studio decided to forgo interviewing as much as possible. The image was still another matter. Due to attractive visual content, these films are worth watching as documents of the epoch. For the researcher, there are other reasons to study newsreels. First, the newsreels belong to a definite genre which is a neutral background for identifying stylistic experiments. Second, informative messages tend to a narrative closure and an integral visual style that facilitate the classification of audiovisual messages. Third, a random diachronic sample of short newsreel segments (90–120 s) is representative of the long period but not too large for a time-consuming qualitative analysis.

Peirce's 10 classes of signs

It is no exaggeration to say that most visual communication scholars are familiar only with Peirce's first system of three classes of signs proposed in 1885. The trichotomy icon, index, symbol conceptualises the sign-object relationship. Later, Peirce developed systems of 6, 10, 28, and 66 classes of signs. Discussion thereof requires an acquaintance with the original terminology, which will be briefly explained below. A more comprehensive introduction to Peircean semiotics can be found in the special literature [Borges 2019; Farias and Queiroz 2014; Jappy 2013; Merrell 1996: 3–70; Short 2007: 178–262].

Documentary filmmaking is a process of semiosis that transforms the reality phenomena into audio (speech, incidental sound, music) and two-dimensional visual signs. Applying Peirce's terminology, one can explain the film semiosis, as follows. The film intends to inform about objects possessing volume, mass, texture, and other physical characteristics – this is a dynamical object which, according to Peirce, is efficient but not immediately present in the sign [1958: 8.343]. The film provides only partial information as a sequence of two-dimensional images captured and edited from the point of view of the cameraman and the film director. The spectator can perceive the dynamical object only insofar as it is represented by the sign – this is the immediate object [1958: 8.343]. Since the sign carries only partial information about the dynamical object, the spectator himself must interpret the meaning that is not accessible immediately. The interpretation process consists of three parts. First of all, the spectator perceives forms, colours, and light contrasts that produce impressions on the mind, but still, these are not the spectator's actual reflections or reactions, Peirce explains [1958: 8.315; 1977: 110–111]. This is the immediate interpretant "*that would enable a person to say whether or not the sign was applicable to anything concerning which that person had sufficient acquaintance*" [Peirce 1977: 110–111]. From this percept, the spectator develops an idea about the missing properties of the dynamical

object. The reflection upon the sign configures the dynamical interpretant which allows the spectator to understand the object, whereas the final interpretant (also called "normal interpretant") is configured by "*the way in which every mind would act*" [1958: 8.315]. The final interpretant is formulated "*after sufficient development of thought*" [1958: 8.343]; being general in character, it allows intersubjective agreement and guarantees future interpretations.

In the process of semiosis, the sign is a mediator between an object and its meaning. Sign as such is a complex phenomenon described by three trichotomies. The first describes how signs are mobilised for communicative purposes. The qualisign is of the nature of appearance. It is a set of visual elements that demonstrate their mutual relations, patterns of combination: colours, lines, forms, and rhythm of editing. Sinsign is an individualisation (hence the prefix *sin* – joint action) of appearance, a representation of a unique object or fact. Legisign is a general type (from the prefix *legis* – "of the law"), and is recognised as a shared semiotic form that can be used to exchange meaning in various circumstances. Legisigns specific to film are the principles of montage. The documentary genre suggests that a sequence of shots represents the spatio-temporal unity of the event that can be secured in various ways. In a customary practice, establishing long shots demonstrate the context of events. To reveal the personality of the protagonists, the filmmakers recourse to staging. Everyday interactions with people and objects staged in private and public settings provide spectators with familiar contexts necessary to understand the characters and motivations of the protagonists. The Russian montage splits an event into a series of close and medium shots; the spectator reconstructs the unity relying on the personal experience of acting in similar situations. Juxtaposition of two unrelated shots can evoke a new meaning: this editing technique is known as the Kuleshov effect.

The second trichotomy describes the relation of the sign to the represented object: likeness, contingency, and convention. Icon refers to the object merely by virtue of characters of its own [Peirce 1932: 2.247]. The index is really related to and really affected by its dynamical object [Peirce 1977: 33; 1998: 292]. The symbol refers to the object "*by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to make the symbol interpreted as referring to that object*" [Peirce 1998: 292]. Symbols are the products of social agreement; their use is institutionalised at least in some spheres of social life. Jean-Marie Klinkenberg distinguishes between two subcategories of symbols [Peirce 1996: 189]. Symbols *stricto sensu* like words can be divided into discrete units (morphemes, sememes) which can be analysed independently, whereas symbols like flags are holistic units. For the purposes of documentary film analysis, verbal and visual symbols should be distinguished. The verbal symbols *stricto sensu* are words that denote the image; verbal symbols that connote the image (metaphors) evoke attitude. Visual symbols *stricto sensu* are

non-verbal behaviours denoting professions (e.g., gestures of a traffic policeman); connotative visual symbols are images carrying conventional meaning (e.g., launch of a space missile stands for technical progress).

The third trichotomy describes the variability in the interpretation of signs as a discourse. A rheme *is "a sign of qualitative possibility, that is, it is understood as representing such and such a kind of possible object*; a dicent is *a sign which, for its interpretant, is a sign of actual existence*; an argument *is a sign of law*" [Peirce 1998: 292]. Interpreted as a rheme, a film is an example of camera work, montage, or narrative technique. In this article, the newsreels are treated exactly as rhemes: examples of audiovisual communication that illustrate 10 classes of signs. In general, however, documentaries are the dicents, because they show the actual persons, things, and places. My social media subscribers interpret newsreels as dicents that represent something they are familiar with. As for critical researchers, they tend to interpret actual phenomena as symbols that refer to social class, political system, or ideology: for them, filmic signs are arguments.

Setting the trichotomies in three columns, one can combine their components in ten classes of signs (Table 1). In other words, spectators have ten possible ways to interpret newsreels. The first trichotomy allows three ways of recognising something

Table 1

Sign trichotomies.

Mode of being	Sign trichotomies			Form of experience
	Sign in itself	Relation of the sign to its object	Interpretant	
Firstness Qualitative possibility	Qualisign An appearance of quality	Icon Sign has some character of the object	Rheme A sign of possibility	Monadic No reference to something else; the sign is appreciated it itself
Secondness Actual fact	Sinsign An individual token (object, fact, event)	Index Sign has some existential relation to the object	Dicent A sign of fact	Dyadic Reference to an existent object
Thirdness Law that will govern facts in the future	Legisign A general law, habit, convention, type	Symbol Sign has a relation to the interpretant of the object	Argument A sign of reason	Triad Reference to an object by means of a convention

The table compiled after Peirce [1955: 75–118].

Table 2

Ten classes of signs.

Class of signs	Mode of being	Peirce's definition	Merrell's designation
1	111	Mode of apprehension of the sign itself	Feeling
2	211	Mode of presentation of the immediate object	Imaging
3	221	Mode of being of the dynamical object	Sensing
4	222	Relation of the sign to its dynamical object	Awaring
5	311	Mode of presentation of the immediate interpretant	Scheming
6	321	Mode of being of the dynamical interpretant	Impressing–Saying
7	322	Relation of the sign to the dynamical interpretant	Looking–Saying
8	331	Nature of the final interpretant	Identifying–Saying
9	332	Relation of the sign to the final interpretant	Perceiving attributes of the sign–Saying
10	333	Triadic relation of the sign to its dynamical object and to its final interpretant	Realising

Source: Peirce [1958: 8.344], Merrell [2003: 53].

as a sign, the second trichotomy allows three relations of the sign to the represented object, and the third trichotomy allows three ways of understanding meaning. The components of the upper row called "sensible" or "Firstness" are the simplest: These are the pure forms perceived by the senses; they do not refer to anything other than themselves. The components of the middle row called "existential" or "Secondness" are related to reality, they refer to a unique existing phenomenon. The components of the lower row called "conventional" or "Thirdness" are generalisations that enable communication about other phenomena. The rules limiting the number of signs to ten are simple: if the component of the first trichotomy is Firstness, then the dependent elements can only be of Firstness, if the component of the first trichotomy is Secondness, then the dependent elements can be of Firstness or Secondness, if the component of the first trichotomy is Thirdness, then the dependent elements can be of Firstness, Secondness or Thirdness.

Ten classes of signs have different abilities to represent objects and suggest interpretants. Floyd Merrell [2003] coined each class by a suggestive term that captures the essence of semiotisation and enables a concise and vivid reference to them. Both classifications are listed in Table 2.

The mode of being of the 1st class of signs is 111. It means that the sign in itself, the relation of the sign to its object, and the interpretant involve only Firstness. Such

a film proposes a monadic experience of the formal properties of audiovisual signs: form, contrast, rhythm.

The sign classes 2 to 4 involve Secondness: these films propose a dyadic experience of the object as it is represented (immediate object) or as it exists (dynamical object).

The sign classes 5 to 10 involve Thirdness: these films propose a triadic experience of the object by virtue of conventions. The legisign suggests a rule of treating the percept as a sign, while the symbol as a component of the signs 8 to 10 suggests also the meaning which cannot be found in the direct dyadic experience of the object as it is represented.

Documentary film studies and semiotics

The existing typologies of documentary film do not refer to semiotics. The pioneering work of Erik Barnouw [1974, 1993] was a social history of the changing role of filmmakers: prophet, explorer, reporter, painter, advocate, bugler, prosecutor, poet, chronicler, promoter, observer, catalyst, and guerrilla. Michael Renov [1993] considered the sender's communicative intentions: to record, persuade, analyse and express. Patricia Aufderheide [2007] focused on the film content: public affairs, government propaganda, advocacy, historical, ethnographic, and nature. For Bill Nichols [1991, 2001], the sender's positioning in relation to subjectivity and objectivity of documentary discourse is important: expository, poetic, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative film. Keith Beattie [2004] followed suit, adding the recent mixture of reality and fiction on television: reconstruction (docudrama) and observation-entertainment (reality TV). William Guynn [1990] studied the ways how spectators addressed cinematic codes in fiction and documentary film.

The contacts between film studies and Peircean semiotics cannot be recognised as a success story. Peirce was writing at the very advent of the cinema, consequently, his theory of visual signs does not cover the moving image. Peter Wollen [1969] introduced Peircean semiotics to film studies in a reduced form. Wollen picked up only one trichotomy of signs that explains the relation of the sign to its object. Taken alone, it cannot address the semiotic complexity of various styles and genres of audiovisual media. All films are necessarily icons because the picture resembles objects; at least all analogous films are indexes because they carry the optical traces of objects; some images are symbols because they refer to something else than what we see on the screen. Despite the limitations, Wollen's selective introduction to Peirce dominates the theory of audiovisual [cf. Altman 2017; Beattie 2004: 10–25; Kuhn and Westwell 2020: 366–367; MacDougall 1998: 236; Mitry 2000; Nichols 2010; Plantinga 1997]. However, even in this reduced version, Peirce remains so marginal

that a comprehensive historical overview of the film semiotics mentions no research paradigm inspired by his semiotics [Kickasola 2009].

Among the established theoreticians only Gilles Deleuze [1986] overcame the limitations of the icon, index, symbol trichotomy. He relied on the Peircean concept of a mode of being to build a taxonomy of the film signs. Unfortunately, Deleuze's superficial reading of Peirce resulted in an unsystematic list of signs. Ronald Bogue [2003: 65–105] inferred "more or less" 18 possible signs in Deleuze's theory. Some are difficult to understand and operationalise for fiction film and adapt to documentary film analysis. Some other signs could have been conceptualised in the Peircean paradigm more consistently, but Deleuze ignored many other concepts, notably, the first and the third sign trichotomy. Peirce's originality was overshadowed by a great dependence on Henri Bergson. Deleuze reproaches Peirce for his exclusively cognitive concept of sign; nevertheless, Peirce had also envisaged gratification and action as the final interpretants that do not require cognitive elaboration [Peirce 1958: 8.372]. Bogue [2003] and Sobchak [1991] provided a substantial critical analysis of Deleuze's sign system. I should add to their criticism the misconceived communication of emotions. First, Deleuze's affection-image reduces the expression of emotions to facial mimics and, consequently, to close-up. The motricity of the entire body is treated in terms of action-image: a shot that includes the actor's body interacting with an object and/or an environment. Nevertheless, the body itself is a sign vehicle of emotions [cf. Fontanille 2001; Kruk 2021]. The appearance of a still or walking body (apparently not interacting with something else) could suffice to evoke a gut feeling about the inner state of the person. For actor Oleg Basilashvili, it sufficed a peculiar gait and stooped posture to create a character of timid and indecisive intellectual in *Осенний марафон / Autum Marathon* (1979, USSR).

Second, Deleuze conceives expressions of emotions as natural iconic signs based in biology: thus, the Firstness of facial expression. Three centuries earlier Charles LeBrun [1702] strived to design an exhaustive album of emotions as a manual for painters; the scholar of non-verbal communication Paul Ekman [1969] reduced the number of natural emotions to six, whereas cognitive theory treats emotional expressions as conventional symbols at large [e.g., Solomon 1976]. The current view is that emotions are both natural and socially learnt phenomena [Hufendiek 2015]. Contrary to Deleuze, facial close-ups can have three modes of being. As the Firstness, they can impress at pre-reflexive level, as the Secondness, emotional expressions can be understood in the given context, but as the Thirdness, they require knowledge about non-verbal communication cultures.

