



JOURNAL OF THE INSTITUTE OF ARTS AND
CULTURAL STUDIES, LATVIAN ACADEMY OF CULTURE

CULTURE CROSSROADS

VOLUME 33
2026

Culture Crossroads is an international peer-reviewed journal published by the Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies of the Latvian Academy of Culture.

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Publisher: The Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies of the Latvian Academy of Culture

The journal has been prepared for publication at the University of Latvia Press

Proofreader: Andra Damberga

Layout: Ineta Priga

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ISSN 2500-9974

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AUDIOVISUAL PRACTICES

GAMES WITHOUT BORDERS: LOCATION AND TRANSCULTURALITY IN THE LATVIAN VIDEO GAME *THE CASE OF THE GOLDEN IDOL*

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Abstract

This article examines the interplay and fusion of different cultural references in the construction of game worlds through the example of the Latvian video game *The Case of the Golden Idol* and its two expansions, *The Spider of Lanka* and *The Lemurian Vampire*. The examined games were developed by the Latvian game studio *Color Gray Games* and represent one of the most successful exploits of Latvian video game developers on a global scale. Since video games are one of the fastest-growing segments of the entertainment industry, developing methodological approaches to the study of video games is beneficial for actualising the existing theories in new topics and environments. The study is centred around a qualitative content analysis, which employs a combination of postclassical narratology, semiotics and intercontextual theory of hybridity. Research findings show that cultural mixing in the game is achieved through different strategies, such as evoking associations through familiar-sounding place names (e.g., Albion, Aquitan and Lanka) or mixing real cultural realia with fictional elements to create new, fictional societies and environments (e.g., by blending elements of Baltic-German manor house interior into the Britain-inspired environment of the main game). However, these strategies are not applied consistently and vary between the main game and the DLCs. The author also suggests a more comparative approach in the future to uncover more detailed systems of connection between game worlds and cultural inspirations, as well as points out the potential gains of depicting local settings in greater detail.

Keywords: *video games, game worlds, cultural hybridity, postclassical narratology, semiotics.*

Culture Crossroads

Volume 33, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol33.564>

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ISSN 2500-9974



Introduction

As one of the fastest-growing branches of the entertainment industry, which is already larger than the music and film industries combined [Forbes 2023]¹, video games are becoming the topic of an increasingly heated debate regarding the nature of art and the place of digital entertainment in it [Bourgonjon et al. 2017]. Various studies and monographs have examined the artistic and narrative potential of video games [e.g., Jones 2008; Clarke & Mitchell 2013; Karhulahti 2015] to explore the appeal of immersive, interactive forms of storytelling over more conventional, linear genres, such as literature.

Nowadays, Latvian video games freely participate in the overall industry development, albeit as a relatively small part of the total number of titles or revenue [Dumbere 2023]. One such game series, *The Case of the Golden Idol*, which was created by the independent Latvian game developer *Color Gray Games*, has earned critical acclaim and a steady fan base on a global scale [e.g., Parkin 2022; Ong 2022], even though its popularity in Latvia is not as widespread. In 2023, the developer released two expansions (or DLCs, downloadable content) to the game, *The Spider of Lanka* and *The Lemurian Vampire*, which supplemented the core plot and environment of the game. This was followed by a standalone sequel *The Rise of the Golden Idol* in 2024 and four of its own DLCs in 2025, providing a consistent flow of new content since the publishing of the original game. This makes the given video game series a suitable object for academic research, especially within the context of Latvian digital storytelling trends and their place in the global entertainment industry.

This article examines various elements of cultural interplay in the world-building and design of the first game of the series, *The Case of the Golden Idol*, and its expansions, *The Spider of Lanka* and *The Lemurian Vampire*. The second instalment, *The Rise of the Golden Idol*, and its DLCs are not included in this study, as they are narratively separate works, though set in the same imagined world. The use of transcultural elements in the game, as well as the potential reasons and strategies for their application are analysed. Structurally, the article first addresses the methodological possibilities and challenges for analysing transculturality and cultural hybridity in video games by clarifying key terms and theories pertaining to questions of cultural hybridity, narrative analysis and semiotics for game studies. The research is primarily based on qualitative content analysis of *The Case of the Golden Idol* (including both DLCs), with additional commentary from an interview with the developers Andrejs Kļaviņš and Ernests Kļaviņš to better understand their motivations for combining elements of various cultures in the game. The second part of the paper is dedicated

¹ In 2024, the global video games market value reached 184.3 billion US dollars [Newzoo 2024; Gamesindustry 2024].

to discussion of research findings, employing the examined theories in practice. It is followed by conclusions and a list of sources.

Studying transculturality in game worlds: challenges and methodology

Digital games have come a long way since their two-dimensional inception in the 1950s to the vibrant works of the 21st century, and nowadays immersion and empathy play an increasingly important role in the player's experience [Cerny 2020]. Similar to literature or cinema, a video game's narrative unfolds in a fictional environment, i.e., a game world, which is governed by specific rules that determine the way players will interact with the game [Ryan 2009]. In the case of independent (or *indie*) games – a category that includes *The Case of the Golden Idol* – the decisions regarding the makeup of a game world depend almost solely on the developers; this includes the mix and ratio of different cultural elements and references that the player will come across during gameplay, as well as altering or combining real-life spaces and locations into fictional ones in a process called ludofforming [Aarseth 2019]. When asked about their decision of mixing vastly varying locations and cultural elements in the game, in addition to using English as its main language, the developers of *The Case of the Golden Idol* used the term “cosmopolitan” to describe their approach². They felt that a local (i.e. Latvian) setting would not align well with the game's aim of reaching a global audience in order to gain success and it was decided to place the events of the main game in Albion – a fictional, Britain-inspired country. The DLCs, on the other hand, draw inspiration from various locations in the Indian Ocean Region, alluding to historical and colonial contexts.

The internationalised approach described above is at variance with the growing trend of producing translocal video games, in which specific, often peripheral locations are used to represent the local culture to a global audience [Eklund et al. 2024]. An exemplary case of this is the elevated interest in Slavic settings in video games, described at length, e.g., by Jaroslav Švelch and Jan Houška [Švelch & Houška 2025]. They underscore the phenomenon of “dual allegiance” in translocal games, as they rely on global markets but depend on local institutions and networks, including state funding [ibid.; Takhteyev 2012]. By contrast, *The Case of the Golden Idol* exhibits no such dual allegiance, since the funding offered by the Latvian state for video

² From an interview with Andrejs Kļaviņš and Ernests Kļaviņš (5 November 2024, personal archive); Anthropologist Steven Vertovec defines cosmopolitanism as “a kind of xenophilia, or penchant for diversity” [Vertovec 2020: 64], which highlights the enriching qualities of cultural interconnectedness and aligns with the main idea that the developers tried to convey when explaining their creative choices regarding the references to cultures and locations in the game.

game development is comparatively sparse³. Thus, rather than feeling compelled to depict a Latvian-themed game world, the developers turned to the more universally known British environment, even if some of the themes in the game still maintain a connection to Latvian historical, cultural and social contexts. However, due to this choice, the analysis of the game poses another question – that of cultural hybridity.

As pointed out by Marwan Kraidy, when examining cultural hybridity in popular culture, one must remain wary of the risks of hybridity “being just a descriptive term for mixing cultures in media” [Kraidy 2002: 317], when in fact it aims to describe the underlying political and economic power structures that continue to exist in a seemingly progressive combination of cultural elements. The question of location, language and culture in *The Case of the Golden Idol* can raise the same question, especially when reflecting on the global, economic considerations of the game and how these considerations affected the selection and mixing of cultural elements in the game: “Based on a “customer-as-king” cliché arguing in favor of the alleged benefits of transnational capitalism to the world population, hybridity is enlisted as a natural dimension of global strategic marketing, predicated on conquering diverse niche markets” [ibid.: 328]. Although Kraidy warns of the risks of uneven transcultural relations in such scenarios – the eradication of smaller cultures and cultural imperialism, – he points out that hybridity is an inevitability, and thus it should rather be evaluated whether hybridity fulfils its progressive potential by being a “meaningful heuristic within intercultural and international communication” [ibid.: 332]. Thus, he proposes the intercontextual theory of hybridity, which abandons simplistic, generalised characterisations of transcultural practices and instead focuses on separate cases and the social, political, historical, economic, etc. motivations for each case of cultural mixing. Rather than trying to define the advantages or shortcomings of hybridity, Kraidy states that the reasons and gains from such mixing, as well as the modes of implementation should be studied [ibid.: 334]; each combination is unique and should be viewed as such.

An illustrative example is Mia Consalvo’s research of hybrid culture in Japanese American console games, where she concludes that, contrary to usual expectations, the generally dominant American culture has given way to new, Japanese of pan-Asian inspirations in console video game content [Consalvo 2006]. This exemplifies Kraidy’s idea of each case as a set of unique, unpredictable circumstances – even when predictably dominant cultures are involved. Consalvo also argues that “it is foolish if not dangerous to determine with any authority the ‘essential’ or ‘fundamental’

³ So far, there have only been discussions regarding such initiatives and all financial support programmes are aimed at digital solutions in general, meaning that game developers would have to compete with representatives of other industries for funding [e.g., Business.gov.lv].

national qualities that may be found in games”, as these cultural references are adapted to the needs of the game itself and there is no guarantee that the players around the globe would read them the same way [ibid.: 127]. This provides a more defined set objectives to the analysis of transcultural elements in *The Case of the Golden Idol* as well, namely, to (a) avoid viewing cultural references as authentic representations, and (b) search for underlying hierarchies and motivations to interpret fictional allusions to different cultures. However, additional theoretical perspectives would help understand the cultural hybridity in terms of world building for games in particular – a task where narratology and semiotics can prove useful.

Narratology is an often-used theory for analysing video game content, as it contains multiple solutions that can be adjusted for such purposes. For example, the narratological notion of heteroglossia or intertextuality can help locate other bodies of text, including cultural references, that have influenced the development of the narrative structure of a video game [Kristeva 1980; Sekste 2013: 191]. The postclassical branch of narratology, which is more inclusive towards various media outside of conventional literature, offers the possible worlds theory, which originated in the domains of modal logic and philosophy and was later adapted for narratological purposes by Marie-Laure Ryan [Ryan & Bell 2019]. According to the theory, just as two or more separate scenarios (or *worlds*) may exist in real life, so does the division between the physical reality and the game environment represent two worlds as well. As Ryan points out, the code serves as a mediator that processes a player’s real-life inputs and projects them on a screen (e.g., jumping, shooting a rifle, cooking a meal etc.). “Thanks to these visualizations, which function as props in a game of make-believe,” she concludes, “players block out their physical environment and become immersed in the game world” [Ryan 2009: 166]. Video game and narrative design researcher Antonio J. Planells de la Maza reinforces this viewpoint, by stating that the fictional worlds within video games “contribute in a critical way to the current cultural imagination of contemporary society” [de la Maza 2017: 4]. This notion is crucial for analysing transculturality in video games, as it allows for the existence of alternate realities, where two or more cultural codes coexist in one space to no surprise of surrounding characters, and, as a result, this becomes acceptable and understandable to the players, who immerse themselves in these worlds as well. This is reinforced by the previously examined research by Mia Consalvo on Japanese American console games, where she concludes – by using the example of *Final Fantasy X* – that in game culture, geography and real cultural boundaries lose their importance and players are largely unperturbed by the mixing or merging of various cultural references in the game world [Consalvo 2006]. In a more general sense, this phenomenon may illustrate the possible benefits of presenting players with culturally diverse game worlds to promote more inclusive attitudes in real-life scenarios.

Another theory, which aligns with the objectives of this study, is semiotics. Although there has been a multitude of interpretations and schools of thought within the general field of semiotics, this article concentrates on the original trichotomy of semiotic signs – symbol, icon and index – defined by Charles Sanders Peirce [Short, 2007; Chandler 2017] and the branch on social semiotics, represented by, e.g., Theo van Leeuwen [e.g. van Leeuwen 2005].

The type of semiotic sign that is instrumental to this study is the index. Daniel Chandler, who has reformulated Peirce's theories on several occasions, summarises the index sign as a direct, causal connection [Chandler 2017: 41]. For example, smoke is an index for a fire; in a similar way a signature or handwriting points towards a certain person. Following the same logic, a person's appearance (including clothing, hairstyle) and customs may indicate which culture they belong to; the environment, such as nature and architecture, is an index for geographic location. People decode countless such indexes every day, by making causal connections between them and what they denote, and the same process of reference transfers to the decoding of game worlds. Thus, every time a connection between an object, feature or action and a culture is made in the qualitative content analysis of *The Case of the Golden Idol*, it is the result of an indexical interpretation.

However, to avoid oversimplified interpretations of index signs, various contexts and readings of the sign should be considered. Social semiotics serves as a bridge between simply locating culture-related indexes in the game and acknowledging the broader implications of intercontextual hybridity that these indexes signify. Social semiotics acknowledges that each game can be viewed as a text, and as such, is always connected to social discourses that exist "in the social-cultural landscape of their time" [Pérez-Latorre et al. 2016: 590]. One sign can mean different things in different cultures and discourses, or it can transcend cultures and illustrate similar experiences that different groups of people have experienced over the course of history or in various parts of the world. In addition, different social discourses can co-exist and contradict each other at one time or within one space. In their case study of the horror survival game *The Last of Us*, Óliver Pérez-Latorre et al. examined the friction of two such conflicting social discourses – anticapitalism and neoliberalism – within the game's narrative and mechanics. The postapocalyptic, urban scenery evokes a feeling of capitalism's futility in the face of a zombie pandemic and promotes the idea of cooperation over individualism to overcome it, whereas the importance of material resources during gameplay and the morally ambiguous ending of the game promotes individualism and consumption [ibid.: 600]. The overview of intercontextual hybridity indicates, that the same divide of semiotic meaning can happen when decoding mixed cultural references as well, as they can contradict each other or have different meanings depending on the cultural background of the players.