Peirce's extended system of ten classes of signs has a wider potential for investigating the role of image, verbal comment, and the generic definition of film. Hing Tsang [2013], the filmmaker and scholar, was the first to apply the system

in documentary film analysis. Unfortunately, he neither proposed an exhaustive description of all ten signs as they are manifest in the film, nor developed a research methodology of shots and sequencies. In a more convincing way, Pierluigi Basso Fossali and Maria Giulia Dondero [2006] adapted ten classes of signs to the analysis of photography, but motion pictures were not within their field of interest.

Ten classes of signs of documentary film

1. Feeling or Mode of apprehension of the sign itself. The components of this class of signs belong to Firstness. By themselves, these signs do not communicate information; they are building blocks for other classes of signs. The spectator apprehends the sign in itself, the plastic qualities of shots: colours, forms, light, rhythm. The filmmakers build geometrical visual compositions of industrial objects from unusually low and high angles, harmonise and contrast the shots that captured the motion direction of objects, and use match cut editing. In a 70-second feature about a weightlifter, the director put together a sequence of several repeated attempts to lift the bar, focussing on the facial expression and muscle tension of the athlete (*Sports Review,* No. 4, 1970, Laima Žurgina, 2:48–3:58)[1]. The newsreel feature is a self-sufficient sign that does not carry information about something else, but directs attention to the film making technique. The sign can also be apprehended negatively. An entire issue of *Soviet Latvia* was assembled of mostly close and medium panning shots; their quick succession creates an impression of decontextualised chaotic movement (No. 15, 1963, Irina Mass).

2. Imaging or Mode of presentation of the immediate object. The sign class model, sinsign – icon – rheme, suggests that a sign-event is interpreted as possibly (rheme) standing for its object (icon) [Peirce 1932: 2.255]. The Secondness of the sinsign means that the sign refers to an existing object which we identify through the iconic representation, although as a rheme the sign connotes no additional information. The sign presents the immediate object, which is the object as the sign represents it [Peirce 1958: 8.343]. The purpose of this sign is to create visual impressions in the spectator's mind, but it does not require further cognitive processing. A newsreel feature appeals to the spectator's imagination by evoking the pleasure of recognising something familiar. Such stories depict rural and urban landscapes in different seasons and weather conditions. The launch of a new public bus transportation line served a newsworthy event to create a road movie depicting countryside landscapes (*Soviet Latvia* No. 29, 1955, Ada Neretniece, 5:06–6:36).

[1] The reference mentions the newsreel title, issue number, year, director's name, the beginning and the end of the cited feature. Internet users with the Latvian IPs can access films at the webpage of the Latvian State Archive of Audiovisual Documents, https://redzidzirdilatviju.lv/en/.

Today, the feature can be perceived as the fourth class of signs because we witness transformations that have occurred in these areas.

3. Sensing or Mode of being of the dynamical object. The sign enables a sensual experience of those properties of the dynamical object that cannot be captured by flat images. The model sinsign – index – rheme suggests that a sign-event is interpreted as possibly standing for another event represented by an index [Piece 1932: 2.256]. The indexical sinsign shows the dynamical object as it exists here and now, but the rheme still does not permit a cognization of its properties. The term "sensing" suggests that the spectator can apprehend the dynamical object by "feeling into" the context of its existence. Cameramen examine the dynamical object from unusual points of view that the film audience cannot access in real life: from the top of a power mast and factory chimney, walking on the shaking timber float, standing near to the brightly lit open-hearth plant. The camera allows the viewer to experience the perspective of the worker. A new sensory experience is not limited to the unusual points of view. The picture reduces dynamical objects to two dimensions, whereas they possess volume and mass, as well as kinetic, olfactory, and textural properties. To some extent, the human brain can reconstruct these properties from two-dimensional visual input. Observing the motion of people in the film, spectators can understand their sensory experience. The brain mechanism that enables understanding of motor experience is known as the mirror neurone system. Mirror neurones are activated when we execute movements and also when we perceive movements executed by others. It is possible to understand actions executed by others directly, without relying on explicit inference. Motor cognition is related to the spectator's own motor expertise acquired during his development [Gallese et al. 1996; 2009]. Film audiences can cognise the motion even reacting on the movement of camera [Gallese and Guerra 2014].

A newsreel segment about timber floating carries any newsworthy information: the voice-over only identifies people and place (*Soviet Latvia* No. 25, 1965, Mihails Poseļskis, 1:16–2:38). The cameraman is on the log raft alongside the timber floaters; his camera focuses on the physical effort of the workers and the coordination of bodily movements. The sight of workers walking on an unstable, slippery surface evokes kinetic sensations. The effect of the Sensing class of signs can be grasped by comparing this feature with another report about timber floating that is concentrated on details and does not evoke a comparable feeling (*Soviet Latvia* No. 20, 1961, Maija Selecka, 4:08–5:32). This 85-second-long segment contains nine long shots showing full body in action and the environment, and 23 medium shots showing parts of the bodies and small fragments of the environment. To compare, Poselsky's feature of the same length contains 18 long and 4 middle shots. Arguably, his montage facilitated the motoric understanding of others through the intensive use of long shots that show the whole

body acting in space. Arguably, editing of close and medium shots can evoke other kinds of sensing effects. Such is the segment about a young surgeon conducting his first unsupervised surgery (*Soviet Latvia* No. 34, 1958, Mihails Poseļskis, 4:21–5:16). Close-ups of the eyes, delicately moving fingers, and perspiration on the forehead reveal the surgeon's internal state of extreme concentration. The shots are not accompanied by the voice-over. In this case, we are dealing with social rather than motoric cognition. The areas of the brain designated as the "social brain" perceive biological motion so that the observed movements of other people can evoke in the observer feelings associated with these movements; simulating the feelings of others, the observer can understand their inner states [Kruk 2022; 2024a]. Close and medium shots focus the spectator's attention on the movement of body parts, and familiarity with the social setting shown can evoke moods that the spectator's memory associates with personal experience in similar settings. In 1960s, Riga Film Studio produced a number of newsreel segments prompting an emotional identification with the film protagonists (*Soviet Latvia* No. 25, 1964, Aivars Freimanis; 0:18-2:30; No. 3, 1965, Biruta Veldre, 2:31–8:02; No. 7, 1967, Imants Brils, 3:02–4:52; No. 14, 1967, Imants Brils, 5:41–7:57). Emotional expressions of workers interacting with objects and peers can evoke similar internal states in spectators. Such a feeling into other person (German – *Einfühlung*) may reveal the mode of being of the represented dynamical object, be it a thing or a person.

4. Awaring or Relation of the sign to its dynamical object. Components of this class of signs belong to Secondness, thus the sign refers to a unique existing phenomenon and it is related to the dynamical object. The sign-event is interpreted as spatio-temporally standing for another event, defines Peirce [1932: 2.257]. Strictly speaking, Awaring is the *modus essendi* of documentary film: the sequence of shots has captured the event to communicate its meaning. Insisting that the production of any documentary film involves at least technical codes, one denies film the status of Secondness. Perceived as Thirdness, such documentaries are deemed to communicate about something other than the persons and things captured by the camera. However, spectators recognise individuals and places as they were at that moment in that situation; they can learn about dressing style, manners of acting, technological processes, climate, etc. A feature filmed by Juris Podnieks has recorded an ambitious project of a tower hothouse (*Soviet Latvia* No. 24, 1973, Rūta Celma, 7:47–10:12). The construction turned out to be structurally unsound and was soon dismantled. When I posted this feature on *Facebook*, I received enthusiastic feedback from village residents. They recognised the project team and the impressive construction of which they had an indistinct memory. The visual document became a cue to reconstruct childhood memories. The neural mechanism of such a reconstruction is explained in another study by the author of the current article (Kruk 2024b).

5. Scheming or Mode of presentation of the immediate interpretant. Immediate interpretant is "*the effect the sign first produces or may produce upon a mind, without any reflection upon it*" [Peirce 1977: 110–111]. In the case of the audiovisual, Scheming is a visualisation of a phenomenon that enables people to apprehend its general properties and distinguish similar phenomena in the future. The model legisign – icon – rheme means that a dynamical object has some essential properties (legisign) that the filmmaker has identified explicitly (icon), and this sign can be used to refer to similar objects (rheme). In other words, this is a type that by virtue of some shared characteristics represents different tokens as the members of the same class. Such a sign can be interpreted as possibly standing for its object, Peirce defines [1932: 2.258, 2.293]. Individual objects grouped in a class may possess some other properties (hence, Peirce writes that the sign **possibly** stands for the object) that distinguish them from other members of the class, but in the current event of communication they were considered irrelevant.

In newsreels, Scheming is the dissemination of visual models of social behaviour, habits, and professional skills that respond to the conditions of modernity [Kruk 2015]. This is the propaganda in the original sense of the word: propagation or spreading of knowledge. For example, the aim of scientific and technical propaganda was to bridge science and business. The news reports informed about research and development and instructed about the use of new machines and technologies. The newsreel *Square pocket potato planting using cultivators, sprinklers and ploughs* (*Soviet Latvia* No. 17, 1954, Aleksandrs Gribermans) explained the agricultural process in detail; filmed and drawn images demonstrated the appropriate use of machines, and the voice-over explained the operations. The purport of the Scheming features was education through vivid examples.

6. Impressing-Saying or Mode of being of the dynamical interpretant. The dynamical interpretant is "*an effect actually produced on the mind by the sign*" [Peirce 1958: 8.343]. Whereas Scheming relies on the icon as the sign vehicle that suggests likeness, for the Impressing-Saying the Secondness of the index is of importance because it affirms the existence of the object. Some properties of the object are subjectively selected (legisign), but they can be used (rheme) to refer to other objects of this class. The indexical shots of **these** fishermen, **this** fishing vessel, and **this** yield can visualise stories about other fishing crews. Foregrounding some properties at the expense of others, the legisign has ideological potential. A case in point is consumer interest stories like one about a charcuterie in the capital city (*Soviet Latvia* No. 35, 1959, Mihails Poseļskis, 2:02–2:22). The Impressing-Saying class of the signs suggests a dynamical interpretant: the state economy provides a great variety of goods, and this is how it looks like. Those spectators who had a negative experience with shopping may have decided that the rheme was not applicable to all cases but only to elite consumer practices.

7. Looking-Saying or Relation of the sign to the dynamical interpretant. The model legisign – index – dicent means that some properties of the existents (index – dicent) can be apprehended only knowing a rule (legisign). This is a **type** interpreted as spatiotemporally reacting with its object or another event [Peirce 1932: 2.260]. Whereas the Awaring film represents the dynamical object visually and the spectator can infer a dynamical interpretant, the Looking-Saying film imposes a dynamical interpretant because some important properties of the dynamical object resist visualisation. The legisign component brings logical causality into the sequence of shots. News reports on research and development display new technologies in work, but understanding of the invention requires a verbal comment.

Social frames are another legisign. In 1950s newsreel, directors were seeking ways to reduce the dependence of image from the voice-over. Spectators do not need the commentary to understand social interaction staged in real-life situations. The aim of such dramatisations was to reveal the personality by showing the protagonist in informal settings. Montage as a cinematic legisign suggested an emotional attitude as the dynamical interpretant. A soft feature about an elderly winter swimmer owes its appeal to the inserted shots of smiling children (*Soviet Latvia* No. 9, 1959, Aloizs Brenčs, 6:40–7:34). The absence of an establishing long shot makes the researcher think that the swimmer and children were filmed on different occasions, but the Kuleshov effect as a legisign preserved the spatio-temporal unity, presenting the film as a real event. In short sports segments, expressive close-ups of the fans communicate their reaction to the action, which sometimes is difficult to understand while watching film.

Fiction film iconography is one more legisign. An advertisement for the *Vyatka* scooter revives the mood of William Wyler's *Roman Holiday* (1953, USA). Iconographic likeness is evoked by *Vyatka* itself, which was an unlicensed copy of *Vespa 150,* by the appearance of the young couple driving the scooter and by the camera work (*Soviet Latvia* No. 30, 1957, Aloizs Brenčs, 5:06–6:20).

8. Identifying-Saying or Nature of the final interpretant. Pointing at the final interpretant, these films strive for generalisations. The sign class "*is a type interpreted as possibly standing for its object (law)*" [Peirce 1932: 2.261]. An indexical shot of a phenomenon can outline the law when it is accompanied by a verbal comment or when the phenomenon is a symbol. The images of the ship, the fishermen and the yield can be used as a vivid illustration of a verbal account of the general stand for the deep-sea fishing in the USSR. The symbolic status of shots is common in reports about commemorative and ceremonial events whose purport is the construction of power relations. A shot of the organised crowd of marching people can symbolise unity. Non-verbal behaviours are visual symbols *stricto sensu*. The staged frontal composition of individuals standing or sitting in a semicircle and looking at their peers connotes cooperative behaviour; image of a person reading

a newspaper connotes political communication; image of an industrial worker in the library connotes the dissemination of technological progress.

9. Perceiving attributes of the sign – Saying or Relation of the sign to the final interpretant. The sign is a type interpreted as physically standing for its object [Peirce 1932: 2.262], and it explains the meaning of or attributes meaning to the image. The voice-over names some attributes of the person, object, or event and offers these attributes as the final interpretant. Words as symbols *stricto sensu* are related to the object by convention; the spectator can doubt the attributed meaning if it is not supported by evidence or experience. Latvian filmmakers recur to verbal metaphors that imply qualities but do not affirm them. The Perceiving-Saying class of signs was developed in the features about work ethics of young people in the 1960s. In the previous decade, work ethics was attested by verified facts: the tangible products of the film protagonist's labour. Now the measure of a moral person is the interiorization of values, and the protagonist should bear a testimony of her moral position. The first such segment was dedicated to fourteen girls and boys who just graduated school and decided to start their work carrier in a collective farm (*Soviet Latvia* No. 23, 1960, Laimons Gaigals, 3:58–5:38). After the graduation exams, they come to the school to visit their teacher. Camera shows face-shots of the youth sitting in the classroom in front of the teacher. Since the Perceiving-Saying involves symbols rather than indexes, the words lose physical connection with the protagonists. The young people do not talk; the sublime thoughts are attributed to them by the off-screen announcers speaking in the first person over silent face-shots. Scripted text and the intonation of the announcers presented as the inner voice of the protagonists sublimes their facial expression. The protagonists look as if immersed in moral reflections; however, mimics *per se* do not communicate a certain meaning. When there is no voice-over, facial expression can be interpreted as embarrassment in the presence of the camera. In another segment about a young female textile worker, the female voice in the voice-over speaks on her behalf, praising the enthusiasm of her colleagues (*Soviet Latvia* No. 7, 1961, Laimons Gaigals, 1:32–2:48).

Despite the fictitious character, the Perceiving-Saying documentary enriched the stylistic diversity of visual communication. Intimate close-ups and poetic texts brought to the forefront the worker as a moral person, while the off-screen actor's voice produced the impression of authentic testimony. However, inevitably, as the filmmakers were striving for a sublime portrayal of common people, the final interpretant got disconnected from the visual image.

Visual symbols as metaphors are created by associative montage in features about political history. Indexical shots of the spring debacle and drifting ice introduced the archival images of the Bolshevik revolution in a feature dedicated to Vladimir Lenin's anniversary (*Soviet Latvia* No. 14, 1962, Mihails Šneiderovs, 0:25–1:47).

To commemorate the peasant revolt of 1905, the cameraman filmed the historical locations with the hand-held camera from the point of view of the rebels walking to the place of execution, and falling after the shooting (*Soviet Latvia* No. 25, 1963, Irina Mass, 0:14–0:56). The visual symbols *stricto sensu* found in the news reports are specific manual gestures denoting professions and non-verbal behaviours denoting mental acts such as reflection, discussion. The latter usually was dramatised. Let us take as an example a reportage about a mechanical invention which took some burden away from dairymaids (*Soviet Latvia* No. 6, 1962, Irina Mass, 3:15–4:48). The cameraman captured the new machine at work, while the design process was staged as an attractive interaction between a mechanician and a livestock expert. Five shots include images of paradigm **research and development**: close-up of the mechanic lighting a cigarette, pan to the livestock expert, middle shot of a hand turning over a technological document, middle shot of two men sitting at a table and drawing, close-up of two men, close-up of a hand drawing a line. The success of the dramatisation depends on the ability of the film crew to build trusting relationships with the protagonists and reconstruct the natural setting.

10. Realising or Triadic relation of the sign to its dynamical object and to its final interpretant. This class of signs tends to give an analytical description (final interpretant) of a phenomenon (dynamical object). All three components – legisign, symbol, and argument – are of the Thirdness that enables communication about something else which is not actually present. An argument is a type interpreted as semiotically standing for its object [Peirce 1932: 2.263]. Being a symbol *stricto sensu* (verbal proposition), the argument is related to the image by convention, and words tend to be detached from pictures. Even if the images are used to illustrate and evidence, the audio is sufficient to understand the message. The Realising became popular in the mid-1970s. Television established itself as the most appropriate medium for hard news, and newsreel makers turned to an in-depth analysis of problem issues. Reliance on the symbolic argument resulted in the expanded use of synchronous sound. Although the filmmakers missed investigative reporting and dialogical skills to arrange a visually attractive verbal interaction in front of the camera. Thus, a critical discussion of the city master plan turned into four monologues of architects speaking on camera and off-screen; the visual content included shots of city landscapes, technical drawings, and 3D architectural models, which did not communicate genuine information (*Soviet Latvia* No. 29, 1977, Andris Slapiņš).

Documentary film director Juris Podnieks assembled his first analytical newsreel in the same way: monologue voices reflected about demography issues; B-reel shots of maternity, nursery, baby strollers, and playing children created a routine image of the topic (*Soviet Latvia* No. 3, 1977). Soon Podnieks adapted the 10th class of signs for newsreels by combining talk and image meaningfully. In a feature on an art

exhibition in a factory, a female worker demands that the artist explain the content of his canvases (*Art* No. 2/3, 1983, 10:57–12:57). The following exchange of words must be heard and seen. The artist's talk is the argument to support subjective perception of art, the image is his non-verbal behaviour that reveals the attitude towards the argument and the audience. In the Realising films, bodily expressions take the function of modal words that demonstrate the speaker's commitment to the proposition.

Conclusion

Objective representation of reality is the main concern of the theory of documentary. Scholars focus on the relationship between the sign and its object and assign meaning to icons, indexes, and symbols. Methodology that disregards the sign itself and the relationship between the sign and the interpretant fails to explain the diversity of perception and understanding of the film. The system of ten classes of signs admits that the documentary can address only our senses (rheme), or represent existing objects (dicent), or construct objects with the help of verbal comments and montage (argument).

The 10th class of signs is the only one that explicitly asserts something about the filmed object. The spectator can follow the logical causality and engage in an analytical discussion with the author.

The classes of rhematic signs 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 8 do not assert something about the reality; thus, they open the way for subjective interpretations. The 8th class of signs informs about the nature of the final interpretant but the relation between the represented object and its understanding remains weak.

The classes of dicent signs 4, 7, and 9 build a dyadic relation with the object, thereby they realise the main purpose of the documentary. Peirce suggests that semiosis can take place in three ways. Film assembles single shots in a holistic picture that suggest a dynamical object, a dynamical interpretant, or a final interpretant. In case of Awaring (mode of being 222), the spectator relies on everyday knowledge to fill in the void created by editing of shots. Film may demonstrate fragments of technological process or social interaction that are related in a logical cause-and-effect chain. Looking-Saying (mode of being 322) involves Thirdness – legisign (verbal comment, montage) that suggests a context of interpretation. Filmmakers offer a subjective frame of reference that the spectator can challenge, but do not change the dynamical object itself. The 9th class of signs, Perceiving attributes of the sign-Saying (mode of being 332), interferes more in the dynamical object. The filmmaker selects the attributes of the object that the spectators cannot see and identifies them by words or visual associations. This class of signs has a larger potential to impose a preferred interpretation.

The 3rd class of signs, Sensing, is the most fascinating. Since, according to Peirce, such signs convey the mode of being of the dynamical object, they must be capable to address not only sight and hearing (as the film usually does), but other senses like proprioception, too. In non-mediated interaction, the meaning of objects is not limited by the information communicated by sight and hearing. Other senses, as well as memory, provide information that is integrated into the semiosis. Empirical neuroscience suggests that a two-dimensional black-and-white film can support this kind of semiosis. This is a topic for special experimental research of the audience of the documentary film.

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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FAMILY NARRATIVES ABOUT HISTORICAL TRAUMA IN RECENT DOCUMENTARY CINEMA IN BALTIC COUNTRIES

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Abstract

Autobiography as a retrospective narrative authored by a real individual concerning its own existence in its literary form primarily focuses on the exploration of one's personal life. Extending beyond literature into visual arts and performance, the autobiography has also found a strong expression in documentary filmmaking. These autobiographical narratives are conveyed through a diverse mix of audiovisual materials from both private and public archives, as well as with documentary animation techniques.

The article focuses on films from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, where personal memories of the filmmakers and their relatives form the foundation of the narrative about the deportations in the 1940s and Soviet occupation, presented in the first person from the perspective of the postmemory generation. The traumatic historical events of the 20th century in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania hold particular significance for these filmmakers, and their films contribute to the broader body of work narrating the historical traumas of the region.

Keywords: *autobiographical narrative, first-person documentary, Estonian cinema, Latvian cinema, Lithuanian cinema, postmemory, mediated memory, historical trauma*

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CULTURE CROSSROADS

Introduction

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the film industry transformed from a strictly regulated model with pre-approved thematic film plans and secure financing to a free-market model with competitive project funding. This transformation manifested in a broader thematic scope of films tackling previously silenced narratives, and greater diversity in formal and stylistic expression. Documentary directors began appearing on screen as characters narrating the stories, incorporating family experiences, reflections on the filmmaking process, and subjective diaries capturing personal experiences, which gradually became visible across the works of different generations of filmmakers from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.[1] Among these forms of personal engagement, autobiography – despite its contested application in cinema – has emerged as a significant narrative mode in documentary films. Using this approach with particular sensitivity, filmmakers tell stories about their families and personal experiences, interwoven with historical events and the resulting traumas that affect family dynamics across generations. This group of filmmakers includes Imbi Paju, Ülo Pikkov (Estonia), Pēteris Krilovs, Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen (Latvia), Giedrė Beinoriūtė, Jūratė Samulionytė, Vilma Samulionytė (Lithuania), among others.

Michael Renov discusses the plurality of autobiographical modalities (such as the confessional mode, domestic ethnography, the essayistic form, etc.) and emphasises the presence of formal and structural variations of such films [Renov 2008: 45]. This diversity is reflected in the films selected for this article: *Memories Denied* (*Tõrjutud mälestused*, Imbi Paju, 2005, Finland, Estonia), *Grandpa and Grandma* (*Gyveno senelis ir bobutė*, Giedrė Beinoriūtė, 2007, Lithuania), and *My Favorite War* (*Mans mīļākais karš*, Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen, 2020, Norway, Latvia). The selection of films examined here covers key historical events in the region's 20th century history, focusing primarily on the loss of independence of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania due to Soviet occupation, subsequent deportations, and life under Soviet rule, specifically reflecting the issue of trauma inflicted from the deportations and Soviet occupation. In constructing these narratives, the filmmakers' personal memories intertwine with family members' experiences, creating a shared image of private and public memory.

[1] On self-reflexivity in Latvian documentary cinema after the 1990, see, for example, Balčus, Dokumentālais kino – studijas, autori, tēmas un stili, pp. 271–276; Balčus, Filmmakers as Onscreen Characters in Recent Latvian Documentary Cinema, pp. 55–65. On Lithuanian contemporary directors, see Šukaitytė, Contemporary Lithuanian Documentary Cinema: A Critical Overview of Main Film Directions, pp 1–23; Šukaitytė, History in Lithuanian Women's Creative Documentaries: Critical and Personal Approach, pp. 118–137.

The phenomenon of portraying subjectivity as multifaceted and interwoven with interpersonal relationships, rather than singular or solipsistic, highlights the collaborative nature of self-representation in film [Egan 1994: 593]. In the context of the films discussed here, interpersonal relationships gain even greater significance, as the filmmakers, who are central to the narrative, tell stories that encompass a broader circle of individuals – parents, grandparents, other family members, and close associates. Thus, in crafting these narratives, both personal experience and memory discourse are equally essential. The filmmakers' own memories and reflections blend with the stories of their relatives, creating a complex view of the past.

The filmmakers attain the role of postmemory narrators, as they belong to a generation that did not directly experience the historical events depicted but is nonetheless profoundly affected by them. In representing these memory narratives, access to archival materials is crucial. The proliferation of public archives, extensive digitisation of private archives, and advancements in video and digital technologies are not only instrumental in shaping autobiographical narratives; they also broaden the possibilities for constructing mediated memory for future generations.

Autobiographical documentary and first-person narrative

Changing perspectives in documentary filmmaking, particularly regarding the truth claims traditionally inherent in documentary cinema, are evident in Michael Renov's argument that autobiography fundamentally challenges the notion of documentary. When a documentary adopts an autobiographical perspective as its narrative strategy, the emphasis on factual, verifiable knowledge is destabilised. This shift introduces the filmmaker's unique subjectivity, highlighting the partial and contingent nature of self-knowledge that autobiographical films display. [Renov 2008: 41–42]

Many debates on documentary autobiography are rooted in Philippe Lejeune's research on literary autobiography. Lejeune, regarded as one of the foremost scholars in this field, defines autobiography as *"Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality"* [Lejeune 1989: 4]. Lejeune terms this interconnected set of elements the "autobiographical pact",[2] which entails a unity between the author, the central character, and the narrator [Lejeune 1989: 4].

Autobiography as a form of expression in documentary cinema has created polarized positions. Authors such as Elizabeth Bruss and Lejeune are critical and consider autobiography impossible in cinema. Lejeune has stated:

[2] The term was first used by Lejeune in 1971 and 1975 in the context of discussing the genre of the novel. Brief overview on the term see Missine, Autobiographical Pact, pp. 222–227.