To summarise, the theoretical outline in this chapter helps answer different questions pertaining to the same task of analysing transcultural elements in the game world of *The Case of the Golden Idol*. The intercontextual theory of hybridity addresses the reasons *why* the elements of various cultures are mixed by inviting one to look past universal definitions of hybridity and to examine the unique social, economic and historical reasons for each case of such cultural mixing. Narratology and semiotics, on the other hand, help reveal *how* cultural mixing occurs in the game and *what* are the potentially shifting meanings of each cultural element.

Transcultural inspirations in the world-building of *The Case of the Golden Idol*

As defined by the creators themselves, *The Case of the Golden Idol* is a mystery and detective game, which contains both scientific and supernatural elements: “We wanted the magic system to be actually based on some kind of rational principle or logic, which could be figured out and used by the characters.”⁴ Story-wise, the main source of inspiration for the game was the novel *Foucault’s Pendulum* by Umberto Eco, which presents a satirical depiction of esotericism and occult societies. The developers wished to cultivate a similar scepticism and uncertainty towards the supernatural in their video game, stating that they “found the novel’s idea of an occult, invented conspiracy fun and [...] assumed it would also work well in the game.”⁵

The plot of *The Case of the Golden Idol* revolves around a mysterious, magical artefact, which gives its wielder various supernatural powers depending on the mode of its use (e.g. the idol can manipulate such aspects as the laws of physics and aging). The idol is discovered by two men during an expedition to Monkey Paw Island, and one of them, Albert Cloudsley, kills his companion to keep the valuable artefact for himself. After remaining in the family for two generations, the idol is suddenly stolen. The task of the player is to follow the idol’s journey as it changes hands, is obtained by a cult and eventually involved in a plot to overthrow the King. The narrative evolves through a series of scenes frozen in time, that the player needs to navigate to find clues and guess the true scenario of the event.

The visual design of the game was created by Ernests Kļaviņš, an acclaimed artist and illustrator with extensive experience in the field. According to Kļaviņš, the pixel-art aesthetic of the game was deliberately chosen to elicit “a sense of nostalgia for fans of the classic point-and-click adventure games of the nineties” [Playstack 2022]. The general nostalgia that the nineties video games evoke in players can be intercontextualised with the situation of the 1990’s entertainment industry in Latvia,

⁴ From an interview with Andrejs Kļaviņš and Ernests Kļaviņš (5 November 2024, personal archive); translated by the author.

⁵ Ibid.; translated by the author.

specifically. Having previously remained behind the Iron Curtain until shortly before the fall of the Soviet Union, Latvia did not experience the dynamic development of the 1980s Western video game market described, for example, by Steven Kent in *The Ultimate History of Video Games, Volume 1* [Kent 2001]⁶. Thus, it could be argued that, in some ways, the 1990s videogames were a more novel and transformative experience for players in Latvia and the post-Soviet countries than it was for players in regions that were more familiar with the preceding array of games. Consequently, the nostalgia to which the developers refer in the interview has several layers of meaning depending on the specific culture and socio-political context through which it is examined.

Other inspirations for the game's art style include French illustrator Gustave Doré and English painter William Hogarth; by combining Doré's grotesque, intimidating scenes with Hogarth's traditional compositions the developers hoped to create a unique, expressive visual identity for the game [Playstack 2022].



Figure 1. Comparison of the poisoning scene in Act 2 of *The Case of the Golden Idol* [Color Gray Games 2022] (above) and William Hogarth's painting *Marriage A-la-Mode: 6, The Lady's Death*, (1743) (below).

⁶ This does not imply the absence of video games in the USSR – in fact, arcade games gained notable popularity among Soviet players during the 1980s; rather, the conception of the games officially available in the USSR was different, often more educational, as illustrated by *Tetris*, for example [Fedorov 2015].

Thus, the multiple cultural layers (English, French and Latvian) and time periods (present-day, 1990s and 18th century) that are at play in the game's visual design create a puzzle of their own, in which players of different cultural backgrounds can find familiar elements based on previous knowledge and associations. This illustrates the process described by Marwan Kraidy in the previous chapter: hybrid entertainment products are created due to the need to globalise for economic gain and to simultaneously address various niche markets.

Transcultural and hybrid elements can also be found in the design of the game world. As mentioned before, instead of a real-life location or one resembling Latvia, *The Case of the Golden Idol* is set in the fictional land of Albion, styled after England, to appeal to a wider audience⁷. However, not all aspects of the game world are entirely removed from the Latvian culture context. The most curious mixing of Latvian and British aesthetic indexes can be found in the indoor scenes of the game. There are several events that transpire in manor houses, where the interior design is visibly more reminiscent of the Baltic-German manor tradition than the classical English manor house. Some of the most visible indexes of this visual transculturalism are the curved ceilings and the blue-and-white glazed masonry stove in the Chapter 2 poisoning scene (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. A screenshot from Act 2, *The Case of the Golden Idol* [Color Gray Games 2022]. The blue-and-white masonry stove on the left side of the picture is strongly reminiscent of Latvian manor houses; there is no tradition of such stoves in England.

⁷ From an interview with Andrejs Kļaviņš and Ernests Kļaviņš (5 November 2024, personal archive).

The tradition of intricate, often highly decorative masonry stoves in Latvian manors stretches back as far as the 15th century [Ose 2015]. As architecture historian Samuel Edgerton notes, masonry stoves have long been an integral part of houses and manors in the Northern parts of Continental Europe, including Sweden, Austria and Germany (and, by extension, Latvia), “whereas, in the British Isles, for some peculiar reason, this continental heating improvement was resisted. The great open fireplace, with all its inherent operational evils was retained in the English house” [Edgerton 1961: 20]. Therefore, British manors have a different layout and aesthetic, often with individual, open fireplaces in several rooms – something that is pointedly absent in the manor design in *The Case of the Golden Idol*. The developers did not remark on this detail as fully deliberate but rather implied that the inclusion of the stove in one of the scenes was an implicit, automatic decision⁸. In this instance, it is important to remember Mia Consalvo’s caution in the previous chapter on determining any *essential* national qualities in games. The presence of Latvian manor elements in the game does not directly convey Latvian (or more precisely, Baltic-German) culture, and most players will probably not perceive them as such either. In fact, they might even view these details as decorative innovations that have no link to any real cultures. Instead, the example of the stove or curved ceilings is important because it implicitly reflects the cultural and visual space which the creators themselves are familiar with and thus recreate in their works.

In terms of heteroglossia, there are several references to famous works of mystery and horror. Although the previously mentioned novel by Umberto Eco represents a general inspiration for the game, there are location-specific intertextual connections, as well. Perhaps the most illustrative is the mention of the Monkey Paw Island, where the golden idol is first discovered in the game. The name of the location refers to the famous horror short story *The Monkey’s Paw* written by William W. Jacobs in 1902. In the story, there is also a magical, albeit cursed, object (a mummified monkey’s paw) that is brought to England from India. The paw grants three wishes, but at the cost of dire consequences [Jacobs 1902/1911]. In the game, Monkey Paw Island is inhabited by an imaginary nation called the Lemurians, which appears to be inspired by various Indian Ocean cultures. Thus, one can see how notions of the exotic Other represented by Jacobs are adapted and transformed for the game world.

⁸ From an interview with Andrejs Kļaviņš and Ernests Kļaviņš (5 November 2024, personal archive).

The introduction of Lemurians in Chapter 3 creates a broader cultural scope, which reaches outside of the European-inspired environment of the game. The use of an existing name of the mythical continent Lemuria, which allegedly used to be located in the Indian Ocean, [Ramaswamy 1999] aligns with the creators' choice of not mentioning any nation outright, but at the same time provides a sufficient associative link to India and its surrounding islands. In order to avoid a direct, arguably caricatured reproduction of cultures, the developers have chosen to add certain elements of Australian aboriginal culture to the image of Lemurians, most notably, through their use of boomerangs. This blending of regionally adjacent cultures mirrors the previous example of the Albionian manor house, where existing insular and continental architectural practices were merged. As later clarified in the expansions, Monkey Paw Island, the origin of the golden idol, is located in the fictional region of Lemuria; this creates an interconnected system of cultures and locations within the game, which is further elaborated in the expansions.

The first expansion, *The Spider of Lanka*, delves even deeper into the imaginary civilizations that are connected to the golden idol. However, a curious pattern also emerges: the further the game's events shift away from Albion, the more frequently existing realia are used in world building – this was previously exemplified by the mention of the existing, albeit mythical, notion of Lemuria. The setting of the expansion is the island of Lanka, yet another mythical location, this time from the epic of Ramayana. In the epic, Lanka is depicted as a fortified island-city with towers and forts [Griffith (trans.) 1874: 1507]. This serves as a further index towards cultures inhabiting the Indian subcontinent and reinforces the cultural references given in the main game. The three kingdoms that the in-game island is divided into – Jaffna, Vijaya and Gamini – have a stronger connection to the real world; Jaffna and Vijayawada are existing cities in Sri Lanka and Andhra Pradesh, respectively, whereas Gamini is a common Sri-Lankan given name. The rulers of these kingdoms are called Raja, a real-life title for Indian princes and kings. This illustrates how differing levels of obscurity are used in terms of transcultural and hybrid elements in the game and how the approach of mixing cultural references has changed throughout the locations in the game world. The content analysis shows that Albion is more fictionalised whereas Lemuria and Lanka contain more real-life realia. The difference may be explained by the East-West opposition and the level of familiarity of that the developers have with various culture contexts – familiar locations may require a higher level of abstraction than foreign ones in order to feel fictional. However, a comparativist approach would be beneficial to study this assumption in more detail, potentially examining several fictional game worlds and comparing the levels of cultural abstraction in them.



Figure 3. The visual design of the Indian-inspired Lanka and the Raja's court in *The Spider of Lanka* [Color Gray Games 2023].



Figure 4. An investigation pane from *The Spider of Lanka*, showing various weapons – a katar blade, circular chakram throwing knives and a talwar sabre – originating from various regions of India [Color Gray Games 2023]. The original names of the weapons have been retained.

The Indian-inspired geographical and cultural references to Lanka are complemented by a distinct visual design of characters and the city itself, all of which also show strong influences of the Indian culture. The steep pyramids of the city allude to the Southern regions of the Indian subcontinent, as does the attire of the characters. Various objects such as clothing and weapons in the Lankan characters' inventory, e.g., chakram throwing blades, katar knives and talwar sabres, are also indexes that point towards the cultural inspirations of the fictional region. These objects are mostly devoid of abstraction – they are not renamed and closely follow the visual appearance of their real-life counterparts.



Figure 5. A real-life katar blade, a chakram throwing knife and a talwar sabre housed in the *Arms and Armor* collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, USA [The Metropolitan Museum of Art].

The first scene of *The Spider of Lanka* creates a stark contrast between the European-inspired characters and the local inhabitants, by depicting an altercation among the two after a game of cards. Satirising colonial attitudes and processes seems to be one of the central tasks of this expansion. The game world's system of nations and cultures has been supplemented for this reason – some characters in the expansion come from Aquitan, modelled after the historical French region of Aquitaine, and the city of Lundenburh in Albion, which draws inspiration from London. Here, another type of cultural referencing is present – one of evocation, where associations with certain real-life locations or countries are created through similar-sounding, yet fictional placenames. However, at the same time all of these diegetic European-type nations share similar colonial ambitions, blurring the lines between them to the point of interchangeability.

The second and last expansion, *The Lemurian Vampire*, is set in Monkey Paw Island and grants the plot a circular structure, as the players witness the events leading directly to the beginning of the main game: the seemingly egalitarian Lemurian society of Monkey Paw Island is visited by two colonists (Albert Cloudsley and Dr. Oberon Geller) who wish to obtain the golden idol. In this DLC, the developers have chosen to diversify the game world and the array of fictional nations even further. Although the culture of the Monkey Paw Island conceptually resembles the island nations of the Indian Ocean, such as the Andamanese, the visual appearance of the islanders themselves is notably diverse, with lighter and darker complexions and hair colour ranging from blonde to dark brown and black. This approach shows how the developers occasionally choose to avoid expected cultural and geographical

references and to distance the game's content from real-life inspirations so as to retain a mixture of realistic and imagined elements.

The everyday clothing, tools and buildings of the islanders are simple, almost primitive in comparison to the other nations of the game; this is juxtaposed with crumbling, futuristic-looking monolithic structures that loom over the island community as a sign of a previous, more technologically advanced civilization that has fallen into ruin. This, along with the depiction of ancient robots later in the plot, gives the game world of the second expansion a post-apocalyptic, science-fiction aspect which is absent from the previous games, but is useful for explaining the origins of the golden idol.

The last expansion continues to depict conflict and cooperation among the various fictional cultures, maintaining intercultural tension in the imagined environment. At the start of the game, a Lankan ship crashes near the island, and the survivors are taken in by the locals. The visiting Lankans attempt to integrate into the Lemurian way of life, and for the most part of the expansion, the players can witness this transcultural exchange, which is not always successful. However, the conflict reaches its pinnacle when the pseudo-English Albionians arrive at the island and steal the golden idol to exploit its powers. This leads to a conclusion that two distinct cultural groups exist within the game: the European-inspired Albionians and Aquitarians, who unite in their colonial ambitions, and the local Lemurians and Lankans, who try to coexist with each other peacefully. Within these two groups transcultural exchanges can take place freely, but when both come face to face, instead of an exchange, the players witness a clash of interests. In a broader sense, it may be assumed that the authors are re-imagining colonial empires and their invasion of other cultures in a satirical yet critical way.

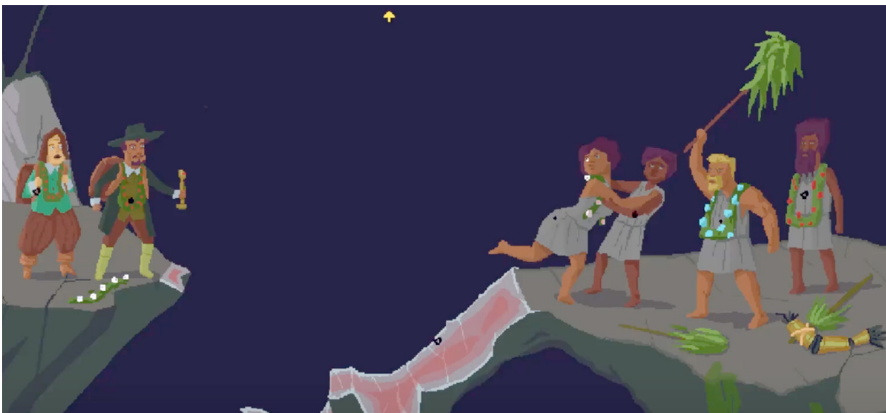


Figure 6. The contrast between Albionian intruders and Lemurian islanders in *The Lemurian Vampire* [Color Gray Games 2023].