> *Can the "I" express itself in the cinema?" Can a film be autobiographical? Why not? But is it the same thing as when we speak of literary autobiography? ... Is autobiography possible in the cinema? ... It is not possible to be on both sides of the camera at the same time, in front of it and behind it."* [quoted in Gabara 2016: 927]

Bruss points to similar issues regarding the feasibility of uniting the author, narrator, and protagonist in film. Language and film are more than just a difference in format of expression, as each has distinct "signifying practices". In cinema, it is not possible to achieve the same level of self-observation and self-analysis as in language and literature [Bruss 2014: 297–298]. In contrast to the views of Bruss and Lejeune, however, P. Adams Sitney highlights the close connection between literary and cinematic autobiography:

> *filmmakers resemble the literary autobiographers who dwell upon, and find their most powerful and enigmatic metaphors for, the very aporias, the contradictions, the gaps, the failures involved in trying to make language (or film) substitute for experience and memory.* [quoted from Gabara 2016: 927–928]

What Sitney illustrates is the human endeavour to capture experience, where the process of capturing and its outcome are more important than the specific means employed.

By emphasising subjectivity and its fragmentation, Rachel Gabara argues that filmic autobiographies, with their inherent separation between the director and the filmed subject, challenge traditional notions of a unified identity, as noted by Bruss and Lejeune. These films introduce new methods for exploring and depicting the complexities of fragmented subjectivity [Gabara 2016: 928]. Gabara further contends: "*Autobiography is always a locus of contact among many genres, at once representation and invention, non-fiction and fiction, in the present and in the past and in the first and third persons*" [Gabara 2016: 925].

The filmmaker operates within at least two levels of interaction: with the people who are part of their narrative circle and with the team involved in the production of the film. Consequently, the autobiographical narrative is constructed not solely from the filmmaker's perspective as an individual narrator but also reflects the influence of other involved professionals. Thus, as suggested by Gabara and Egan, this approach opens up possibilities for understanding new dimensions of subjectivity in filmed autobiography.

Egan emphasises the interactive role of the filmmaker in constructing filmic autobiography:

> *Unlike traditional autobiography, film constructs interaction – certainly between the subject and the camera, but also, it seems, for various reasons, among subjects. Technical and personal collaboration interfere with and become part of the living moment, altering perception and creating, therefore, new "realities."* [Egan 1994: 616]

The formation of these newly created "realities" also depends on the filming strategies chosen by the author, which may include filmed interviews with family members or other people, various locations, or the involvement of animation artists who contribute their artistic vision to realise the author's concept.

Jim Lane by adopting the definition of autobiographical documentaries proposed by film critics John Stuart Katz and Judith Milstein Katz, in which "*the subject of the film and filmmaker often begins with a level of trust and intimacy never achieved or strived for in other films*" [Lane 2002: 3] adds another layer of specificity and relationality, as it suggests building the trust between the filmmaker and the spectator.

The question of using the first-person singular or first-person plural further highlights the inherent challenge of the "I" in audiovisual (and photographic) work, as opposed to literary autobiographies. While cinema and photography can lend a strong physical presence to auto-narratives, they often diminish the emphasis on subjectivity and identity. This raises the persistent question of how an auto-narrational discourse is attributed to a specific enunciator [Christen 2019: 97]. It could even be argued that autobiographical film necessarily implicates others in representing the protagonist, constructing this figure as constantly in relation with others – thus, always positioned in the "first-person plural" [Lebow 2008: xii]. Lebow echoes Egan's notion that relationships in autobiographical storytelling exist within interactions. Lebow suggests that first-person narration does not always, and is not solely meant to, belong to the speaking self, but "*it belongs to larger collectivities without which the maker would be unrecognizable to herself, and effectively would have no story to tell*" [Lebow 2008: xii]

Operating on the premise that crafting autobiographical narratives in film can imbue them with heightened expressive dimensions, and acknowledging the inherently collaborative nature of cinematic production, it is crucial for the spectator to engage in an active, critically reflexive relationship with the autobiographical text. Scholars of both literary and cinematic autobiography underscore this dynamic, emphasising the need for a dialectical engagement between the viewer and the work.

Historical trauma narratives from postmemory generation

The films selected for discussion in this article address the traumas inflicted on the inhabitants of Baltic region – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – by totalitarian regimes, resulting in the loss of national independence and significant demographic

upheavals. Experiencing three successive occupations – the Soviet occupation from 1940–1941, the Nazi German occupation from 1941–1944, and the subsequent reoccupation by the Soviet Union in 1944 – left indelible scars on the society of the three states.[3] The films analysed in this article focus particularly on the Soviet occupation and its repressive mechanisms, which, as historian Andres Kasekamp notes, targeted "class enemies", members of post-war resistance movements, and those affected by forced collectivization, which involved mass deportations to prison camps in the Soviet Union [Kasekamp 2018: 113].

Although the timeline and scale of deportations varied among Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the scope of repression was extensive: from 1940–1941, approximately 15 000 people were repressed in Estonia, 35 000 in Latvia, and 35 000 in Lithuania. In 1949, further deportations affected 20 713 Estonians, 42 149 Latvians, and 31 917 Lithuanians [Gūtmane 2019: 87–88].[4] Under the Soviet regime, narratives of these experiences were suppressed and restricted to private family circles, if at all shared. Those who survived deportation and returned in the 1950s faced social ostracization, which deliberately hindered their reintegration and participation in public life.

During the Perestroika period (1985–1991) and the atmosphere of national awakening (1986/1987–1991), these suppressed experiences finally began to be articulated publicly, playing a crucial role in uniting society in all three countries against the Soviet regime.[5] In the context of the independence movements, these

[3] The three countries are often termed "Baltic states", however, historically people living along the coast of the Baltic Sea have not addressed themselves as such. The term became more frequently used after World War I and was quite fluid (including in this description Finland), but after the Soviet occupation the three countries were branded in Russian as *Pribaltica*. More ground for using the common term of Baltic states again was associated with the shared path and cooperation for achieving their independence from the Soviet Union [Kasekamp 2018: viii-ix]. Employing one term for denotation might be useful from the outset, but it does not reflect the diversity pertinent to each country (language, culture, religion, etc.).

[4] The numbers in various sources differ. The McDermott and Stibbe list around 500 000 displaced people from Baltic countries [McDermott, Stibbe 2010: 13]. 1941 and 1949 were the years with the largest deportations, they were carried out also in other years, only in smaller total numbers.

[5] The *Perestroika* (reconstruction or restructuring) period described the last years of the Soviet Union when the Communist Party leader was Mikhail Gorbachev, even though initially it was referred to an effort of a small number of Communist Party leadership and political elite to reform the Soviet system and subsequently to transform it. Once these changes started and previously silenced problems began to be addressed, the gradual shift became impossible [Brown 2007: 17–18]. In 1986 and 1987, the environmental protests started, people began to commemorate mass deportation victims, and the first anti-regime demonstrations took place, which was just the beginning for aspiration to political independence of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which was finally recognized by the Soviet Union in 1991 [Kasekamp 2018: 147–156].

testimonies and memories garnered widespread public interest and served as instrumental forces in reconstructing national memory and identity in post-Soviet society [Davoliūtė, Balkelis 2012: 10]. The ongoing re-evaluation of these historical experiences remains relevant, a persistence that, as literary scholar Zanda Gūtmane suggests, is likely rooted in the Baltic countries' prolonged engagement with identity formation and the ongoing search for cultural sovereignty – a dynamic that aligns with the theoretical framework of postcolonialism [Gūtmane 2019: 18].

The notion of trauma is seeing an increased popularity; however, it is noted that attention needs to shift and turn to lesser-explored groups who were affected by the World War II and its aftermath, such as women participants of the war, veterans, civilians, defeated populations and other similar groups [Leese 2022: 9], and it can be seen in the films analysed in this article. Peter Leese notes:

> *While it is important not to underestimate the resilience effect, it is equally important to acknowledge that trauma is always mediated as memory, and that the forms by which it is transmitted also influence what stays in the mind, what is forgotten, and the degrees of recollection, amnesia or erasure.*

For subsequent generations, the past passed down from parents is often experienced through a lens of "belatedness" or a "syndrome of post-ness", concepts articulated through a range of terms including "absent memory", "belated memory", and "prosthetic memory", and others [Hirsch 2012: 3]. Marianne Hirsch, in her influential exploration of generational memory, introduced and elaborated on the concept of postmemory. This term arises from her analysis of autobiographical works by second-generation writers and visual artists, as well as her own experiences as a descendant of Holocaust survivors [Hirsch 2012: 4]. With the term, she describes the relationship that the generation, which comes after forms with

> *personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to* seem *to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation.* [Hirsch 2012: 5]

As the historical distance from the traumatic events of occupation, deportation, and Soviet-era life grows, the process of remembering these experiences becomes increasingly mediated, as direct testimonies from the first-hand witnesses fade. Consequently, films on these topics can be viewed as contributors to the discourse of mediated memory, where personal memories and collective history are filtered and shaped as mediated representations [van Dijck 2007]. The memory objects, their

presence, reworking, "*raised poignant concerns about the relation between material objects and autobiographical memory, between media technologies and our habits and rituals of remembrance*" [van Dijck 2007: xii].

The mediated memory concept becomes even more poignant at the time when digital format is the norm, and the films use documentary objects as their digital reflections in the films.[6]

Narrating the past experiences through personal perspective: Case studies of films

The films selected for analysis were produced in the 21st century and constructed as autobiographical narratives focusing on the experiences of the directors and their families during World War II, Soviet occupation and deportations employing a first-person narrative from.[7] These narratives are told from the filmmaker's perspective, and present in the foreground specific events within their lives in the context of historical narratives. The films interweave autobiographical, biographical, and historical themes, where personal experience is closely connected with the collective ones. This duality is especially evident in the visual materials of the films, in which personal and private archives assume equally significant role to those of the public archives. Personal archival materials serve as foundational elements, providing a direct representation of the protagonists, while public archive sources are employed to create a visual backdrop of historical events.

In two of the films, animation serves as a prominent stylistic device, functioning as a tool for historical reconstruction and imbuing the narrative with heightened artistic subjectivity. These works can be classified as animated documentary films, created using animation techniques to depict real-world events rather than

[6] From the constant presence of mediated memory sources like fiction films, novels, newspapers, social network posts, digital images, and so forth, the term "mediated media studies" emerged already in the early 2010s. As Dagmar Brunow suggests, it stresses the importance of media for the construction of cultural memory. [Brunow 2015: 1–2]

[7] The deportations and Soviet occupation are the subject of many other films. Their narratives are presented along an already discussed first-person approach, also in observational form, essay, and other. Among the titles are: *Juoda dėžė* (*Black Box*, Algimantas Maceina, 1994, Lithuania), *Sibīrijas bērni* (*Children of Siberia*, Dzintra Geka, 2001, Latvia), *Ajapikku unustatakse meie nimi* (*Our Name Will Be Forgotten in the Course of Time*, Andres Sööt, 2008, Estonia), *Uz spēles Latvija* (*Obliging Collaborators*, Pēteris Krilovs, 2014, Latvia), *Vectēva tēvs* (*Grandfather's Father*, Kārlis Lesiņš, 2016, Latvia), etc.). Andres Sööt has directed several films about the deportations, thus relating to his own experience of being deported at a young age. However, it is Latvian director Dzintra Geka (whose father was a "forest brother" – an armed resistance fighter (see footnote 9 below) – and spent almost two decades in exile) who has created the largest body of work dedicated to deportations, since the beginning of the 2000s she has released 37 films about the topic (on Geka's films, see [Pērkone 2023]).

an imagined reality, and presented to audiences as a synthesis of animation and documentary[8] [Honess Roe 2013: 4].

These films engage with a discourse that began to dominate in the West from the late 20th century, focusing on the changing form of remembrance of historical trauma. This discourse highlights psychological suffering, and the traumas endured by individuals, drawing attention to methods of overcoming the after-effects of difficult events [Laanes 2017: 243].

Memories Denied (2005)

In *Memories Denied* (*Tõrjutud mälestused*, 2005, Finland, Estonia), Estonian director, journalist, and writer Imbi Paju narrates the story of her mother and her mother's twin sister, who were deported to a prison camp in Arkhangelsk in 1948, accused of assisting the "forest brothers",[9] just as both young women had turned 18.[10]

The film is created from the director's perspective, using her childhood memories as a starting point – specifically, memories of her mother's nightmares, in which she cried out for help. In these dreams, Paju's mother returned to the repressed past, reliving the conditions of the labour camps, haunted by images of Soviet soldiers who threatened her life. As a child, Paju felt a sense of anxiety; the reality of the labour camps seeped into her subconscious through her mother's dreams. In her commentary, the director explains that she was unaware her mother was tormented by memories; as a child, she only felt helpless. Thus, her mother's experiences entered her daily life, while the cause of these anxieties remained concealed for years.

In the film, Paju strives to articulate this silenced past – experiences that are difficult to discuss and sometimes remain unspoken by choice. The director's presence is more audible than visible; she appears visually only in a few scenes, yet her presence is palpable through the deeply personal perspective of the narration. This approach underscores the intimate and psychological dimensions of addressing trauma, positioning her as a reflective observer, who channels the memories and emotions that her mother's experiences have passed down to her.

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[8] Animated documentaries became more widespread in the 1980s, but the boom of animated documentaries has been recognized since the 1990s [Honess Roe 2013: 11]. Christina Formenti notes that animated documentaries created after 1985 often tend to be first-person stories imbued with subjectivity, and this also reflect the turn to more personal stories in documentary film proper [Formenti 2022: 228].

[9] Armed resistance against the Soviet regime was present in all three Baltic countries. "Forest brothers" in Estonia and Latvia were organized in small autonomous bands, but in Lithuania itevolved into an organized structure and in 1949 the Council of the Lithuanian Freedom Fighters was established [Kasekamp 2010: 128].

[10] The book with the same subject and title was published in 2007 in Estonian, and later was translated in other languages (Finnish, Swedish, German, English, and others).

The primary theme of the film is the narration of these past events from a distinctly female perspective. The director's mother and her twin sister are the central figures, around whom other characters are structured to provide a broader narrative. The film includes interviews with other women who share similar fates, specialists working on these historical issues, a psychologist who himself lost family members, was deported and, after Estonia regained independence, provided psychological support for other survivors during the period of regained independence. There is also an interview with one of the perpetrators. These stories are complemented by archival materials from historical events, as well as everyday rural life in Estonia, evoking an image of harmonious life before the Soviet occupation and illustrating its devastating effects.

The film held particular significance within the context of memory culture due to its focus on women's experiences. Although many women were sent to labour camps, and many survivors were women, Estonian memory culture in the 1990s, as Laanes notes, was male-centred, emphasizing resistance against Soviet power, men's involvement in the German army, and the movement of "forest brothers" [Laanes 2017: 249]. Paju's film seeks to highlight the violence specifically inflicted upon women, including sexual violence and humiliation, which broadens the narrative about the past. However, this subject is only sparsely addressed in the film, as it remains too painful to verbalize directly.

To illustrate this violence, the film uses drawings by NKVD prison guard Danzig Baldaev, who, due to his position, travelled across different parts of the USSR and bore witness to scenes within the Gulag.[11] His drawings reveal the treatment of women, showing, for instance, women being interrogated while naked or the scars left after interrogations. In the film, Paju takes several of the female protagonists, who had been detained and interrogated, back to the NKVD basements where they were once held. Their stories, together with these illustrations, create a powerful space for the viewer's imagination to envision the suffering they endured.

Grandpa and Grandma (2007)

Grandpa and Grandma (*Gyveno senelis ir bobutė*, [12] 2007, Lithuania) is a short film by Giedrė Beinoriūtė that recounts her grandparents' exile to Siberia. Presented as a fairytale, the film adopts the perspective of a young girl narrating her grandparents' story. This documentary animation reflects the historic turn in Lithuanian cinema in the 2000s, when directors, often women, increasingly focused on exploring historical narratives through a personal lens [Šukaitytė 2021: 15].

[11] Baldaev's drawings have been published in a book *Drawings from Gulag*, London: Fuel, 2010.

[12] The direct translation of the film's original title is "Once there lived grandpa and grandma", mirroring the fairytale style of the film and its narration.

The fairytale format is introduced in the opening line: "*Once there lived a grandpa and a grandma – my grandpa and grandma*," accompanied by a photograph of the director's grandparents followed by an image of her childhood self. Then a sequence of rapidly changing photographs of people in different ages follows accompanied with a text – "*as once lived all of our grandpas and grandmas*," thus expanding the subject from individuality to collectivity, since this is a story connecting many Lithuanian families.

The storyline spans Lithuania's initial independence, its subsequent occupation by the USSR, and the family's forced deportation alongside roughly 48 000 other Lithuanians in 1948.[13] Following Stalin's death in 1953, the family seeks permission to return home, which is finally granted in 1957. The film begins and ends with family portraits, underscoring the cyclical narrative from exile to eventual homecoming.

Beinoriūtė's goal was to connect younger generations with the personal stories behind the statistics of exile and trauma, using the child's perspective as an empathetic bridge. The fairytale form and the child's viewpoint introduce a playful approach, enabling creative visual interpretations that transcend the stark historical facts [Tuzaite 2020]. The idea for the film developed from the recollections of the director's mother of her childhood in exile. Family photographs alone could not fully capture these memories, so Beinoriūtė supplemented them with archival material from the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania. Some photographs featured faded ink sketches drawn by children, inspiring the film's narrative strategy – a child's viewpoint, enhanced by illustrations [Kanopkaite 2008].

Visually, the film blends family photos, archival footage, and animation. Animation adds imaginative elements, adding movement to the static images and blending reality with fantasy. For instance, a "forest cat" (a tractor) is associated with actual cats, while crosses "look" towards Lithuania – with eyes drawn on the photographic image of a cross, capturing the child's imaginative interpretation. Sound complements and extends the visual imagery, inviting viewers to imagine the scenes evoked by still images.

Beinoriūtė employs a subjective animated documentary style,[14] blending visual and audio elements to challenge traditional objectivity and highlight larger social issues through personal expression [Honess Roe 2013: 19]. Although the film does

[13] The 1948 deportations in Lithuania were largely connected to the partisan activity which was the most pronounced and active in the Baltic states after the end of the War. 18 May 1948 deportations targeted 48 000 people, of which almost 40 000 were deported. [Purs 2010: 31]

[14] Honess Roe references the modes of documentary animated films devised by Paul Wells, who creates them on the basis of the documentary categories proposed by Richard Barsam. Wells's modes are imitative mode, subjective mode, fantastic mode, postmodern mode. [Honess Roe 2013: 19–20]

not strictly adhere to the autobiographical pact (the director does not narrate in her own voice), Beinoriūtė's authorship shapes the story of her grandparents.

My Favorite War (2020)

The film *My Favourite War* (*Mans mīļākais karš*, 2020, Norway, Latvia) by Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen is the most explicitly autobiographical of the three films discussed, purposefully delving into the director's own biography and her personal lens through which she perceives the world. The title's reference to "war" is both metaphorical and ironic, alluding to World War II, a historical event that deeply impacted the director's life despite her not experiencing it directly. As a result of World War II, Latvia was occupied and became a Soviet republic, which profoundly influenced various aspects of Burkovska-Jacobsen's life, shaped family dynamics, and formed a key reference point for her worldview, which she reflects upon in the film.

The film's narrator is the director herself, recounting her experiences of growing up during the Soviet era, specifically in the Cold War period, in western Latvia. Western Latvia became a significant location for the Soviet Union as its westernmost border, leading to heightened surveillance. It had been an important strategic location also during World War II, as it was the site of the Courland Pocket, where the German army managed to hold its position for nearly a year while encircled by the Red Army, until Germany's capitulation, thus leaving many casualties. The director's maternal grandfather was exiled to Siberia in 1949 for owning a mid-sized farm, only returning to Latvia in the latter half of the 1950s – like the experiences of the relatives of other filmmakers discussed.

The director reflects emotionally on her grandfather, who felt constrained within Soviet Latvia due to his past deportation. He was an amateur painter and each of his exhibition requests were denied without explicit reference to his past, however, the reason was clear to the family. The opposing positions of her grandfather and father regarding the Soviet regime fostered family tensions, as her father had a state job, consequently, she grew up caught between two conflicting worldviews. She was cautioned against mentioning her grandfather or deportation, forcing her to navigate childhood in an atmosphere of silence, where open discussions about family members and their experiences were fraught with difficulty. Her father's untimely death in his youth meant she could never directly address the questions she longed to ask in freer times – what he believed in, and why he joined the Communist Party [Bruggeman-Sękowska 2019].

The film employs documentary animation to present a narrative that resonates with both younger local viewers and an international audience, offering a broader historical context while depicting everyday visual nuances and situations. These elements reflect personal memories and have also become part of the collective memory.

This aligns with Cristina Formenti's observation that contemporary animated documentaries, while personal and subjective, can be perceived as representatives of a broader category of people, and "*universality is conferred to the vicissitudes narrated and, thus, a (latent) generalizing synecdoche is activated*" [Formenti 2022: 241].

The film includes minimal live-action footage, captured during production, showing the director in various scenarios. Among the most significant scenes are the opening and closing sequences, which link the past and the present. These scenes involve the sea, a motif imbued with profound significance within the narrative. The sea, symbolising both literal and metaphorical borders, represents Soviet-imposed constraints and the potential for connection with others. At the film's beginning, the sea is a restricted area, secretly observed by the director from a distance with her parents (in an animated sequence). By the film's end, however, she is free to wade into the sea with her own teenage children.

Conclusion

Although these films do not always strictly adhere to the conventions of the autobiographical pact, they can be considered autobiographical in the sense that they convey not only the authors' life events but also their experiences and reflections, which are integral to their processes of self-realisation. The approaches to expressing these personal experiences are diverse, yet they are unified by the authors' subjectivity and their choices of artistic methods. Films can be autobiographical in a broader sense by showcasing the authors' cinematic vision and their artistic personalities, which become integral parts of their autobiographical selves as artists.

These films exhibit the stylistic fluidity in their filmmaking strategies while adhering to the first-person mode of narration. They employ various approaches, visual forms, and genres. Documentary animation is one of the chosen mediums, as

> *animation is a fruitful means of documentary representation in part because it creates a conflation of absence and excess. That is, the expected indexical imagery of documentary is absent, and in its place is animation, which can take multiple forms, all with a materiality, aesthetics, and style that goes above and beyond merely 'transcribing' reality.* [Honess Roe 2013: 14]

Thus, the expressive choices facilitate reflexivity and referentiality, allowing the filmmakers to connect to their immediate environments and ground their sense of belonging in specific social and historical contexts.

As Efren Cuevas has noted, autobiographical documentaries – particularly those constructed through interaction with family members and forming part of public discourse – contribute to the shaping of collective memory. In this social dimension of autobiography, the family provides a fundamental context for socialisation, which

autobiographical films vividly represent [Cuevas 2022: 37]. The films discussed in this article highlight both the central role of family in the authors' self-construction and the shared historical traumas among filmmakers from the Baltic states. During the independence movement, the traumas experienced during the Soviet era, especially those related to deportations, began to be articulated, and they were portrayed in films especially by those filmmakers who had a direct connection to them, and/or were in a formative stage of life during that time. Psychological portrayals of trauma, which had become a dominant mode of representation since the 1990s, became especially prominent.

The films discussed in this article present very personal stories, which contribute to the formation of a collective image of this shared past. They also reveal that the scope of this subject is much broader and merits further exploration, particularly in relation to the representation of women's narratives, as evidenced by the identities of the filmmakers and their family members.

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TAVA LAIME / *YOUR HAPPINESS* BY ADA NERETNIECE: IDEOLOGICALLY DATED FILMS AND EPISTEMIC IMPERIALISM OF DISCURSIVE FIELDS

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Abstract

In Latvian film historiography, the feature film *Tava laime* / *Your Happiness* (1960) by Ada Neretniece is considered the worst film ever made. In order to reassess the film, it is first necessary to uncover the ideologically conditioned reception of the film in the 1960s. I will use archival research to uncover the conditions of production of *Your Happiness* and how they may have contributed to the notorious fame of Neretniece's film. Both – the history of production and the history of reception – and their respective underlying narratives belong to separate discursive fields. And both are deeply rooted in Soviet ideology. Now, sixty years after *Your Happiness* was made, we can remove it from the discursive field defined by the values of the Soviet state and establish a new reading of it by applying contemporary film theoretical concepts. With regard to the intratextual features of films made during the Soviet occupation, the concept of dated film (Jamie Baron), which encompasses cultural and aesthetic datedness, can be supplemented by ideological datedness. Thus, thanks to the digitisation and restoration activities of the archives and the updated theoretical agendas of film scholars, following the line of thought of Pamela Hutchinson, films of the Soviet period now constitute our "new cinema".

Keywords: *Latvian film history, film theory, Ada Neretniece, dated film, ideological datedness, new cinema, discourse analysis*

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Introduction

In August 1960, the Latvian satirical magazine *Dadzis* published a review of the newly released feature film *Your Happiness* by the young director Ada Neretniece. The author of the review asks the rhetorical question – "*Whose happiness are we talking about here?*" and refers to a conversation he had with a friend, asking him if he had seen the film *Your Happiness*. "*No, he hasn't. – Maybe this is his luck!*" [Strīķis 1960]. Since then, the myth that this is the worst Latvian film ever made has been quite consistent and could be found in private conversations with Latvian filmmakers. Even if this assertion lacks scholarly support from other historical sources, it is in line with such alternative forms of knowledge as rumours and gossip. Only recent works in film history have begun to acknowledge such discursive practices which are characterised by narrative unreliability and shaky epistemological status as rumours and gossip [Baer, Hennefield 2022: 8]. Queer and feminist scholarship has shown how taking these forms of knowledge seriously can disrupt the normal workings of power [Baer, Hennefield 2022: 6–7].

In a similar vein, I claim that now, sixty years later, we can reassess this particular film without the Soviet ideological overtone. *Your Happiness* stands as an example of how the cinematographic works of art need to be reassessed, acknowledging on the one hand the obsolescence of the filmic text itself, and on the other hand by revealing the changed discursive fields of the film's reception and thus rescuing it from the imperialism of the discursive fields of Soviet ideology. The essay begins with the analysis of the film's reception at the beginning of the 1960s, and it is supplemented by recent archival research. Furthermore, I will link the aesthetic judgement of the film to Jamie Baron's concept of the historical datedness of films and propose to extend it to include ideological datedness as one of its aspects.

On the basis of these theories and findings, I argue that Latvian films of the Soviet period constitute our new cinema, because only now, when we have not only acquired knowledge of Western film theory, but since 1990 also new theoretical findings on art of the Soviet period have been made by Eastern European scholars, we can self-consciously uncover the entanglements of different discourses surrounding film in the 1960s.

In the search for answers to why Ada Neretnieces' film *Your Happiness* has been called the worst Latvian film ever made, we can uncover the dated aspects of this cinematic work as well as reassess the artistic choices that have been overlooked. In doing so, I hope to describe how the film's reception has shifted between different discursive fields.