To summarise, the DLCs serve as a notable expansion of the game world both, geographically and in terms of variety of cultural inspirations. Despite being shorter than the main game, *The Spider of Lanka* DLC contains a much larger diversity of fictional nations. The portrayal of Lanka as a multicultural melting pot replete with travellers and emissaries provides a suitable setting for the interplay of various cultures, which is brought to a conflict for narrative purposes. However, it is during *The Lemurian Vampire*, i.e., in the most constrained of the game world locations, that these intercultural conflicts gain maximum traction. This confirms that in the examined game, location is a determining factor of how the different cultures and societies within it will react to one another.

Conclusions and future directions

The aim of this paper was to examine various elements of culture mixing and interplay in the world-building and design of *The Case of the Golden Idol*, and its two DLCs. For the analysis, the intercontextual theory of hybridity was chosen, as it targets the motivations and underlying power structures in the use of multiple culture elements in popular entertainment. For the same reason, more specific branches of narratology and semiotics – the multiple worlds theory and social semiotics – were selected. This illustrates how the theoretical focus can be narrowed down to test the optimal theoretical branches for studying game worlds in particular.

The game world of *The Case of the Golden Idol* and its DLCs enables its players to experience a vibrant combination of various cultural references that exist in a highly detailed environment. However, upon closer examination, the approach and strategies for using cultural inspirations and references, such as blending, evocation or the use of real-life realia, are not always consistent in the world-building of the game. The main criterion for this approach variation seems to be the division of East-West, where distant, Eastern-inspired cultures are constructed, using more real-life elements, such as weapons, placenames or titles of nobility. This may be linked to how familiar (or unfamiliar) the developers and players are with different cultures. Widespread knowledge regarding European-inspired details and references allows for a more creative interpretation of these elements, whereas seemingly exotic and more distant locations are more likely to be unfamiliar to a large part of players, who might not be able to notice similar interpretation of cultural references; therefore, existing realia are used instead.

However, to reinforce and clarify these initial findings, a comparative study would be beneficial to appraise the levels of cultural abstraction and pinpoint the use of real-life realia in different game worlds for a more comprehensive overview of this process.

Basing a game world on a diverse array of cultural inspirations has its advantages and potential complications. The depiction of culturally diverse game worlds may contribute to a general openness to a similar diversity in the real world, as illustrated by the example of *Final Fantasy X* [Consalvo 2006]. However, there are also risks of oversimplifying the connections to real-life cultures, resulting in exoticisation and caricature, which could promote an uneven power balance between cultures. A more uniform approach in the strategies of combining cultural references throughout the game may help avoid this issue in the future.

The final conclusion concerns the references in the game world that were consciously or intuitively drawn from the Latvian cultural space. Such details were few and usually deeply contextualised in relation to other (English, global) perspectives, reinforcing the statement made by the developers themselves that they concentrated on other locations for inspiration. However, the existence of such elements, however sparse, in an internationally well-received game points towards the potential of a more translocal approach in the future games, in line with the ongoing tendency in the video games industry of marketing local settings to global audiences.

Acknowledgements

This research is financed by the Recovery and Resilience Facility project *Internal and External Consolidation of the University of Latvia* (No.5.2.1.1.i.0/2/24/I/CFLA/007) within the research project *Latvian Diaspora Identity Transformation: Text, Language, Digital Environment*.

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THE INTERPLAY OF CONTRADICTIONS: FORMAL STRATEGIES IN ESSAY FILMS BY LAILA PAKALNIŅA

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Abstract

In literary studies, an essay is traditionally and etymologically defined as an experimental presentation of a thesis, idea, or criticism, with pronounced authorial involvement in the construction of the argument. It is a genre that appears in various academic disciplines and art fields. The essay film has been a part of film theory and practice since the 1940s, and is currently a key topic in the international film industry. The essay film genre in world cinema includes works by directors such as Agnès Varda, Chantal Akerman, Chris Marker, Harun Farocki and Peter Mettler, among others. Individual essay film examples in Latvian cinema were created by Aivars Freimanis, Hercs Franks, Laima Žurgina, Dāvis Sīmanis, Kristīne Želve, Jānis Ābele, Betija Zvejnice and a few others.

The current article is dedicated to the work and artistic uniqueness of Laila Pakalniņa (1962), an internationally acclaimed and prolific Latvian director, screenwriter, and producer. The artist is considered the demiurge of conceptual filmmaking and the most consistent representative of the tradition of the essay film genre in Latvian cinema. The author of the current article aims to confirm that Pakalniņa's creative legacy belongs to the essay film genre by analysing the diverse formal techniques employed. This diversity emphasises the individuality and authorship of the artist, while simultaneously testing and expanding the boundaries of cinematic language and initiating an active dialogue with the audience.

Keywords: *Latvian cinema, documentary cinema, the essay, the essay film, cinema modernism, subjectivity, Laila Pakalniņa.*

Culture Crossroads

Volume 33, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol33.562>

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ISSN 2500-9974



Introduction

The essay is a genre that connects and permeates eras and fields of art. “Essayistic compositions can already be found in the works of Seneca, Plutarch, Cicero and other ancient philosophers” [Cimdiņa 2000: 12]. To illustrate the transhistorical nature of the essay and the uncertainty of disciplinary boundaries, it is worth noting the intertextual relationships between, for example, the epistolary collection *Moral Letters to Lucilius* by the ancient Roman author Lucius Annaeus Seneca and the films of the currently active Swiss Canadian director and cinematographer Peter Mettler. They are united by several narrative features, including associative thematic leaps, fragmentary and disjointed expression, active dialogue with the involved characters, the use of “I” rhetoric, and the intertwining of introspection with an interest in social and political issues. The concept of the essay is also evident in contemporary theatre today. “Companies and directors use the means of theatre to “think aloud” publicly or to make theoretical prose heard. [...] In works that use theatre texts one can also find that the actors seem to be more engrossed in the debate about their subject and its representation than in the actual presentation of it. Such transitions to a form that could be described as a theatrical or scenic essay incidentally represent the reverse of the noticeably increased attempts to theatricalize the teaching processes in schools and universities” [Lehmann 2006: 113]. Theatrical or scenic essay can therefore be viewed as a public platform for reflection, whose loose structure emphasizes not the finished and completed work, but rather the process in which both its creators and viewers are equally actively involved. This aspect essentially coincides with two other interpretations of the genre in philosophy and cinema: the “arena for intellectual experience” formulated by philosopher Theodor Adorno and the “openness of the essay film” defined by theorist Laura Rascaroli. In the context of various creative industries, the scope and convergence of the essay genre means that theoretical concepts formulated in literature, theatre and other art forms are also useful for understanding the essay film, and these concepts will be further explored in the article.

When focusing specifically on essays in the field of cinema, it is important to mention Hans Richter, a German director and critic from the last century. He was one of the first people in the cinema industry to describe a film as an essay and provide it with context. Richter emphasised the aesthetic potential of the form, characterised by a blend of genres and styles and the incorporation of diverse audiovisual elements, such as photographs and animations. In his 1940 article *A New Type of Documentary Film*, Richter identified a then-innovative form of documentary cinema that was both conceptual and personal, and explained that “the staged scene as well as the reproduced facts are points in a line of argument that has as its aim to make

problems, thoughts, and even ideas comprehensible to everyone. Therefore, I consider the term “essay” appropriate for this type of form, as even in literature the word “essay” is used for the treatment of difficult subjects and themes to render them into a generally comprehensible form” [Richter 1940: 91]. This statement suggests that the stylistic and formal techniques employed in the essay film are organised elements that contribute to the depiction of a subjective thought process, rather than merely serving an illustrative or entertaining purpose.

In the early 1980s, film scholar Noël Burch also used the term “essay” to describe the approach of French documentary filmmaker Georges Franju, defining it as the development or interpretation of a theme. According to Burch, the works of this director do not merely offer a record of objective reality, fundamental to the documentary tradition, but “their entire purpose being to set forth thesis and antithesis through the very texture of the film” [Burch 1981: 159]. Of course, the ideological load – theme, message and intention – can be found in any film belonging to any genre. However, it is important to emphasise that, although they may seem fundamental, elements of an essay film, such as the plot, the psychological portraits of the characters and their relationships with each other, are not an end in themselves. In the structure of the essay film, all formal and narrative strategies – however arbitrary and eclectic they may seem – are employed to the same extent and with the same emphasis as they serve to construct a personal argument and the doubts, contradictions and uncertainties it contains. This aspect is crucial for justifying the presence of the substantive meaning contained within the essay films created by Laila Pakalniņa.

Although essay films are difficult to categorise, film scholar Timothy Corrigan has identified three key features of the genre. These features correspond to the structure of Laila Pakalniņa’s work and will be evident in the analysis of the selected films:

- 1) “A usually – but not necessarily – short documentary subject;
- 2) The lack of a dominant narrative organisation (although narrative may provide one of several patterns in the film);
- 3) The interaction of a personal voice or vision, sometimes in the form of a voice-over. In the essay film, the interaction of that subjective perspective and the reality before it becomes a testing or questioning of both, and the structure of the film, like the literary essay, follows the undetermined movement of that dialogue” [Corrigan 1999: 31].

It is important to note that there are various indications of the presence of a personal voice and perspective. There may be clear and obvious manifestations, such as the use of “I” rhetoric, the creation of a voice behind the scenes, an unconcealed filming process, and the creators’ physical appearance on screen. Meanwhile, Corrigan stresses: “When lacking a clearly visible subjective voice or personal organizing

presence, this act of enunciation can also be signalled in various formal or technical ways, including editing and other representational manipulations of the image” [Corrigan 2011: 30]. The selection, integration and, above all, combination of stylistic, formal and technical resources confirms the presence of a subjective voice in Laila Pakalniņa’s essay films, since the director rarely appears on screen or participates in other overt ways.

A personal voice and perspective is one of the three essential aspects that make the essay film genre relevant in contemporary cinema. The essay film is a form that emphasises individuality, and can therefore be considered an act of self-expression and nonconformity. In their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote: “From this moment on, matter must be managed without illusions about any guiding or inherent forces, about any hidden properties. Those who do not wish to be included in the measures of calculability and usefulness seem suspicious to enlightenment” [Adorno, Horkheimer 2009: 24]. As can be seen, both authors are attempting to reinstate the importance of individual experience. In this case, the essay can be seen as a tool for challenging established beliefs and narratives by incorporating personal emotional, psychological and intellectual responses and viewpoints into our understanding of the relevant topic and the world as a whole. This is especially important given the rapid development of artificial intelligence tools that can automate and standardise audiovisual content.

Secondly, the essay film is arguably the most politically charged genre in contemporary cinema. As film scholar Laura Rascaroli points out: “To say “I” or “we” is, first, a gesture of responsibility and accountability, in filmmaking too. The moment of the essay film is, therefore, politically inflected. Precisely for this reason, we can venture, the essay film first boomed worldwide in the 1960s, a decade marked by a widespread desire for increased participation, democracy, and self-expression” [Rascaroli 2017: 5]. Representing the surrounding environment and its connection to personal experience demonstrates that the essay film is a significant format for public participation, encouraging critical thinking and discussion during periods of change and conflict. Film scholar Nora Alter has stated that “the essay film also tends to become more pointed and effective during periods of cultural, social, and political crisis” [Alter 2018: 15]. The popularity and interpretation of contemporary social processes confirm the power of the essay film genre to counteract the widespread commercialisation of audiovisual content and its apolitical nature.

Thirdly, the essay film is a captivating form that confirms cinema’s potential to stimulate and provoke thought. The form’s dialogical nature is confirmed by its specific and familiar forms of address, its ironic, critical, or polemical tone, its interrupted, unfinished, or shifted trains of thought, and its other rhetorical, technical, and formal manoeuvres. Laura Rascaroli formulates the term “openness of the essay film” in

this situation and explains: “The essay film constructs such a spectatorial position by adopting a certain rhetorical structure: rather than answering all the questions that it raises, and delivering a complete, “closed” argument, the essay’s rhetoric is such that it opens up problems, and interrogates the spectator; instead of guiding her through emotional and intellectual responses, the essay urges her to engage individually with the film, and reflect on the same subject matter the author is musing about” [Rascaroli 2009: 34]. It could be argued that the author of an essay film merely sketches ideas or outlines themes, rather than completing them. As with the aforementioned scenic essays, the audience is left to interpret them further. This demonstrates that essay films can stimulate critical thinking and encourage dialogue.

Examples of essay films have appeared regularly in Latvian cinema since the 1960s. The films *Frescoes of Kuldīga* (*Kuldīgas freskas*, Aivars Freimanis, 1966), *Dear Life* (*Dzīvīte*, Aivars Freimanis, 1989) *Flashback* (*Flashback*, Hercs Franks, 2002), *D is for Division* (*Mūris*, Dāvis Sīmanis, 2018), *Einarrrative* (*Einaratīvs*, Betija Zvejniece, 2022), *81 Meters* (*81 metrs*, Jānis Ābele, 2022), *Postpartum* (*Postpartum*, Katrīna Birkenberga, 2024) and many others can be viewed from the perspective of this genre. However, when it comes to this genre in Latvian cinema, special mention must go to director Laila Pakalniņa. The concept of essay film is exemplified by most of her documentary works, which demonstrate its formal, narrative and critical potential. Since the 1990s, Pakalniņa has produced over 40 documentaries and feature films, many of which have been screened and acclaimed at renowned festivals such as Cannes, Venice and Berlin. Pakalniņa is a director who disregards commercial logic in favour of uncompromising artistic originality. In his review of the film *Spoon* (*Karote*, 2019), film critic Dmitrijs Rancevs wrote that “both *Hello, Horse!* and *Karote* seem at first glance to be films without a plot and even without any particular content” [Rancevs 2019]. This could explain why Latvian viewers are ambivalent towards the director’s films. Film scholar Inga Pērkone, who has thoroughly examined Laila Pakalniņa’s work, highlights that there have been challenges in terms of local interest in it. Pērkone explains this by deviating from the conventions of classic cinema, such as specific genres and plot frameworks, and the identification of characters [Pērkone 2021: 392–393]. Including and analysing the director’s work in the context of the essay film genre highlights its ideological depth, interpretative potential and deliberately experimental nature.

The majority of the director’s documentaries share a common thematic focus: everyday life in an urban environment. Similarly, her work consistently features certain stylistic elements, such as long, still and black-and-white shots, static compositions and unique camera angles. However, Laila Pakalniņa’s approach is essentially essayistic. It experiments with various formal characteristics, such as what is filmed, combined and arranged, thereby analysing itself and highlighting the diversity of cinematic

language. However, the combination of different formal elements in the film also affects its dramaturgy, creating a contradictory thematic layer of thesis and antithesis, as described by Noël Burch. The aim of this article is to confirm that part of Laila Pakalniņa's creative legacy belongs to the tradition of the essay genre by analysing the diverse formal techniques used in it. Firstly, it would confirm the presence of this genre in Latvian cinema. Secondly, it provides a new perspective on the style and content of the director's documentaries. Finally, an analysis of formal characteristics reveals how the genre highlights the artist's identity and authorship while expanding the language of cinema through experimentation. The research method used in this article is close reading of the following essay films by Laila Pakalniņa: *Papa Gena* (2001), *Dream Land* (*Leiputrija*, 2004), *On Rubik's Road* (*Pa Rubika ceļu*, 2010), *Hello, Horse!* (*Zirdziņ, hallo!*, 2017) and *Spoon* (*Karote*, 2019). It will be based on the involvement and comparison of theoretical concepts and approaches developed by film scholars such as Laura Rascaroli, Timothy Corrigan, András Bálint Kovács, Nora Alter, Inga Pērkone, Zane Balčus, and others.

Sound scores in *Papa Gena* (2001)

As director Laila Pakalniņa explained: "Image and sound are not different layers of perception in my films. The film's dramaturgy develops gradually, with the dominant elements changing and complementing each other from episode to episode. All of this creates the rhythm of the film: the movement of the image, the sound, the light" [Āboliņa 2019]. The director's early work already shows an emphasis on sound and the careful organisation of relationships between image and sound. Documentary short film *Papa Gena* (2001) was part of the Latvian exposition at the 49th Venice Biennale. It demonstrates a meticulous editing process, resulting in playful combinations, primarily between different soundtracks. They are also significantly complemented by the visuals. This creates a unique urban landscape where contrasts such as noise and silence, and stillness and movement, come together.

Mainly, the structural framework of *Papa Gena* is formed by the interplay of a triad of contrasting sound scores: silence, an excerpt from the opera *The Magic Flute* (*Die Zauberflöte*) by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and diegetic noises, that is, those contained in the documented environment. Like other films by Pakalniņa, *Papa Gena* is an object of urban landscape research, offering a relaxed, everyday portrayal of people moving through the harbour, an apartment building courtyard, the Old Town, a bus terminus, and other features of the urban environment. Pakalniņa's typically long and static shots of pedestrians and vehicles reveal the rhythmic pulsation of the city. This is occasionally interrupted by a request for the participants to stop and listen to a piece of classical music: Mozart's playful duet between the characters Papagena and Papageno from *The Magic Flute*. In this way, the essay film reflects

a liminal situation, juxtaposing movement and rest, and pitting the polyphony of the city against the integrity of classical music.

As Inga Pērkone points out: “The structure of the film here ironically follows the logic of how audio technology works: while wearing headphones, the viewer hears nothing; when the headphones are removed, the music plays, but the portrayed “listener” no longer hears it” [Pērkone 2013: 101]. The characters’ experience of classical composition through serenity, expressive facial expressions, humming, verbal comments and gentle movements becomes the central visual focus. However, it does not exclude real sounds, such as car alarms, barking dogs, chirping birds and rustling wind. This leaves the city *open* to the viewer. At other moments, though, the audience hears the soundtrack, thus becoming one of the film’s characters. The conceptual setting of the film – classical music in an urban environment – is reinforced at the end, when the wind *blows through* the sheets left on the washing line in the courtyard of a Soviet era apartment block.

In purely visual terms, too, Pakalniņa creates an antithesis: an alternative biography of Riga. Rather than filming tourist attractions and iconic landmarks, a new landscape of hidden places in the city is being created. The main elements are a remote, birch-covered hillside; an empty street; a residential courtyard; a fragment of a building; and a crumbling brick wall. Similar marginal or anonymous areas of the capital are also included.

Abstraction in *Dream Land* (2004) and *Spoon* (2019)

In his research *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (2011), Timothy Corrigan distinguishes five modes of essay film: autobiographical or biographical, travel, diary, editorial and refractive. The documentaries *Dream Land* and *Spoon* reveal the hidden stages in the life cycle of everyday household products, namely the manufacturing process and waste management. This categorises both works as editorial essays. Corrigan explains: “As polemics about hidden, missed, or critical events and people or about moral, political, or philosophical imperatives for understanding those people and events, these essays offer or demand ways of understanding and, more important, ways of personally and publicly reacting to the news of daily life” [Corrigan 2011: 154]. In this case, Laila Pakalniņa conducts anthropological research by focusing on what seemingly does not apply to or affect society. She does not represent or confront people directly.

The documentary *Dream Land* is a detailed cross section of the solid waste landfill *Getliņi* in Rumbula, exposing the duality of the main inhabitants of the site – birds, insects and other animals. On the one hand, cinematographer Māris Maskalāns’ (1971) patient observation has resulted in a literal visualisation of the title: the dump truly serves as a wondrous, abundant place of refuge and nourishment. This aspect

is revealed in many of the shots. For example, there are seagulls picking at food scraps and small organisms; an active rat hiding in a packet of crisps; and a snake slithering along empty cigarette packets and feeding on the abundant smaller animals in the area. However, the film's title also has an ironic tone. The footage also reveals that waste – the invisible, redundant by-product of human consumer culture – can pose a dangerous threat to animals. We see them tangled in plastic bags and leaving the previously inhabited bodies of water due to the sheer number of discarded drink bottles.

The structure of *Spoon* consists of a series of long, monochrome shots. They rhythmically arrange individual emblems of the industrial environment in a line, such as walls, fragments of factory buildings, cranes, freight trains, cars, pipes and technical devices, as well as rows of workers. It resembles carefully organised *empty* shots of the Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni, such as the barren field in the 1964 film *Red Desert (Il deserto rosso)* where the barely perceptible silhouettes of buildings and characters can be seen in the wisps of smoke from factory chimneys. The visual configuration of *Spoon* corresponds to the conclusion by film scholar Zane Balčus: “Conceptual observation of the environment is characteristic of Laila Pakalniņa’s documentaries, in which camera position, framing and editing are used not to capture the action of events, but to reveal various elements” [Balčus 2021: 284]. In this film, the depiction of visual cues, such as electricity pylons, aeroplanes, vehicles, railway tracks, stairs and road signs, as well as pedestrians, joggers, cyclists and other city dwellers, and their various combinations, takes precedence over a clear narrative.

Timothy Corrigan agrees with Nora Alter’s idea that there is a connection between essay films and crisis, which is particularly evident in the context of editorial essays: “Although these kinds of essays can sometimes choose topics that are light or even trivial, more often than not they are attuned to crisis, frequently a crisis related to a social or communal collapse or trauma” [Corrigan 2011: 155]. Both essays appear to depict animals and urban ornaments from everyday life as the central characters. However, it is precisely this extreme reduction of content that gives rise to a general commentary on the ecological crisis. Therefore, an anthropological study is conducted using the concept of conditionality, which means to highlight individual images in the representation of reality. This technique corresponds to both the representation of subjective reality, as highlighted by Corrigan’s interpretation, and the fundamental principle of abstraction within the context of cinema modernism.

Describing cinema modernism and the essay film as one of its genres, film theorist András Bálint Kovács defines abstraction as one of the main characteristics of the films made during this period, which “means that the form refers not to traditional ways of representing nature or reality but to a conceptual structure or

system that is regarded as an essential summary of the main constitutive principles of reality or nature” [Kovács 2007: 204]. In the context of these two essay films, the summary is represented by two symbols: a landfill site and a factory. They offer a sharp social commentary on the climate crisis, highlighting the role of unprecedented production and consumption of goods. The polemic is constructed in two ways. Firstly, these zones are not part of the trajectory of everyday life and are beyond the limits of visibility. Secondly, both films are based on a conflict of ideas. The final montage sequence of *Dream Land* contains a warning about the devastating effects of waste on animal and natural diversity. A picturesque natural landscape with a deer silhouette in the foggy distance is replaced by an image of an animal in the landfill site manager’s office. This art object, like many others, threatens to become the only way to perceive and experience nature. But the aestheticization of the resources required for production in *Spoon* can be interpreted as being highly ironic. The shots’ intrinsic value, created through refined composition and highlighted textures, contrasts with the multilayered, difficult-to-grasp, otherwise horrifying grand scheme of producing small objects. This scheme only becomes clearer during the film through associations, such as production lines for small objects and people eating with spoons. This contradiction highlights how consumers are alienated from and distant from the many steps involved in the production process.

Both films demonstrate the correspondence of the essay film to the status of criticism, highlighting the form’s ability to interpret current events through rearrangements, reversals, superimpositions and other modifications of their meanings. In *Dream Land* and *Spoon*, this is achieved by narrowing or abstracting the content, meaning that only certain elements, detached from the everyday view, are highlighted.

Text and image in *On Rubik’s Road* (2010)

Film scholar Paul Arthur explains: “The conjunction of language and image, fundamental to film grammar, is a key ingredient of the essay film. In some sense all great essays are about complex relationships between words and pictures, the mechanisms by which speech can annotate, undermine, or otherwise change the signification of what we see – and vice versa” [Arthur 2003: 165]. As an example, Arthur mentions the 1956 essay film *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*) by the French director Alain Resnais, a meditation (or rather a statement on its impossibility) on the tragedy of the mass humiliation and murder of Jews by the Nazis in the Auschwitz concentration camp. The film’s visuals are based on the combination of archival footage (shots of piles of corpses, etc.) and present footage (shots of green grass and sunshine in a given area), but the background voice-over narration and its transcription are used in questions, multipoints and other rhetorical manoeuvres

that create a questioning, doubtful and polemical atmosphere. “Statements such as “There is no use even describing what went on here” and “There’s nothing left to say” limn the failure of language and image to offer a fully intelligible portrayal of events” [Arthur 2003: 166]. Contradicting text and images can create depth of content. This is precisely what forms the dramatic basis for Pakalniņa’s film, which was included in one of the competition programs at the Venice Film Festival and was screened and awarded at other film festivals at the time – *On Rubik’s Road* (2010).

This film documents everyday life along the pedestrian and cycle path that connects Rīga and Jūrmala. Thanks to the inclusion of two textual inserts that alter the neutrality of the image, the film gains the status of a political aporia. At the beginning of the film, the text decodes the title by providing a brief description of the person who initiated the construction of the cycle path: Alfrēds Rubiks [Redovics 2020]. Launching the initiative, Rubiks was then Chairman of the Riga City Executive Committee. He was also the First Secretary of the Latvian Communist Party and later Chairman of the Latvian Socialist Party, who in the 1990s was loyal to the Soviet Union system and opposed the independence of the Latvian state by brutal means.

The first textual sequence is followed by a series of everyday, small-scale events and gestures: young people chatting, cyclists colliding and runners falling. Dog owners, motorcyclists, firefighters and families with children are just some of the many people who have also chosen this area as a stage for human interaction. As Pakalniņa points out, the method used in her films is a prolonged observation of a particular territory, which allows the dramatic and the comic to be revealed in a seemingly domestic situation: “For example, when filming *On Rubik’s Road*, we put the camera in the same place every day, on the side of the road. There was nothing special, not even a pit or a road elevation, but believe it or not, miracles happened. People suddenly started falling in that place. And so it happens” [Āboliņa 2019]. In this film, it is particularly essential that the everyday, the mundane and the human are highlighted in the image. Moreover, these scenes are sometimes replaced by shots of complete inactivity featuring individual elements from unusual camera angles. As with *Spoon* and other essay films by Pakalniņa, certain codes are repeatedly presented alongside the prosaic scenes, such as bus stops, aeroplanes, puddles and sun-drawn stripes on the asphalt. In this case, film scholar Inga Pērkone explains the highlighting of individual elements: “The film is constructed using the polysemy encoded in its title, where the word Rubiks is associated not only with the last Latvian communist, but also with the Rubik’s cube, where a limited number of given elements can be arranged in an almost inconceivable number of combinations” [Pērkone 2013: 107]. Pērkone’s interpretation emphasises an essayistic approach, presenting these visual configurations and their variations as the film’s primary artistic focus. This

seems to suggest that the visual content of this film is apolitical, as it focuses solely on everyday scenes and combinations of urban symbols.

However, the second textual sequence at the end of the film changes this. It is important to note that Alfrēds Rubiks was tried for actions intended to weaken and overthrow the Latvian state. For example, he was involved in the August Coup of 1991 [Redovics 2020]. Nevertheless, this has not stopped him from pursuing a political career in Latvia. In the closing moments of the documentary, Pakalniņa highlights the rupture of collective memory by describing the absurd turn in this politician's career: "While we were making this film, the citizens of Latvia elected the leader of the Communist Party, Alfrēds Rubiks, to the European Parliament." Thus, the cheerful daily scenes and urban realities that we see on the screen, as well as the rhythmic arrangement of these scenes, can be perceived as a thesis for freedom of all kinds, including artistic freedom, which is what the essay film genre brings to the fore. In turn, what we read creates an antithesis, evoking associations with individuals and historical situations in which freedom was denied or taken away, both literally and figuratively. The extraordinary and dramatic political context and character of Alfrēds Rubiks are also juxtaposed with the everyday, creating a further contradiction within the film. The chosen filming location evokes certain associations that Pakalniņa highlights and builds upon through certain phrases. This creates a conflict between image and text in order to maintain the memory of the wrongs, injustices and oppression suffered by the Latvian people at the hands of Alfrēds Rubiks and others who directly or indirectly sympathize with the Soviet regime.