Historical reception of *Your Happiness*

A synopsis of the film from old Soviet publicity material reads, as follows:

> *The financial inspector of the bank, Velta Roze, with the support of her boss, advocates the reconstruction of the ship-repair factory, the project of which was developed by the foreman of the factory, Juris Egle. However, the factory's chief engineer, Gunārs Liepa, who is in love with Velta, asks her to give up the project so that he can climb the career ladder. Velta leaves Gunārs and starts a closer friendship with Juris.*

The film *Your Happiness* was released in Latvia in the summer of 1960. It was the third feature film by Ada Neretniece (1924–2008). Neretniece was one of the most prolific directors of the Riga Film Studio – she directed 16 full-length feature films (plus two more made at the AL KO studio at the beginning of the 1990s). This creative output places her alongside such giants of Latvian film history as Jānis Streičs and Rolands Kalniņš[1]. Only 15.21% of feature films made at the Riga Film Studio during the Soviet occupation were directed by women [Zelče 2023: 106]. Ada Neretniece was not researched at all in Latvian film historiography until 2023, when historian Vita Zelče published an article dedicated to women directors at the Riga Film Studio [Zelče 2023] and film historian Inga Pērkone organised an event at the Riga Film Museum in 2024 to mark her centenary.[2] The only film of Neretniece's that has been analysed in detail is her debut film *Rita*, about a girl who helps to hide partisans during the World War II, which is considered her best film [see Pērkone 2011: 164 and Pērkone 2008: 58–62].

Immediately after graduating from All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow, in 1949 (specialisation – film directing), Neretniece was sent to work at the Riga Film Studio, where she directed 16 full-length feature films and more than 40 chronicles by 1990. The Riga Film Studio[3] was founded in 1940, and until 1990 it was the only film studio in Latvia to cover the full range of film

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[1] Jānis Streičs (b. 1936) – one of Latvia's most prolific and influential filmmakers. Directed 22 feature films. Rolands Kalniņš (1922–2022) was a Latvian film director whose films of the 1960s and 1970s show characteristics of European modernism. Two of his films faced restrictions with distribution, proper release being possible only in the second half of the 1980s, while the production of the film *Piejūras klimats* / *Maritime Climate* (1974) was cancelled.

[2] The event dedicated to Ada Neretniece's centenary with a mini exhibition and a film programme was organised by the Riga Film Museum and took place on 18 May 2024.

[3] From 1940–1948 two separate studios existed for fiction and documentary films, in 1948 both studios were merged into Riga Fiction and Chronicle Film Studio, but in 1958 it was renamed Riga Film Studio.

production. During its zenith in the 1970s and the 1980s, it produced 10–15 full-length feature films a year and employed around 1000 film workers.

In an attempt to redraw the timeline of the development of the public reception of *Your Happiness*, it is first necessary to cite the letter by the Madona District Executive Secretary V. Kalējs, printed in the Communist Party newspaper *Cīņa*, No. 216, 10.09.1960, in the section *Letters from Our Readers*:

> *I don't think I'm wrong when I say that the public awaits every Latvian fiction film with great interest. Unfortunately, however, it must be said that sometimes the public's expectations are disappointed. One of the last feature films,* Your Happiness*, also disappointed the audience. The real background of the film – the struggle to rebuild the ship-repair factory – is presented in an unconvincing way, as if in passing. Does the reconstruction of an entire factory depend only on the amount of money? A brigade fought to rebuild the factory (again, not unconvincingly), as did a few individuals. But where is the rest of the factory collective, the party and Komsomol organisations? It never happens in life that they can distance themselves from the future of the whole factory.* [Kalējs 1960]

This letter is consistent with the Soviet ideological position that the opinions of workers as representatives of the Soviet collective are highly valuable because the interests of the collective, not the individual, must prevail [Bleiere 2015, 86].

On 11 April 1961, a plenary meeting of the Latvian Filmmakers Union was held to discuss the latest Latvian films. The film that received the harshest criticism was *Your Happiness*. The prevailing opinion was that this film was a prime example of how not to make a film [N. N. 1961]. The peak of criticism was reached in September 1961, when Arvīds Pelše, First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Latvian SSR, in his address at the Communist Party Congress declared:

> *The film* Your Happiness *is considered an undoubted failure, in which the spiritual world of the Soviet man is exhausted, while the new things happening in our country are shown in a simplified and primitive way.* [Pelše 1961]

The reason why the profoundly negative opinion of *Your Happiness* has persisted over time is not only the lack of access to the film (it was digitised and made available by the Latvian State Archive of Audiovisual Documents only recently). I would argue that one of the reasons for the long-lasting prejudice against *Your Happiness* was the fact that the reception of the film was still within the discursive field of Soviet ideology.

Discursive field, according to David A. Snow, is

> *a term used to conceptualise at least one component of the context in which framing and discourse more generally are embedded...* [Further], *the discursive fields are the contexts in which meaning-making activities such as framing are embedded;* [they are] *the ideational stuff that is discussed, and the rules or grammar for the discourse are contained within the field; the field is also constituted by a set of patterned relations imported from outside* [Snow 2008: 7–8].

What I found most important about Snow's theses on discursive fields is the typology of them that Snow establishes. He sees them not as fixed entities but as a system of relations of varying degrees between actors, and thus places discursive fields on a continuum from emergent fields to structured (or stable) fields, and from consensual fields to contested fields. He also stresses the dynamic nature of discursive fields.

Following Snow, the history of interpretation and reception of the film *Your Happiness* can be seen as an event (or product) that has experienced different discursive fields. In the summer of 1960, the film was considered good enough to represent Soviet Latvia at the Latvian Film Days in Azerbaijan and was also screened at the film festival celebrating the 20th anniversary of Soviet Latvia. Soon after, however, a campaign against the film began, which Vita Zelče locates in the context of the defeat of the national communists in the Latvian Communist Party at the end of the 1950s [Zelče 2023: 116–117]. It is important to stress that the contemporaries' judgement of the film, which I have outlined above, was framed as an aesthetic judgement at the time, and it is highly likely that the perception of this particular film influenced both Neretniece's career choices and the younger generation's appreciation of her films.

Mihails Savisko, who later became a very prominent film critic in Latvia, in his review published in January 1962 in the magazine *Māksla*, drew attention to the history of the film's production: that the script was first rejected in Moscow, but was later adapted to the Latvian situation:

> *Understandably, after such adaptation and localisation, the script became even worse. There was no sign of living, full-blooded characters whose clashes would reveal an assessment of the reality of life, an idea that organically arises from a work of art* [Savisko 1962].

Certainly, Savisko is trying to criticise the imperial power, expressed in the tradition of the Soviet film system, of taking scripts by Russian authors, written for other contexts, and forcing them to be filmed in regional republics. Thus, his comment can be interpreted as a gesture of resistance to the oppressive power system. But his remark also encourages us to look deeper into the history of the film's production.

Production history of *Your Happiness* and the formation of prejudices

Another aspect of *Your Happiness* is denigrated when researching the film's production history in the documents of the Riga Film Studio. However, the rhetoric of the documents found in the archive must be read against the critical background that in 1940–1941 and 1945–1990 the Latvian film industry worked within the state-socialist mode of film production. It was controlled by a central administrative body on two levels – in Latvia and in Moscow – by the Communist Party, state censorship and bureaucratic production plans and norms [Szcepanik 2013, 15]. Inga Pērkone, in her model of Latvian classical film, which according to her periodisation lasted from the mid-1960s to 1989, emphasises that in contrast to the Hollywood economic model, where profit was central, within the Soviet film production system the central aim was to reinforce Soviet ideology [Pērkone 2011: 47–49].

Documents show that work in the Riga Film Studio took place under harsh conditions. In 1960, only two full-length feature films were released – *Your Happiness* and *Storm* (*Vētra*, dir. Varis Krūmiņs, Rolands Kalniņš). The minutes of the Community of the Communist Party of Latvia at the Riga Film Studio reveal that the film *Your Happiness* was a great test for the studio, which failed. [LVA 416/9/10]. Other misfortunes also befell the film crew: most of the footage shot on both expeditions turned out to be camera malfunctions [LVA 416/2/49]. It was also revealed that the assistant producer had extorted money from members of the film crew during the expeditions [LVA 416/1/22]. In its report for 1960, the Riga Film Studio admitted that the misfortunes of *Your Happiness* were due to the weak, very schematic script, the director's lack of self-confidence and creative maturity, and the wrong choice of actors [LVA 416/2/53]. The film industry throughout the Soviet Union was in desperate need of films that represented young contemporaries, and *Your Happiness* should have helped to fill this gap, but due to the film's poor artistic quality, "*we are indebted to our viewers*", the Riga Film Studio said in its annual report [LVA 416/2/53].

Coming back to the question of whose happiness it should be, the answer can be found in the dialogue sheets of the promotional reel for the film *Your Happiness*. It shows young people dancing the samba, enjoying life, and the film's leading couple talking about love in their rendez-vous. The promotional reel for *Your Happiness* does not advertise the film as a production drama, but judging by the episodes included in the reel, audiences will be treated to a melodrama directed by a female director – Ada Neretniece – and starring leading Latvian film star Dzidra Ritenberga [LVA 678/2/250].

We have no explanation as to why the publicity for *Your Happiness* should mislead the public about what they could expect in the film. Meanwhile, it helps to

understand why the love scenes in *Your Happiness* are staged with great attention to detail and tenderness towards the characters – Neretniece seems to be more interested in the private moments of her characters than in the party meetings depicted in the film. In comparison, even judging by the staging, these seem like an unavoidable must. However, the duty of film was to show contemporaries with their everyday problems, which in Soviet ideology meant the problems of building a better Soviet society, not those of an individual. This explains why, in 1960–1961, when *Your Happiness* was screened, no one recognised the film's merits as a solid melodrama.

Another aspect of *Your Happiness* that has been completely neglected, even after the film's premiere, is its rather formalist aesthetic. As the action takes place in the shipyard, film's cinematographer Jānis Celms regularly uses extreme camera angles that are repeated in several shots of the film. When staging the mise-en-scène, Neretniece prefers to arrange the figures in space along the diagonal line, thus revealing a depth of field of several layers. One can also point to the plasticity of the way the camera and mise-en-scène resolve the filmic spaces and the empathy for Velta. Watching it again today, it seems quite obvious that the love story has received much more care and nuanced attention from both the director of the film and the cinematographer. None of the contemporary reviewers of *Your Happiness* addresses the film's aesthetic merits. Thus, the discursive fields of film production and reception in Soviet Latvia at the beginning of the 1960s contributed to resignation of the artistic merits of Neretniece to oblivion, but the neglect of another – the discourse of formalist aesthetics – helped to reinforce her image as an untalented filmmaker.

From today's perspective, however, the ideological power of the discourses of the Soviet period has disappeared. Nowadays, Neretniece's more formalistic approach to the staging of the film helps to appreciate her directorial efforts. At the same time, the obsolescence of the film's ideological qualities, which greatly influenced its reception, comes to the fore.

Concept of a dated film

Film theoretician Jaimie Baron distinguishes between two types of dated film. There is ethical datedness – when some aesthetic choices seem outdated because technology or artistic styles have evolved. In either case,

> *it is more likely to produce a nostalgic or kitschy mode of spectatorship that enjoys the pastness of the text but does not find it disturbing or offensive* [Baron 2023: 3].

Another form of datedness that Baron identifies is cultural datedness. We encounter this phenomenon in films that depict situations or lines of dialogue that have been culturally acceptable some time ago, but are no longer tolerable today.

The most prominent example is the shift in cultural perception of various sexist jokes or situations that are no longer acceptable following the #metoo movement. Baron stresses that it is not the function of the text itself to be dated. "*A particular film seems dated to a particular audience at a particular time*" [Baron 2023: 3]. Meanwhile, from the perspective of a scholar analysing a film made during the Soviet occupation in Latvia, I would like to propose that the list of forms of datedness be extended to include ideological datedness, which I believe cannot be covered by the notion of cultural datedness, because ideological datedness is not only the relationship between the film and its audience, but between the film and the political system and the state in which it was made. During the fifty years of Soviet occupation, the ideologically wrong messages or aesthetics of their films (or if something was interpreted as such by the authorities) could determine the careers of filmmakers. Today, however, these ideological messages of films have become outdated, although this is not always apparent to younger audiences, for example, those who are not familiar with Soviet history or the discourses of the Soviet period. Hence, it may be that film critics and film scholars are of paramount importance when it comes to discovering the ideological cringe, as opposed to the aesthetic and cultural cringe.

When working out the ideological datedness of an audiovisual work of art, it is not so much the temporal disparity as the intentional disparity that should be consulted. Both of these phenomena have been defined in Baron's most influential theoretical book to date – *The Archive Effect: Found footage and the audiovisual experience of history* (2014). Baron defines temporal disparity in relation to *appropriation* films: it has to be visible either on the level of the protofilmic object or on that of the film strip itself [Baron 2014: 36]. It forms the basis to the archive effect [Baron 2014: 32]. However, temporal disparity is not the most crucial reason for films to be perceived as ideologically dated. Rather, it is the intentional disparity. It is produced when "*the previous intention of the document is inscribed within the archival document*" [Baron 2014: 39]. Our filmic experience of intentional disparity is defined by the fact whether we belong to the intended audience and whether we accept the intended context of the reception [Baron 2014: 113]. For recognizing intentional disparity and thus, the ideological datedness, our extratextual knowledge has to be consulted [Baron 2014: 39].