Strategy of repetition in *Hello, Horse!* (2017)

Pakalniņa's documentaries are usually based on collages of seemingly unrelated images. The essay film *Hello, Horse!* (2017), which has an extremely fragmented narrative, consists of a series of shots of a roadside, a farmstead, a birch grove, hay bales, electricity poles, a railway crossing, a road sign, and animals. These were taken on a small stretch of road outside Krāslava at different times of the year and day. This film meets all three criteria mentioned by Timothy Corrigan: a real documentary situation or context, the absence of a plot (most evident in *Hello, Horse!* and *Spoon*) and also a personal voice and vision. The latter characteristic manifests itself both in terms of content and form. Film scholar Thomas Elsaesser has written that "[...] essay films are driven by a structure of thought, however apparently hidden or at first glance imperceptible this thought process may be. To that extent, even the disparity of sources and the assemblage of heterogeneous elements generally results in an order or a sequential logic that is less a matter of *compilation* and more the result of *composition*" [Elsaesser 2015: 241]. In this film, Pakalniņa reveals her thought process and begins a discussion by using repetition as a strategy.

The repetition of certain motifs, presented in contrast to each other, reveals the conceptual nature of *Hello, Horse!* and highlights the idea of change within an apparently unchanging landscape. This strategy challenges perceptions of reality by presenting successive representations of a stop or other element that seem to contradict each other, despite the composition of the shots dedicated to them remaining unchanged. To convey the possibility of the experience of change, Pakalniņa employs precise compositions and durations of repeated shots to capture a landscape or sign. She also employs seamless editing technique, primarily achieved through the use of passing vehicles. As Timothy Corrigan has already pointed out, technical techniques can also confirm the presence of the author, and *Hello, Horse!* is precisely the case. Inga Pērkone describes the development of artistic approach of Pakalniņa: “In fact, the development of the director’s handwriting shows an increasingly pronounced focus on editing as the foundation of the work’s structure, editing is understood here not only as the putting together of separately shot film plans, but also as the creation of an internal dynamic structure for each scene to be filmed.” [Pērkone 2013: 105]. The repetition strategy is effective and raises various questions due to the similarity or coincidence of image composition and hidden montage. Is the stop at dawn the same stop when evening comes? Is an electricity pole in winter the same as an electricity pole in summer? Does the flow of time mainly cause changes in objects and living things? Aspects of this discussion are summarised in the description on the website filmas.lv of The National Film Centre of Latvia: “A film about how things change while staying the same. Or, you could say, how everything stays the same as it changes.”

The important thing is that *Hello, Horse!* does not offer clear answers, but instead suggests ideas and raises questions. The essence of the essay is embedded in the etymology of the concept, which frees the form from the requirement for clear, coherent and logical expression and conclusions, and emphasises the process rather than the result. The form allows for ignorance, contradiction, doubt and irony, as well as other rhetorical devices that demonstrate the process of subjective thinking without insisting on the correctness of the outcome. As Paul Arthur explains: “Of course, documentaries in general frequently discover themes and structures after the fact, as a result of culling accumulated footage in the editing room. The essay, however, assumes that what it tells us and the order in which it is communicated could have taken an entirely different route, that it is one of several possible versions of the same concept. It delights in quirky arcs of logic, sudden digressions, unexpected epiphanies, pauses for self-reflection” [Arthur 2003: 165]. As we can see in this film, Pakalniņa is a tireless creator of combinations. She plays with and dynamically arranges the rather monotonous material created in this rather hermetic territory.

The openness and playfulness with which the author of the essay film expresses hers or his vision also implies a tendency to engage with the viewer in a dialogue

that requires a critical response. Here repetition is used to highlight the phenomenon of time and share the experience of it. Rather than proposing a specific thesis and antithesis, the film simply asks whether repeated visual signs are the same in different situations. This film specifically embodies Laura Rascaroli's aforementioned understanding of the openness of the essay film. This has been highlighted as one of the main characteristics and values of the essay genre by representatives of various fields of art.

In his article *The Essay as Form* (1958), Theodor Adorno writes: "In this experience, concepts do not form a continuous stream of activity, and thoughts do not flow in a single direction, but rather various moments are interwoven like the fabric of a carpet. The fertility of thought depends on the thickness of this fabric. In fact, the thinker does not actually think, but rather makes himself into an arena for intellectual experience, without resolving this experience" [Adorno 2024]. The word "stage" in the last sentence of this statement is worth paying attention to – it refers to a shared, participatory experience. Literary scholar Kathryn Murphy adds: "The relationship of writer and reader is not [...] voyeuristic. Instead, the essay is a space for cognitive emulation, for vicarious experience" [Murphy 2020: 95]. A cognitive test is created using a repetition strategy, and a train of thought is drawn out: are these compositions the same or different? However, Pakalniņa does not answer, explain or argue, instead leaving the interpretation of the film to the viewer.

Conclusion

The films discussed in the article employ a variety of formal strategies, including abstraction, textual insertions, different sound scores and repetition. Their use demonstrates the prioritisation, exploration and fluidity of form that characterise the essay film genre. Laila Pakalniņa's relentless, artistically valuable and distinctive experiments also reveal the presence of a personal voice and position, which is particularly evident in the genre. According to András Bálint Kovács, the author's subjectivity, which is typical of modernist cinema genres, applies not only to the opinion itself, but mainly "as a new artistic way of looking at things" [Kovács 2007: 204].

However, although Pakalniņa's films lack a clear narrative, subjectivity is also present thematically. The formal experiments result in a variety of interpretations of the director's possible ideas, comments, and criticism, thus initiating a dialogue with the audience. Both in terms of form and content, the keyword that characterises the films discussed in the article is contradiction. *Papa Gena* is a conceptually rich film that portrays the modern urban environment and its liminal states, such as stillness and movement, silence and sounds, etc. This film reveals a wide spectrum of audiovisual means of expression, which are arranged in various combinations.

The principle of abstraction employed in the films *Dream Land* and *Spoon* manifests itself as a focused representation of individual images and objects that are beyond the limits of visibility and accessibility. Thus, Pakalniņa creates a paradox: these distant and even vague symbols signal a very close and real ecological crisis today. Meanwhile, the essay film *On Rubik's Road* uses textual descriptions to extend and even contradict the meaning of the images, giving the documentary a politically critical dimension. This film contrasts everyday life and freedom with political conflict, oppression, and the denial of independence, presenting a thesis and antithesis. And in the film *Hello, Horse!* Pakalniņa uses the strategy of repetition to challenge perception, leading to reflection on the experience of the passage of time. This time, the contradiction lies in the fact that, although the film appears to be held together by arbitrary images, it is precisely the composition and sequence of the frames that imbue them with an additional layer of meaning.

The essay film is an audiovisual form of expression that enables filmmakers to share their personal experiences and perspectives, engage with social and political issues, and interact with their audience. All these aspects can be found both in the works mentioned in the article and even in other films by Laila Pakalniņa. From an aesthetic perspective, the essay film lends itself well to experimentation, as demonstrated by the analysed examples. Taking all this into account, some of Laila Pakalniņa's creative work can be interpreted as belonging to the essay film genre. This genre emphasises the author's subjectivity and artistic exploration, inviting viewers to join the public platform for experimentation and reflection, and encouraging them to question their own subjectivity. The films analysed in this article clearly demonstrate that the concept and genre of the essay film, as well as Laila Pakalniņa's oeuvre, are both broad and promising topics, whether viewed together or separately.

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EXPLORING OF “SERUMPUN” CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION IN INDONESIAN AND MALAYSIAN COMEDY FILMS AS AUDIOVISUAL PUBLIC PEDAGOGY

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Abstract

This study explores the intersection of cross-cultural education and audiovisual public pedagogy through the analysis of mise-en-scène in Indonesian and Malaysian comedy films. The authors focus on the “Serumpun” relationship, reflecting the shared cultural and historical roots of these two nations. The research investigates how comedy films serve as mediums for cultural expression and education, fostering intercultural dialogue and understanding. The authors use a qualitative approach

Culture Crossroads

Volume 33, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol33.522>

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ISSN 2500-9974



that integrates semiotic and content analysis to examine three critically acclaimed Indonesian and Malaysian comedy films released between 2000 and 2023. The analysis underscores the significance of *mise-en-scène* in conveying cultural symbolism and values, particularly in reflecting the nuances of the “Serumpun” relationship. Through comparative analysis, the researchers reveal how these films utilize humour, family dynamics, and visual aesthetics to address and reflect societal norms, cultural heritage, and the complexities of modern life in both countries. The findings indicate that these comedy films serve as informal yet highly effective audiovisual educational platforms, playing a critical role in both the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage, while simultaneously fostering cross-cultural understanding. The pedagogical potential of film is particularly evident in its ability to shape public perceptions, positioning these films as dual-function cultural artifacts and educational tools. Films engage public pedagogy, engaging audiences on both emotional and intellectual levels; these films transcend mere entertainment, becoming catalysts for cultural discourse and vehicles for deeper societal reflection to encourage a more profound understanding of the complexities of societal changes, cultural norms, and the evolution of humour in reflecting contemporary issues as intercultural relationships.

Keywords: *“Serumpun” relationship, cross-cultural education, film, Indonesian, Malaysian, audiovisual public pedagogy.*

Introduction

The term “Serumpun”, signifying ‘one root’, poignantly captures the intricate web of shared history, language, and culture that entwines Indonesia and Malaysia [Clark 2013]. This deep-seated connection forms a vital backdrop against which this paper is positioned, aiming to dissect and understand the nuanced role of comedy films from these nations in facilitating cross-cultural education. Predominantly, this exploration is centred around the concept of *mise-en-scène*, a pivotal element in film studies, encompassing the arrangement of everything visible in a frame – actors, lighting, décor, props, and costumes [Ortiz 2014; Skjerseth 2020]. This study is grounded in the belief that such films are not mere vessels of entertainment but potent mediums of cultural expression and pedagogy. The choice of Indonesian and Malaysian comedy films as the focal point of this research is underpinned by the genre’s inherent capacity to reflect societal norms, challenge existing paradigms, and act as conduits for cultural discourse [Maksum 2022]. These films serve as a reflective surface, revealing shared customs, linguistic threads, and historical narratives, thereby providing a fertile ground for exploring the “Serumpun” relationship.

In the ever-changing landscape of film study, the intersection of cultures on the screen and the resulting intercultural interactions, combined with shared comedic storylines, have become a significant focus [Dixon 2007]. The popularity of what is newly termed “cross-border humour” in engaging audiences has drawn attention to Indonesian and Malaysian humour films [Grossman 2017]. These films reflect cultural and identity aspects and intertwine them with socio-political elements within their narratives. Beyond being a visual spectacle, the film serves as a dynamic medium for cross-cultural dialogues, facilitating the exchange and exploration of ideas representing collective experiences within and beyond national confines [Lamarre 2002]. This medium connects with viewers in unconventional ways through visual aesthetics, performances, dialogue, and storytelling [Dubowsky 2016].

Mise-en-scène is central in cinematic storytelling, involving elements like set design, costuming, lighting, and spatial arrangements [Simou 2022]. These elements are crucial in conveying cultural symbolism and meaning. Scholars such as Bou [2019] and Skjerseth [2020] highlight the importance of visual elements in communicating cultural norms and values. In this context, mise-en-scène becomes a cultural site where Indonesian and Malaysian elements interact, highlighting similarities and differences [Wilcox 2016]. Meanwhile, humour, transcending language and culture, is a transformative agent that fosters connections and enhances understanding across cultures [Gell 2006]. The development of cinema in Indonesia and Malaysia is rooted in their unique historical, socio-political, and cultural landscapes. Despite their proximity, these countries have distinct narratives focusing on national and ethnic identity complexities, as explored by scholars like Heryanto and Khoo in Southeast Asian cinema [Tse 2021].

This research discusses mise-en-scène in Indonesian and Malaysian comedic films as a platform for intercultural dialogue. It highlights the role of shared comedic experiences in fostering transcultural understanding amidst socio-political challenges. Voci introduces the concept of “para-animation”, exploring creative intersections between mainstream and avant-garde animation [Voci 2023]. Similarly, Türeli investigates film’s role in design education, showcasing its potential as a tool for visualizing urban landscapes [Türeli 2021], thereby emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between cinematic representation and architectural creativity. The urgency of this research stems from a critical need to understand the dynamics of cross-cultural communication in an increasingly globalized world. The unique socio-cultural landscape of Indonesia and Malaysia, characterized by shared yet distinct cultural identities, presents an exemplary case study. In an era where cultural homogenization and erosion of traditional values are prevalent concerns, analysing the role of popular media, especially comedy films, in preserving and promoting cultural heritage becomes imperative. Furthermore, the growing influence of such

media in shaping public perceptions and attitudes underscores the relevance and timeliness of this study. This research addresses the underexplored potential of comedy films in the realm of public pedagogy and cross-cultural education, especially in the context of the Indonesian-Malaysian “Serumpun” relationship. Despite the rich cultural tapestry these films present, academic discourse often overlooks their educational value.

Accordingly, this study investigates how Indonesian and Malaysian comedy films, through their *mise-en-scène*, function as pedagogical tools for cross-cultural education within the broader “Serumpun” framework. The research investigates how visual aesthetics, spatial compositions, and cultural symbols embedded within these cinematic texts facilitate the articulation and negotiation of shared and divergent identities by conducting a comparative analysis of selected films from both countries. This approach underscores the educational potential of comedy as a conduit for public pedagogy, especially in multicultural and postcolonial contexts. More specifically, the objectives of this study are: (1) to analyse the *mise-en-scène* in selected Indonesian and Malaysian comedy films and examine how these visual elements reflect cultural values, social critique, and national identity; (2) to compare and contrast how both national cinemas engage with themes of humour, tradition, and modernity in their portrayal of everyday life; and (3) to explore the potential of these films as platforms for intercultural understanding and informal education across national boundaries. In doing so, the research positions cinema as a dialogic space where cultural commonalities and tensions can be meaningfully examined, offering critical insights into the pedagogical functions of popular visual culture in Southeast Asia.

Method

This research delves deeply into the “Serumpun” relationship, which captures the shared roots between Indonesia and Malaysia, examined through the lens of comedy films. Its authors investigate the subtle role these films play in cross-cultural education, emphasising *mise-en-scène* as a fundamental aspect of film studies. The selection of Indonesian and Malaysian comedy films for study is due to their ability to reflect societal norms, challenge established paradigms, and encourage cultural discourse. The research sits at the intersection of film study, culture, and education, focusing on how humour in these films fosters intercultural interactions. The appeal of “cross-border humour” as it captivates audiences with its reflection of cultural and identity issues, often intertwined with socio-political narratives that engage viewers through visual aesthetics, performances, dialogue, and storytelling, serving as potent mediums for cross-cultural dialogue.

The five films selected for this study – *Warkop DKI Reborn*, *Susah Sinyal*, *Hantu Kak Limah*, *Polis Evo*, and *Ola Bola* – were purposefully chosen based on

a set of rigorous qualitative criteria. These included the films' demonstrated cultural relevance, public and critical reception, and richness in visual and thematic material suitable for *mise-en-scène* and pedagogical analysis. Critical acclaim was defined through a triangulation of sources: national and regional film award nominations and wins, positive scholarly or journalistic reviews, and high audience ratings on platforms such as IMDb and local film databases. Each film had to (1) originate from either Indonesia or Malaysia; (2) belong to the comedy or comedy-drama genre; (3) be released between 2000 and 2023; and (4) explicitly address themes such as family, societal change, multicultural identity, or traditional values that all of which intersect with the "Serumpun" framework. Furthermore, their *mise-en-scène* had to present strong visual cues through set, costume, or spatial storytelling that communicate sociocultural messages relevant to cross-cultural education. This selection ensures a balanced comparative representation of contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian comedic cinema, aligned with the study's focus on public pedagogy and cultural negotiation through humour.

The researchers have adopted a qualitative approach, combining semiotic and content analysis, and is interdisciplinary, bridging film studies, cultural studies, and educational theories [Moran 2002; Schuermans, Loopmans and Vandenabeele 2012; Audissino 2017; Chandler 2017]. They selected three Indonesian and Malaysian comedy films released from 2000 to 2023 that have received significant public and critical acclaim, focusing on those with cultural themes and symbols relevant to the "Serumpun" context. The films' narratives, themes, characters, dialogues, and visual elements are examined by means of content analysis, especially in exploring aspect cultural, historical, and socio-political narratives [Table 1]. Meanwhile, semiotic analysis deciphers the meanings in *mise-en-scène*, such as set designs, costumes, lighting, and spatial arrangements, to reveal more profound cultural significance [Chandler 2017].

The researchers in this study also apply intercultural communication theories to understand how these films promote cross-cultural understanding and dialogue, primarily focusing on how humour negotiates cultural differences and influences audience perceptions. Comparative analysis underpins the portrayal of cultural elements in Indonesian and Malaysian films, reflecting each country's unique socio-cultural landscape. Data collection includes detailed viewing of selected films, note-taking, and capturing critical scenes for analysis, along with interviews from film critics, academics, and viewers from both countries for diverse insights. Data analysis uses thematic coding to identify patterns and themes underpinned by theoretical frameworks from relevant disciplines.

To operationalize the semiotic analysis, each selected film was closely examined through a frame-by-frame breakdown, focusing on elements of *mise-en-scène* like

Table 1.**Instrument for the analysis of Indonesian and Malaysian comedy films**

Stage	Description	Tools/Approaches
1. Film selection	Establish criteria for film selection based on origin, genre, release period, and themes relevant to cultural and educational aspects.	–
	– Country of origin: Indonesia and Malaysia	
	– Genre: Comedy and comedy-drama	
	– Release period: 2000 to 2023	
2. Data sources	Identify primary sources for gathering film data.	– Film databases [IMDb]
	– Academic articles, reviews, and studies on films.	– Academic databases [Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus]
	– Background information and director's notes.	– Official film websites and press kits
	– Access to films for analysis.	– Streaming platforms [Netflix, Vidio, Prime Video, regional services]
3. Data collection	Outline methods for collecting data on films.	–
	– Watching films for theme and mise-en-scène analysis.	– Film viewing
	– Systematic analysis of film content including dialogue, narrative, and visual style.	– Content analysis
	– Analysis of signs and symbols within the mise-en-scène.	– Semiotic analysis
4. Analysis framework	Describing the analytical framework for examining films.	–
	– Identifying and discussing central themes.	– Thematic analysis
	– Comparing and contrasting themes and mise-en-scène elements.	– Comparative analysis
5. Reporting	Explain organization and reporting of findings.	–
	– Structure of analysis, integration of quotes/descriptions, use of visual aids.	– Reporting format

spatial composition, lighting, costume, set design, and visual motifs as cultural signifiers that encode ideological, historical, and social meanings. For instance, traditional Malay village backdrops in *Hantu Kak Limah* or the nostalgic urban imagery in *Warkop DKI Reborn* were analysed as visual narratives that reflect evolving

national identities and communal values. These visual cues were interpreted using Barthesian semiotic theory (denotation/connotation) and anchored in the socio-political and cultural contexts of each nation, enabling the decoding of dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings based on audience responses and scholarly interpretations. Simultaneously, a qualitative content analysis was conducted by applying a multi-step coding procedure. Thematic indicators were inductively derived and refined into four primary analytical categories: (1) portrayal of family dynamics and generational identity; (2) representation of socio-cultural issues through humour; (3) linguistic strategies in comedy (wordplay, satire, irony); and (4) educational and moral narratives conveyed through plot development. Then, respondents' feedback was triangulated with these thematic codes to ensure analytic validity and to capture the layered reception of filmic content.

Results and discussion

The intrinsic power of film to mirror and mold societal norms and cultural values is profoundly evident in the realms of Indonesian and Malaysian filmmaking serve not just as a source of entertainment but as a potent tool for public pedagogy and cross-cultural education. It focuses on the shared cultural themes, the role of *mise-en-scène* as an educational instrument, and the underlying implications for cross-cultural understanding between Indonesia and Malaysia, two nations bound by shared linguistic and cultural roots, often referred to as “Serumpun”. Both Indonesian and Malaysian films, as depicted in the selected works, extensively utilize humour and family dynamics as pivotal elements are mirrors reflecting the societal norms and cultural ethos of their respective countries [Table 2]. In Indonesian films these elements are employed as a discernible emphasis on the evolving youth culture and the challenges of modern parenting, respectively. Similarly, Malaysian films navigate through traditional beliefs and the nuances of multicultural interactions.

The humour in these films is not a mere comedic device but a cultural lens (see Table 2) [Pérez Ríu 2017]. It provides insights into what each society laughs about, which is often what they care about. Therefore, comedic elements become a vehicle to address social issues and cultural specificities subtly. The portrayal of family dynamics further adds depth, highlighting the societal values embedded within family structures and relationships. This shared approach in both countries' cinemas underscores a common cultural sentiment that values humour and familial bonds as essential to societal reflection. *Mise-en-scène* in these films is a background element and a character, telling a story beyond the dialogues and plots. The urban landscapes of Indonesia, the traditional Malay villages, the modern offices, and the rural landscapes depicted in these films are not mere settings (see Table 2). They are visual narratives that communicate cultural heritage and modern challenges of these societies.

Table 2.**Comparative analysis of mise-en-scène and educational aspects in Indonesian and Malaysian comedy films**

Country	Film title	Theme description	Mise-en-scène aspects	Educational aspect
Indonesia	<i>Warkop DKI Reborn</i>	Revival of famous comedy characters in everyday scenarios.	Classic settings, slapstick humour, colourful costumes.	Offers insight into the evolution of Indonesian humour and comedy styles.
Indonesia	<i>Susah Sinyal</i>	A single mother balancing work and family life.	Modern office spaces, rural Indonesian landscapes.	Highlights challenges faced by modern working parents in Indonesia.
Malaysia	<i>Hantu Kak Limah</i>	Comedic horror story set in a Malaysian village.	Traditional Malay village setting, local costumes.	Explores traditional Malaysian beliefs and rural village life.
Malaysia	<i>Polis Evo</i>	Buddy cop action-comedy reflecting Malaysian society.	Urban environments, police uniforms, action sequences.	Discusses themes of teamwork and cultural diversity in Malaysia.
Malaysia	<i>Ola Bola</i>	Sports drama about Malaysia's national football team.	1980s Malaysia, football stadiums, period costumes.	Showcases Malaysia's multiculturalism and unity, highlighting the unifying power of sports.

These films' narrative and visual elements collectively serve as an informal yet influential educational platform and offer a window into societal changes, cultural norms, and the evolution of humour in reflecting contemporary issues (see Table 3). Films like *Warkop DKI Reborn* and *Ola Bola* are not just sources of entertainment but are educational with provide cultural insights and historical context, making them valuable tools for public pedagogy [Biesta 2012; Schuermans, Loopmans and Vandenabeele 2012]. These films educate not through didactic lessons but through stories that resonate with the audience and reflect their lives, aspirations, and conflicts (see Table 3). This form of public pedagogy is particularly effective as it engages its audience emotionally and intellectually, making the learning experience more profound and enduring. By blending entertainment with education, these films have the potential to influence public opinion, shape cultural perceptions, and foster a better understanding of societal dynamics.

Table 3.**Audience perceptions on the cultural and societal impact of Indonesian and Malaysian films**

Country	Respondent	Film discussed	Perception and impact
Indonesia	R1	<i>Warkop dKI Reborn</i>	“The film brilliantly bridges past and present Indonesian comedy, making me appreciate the evolution of our humour. It’s a cultural lesson wrapped in laughter.”
Indonesia	R2	<i>Susah Sinyal</i>	“It reflects our society’s struggle with modernity vs. tradition, especially in family relationships. It made me reevaluate my own life choices.”
Malaysia	R3	<i>Hantu Kak Limah</i>	“It humorously captures the essence of Malaysian rural life, reminding us of our roots and the importance of community. I found it enlightening and entertaining.”
Malaysia	R4	<i>Polis Evo</i>	“The film’s exploration of teamwork amidst diversity is a mirror to Malaysian society’s strengths. It’s a call to embrace our differences.”
Indonesia	R5	<i>Warkop DKI Reborn</i>	“Seeing new actors take on classic roles was nostalgic yet fresh. It showed how certain cultural aspects remain beloved across generations.”
Malaysia	R6	<i>Ola Bola</i>	“It’s more than a sports movie; it’s a narrative on unity and achieving dreams together regardless of background. It beautifully showcases the Malaysian <i>muhibbah</i> spirit.”
Indonesia	R7	<i>Susah Sinyal</i>	“The film’s portrayal of a working mother’s life in Indonesia resonated with me deeply. It’s a reflection of the modern Indonesian woman’s challenges.”
Malaysia	R8	<i>Hantu Kak Limah</i>	“The blend of comedy and horror with Malaysian cultural elements was perfect. It made me appreciate our folklore and the creative ways we can tell our stories.”

Then, from encoded messages and potential decodings, *Warkop DKI Reborn* revives beloved comedic characters and serves as a cultural artifact, encoding a celebration of traditional Indonesian comedy and its relevance in contemporary society. This encoded message offers a spectrum of decodings: a dominant reading may see it as an homage to the legacy of *Warkop DKI*, evoking nostalgia and appreciation for traditional humour; a negotiated reading might enjoy the humour

while questioning its modern relevance; and an oppositional reading could critique the film for relying too heavily on nostalgia, lacking contemporary resonance. Like *Susah Sinyal*, it encodes the struggles of modern Indonesians in juggling work-life balance, resonating with the audience's experiences of negotiating traditional family values and the demands of contemporary work life. Audiences may predominantly empathize with the protagonist, seeing their challenges reflected on screen. However, some may negotiate this portrayal with personal reservations about its depiction of work or family dynamics. In contrast, others might view the film as oversimplifying the complexities working mothers face, suggesting an oppositional decoding.

In Malaysia, *Hantu Kak Limah* humorously explores traditional beliefs and village life, encoding a message that intertwines Malaysian folklore with comedic elements. This can lead to a dominant reading that appreciates the cultural references and enjoys the humour. This negotiated reading has mixed feelings about the blend of horror and comedy, and an oppositional reading critiquing the potential trivialization of traditional beliefs (see Table 3). Meanwhile, *Polis Evo* reflects Malaysian society through a buddy cop narrative, encoding teamwork and cultural diversity themes to overcome societal challenges. Audiences might dominantly receive this as a positive message, appreciating the film's emphasis on unity and diversity [Table 3]. However, there could be a negotiated decoding that appreciates the message but questions the portrayal of law enforcement or an oppositional decoding that disagrees with the representation of cultural diversity or critiques the genre's handling of serious themes. Lastly, *Ola Bola* encodes a unifying message by portraying Malaysia's national football team, highlighting the power of sports in bridging cultural divides. This message might be dominantly decoded as inspirational, showing how sports can unify diverse groups. However, some viewers might negotiate this interpretation, pondering over historical accuracy or the depth of cultural representation (see Table 3), whereas others could oppose it, perceiving the film as idealizing or oversimplifying the complexities of multiculturalism.