As mentioned above, the ideological messages within the filmic texts were a crucial factor for film's evaluation during the period of the Soviet occupation. Curiously, in case of *Your Happiness*, the artistic failures of the film were perceived as a sabotage to the ideological undertone of the story, whereas today, following the line of thought of Baron, the intentional disparity can offer us a voyeuristic joy, because it reveals something we are not **meant** to see [Baron 2014: 110].

Baron emphasised that datedness is not about the superiority of the present moment of interpretation over the reception of a film in an earlier period. For her, datedness is

> *a matter of "preceding" a particular transformative moment, whether this is a shift in esthetic norms or cultural values, and – crucially – of betraying that precedence to the audience.* [Baron 2023: 3]

The period of the Soviet occupation, its political and social structures and the principles of evaluating works of art is a historical period – 1940–1941 and 1945–1990. The collapse of the Soviet Union was the decisive moment that transformed a considerable part of the films made during the Soviet period into ideologically obsolete objects, characterized by temporal, but foremost – by their intentional disparity. *Your Happiness* is just one case study that could be followed by many others.

Old films constitute our new film history

The famous British film historian Pamela Hutchinson, speaking about silent films made by women filmmakers, wrote in

> *Feminist Media Histories*: *Let us curate not old films, but young cinema, those films made in a period of exploration, when the medium was new and its possibilities had not been fully mapped out. In this conception, films released in the first quarter of the twentieth century are young, which means, conversely, that films released in the first quarter of the twenty-first century are old. Young films have no history, but they are brimming with possibilities – with faith in the future of the medium, its untapped treasures and its unmapped landscape.* [Hutchinson 2024: 161]

I would like to claim that Latvian films made during the Soviet occupation are our new cinema. Because now, thirty-five years after Latvia regained its independence, these films have been digitised and restored; new generations of film scholars have been trained; we have not only appropriated Western paradigms of film theoretical thought, such as feminism, postcolonial criticism, queer theory, but over the years colleagues from other Eastern European countries have developed new approaches and carried forward our research, which can be used when analysing Latvian films of this period.

The layered gaze is one of the core concepts when Jamie Baron discusses the reuse, misuse and abuse of archival materials by contemporary filmmakers [Baron 2021: 16]. A layered gaze is needed when carrying out research on Latvian films of the Soviet period. However, identifying the ideological datedness and intentional disparity of the newly digitized films could be only one of the tasks. There are various new discourses and framings of these films now possible. For example, *Your Happiness* also

belongs to the corpus of films with actors from other Baltic states, which is common not only in Neretniece's films, but also in other films made during the Soviet occupation.

While working on another article in the summer of 2024, I happened to learn that Ada Neretniece was considered a lesbian by her contemporaries [Reitere 2024a]. We have no testimony from Neretniece herself on this matter. The scientific archive of the Riga Film Museum's collection holds an interview from 2013 in which Zigfrīds Kravalis (1929–2019), production manager and long-time manager of the Latvian branch of the Propaganda Bureau of the USSR Union of Cinematographers, recalling Vadims Mass'[4] collaboration with the director on the set, mentions Ada Neretniece's "*disease* [*sic* –in Latvian original – slimība] *with women*" [Balčus, Mincenofa 2012].[5] Several film workers of the younger generation who worked at the Riga Film Studio in the 1980s confirmed to me that everyone at the Studio knew about Neretniece's girlfriends [for example, Krilovs 2024]. Here, once again, we encounter the realm of rumours and gossip concerning Neretniece, although from another perspective. Yet, if we take them seriously as a source of historical knowledge (see, for example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who when writing about queerness, considers gossip as pivotal in "*helping discern what kinds of people there are to be found in one's world*" [Sedgwick 1990: 23]), they encourage us not only to look at the cinematic work of Neretniece in a new light in the future. For example, more research should be done on how her queerness and the prejudices of her colleagues about it affected her career. Furthermore, when conducting research on Latvian history during the Soviet occupation, we must acknowledge rumours and gossip as credible epistemic tools, given that official historical resources on the period are shaped by those in socially and politically dominant positions.

Conclusion

Although Ada Neretniece received the National Film Award in 1988 for her film *Divination on a Lamb's Shoulder* (*Zīlēšana uz jēra lāpstiņas*) about deportations, the discursive field in which she has been located for the last thirty years is that of oblivion. But thanks to the digitalisation of the films, *Your Happiness* has been shifted into several discursive fields, all of which are more or less still emerging (using David Snow's typology) within Latvian film historiography.

Using archival records of Riga Film studio in this article, I showed how the stereotypical reception of Neretniece's film *Your Happiness* as the "worst Latvian film ever made" might have come into being. On one hand, the problems during the film's production and its obviously weak script contributed to it. On other hand,

[4] Vadims Mass (1919–1986) – director of photography and film director.

[5] Presumably, this is the film *Pieviltie / The Deceived* (1961), as Kravalis and Neretniece worked on it together.

due to its artistic weaknesses, *Your Happiness* was an easy target for the campaign against national communists in the Latvian Communist Party at the end of the 1950s. Meanwhile, this discourse has completely ignored the staggering staging strategies of the film that echoes formalist aesthetics. I would like to claim that Neretniece's film is an example of Latvian films made during the Soviet period that for us now constitutes our new cinema. Because the newly digitized films can now be analysed using new theoretical approaches and new paradigms of film theoretical thought. In doing so, the ideological datedness of them comes to the fore.

Jaimie Baron, who defines dated film as a phantom genre, also acknowledges that "*by encountering these ghosts we can experience our distance from them [...] dead tropes that no longer have ideological power over us*" [Baron 2023: 8–9]. Thus, by uncovering and analysing the dated films and the old discourses in which they were received during the Soviet occupation and by establishing new ones, we free ourselves from the epistemic imperialism of the Soviet period. With such handling of audiovisual texts we not only "*take responsibility for our relationship to historical knowledge and its production*" [Baron 2014: 227]. We continually co-constitute our past. [Baron 2014: 227]. It is our duty, more than thirty years after Latvia regained its independence from the Soviet Union to finally reassess these fifty years of our film history.

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TEMPORAL ASSEMBLAGES: FILMMAKING AND ARCHIVAL RECONTEXTUALIZATION IN *JANUARY*

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Abstract

The film by Viesturs Kairišs *Janvāris* / *January* (2022) presents a nuanced portrayal of Latvia's independence struggle of 1991, merging personal and political narratives through the lens of Jazis, a young aspiring filmmaker. In *January*, archival footage and fictional elements intertwine, creating a non-linear temporal experience that reimagines traditional cinematic storytelling. Using period-appropriate film stocks, the film blurs the line between past and present, encouraging viewers to experience history as a dynamic, evolving force. This paper explores how *January* recontextualizes archival material within a fictional framework, engaging viewers in a multidimensional encounter with the past. Drawing on Catherine Russell's concept of *archiveology* and Gilles Deleuze's theory of the crystal of time, this study investigates how archival fragments, when woven into contemporary narratives, transform into active agents of memory and historical reflection. Russell's *archiveology* underscores the repurposing of archival images as flexible components in new contexts. At the same time, Deleuze's crystal of time clarifies the interrelations between past and present, challenging the conventional view of time as strictly linear. In conjunction with Russell's framework, such a perspective suggests that *January* invokes a reflective treatment of memory, where history is characterized by its open-ended nature. The film's portrayal of the 1991 events in Latvia's fight for independence moves beyond a simple historical account, critiquing imperial power and its impact on

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personal and collective memory. Under direction of Kairišs, archival footage comes alive in a new context, demonstrating how memory can actively shape modern perspectives through cinema.

Keywords: *Latvian film, Viesturs Kairišs, archival footage, January, Juris Podnieks*

Introduction

"*History decays into images, not into stories... It is not that what is past casts light on what is present, or what is present on what is past; rather image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now in the form of a constellation*" [Benjamin 2003: 461]. Here, Walter Benjamin presents history not as a seamless, linear story but as a collection of fragmented images. History comprises moments where past and present meet, which form what he describes as a "constellation" of meaning. These intersections offer insight into the layered, non-linear nature of memory, showing how the past continually shapes and redefines our experience of the present.

Building on Benjamin's idea of history as a constellation of images, film scholar Catherine Russell's theory of archiveology explores how filmmakers reconfigure and resignify archival material to create new meanings. According to Russell, this practice shifts how we engage with the past. Archival footage is no longer just historical documentation; it becomes living material, reshaping how we understand memory and time [Russell 2018: 9]. In this way, Russell extends Benjamin's insights into the world of filmmaking, where archival images become active participants in shaping the present, particularly when footage is recontextualized in new cinematic contexts.

Such a reworking of the archival image is exemplified in *January* (2022), a film in which Viesturs Kairišs presents a compelling case study on how archival material can be reappropriated within a fictional narrative to create an experience of time. The film portrays the filmmaker as a storyteller and a symbol of the creative process, highlighting how personal filmmaking shapes historical memory. Set against Latvia's fight for independence from the Soviet Union in 1990–1991, the film combines archival footage from renowned Latvian documentarians Juris Podnieks and Zigurds Vidiņš, whose materials are credited as source footage by Kairišs, with a fictional narrative about Jazis, a young filmmaker. The archival footage is not presented as a collection of past images but woven into the fictional narrative, creating a dialogue between personal memory and historical events. Jazis's amateur filmmaking functions as a tool to mediate his engagement with the events in Latvia in 1991.[1] Kairišs

[1] Juris Podnieks was an internationally acclaimed Latvian filmmaker, best known for his groundbreaking documentary *Vai viegli būt jaunam? / Is It Easy to Be Young?* (1986), which

positions the filmmaker as an active participant in constructing history rather than a passive recipient. Through the depiction of Jazis's filmmaking, *January* demonstrates that filmmaking is not merely an act of documentation but an interpretive practice that actively shapes the ways how historical events are remembered and reconfigured.

In this paper, two central research questions are addressed: How does *January* recontextualize archival material to challenge linear representations of historical time – and how do the film's fusion of fiction and archival footage engage viewers in encounter with memory, offering new perspectives on collective and personal history? These questions are explored through close textual analysis of selected sequences from *January*, focusing on scenes where archival and fictional elements converge. By analyzing visual, auditory, and narrative structures, Deleuze's concept of the crystal of time and Russell's *archiveology* are applied here to explore how temporal boundaries are collapsed, creating a layered understanding of historical memory.

Role of the filmmaker: Personal and historical narratives in *January*

In *January*, Kairišs uses the lens of personal filmmaking to explore how individuals engage with moments of historical transition. Drawing from his own youth during Latvia's independence movement, Kairišs crafts Jazis's coming-of-age story to demonstrate how filmmaking serves as both a personal outlet and a way of documenting and questioning dominant narratives [*Cinema Without Borders* 2024]. Through Jazis's coming-of-age story, the film demonstrates how filmmaking can serve both as a tool for personal expression and as a means of documenting and contesting dominant narratives. Set in 1991, *January* follows 19-year-old aspiring filmmaker Jazis (Kārlis Arnolds Avots) as political turmoil disrupts his life amidst Latvia's nonviolent resistance to Soviet efforts to reclaim power. Alongside his friends and love interest, fellow cinephile Anna (Alise Dzene), Jazis pursues filmmaking, seeking artistic expression while navigating the freedoms and uncertainties of young adulthood during the collapse of the Soviet system.[2]

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explored the social and cultural challenges faced by Soviet youth. His later works, such as *Krustceļš* / *Homeland* (1990), provided a profound visual chronicle of the Baltic independence movements, highlighting the political and emotional dynamics of the period. Zigurds Vidiņš (b. 1943) began his career as an amateur filmmaker in the 1970s, working at the People's Amateur Film Studio of the Academy of Sciences. He later collaborated extensively with Podnieks and is better known for his post-Soviet professional filmmaking career. Their works, used as source material for *January*, remain vital historical testimonies of the transformative events of the era.

[2] The autobiographical approach of Kairišs intertwines personal memories with Latvia's historic struggle, blending fiction with lived experiences. For more on this, see Redovičs, A. (2024), who explores the ways *January* balances personal storytelling and historical context (*Kino Raksti*).

The film opens with a close-up of a television set playing Ingmar Bergman's *Såsom i en spegel / Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) dubbed into Russian, with traces of the original Swedish faintly audible beneath. This moment sets the tone of Jazis's interest in cinema under Soviet occupation and introduces the film's central theme: the tension between cultural domination and personal agency. As the camera pulls back, Jazis appears in a work uniform and is absorbed in the film. His concentration is broken when a friend tells him OMON[3] officers are attacking the Press House. They rush to leave, ignoring their employer's protests; they must film this. The scene cuts to the Press House exterior, where Jazis readies his Super 8 mm camera to capture the events. When Jazis brings the camera to his eye, the point-of-view shot overlaps the grainy texture of Super 8 mm film. The sudden change in visual register marks the intersection of subjective memory and historical documentation, where Jazis's filming turns the personal experience into a potential historical record. Kairišs, working with Wojciech Staroń as his cinematographer, replicates the textures of Super 8 mm film – grain, burn marks, imperfections – to capture the medium's limitations and aesthetic.[4] The tactile quality of the image aligns with Laura Marks' concept of haptic visuality, in which the visual experience induces a bodily connection with the materiality of the image. The textured grain and imperfections invite viewers to engage with the film sensorially, evoking memories that are felt rather than recognized [Marks 2000]. In *January*, these sensory elements collapsed the temporal boundaries. The textures and grain make the archival material a physical trace of the past and an active force in the present narrative.