One crucial area of investigation in this discussion pertains to the key significance of local language as a mechanism for cultivating international bonds [Kiminami and Duggan 2022; Rajas, Barral and Baños 2023]. Language has a significant role in facilitating effective communication and fostering international understanding by serving as a powerful tool for overcoming cultural divides as educational mode. Language humour is a fundamental tool in creating hilarious situations that surpass cultural barriers, achieved through the manipulation of words, speech, and meanings. Linguistic elements such as wordplay, puns, and skilful repartee are deliberately utilised by filmmakers to create linguistic environments that facilitate the collective sharing of comic experiences among viewers from various cultural backgrounds. This practice aligns with the notion of fun learning, similar to a technological marvel,

as it utilises linguistic intricacies to establish linkages amidst linguistic variances in teaching-learning methods [Sampurno and Camelia 2020; Wiratmoko and Sampurno 2021; Sampurno 2023]. The deliberate and purposeful incorporation of humour into language enhances conversations in public pedagogy setting and creates an environment where cultural discussions can take place within the framework of fun learning [Ramani and Eason 2015].

The examination of cultural dynamics through comedy is further enhanced by the inclusion of the logical aspect. Humour rooted in logic serves as a medium for fostering critical thinking by use of humorous channels [Lionis 2021]. Through the skilful integration of tales that traverse improbable settings, unexpected plot developments, and exaggerated aspects, filmmakers compel audiences to engage in a critical analysis of the socio-cultural frameworks that form the foundation of the concept of “logic”. The aforementioned methodology serves as a medium for both entertainment and cognitive engagement, seamlessly aligning with the primary objective of this study, which is to decipher the impact of humour on cultural dynamics. The capacity of humour to stimulate critical involvement, thereby facilitating deep investigations into the fundamental components of humorous narratives and functions as a catalyst for facilitating cross-cultural connections, prompting viewers to engage in a critical re-evaluation of their preconceived notions and perspectives [Lucardie 2014; Rajas, Barral and Baños 2023]. The convergence of these varied comedic approaches results in a vibrant interaction of cultural negotiations within the *mise-en-scène* of Indonesian and Malaysian comedy films. As the integration of these strategies occurs, it gives rise to transnational comedy, a captivating phenomenon that possesses the ability to transcend linguistic, and intellectual barriers into public pedagogy about cross-cultural of “Serumpun”. This detailed research provides a thorough examination of the various strategies employed in these films, revealing significant observations on the complex nature of cultural interactions through the use of humour that reflect and potentially reinforce specific cultural narratives to highlighting the pedagogical role of film in shaping perceptions of race and education.

A brief excursion into the cinemas of Malaysia and Indonesia in dialogue with European film traditions

Combining Indonesian and Malaysian cinema with European cinematic traditions offers fertile terrain for cross-cultural commentary. This is particularly evident when approached through the lens of comedy as a narrative device and a socio-political register. European cinema, particularly Italian neorealism, French poetic realism, and British social satire, has long foregrounded everyday struggles, community life, and ironic commentary on class and cultural identity. Similar

thematic tendencies appear in Southeast Asian comedic traditions. In these traditions, comedy functions as a vehicle for cultural introspection and socio-political critique.

Indonesian and Malaysian comedic films such as *Warkop DKI Reborn*, *Susah Sinyal*, *Hantu Kak Limah*, *Polis Evo*, and *Ola Bola* reflect a hybrid cinematic vernacular. This vernacular fuses the didactic tendencies of public pedagogy with the local specificities of language, humour, and mise-en-scène. In Jacques Tati's or Roberto Benigni's works, films deploy slapstick and satirical tropes to expose cultural contradictions in postwar Europe. Likewise, the Indonesian and Malaysian comedies negotiate tradition and modernity through cultural signifiers embedded within their visual compositions.

In *Warkop DKI Reborn*, the revival of the iconic trio from 1980s Indonesian cinema – *Dono*, *Kasino*, and *Indro* – occurs in contemporary urban and bureaucratic settings. This intergenerational comic nostalgia resembles Italian commedia all'italiana, where characters caricature and critique modernization. The film uses mise-en-scène for visual realism and semiotic layering. Chaotic urban backdrops, garish police uniforms, and exaggerated domestic spaces symbolize a society positioned between its past and a neoliberal present. The slapstick humour, sometimes perceived as simplistic, reveals a deep satire of institutional inefficiency and generational disconnection. This reflects themes similar to those in films like *La Grande Bouffe* or *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, which use absurdity to dissect bourgeois values.

In *Susah Sinyal*, the duality of urban careerism and traditional familial roles is visualized through spatial dichotomies. Sleek office interiors in Jakarta contrast with the rustic beauty of Sumba's coastlines. This dualism echoes spatial tension in German *Heimatfilme*, where rural purity is juxtaposed with urban alienation. The story follows a single mother and her daughter, forced into emotional confrontation and reconciliation during a vacation without digital technology. A narrative of affective labour and cultural dislocation emerges, with themes similar to those explored in European melodrama and postcolonial cinema, where gender, space, and identity interact in unresolved contradictions.

Hantu Kak Limah operates in a different tonal register. It weaves supernatural folklore with comedic motifs. Set in a rural Malay village full of localized idioms and spectral imagery, the film blends horror and humour to deconstruct collective memory and superstition. The film channels the Gothic filtered through a postcolonial lens. In the works of Guillermo del Toro or George Romero, hauntings are symptomatic of unresolved historical trauma. Here, mise-en-scène functions as an ethnographic tableau. Traditional kampung houses, dim lantern lighting, and shadowy banana groves provide visual authenticity and mythic resonance.

The spectral “kak limah” becomes a cultural signifier and a manifestation of rural anxieties shaped by modernization and secularization.

Polis Evo and *Ola Bola* foreground multicultural narratives through action and sports genres. These underlying discourses resonate with ensemble films such as *Trainspotting* or *The Full Monty*. These films rearticulate working-class identity through stylized realism. *Polis Evo* uses fast-paced cinematography, urban landscapes, and a buddy-cop formula to explore ethnic diversity and institutional authority in Malaysia. Mise-en-scène features such as uniforms, city traffic, and tactical gear reflect procedural genre visual codes and sociocultural tensions in a pluralistic society.

Ola Bola presents a historical narrative focused on Malaysia’s 1980s football team. The film uses retro mise-en-scène such as period costumes, sepia-toned filters, and analogue broadcast aesthetics to evoke a romanticized national past. Its emphasis on team unity across ethnic lines reflects concerns in films like *Les Choristes* or *Bend It Like Beckham*. In these films, sports represent integration and aspiration. The film becomes a site of national myth-making, using nostalgia as an affective strategy and ideological tool.

These films reflect Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “third space” where hybrid identities negotiate meaning. Comedy becomes a mode of resistance and resilience. It enables audiences to respond to cultural tensions through laughter. Language plays a central role in these films. Puns, dialect switches, and code-switching create a polyphonic text in line with Bakhtinian dialogism. These elements resist singular cultural readings. According to Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory, each visual and linguistic sign within the mise-en-scène carries denotative and connotative meanings. These meanings shift depending on the viewer’s social position, national origin, or generational background.

European cinema has emphasized auteur theory and existential themes. Southeast Asian comedic films reveal a tradition rooted in collective authorship, folklore, and public pedagogy. Didacticism in these narratives includes themes of modern work ethics, traditional family expectations, supernatural belief, and rationalism. These films reflect cultural values through story and mise-en-scène, aligned with Henry Giroux’s theory of public pedagogy. Cinema in this context serves as a cultural text and a pedagogical intervention. It has the capacity to shape public consciousness and facilitate intercultural empathy.

The cinema of Malaysia and Indonesia uses comedy, mise-en-scène strategies, and linguistic hybridity to engage with global film traditions. It adapts cinematic devices with cultural specificity in semiotics, historical reference, and narrative ethos. This combination of global relevance and local depth positions “Serumpun” cinema as a significant contributor to world cinema and cross-cultural education.

Conclusion

Within the context of Indonesian and Malaysian comedy films, examining comedic strategies arises as a dynamic framework that illuminates the intricate interplay of cultural dynamics within the cinematic setting. This study examines the strategic utilization of cross-border humour as a mechanism of enchantment, effectively navigating films across the complex landscape of cultural exchanges. The language humour developed in these films adds even more educational value to them as this element of the films surpasses cultural boundaries. As a common language of humour, it creates unanimity among viewers of different cultures.

In addition to the relatability within the education aspect of these films, they also add language humour allowing a cultural barrier bridging the audiences under the films to have a relatable experience. The cultural level is further enriched by the language humour of these films, which is above culture and allows for shared viewing entertainment for diverse audiences. This film's use of language as a didactic utility interrogates the ability of film to improve cultural understanding and interdependency, especially between nations that share a linguistic and cultural past, such as Indonesia and Malaysia. As is evidenced by the capacity of such films to speak about important but rather ambiguous themes such as multicultural challenges, traditional beliefs, as well as physical and cultural aspects of the modern world in an understandable and lively manner, film is one of the most suitable audiovisual mediums for the development of critical thinking and cultural empathy.

Equally important, the representation of characters and settings in such films provides viewers an avenue to gain insights into cultural identities and social values more profoundly. A film works as a non-formal audiovisual educational platform where viewers get involved emotionally and intellectually with the content. This engagement contributes to a better self-perception of one's culture. It encourages an understanding of other people and cultural practices to bring people together and promote a sense of unity for the human race. Therefore, Indonesia's Malaysian film that have similar culture reflects that movies can be a highly significant public pedagogy tool offering insight into cultural heritage, societal changes, and convergence of human relations. In a balanced mix of education and entertainment, these films contribute significantly to molding public opinion, establishing cultural notions, and promoting cross-cultural understanding. Thus, film can become proof of the living value of storytelling from an educative, meditative, and cultural cross-exchange point of view, i.e., of its usefulness in creating a more informed and broaden virtual world.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their profound gratitude for the financial support received to conduct this research. This work was made possible by an International Research Grant Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris No. 2023-0050-106-1 provided by the Department of Design, Faculty of Language and Arts, Universitas Negeri Surabaya.

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AI, CREATIVITY AND DESIGN

REPRODUCTION OF ARTIST'S UNIQUE VISUAL STYLE. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) – TOOL FOR THE OPTIMIZATION OF CREATIVE PROCESSES

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Abstract

This study is dedicated to examination of the ways how generative AI, specifically trained open-source models by *Stable Diffusion*, can support reproducing an artist's unique visual style. Conducted across four semesters (2023–2025) at the Art Academy of Latvia, the research investigates the pedagogical and creative outcomes of teaching students to train personalized AI models using their artworks as datasets, further combining other tools with the trained models during the study process.

A mixed-method approach – combining surveys, AI image recognition tests, semi-structured interviews, practical assignments, and qualitative observation – was applied to assess the effectiveness of AI-assisted style reproduction. The study evaluates challenges related to further combining models and learned tools, dataset preparation, authorship, and the discussion and research about cognitive differences between human and machine creativity.

Findings show that personalized model training can enhance creative autonomy, enabling results closer to an artist's unique visual style than generic AI tools. However, the process also reveals ethical and conceptual tensions regarding authorship, randomness, and control. The study concludes that, when applied critically and reflectively, generative AI can serve as a powerful tool for both creative exploration and pedagogical development.

Keywords: *generative AI, Stable Diffusion, artistic style, authorship, cognitive processes.*

Culture Crossroads

Volume 33, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol33.600>

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ISSN 2500-9974



Introduction

In a shifting cultural paradigm, contemporary creative industries are increasingly shaped by the rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI). The oversaturation of image production, design tools, and automated workflows has introduced a new urgency to redefine the artist's role within a technological environment. AI applications – from language assistants to text-to-image generation platforms – have become commonplace. However, while most commercial tools offer rapid visual output, they often constrain artists within stylistic defaults shaped by generalized training data. This narrows artistic expression and raises ethical questions regarding imitation, originality, and authorship, as reflected in surveys conducted among art and culture students and teachers. Not all companies offer AI services, clear information about the data used, and often retain copyright in creating the work. [Midjourney 2024]¹ Most available AI tools are limited in style (often referred to as “synthetic”), are designed to satisfy the tastes of the majority of consumer society, and are necessary for a beautified image. However, the saturation of these tools has already contributed to the automation of creative work, replacing photographers, designers, and representatives of other creative fields. Alongside commercial tools, however, a growing community of developers provides open-source AI models and desktop-based systems. These platforms offer opportunities for deeper understanding and enable artists to train generative models using their own datasets. Such practices allow for the creation of AI-assisted sketches, prototypes, and visualizations that reflect the artist's style.

This study responds to these developments by examining the potential of **open-source diffusion models** – specifically *Stable Diffusion* – for professional and emerging artists to develop customized generative tools capable of replicating their artistic style. Such an approach enables greater control over creative outputs and a critical re-engagement with **technology as a co-creative partner rather than a passive generator**.

The research draws on a four-semester pedagogical experiment conducted at the Art Academy of Latvia (2023–2025), where undergraduate bachelor's students in the Faculty of Audiovisual and Media Arts (2nd and 3rd year) were introduced to model training techniques using their visual material as data input. This article explores how generative AI can be meaningfully integrated into arts education

¹ For example, one of the most widely used applications, Midjourney, will still not disclose the data used until September 2024. Also, although the results created in the respective program are allowed to be used with a paid subscription commercial, it does not provide copyright and newly created content. Available: <https://docs.midjourney.com/docs/terms-of-service> (viewed 15.12.2024.)

and whether it fosters deeper reflection on artistic style, authorship, and creative autonomy.

The theoretical framework combines concepts of cognitive science and AI studies, with particular attention to the distinction between human creativity and algorithmic reproduction. Neuroscientific insights into the default mode network (DMN) are discussed in parallel with early AI art systems such as Harold Cohen's AARON. The study situates machine-generated imagery within a broader discourse on aesthetic identity, authorship, and randomness.

This article contributes to the discourse on cultural production in the age of automation by proposing that artists can reclaim agency through the critical and individualized use of generative technologies. The research questions addressed here are, as follows:

- 1) What happens when artists train machines to imitate their thinking?
- 2) How do students' attitudes towards creativity, authorship, and optimization of creative work transform during the study process, while working with their data?
- 3) Do students build independent workflows with AI tools?
- 4) Do students recognize the benefits and limitations of personalized models?
- 5) How do attitudes toward authorship and creativity differ between students who participated in the course "Speciality and Practice: Generative Technology Studies" and those with no prior experience with model training?
- 6) How do students apply AI knowledge in later creative work?