[3] OMON (*Otryad Militsii Osobogo Naznacheniya*, or Special Purpose Police Units) were Soviet special forces under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, known for their involvement in suppressing pro-independence movements during the late Soviet period. In January 1991, OMON forces were implicated in violent crackdowns in both Lithuania and Latvia, targeting key infrastructure and independence activists. To read more about OMON's actions in Riga in 1991, see Stukuls Eglitis, D. (2002) *Imagining the Nation: History, Modernity, and Revolution in Latvia*.

[4] In an interview, Kairišs shared his observations that the film's visual style came together naturally, shaped by both the story itself and his collaboration with Polish cinematographer Wojciech Staron. They experimented with a range of formats—from 8 mm film to *Betacam* video – capturing the right mix of Soviet-era intimacy and cinematic dynamism. The goal was to create a seamless visual flow that reflected the film's emotional and narrative shifts, merging different aesthetics into a single cinematic canvas. A conversation with Viesturs Kairiss about January, Latvia's Oscar Entry, Cinema without Borders, 2022, https://cinemawithoutborders.com/viesturs-kairiss-january-latvia-oscar-entry/ (viewed 07.08.2024)

Figure 1: Still of the replication of Super 8 mm film texture in *January*

In the scene at the Press House, Jazis's attempt to film is interrupted by Soviet guards, and the film abruptly cuts to archival footage. This transition reveals the tension between official state narratives and personal attempts to capture the reality from below. The archival footage shows Soviet officials delivering scripted statements about restoring peace and order, in contrast to Jazis's cut-off attempt to film the events. The scene then cuts back to Jazis's home, where the sound from the archival footage overlaps with an image of his parents watching the same event on television.

The sound and image blend to blur the line between personal memory and official narratives and show how historical events are shaped by those who record them. Jazis's connection to filmmaking grows through his interactions with Anna, his friend who confidently seeks guidance from Juris Podnieks (played by Juhan Ulfsak), the renowned Latvian documentarian known for his politically provocative films. When Jazis and Anna present their footage to Podnieks, he critiques Jazis's distant, detached shots of the OMON forces, advising him to "*get as close to the event as possible so they cannot remain indifferent*." This feedback reflects Podnieks's philosophy, which views the camera as an active instrument – a "soldier's line of fire" designed to provoke emotional engagement and make historical events resonate with viewers [Vitols 1991/1992: 198].

Anna's music videos capture the raw energy of the punk subculture through close-up shots, embodying the immediacy that Podnieks admires, in contrast to Jazis's more reflective style. Impressed by Anna's work, Podnieks offers her a job, granting her access to the institutionalized world of documentary filmmaking – a privilege that Jazis does not experience. Podnieks encourages them both to move closer to

the action to better understand how power dynamics shape historical memory. The archive, in this context, is not just a static collection of facts but an evolving construct, shaped by the intentions and perspectives of those who document history. While Anna's institutional access allows her to contribute to the official record, Kairišs shows that filmmakers like Jazis, who work outside these structures, can still influence the historical narrative through "personal archives." These archives, drawn from personal collections and often excluded from official histories, offer alternative ways of engaging with the past. In fact, Kairišs himself credits the archival footage in his film to the "personal archives" of Vidiņš, further underscoring the importance of private documentation in shaping memory. Through this, the film illustrates that even filmmakers on the margins – through both their creative decisions and their use of personal archives – actively contribute to the dynamic construction of history.

Reappropriating the archive in *January*

In *January*, archival footage takes an active role in representing the past, moving beyond the overuse of elaborate sets and special effects that feature films tend to use to recreate historical moments. This approach reflects a shift in how archives function as historical records. According to Russell, the recontextualization of archival footage allows it to transcend its original documentary intent, gaining new meanings within fictional frameworks [2018: 9]. As we see in the film, this process underscores how the archive becomes a flexible narrative agent, shaping both historical and personal memory. The archival footage shapes the characters' actions and informs the audience's engagement with historical events, inviting reflection on how personal memory intersects with the collective experience documented in archives.

The personal and collective are mediated, for example, when Jazis travels to Vilnius in search of Anna and finds himself amid the series of violent clashes between Lithuanian civilians and Soviet forces, known today as the January Events[5]. As Soviet tanks advanced, Jazis moved as close to the action as possible, embracing the philosophy of proximity that Podnieks advocated earlier in the film. Kairišs highlights this shift by contrasting the close-up of Jazis with a wide-angle shot of the tanks in the street. When the officers destroy Jazis's Super 8 mm camera, this act symbolizes the personal cost of collapsing the distance between the filmmaker and the subject. Immediately following this encounter, the film cuts to authentic archival footage of the 13 January 1991 events, preserving the raw emotional impact

[5] The January 1991 events in Latvia and Lithuania marked a pivotal moment during the Soviet Union's dissolution, with military operations causing nearly 20 civilian deaths and hundreds of injuries. For more, see Lasas (2007, pp. 179–194).

of the historical moment. These archival images – Soviet tanks advancing, officers suppressing protesters, and a victim's body draped in a white sheet – become more than historical inserts; they serve as active narrative elements that emphasize history as a lived, immediate experience.

This abrupt narrative transition invites the audience to shift their focus from Jazis's personal struggle to the broader historical context captured by archival footage. Building on Russell's notion of the archive as a flexible narrative agent, Baron's concept of the archive effect highlights the viewer's recognition of archival material as distinct from the fictional, creating a temporal tension that disrupts narrative continuity [Baron, 2014: 13]. Baron notes that the archive effect disrupts a seamless narrative, compelling viewers to critically engage with the constructedness of historical memory [2014: 15]. This shift between fiction and non-fiction footage bridges personal action with larger issues, reframes the audience's relationship with the past, and reflects on how historical events are documented–and how they can be reused, and reinterpreted.

Moreover, the archival footage embodies what Baron [2014: 18] describes as its evidentiary value, reinforcing the authenticity and immediacy of the film's narrative. By integrating archival footage rather than recreating these moments, *January* grounds its story in historical truth while challenging the audience to question how memory is shaped through mediated images. As Baron observes, this recontextualization creates new meanings that compel viewers to grapple with the gaps and tensions between archival records and their use in contemporary narratives [2014: 22].

In this sequence, Jazis's decision to adopt the Podnieks's style of close physical proximity to the event marks personal growth, as he realizes that filmmaking requires risk in a particular historical context. His shift to an engaged filmmaker aligns with Podnieks's belief that the distance between observer and subject must be collapsed to fully capture the urgency of events. Through the integration of archival footage, *January* reimagines the role of the archive in contemporary filmmaking. As demonstrated in the Vilnius sequence, by carefully selecting and recontextualizing historical materials, the film explores the intricate relationship between individual and collective memory. In foregrounding the archive's active agency, *January* prompts viewers to question the nature of historical truth and the filmmaker's role in shaping public memory.

Shaping narrative through the crystal image

In *January*, viewers encounter a layered temporal structure where past and present coexist, challenging linear understandings of history. This temporal complexity aligns with Gilles Deleuze's concept of the crystal of time, which captures how the actual (present) and the virtual (past) exist simultaneously, reflecting and refracting one

another without merging into a single truth [Deleuze 1989]. The crystal of time presents a fluid view of memory and time, where moments influence one another across temporal boundaries, continuously reshaping the present.

Building on Henri Bergson's philosophy, Deleuze says the virtual past is not just a passive recollection but an active force that shapes the present [Deleuze 1989; Bluemink 2023]. *January* uses archival material as a narrative agent, weaving it with fiction to show how personal memory and collective history evolve. This interplay demonstrates how the virtual past, embedded within the narrative, continuously informs the characters' actions and influences the audience's understanding of Latvia's struggle for independence. Time is "crystallized" in the Deleuzian sense towards the film's end, culminating in the sequences depicting the Riga barricades.

A striking example first occurs during the daytime barricade sequences, where shifts in perspective blur the boundary between Jazis's subjective viewpoint and the viewpoints of other documentarians filming the same event. This cinematic device immerses viewers in multiple perspectives that shaped historical documentation during this tumultuous period. By alternating between these viewpoints, the film highlights how historical events are inherently collaborative and open to reinterpretation through multiple lenses. Including archival footage, such as the bride and groom walking through the barricades (Figure 2) illustrates how *January* layers personal and collective memory. By juxtaposing this image with Vidiņš's archival perspective (Figure 3), the film engages viewers in a reconfiguration of historical narrative, where memory is shaped through repetition and reinterpretation.

Figure 2: A still of documentary footage included in *January*

Figure 3: A still of documentary footage of the same couple in *White Bells* by Zigurds Vidiņš

A striking example occurs during the barricade sequences, where shifts in perspective blur the boundary between Jazis's subjective viewpoint and the viewpoints of other documentarians filming the same event. This cinematic device immerses viewers in the multiplicity of perspectives that shaped historical documentation during Latvia's fight for independence. For instance, the bride and groom walking through the barricades appear in both Kairišs's film and Vidiņš's documentary *Balti zvani* / *White Bells* (1991), but from different vantage points. This repetition emphasizes how archival material evolves with each retelling, becoming a vital part of Latvia's collective memory. The interplay of these perspectives invites viewers to see historical events not as fixed narratives but as open to reinterpretation through multiple lenses.

In the following nighttime barricade sequences, archival and fictional perspectives intertwine even more fluidly. Jazis is depicted wandering through the barricades in the night. Upon hearing gunshots, he grabs his camera and runs toward the action, disappearing into the darkness. Extradiegetic sound – a mix of gunfire and ambient noise – builds tension. Modern cinematography suddenly shifts to grainy VHS footage, recognizable as the archival material filmed by Podnieks during the January 1991 events. This footage is presented with low resolution and handheld camerawork and captures chaotic moments in a series of cuts: a man running, fires in the street, civilians shouting, and officers advancing. The sequence grows increasingly intense as the archival and fictional elements intertwine. Jazis is seen from multiple angles in multiple shots: filmed by an anonymous camera, framed against streetlights, and through close-ups of his

eye and camera lens. These layered perspectives mirror the real-life multiplicity of documentarians, such as Podnieks and Andris Slapiņš, who were actively filming the events. The sequence culminates with the actual footage from Slapiņš's camera, capturing his fatal shooting as he lay in the snow, uttering the haunting words, "Keep filming." Another member of Podnieks crew, Gvido Zvaigzne, died as a result of the attacks that night on January 20–21, 1991 by Soviet OMON officers in Riga.

Figure 4: Jazis, captured by an anonymous camera, during the sequence depicting the January events in Riga

Figure 5: A still of the footage from Andris Slapiņš's camera after he was shot by OMON forces included in *January*

This sequence in the film is an example of the crystal of time: the archival footage functions as both a historical trace and an active presence, shaping the fictionalized narrative while remaining independent of it.

By intertwining Jazis's fictionalized perspective with archive footage, *January* underscores the nature of memory and its role in shaping the historical narrative in the archive. Deleuze's crystal of time is not just a theoretical framework in this instance but a method of storytelling, where the past and present coexist and reshape one another. As a fragment of the virtual past, archival footage influences the narrative's construction and the audience's interpretation. At the same time, fictionalized scenes offer a lens through which to imagine the personal stakes embedded within historical events. In *January*, history is not presented as a linear or fixed narrative but as a process shaped by those who document it and those who interpret it. The crystal of time structure challenges the audience to see the past as an active force in the present, emphasizing that memory and narrative are constantly in flux. This layering of temporalities encourages viewers to consider how personal and collective experiences continuously shape and reshape the understanding of historical events.

Conclusion

The resonance of Kairišs's *January* goes beyond Latvia's 1991 struggle for independence. It showcases the ways how contemporary films engage with archival material to reshape understandings of history and memory. Rather than directly critique imperialism, *January* recontextualizes archival footage from past struggles within fictional storytelling to address present realities. This approach illustrates memory's role as a dynamic force, shaping personal identity and collective experience over time.

By integrating archival footage and fictional elements, *January* reframes the archive as an active participant in storytelling, making the past feel immediate and relevant. Using Russell's concept of archiveology, it has been explored how archival material gains new meaning when recontextualized, transcending its traditional documentary role and interacting with the present. Jazis's story, alongside his interactions with the fictionalized figure of Podnieks, highlights the filmmaker's dual role as a witness and interpreter, connecting past events with their reinterpretation in the present.

Deleuze's crystal of time adds to the analysis of how the temporal interplay in *January* collapses the boundaries between fact and fiction. The archival footage operates as a virtual presence, shaping the narrative even as the characters are unaware of its influence from their position in history. This temporal structure emphasizes the filmmaker's responsibility to engage deeply with history.

Ultimately, *January* demonstrates how contemporary films can engage with archival material to challenge traditional historical narratives and offer new perspectives on the dynamics of power and memory. By transforming archival footage into a narrative force, the film dismantles hierarchies of historical authority, resisting imperial narratives and inviting viewers to see history as an evolving, participatory process. This recontextualization empowers both filmmakers and audiences to question dominant perspectives and explore alternative ways of understanding the past.

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