Theoretical framework

This study is situated at the intersection of human cognition and machine-based generativity, focusing on how artistic style may be understood, replicated, and transformed within artificial intelligence systems. It draws on a comparison between human creative thinking and the operational logic of central point of contrast lies in how humans and machines process spontaneity, memory, and intention. While humans rely on emotion, intuition, and accumulated embodied experience, AI operates within probabilistic frameworks guided by large-scale training data.

The Default Mode Network (DMN)² is at the core of human creativity, a neural system active during introspection, imagination, and non-linear thought³.

² The Default Mode Network (DMN) is a brain network that is activated when a person is not engaged in a purposeful thought process, such as solving a task or processing external stimuli. This network is active when our minds are "resting" or we are engaged in internal thinking, such as daydreaming, introspection, memory recall, or creative thinking. [Baroli 2014]

³ The authors of the aforementioned study made equal contributions to the study in its creation: Authors: Eleonora Bartoli, Ethan Devara, Huy Q Dang, Rikki Rabinovich,

Recently published research by Oxford University Press *Default mode network electrophysiological dynamics and causal role in creative thinking* shows that DMN activity correlates with associative thinking and inner visualization, often associated with artistic practice and spontaneous idea generation [Bartoli et al. 2024]. The DMN allows for random, subconscious flows of thought that are not task-directed – a feature not native to AI systems, which require prompts and responses within defined algorithmic parameters.

This distinction is significant when considering how an artist's style is formed. Style emerges from years of material exploration, emotional development, and sensory learning in human practice. By contrast, generative models approximate this process through data input and pattern extraction. This research used the open-source AI model *Stable Diffusion* with **LoRA (Low-Rank Adaptation) methods**, allowing students to fine-tune the model on their personal illustration data. These models were trained with 30–100 images per student, enabling a simulation of their aesthetic handwriting. By experimenting with training parameters, students obtained *LoRA* models (in a .safetensors file) during training, with which it was possible to operate in the interface *Automatic1111*,⁴ creating frame plans for animations, idea sketches, and prototypes.

The theoretical backdrop also references Harold Cohen's early AI art system, *AARON*, which operated as a rule-based drawing program. Cohen's work raised foundational questions around authorship and agency in machine-generated art, and he maintained that *AARON* was not an artist but a system co-authored by a human creator [Cohen 1995]. This historical perspective helps frame current approaches to generative art as acts of procedural co-creation rather than autonomous machine authorship. It should be noted that Harold Cohen's early AI art system was based on other algorithmic structures. Still, Harold Cohen's approach is essential: controlling the algorithms as much as possible and giving them specific tasks so that the AI approaches the artist's needs.

Media artist and researcher Heidi Boisvert offers a related and contemporary perspective that integrates neuroscience, biometric data, and machine learning in developing what she calls "embodied algorithms". In her work with students, Boisvert explores how AI can be trained not only on aesthetic features but also on the emotional and neurological responses of the human body. Her approach redefines model training as a process of empathetic extension, where the machine

Raissa K Mathura, Adrish Anand, Bailey R. Pascuzzi, Joshua Adkinson, Yoed N. Kenett, Kelly R. Bijanki, Sameer A. Sheth, Ben Shofly. <https://doi.org/10.1093/brain/awae199>

⁴ *Automatic1111* is a user interface (UI), open source tool for working with *Stable Diffusion* models. Thanks to its intuitive interface, no programming knowledge is required to work with AI models.

becomes attuned to the affective and cognitive dimensions of human experience. Boisvert argues that AI systems, “rather than replacing creativity, can catalyse deep reflection, empathy, and cultural transformation when integrated as co-creative tools” [Boisvert 2023].

This framework supports a critical examination of authorship, randomness, and artistic control by comparing human cognitive mechanisms with generative AI outputs. It also establishes the premise for understanding AI model training as a technical act and a conceptual strategy to control aesthetic aspects within automated environments.

Methodology

This study applies a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods to investigate the reproducibility of artistic style using generative AI tools. The empirical component was implemented over four semesters (Autumn 2023 to Spring 2025) through the course “Speciality and Practice: Generative Technology Studies” (developed and led by Līga Vēliņa) at the Art Academy of Latvia, Department of Audiovisual-Media Arts.

The study involved parallel observations, structured surveys, and semi-structured discussions conducted within the course environment, alongside contributions from representatives of the broader cultural field and uninvolved focus groups. The course introduced second and third-year bachelor’s students to open-source AI systems, particularly Stability AI’s Stable Diffusion model, focusing on the fine-tuning of personalized *LoRA* (*Low-Rank Adaptation*) models using their works of art as training data. The primary objective was to investigate how artists’ unique visual styles could be simulated and reused for sketching, animation, and ideation through model training. The methodological foundation was based on constructivist pedagogy, emphasizing student-centred learning, experimentation, and the adaptation of AI tools to individual artistic identities. The lecturer acted as a mediator, regularly updating content in response to emerging technologies. Learning was approached as both a technical and conceptual process, in which students explored authorship and creative control while developing their workflows with generative tools.

Quantitative methods included testing generative tools and administering two structured student surveys (Survey 1 and Survey 2) to assess prior knowledge, the perceived effectiveness of AI tools, and understanding of authorship in AI-assisted collaboration.

Quantitative data were obtained through surveys of students outside the course, including bachelor’s students from the Latvian Academy of Culture and master’s students from the Art Academy of Latvia, to compare perspectives. To objectively test the ability to recognize machine-generated content, Image Recognition Tests

were conducted among scholars, students, and educators in the arts and culture field and general education, as well as among secondary school students from Alūksne.

Participants were divided into two primary categories: experimental groups (Focus Groups 1 and 2), who completed the full study module “Speciality and Practice: Generative Technology Studies” and engaged in training personalized AI models using their own artwork; and control groups (Focus Groups 3 to 9), who either participated in pre-course surveys or took part in image recognition tests but had no prior experience with model training. Within the control category, participants were further differentiated based on their engagement in courses and guest lectures led by Līga Vēliņa, identifying their prior knowledge and attitude: some, such as Focus Group 3, had limited familiarity with textual AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT) but lacked experience in training visual models; others (Focus Groups 4, 6–9) with wide spectre of represented age groups and represented fields participated solely in recognition tests to assess their ability to identify AI-generated content. In addition, Focus Groups 3 and 5 offered a disciplinary contrast – students from the Latvian Academy of Culture and the Art Academy of Latvia, respectively – allowing for comparison of perceptions between cultural management and visual arts education contexts. This layered design enabled a more nuanced analysis of how familiarity with generative AI tools, participants’ educational background, and disciplinary identity shape perceptions of authorship, creative autonomy, and the perceived value of AI in artistic practice.

Qualitative methods comprised literature analysis, direct observation, unstructured classroom discussions, pre- and post-course surveys, and visual analysis of students’ outputs.

To ensure a diverse sample, a purposive sampling strategy was employed. Participants were selected based on their involvement in AI-focused study modules, courses, and guest lectures (all led by the author L. Vēliņa). The sample included students and other focus groups (educators) with and without prior experience in generative AI workflows, aiming to capture a broad range of educational contexts and familiarity with digital tools. Surveys and recognition tests were administered in-class or via institutional platforms, either before or after course modules or guest lectures, to ensure voluntary and informed participation.

In total, six structured surveys (Survey 1 (Focus Groups 1, 2, 3, 5) and Survey 2 (Focus Groups 1, 2)), six image recognition tests (Focus Groups 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9), and two semi-structured interviews (Focus Groups 1, 2) were conducted. All participants provided informed consent and were informed about the purpose of the research and the use of their data.

Table 1.

Overview of focus groups, survey themes, and test specifics

Group	Institution / Programme	Timeframe	Participants, average age	Survey focus
1	2 nd -year bachelor's students (Art Academy of Latvia, Department of Motion. Image. Sound, participants of the course "Speciality and Practice: Generative Technology Studies"), autumn and spring semesters	From September 2023 to March 2024	8 (average age, M = 21.5)	Survey 1. Prior knowledge, authorship, and creativity.
1	3 rd -year bachelor's students (Art Academy of Latvia, Department of Motion. Image. Sound, participants of the course "Speciality and Practice: Generative Technology Studies"), autumn and spring semesters	From September 2024 to March 2025	8 (average age, M = 22.5)	Survey 2. Course reflection, authorship, and creativity. Unstructured classroom discussions.
2	2 nd -year bachelor's students (Art Academy of Latvia, Department of Motion. Image. Sound, participants of the course "Speciality and Practice: Generative Technology Studies"), autumn and spring semesters	September, 2024	5 (average age, M = 26)	Survey 1. Prior knowledge, authorship, and creative process.
2	2 nd -year bachelor's students (Art Academy of Latvia, Department of Motion. Image. Sound, participants of the course "Speciality and Practice: Generative Technology Studies"), autumn and spring semesters	March, 2025	5 (average age, M = 26)	Survey 2. Course reflection, authorship, and creativity. Unstructured classroom discussions.
3	BA students (Latvian Academy of Culture. Department of Sociology and Management of Culture, bachelor's programme "Creative Industries" (Survey before the course, "The Introduction of Using Artificial Intelligence Tools for the Creative Industries", led by L. Vēliņa)	September, 2024	10 (average age, M = 22)	Survey 1. Pre-course survey on AI knowledge, authorship, and creativity. Image Recognition Test. Recognition of AI-generated artwork.

Group	Institution / Programme	Timeframe	Participants, average age	Survey focus
4	Participants of the Professional Competence Improvement Program (led by Liga Vēliņa), Generative Artificial Intelligence. AI Tools for Optimizing Creative Processes for General Education and Art Education Teachers	March, 2024	16 (average age, M = 53)	Image Recognition Test. Recognition of AI-generated artwork.
5	MA students (Art Academy of Latvia)	April, 2025	57 (average age: M = 34)	Survey 1. Prior knowledge, authorship, and creative process.
6	MA students (Art Academy of Latvia)	March, 2025	40 (average age: M = 27)	Image Recognition Test. Recognition of AI-generated artworks.
7	Students & educators, Liepāja Music, Art and Design School	March, 2025	16 (average age: M = 22.5. Average age of students: M = 18)	Image Recognition Test. Recognition of AI-generated artworks
8	Students from Visual Communication & Environment, 2 nd -year bachelor's students at the Art Academy of Latvia in the sub-programmes "Environmental Art" and "Visual Communication"	January, 2025	8 (average age: M = 22)	Image Recognition Test. Recognition of AI-generated artworks.
9	Lower and upper-secondary school pupils (grades 8–12) from Alūksne Secondary School	April, 2024	14 (average age, M = 15)	Image Recognition Test. Recognition of AI-generated artworks.

The research evaluated the effectiveness of model training based on three key dimensions: aesthetic fidelity, student self-assessment, and third-party recognition of AI-generated outputs. To further assess this, additional tests were conducted by presenting both original and AI-generated artworks to educators and students, measuring their ability to distinguish between them and assess the perceived authenticity. These tests provided insight not only into the visual accuracy of generative results but also into broader questions of authorship, creativity, and machine agency.

The primary research questions guiding this study were, as follows:

1. Can training AI models successfully reproduce an artistic style?
2. Does the study process through the course “Speciality and Practice: Generative Technology Studies” foster a more profound, critical understanding of the principles underlying AI tools?
3. To what extent does this enable artists and students to operate, understand, and apply such tools more effectively to their own creative needs?

Course context and implementation

The rapid technological development of artificial intelligence requires a quick response from educational institutions (including art and culture universities) and teachers, integrating generative AI tools into studies, with the teacher becoming a mediator between technologies and students. In the fall semester of 2023, at the Art Academy of Latvia (Riga), in the subprogramme “Audiovisual media arts”, department of Image. Movement. Sound, with the initiative of Professor Ojārs Pētersons, a new mandatory subject, “Speciality and Practice. Generative Technology Studies”, which was created and led by Mg. Art. Līga Vēliņa.

The first module was designed for two semesters and targeted 2nd-year bachelor’s students. Following the successful implementation of the module, it was further developed and implemented over two additional semesters in September 2024, targeting third-year undergraduate students. When studying the artificial intelligence systems and applications offered at a particular time, *Stability AI* emerged as a notable presence, offering a series of open-access AI diffusion models that enabled the operation of stationary, loadable applications with various interfaces (*Automatic1111*, *Comfy UI*, *Kohya*, and others (see Figure A1, A2, A3)). Used models by *Stable Diffusion* are based on the open-access LAION-5B⁵ database. By choosing it as the central technology for learning in the developed study module, the work with students expanded in this study to focus on the reproducibility of

⁵ LAION-5B (Large-scale Artificial Intelligence Open Network) is one of the largest, open-source databases, consisting of 5 billion image-text pairs. Most of the data is obtained from websites where public content access is available. Available: <https://laion.ai/blog/laion-5b/> (viewed 15.12.2024.)

the artist's visual language, while simultaneously studying not only the potential of the existing tool but also students' attitudes and opinions about the potential of the tool, the concepts of creativity and copyright.

The methodology was rooted in constructivist pedagogy, focusing on student-centred learning, experimentation, and adaptation of AI tools to individual artistic identities. The lecturer served as a mediator, frequently updating the content in response to new technologies. Learning was understood as a technical and conceptual practice, wherein students explored authorship and creative control while developing personal workflows with generative tools.

This section will discuss the study process of the module “Speciality and Practice. Generative Technology Studies”, which is divided into four semesters.

The first two semesters emphasized the experimentation and training process of open-source AI models, primarily *Stability AI's Stable Diffusion* deep learning models, accessed via *Automatic1111* and *Kobya* interfaces. The first semester **introduces** students (Focus Groups: 1, 2) to generative tools and AI fundamentals through tasks such as *deepfake* video creation, character model training, and art style training using the fine-tuning process of models using the *LoRA (Low-Rank Adaptation)* training technique in the *Kobya* interface.

The following tasks had to be completed as part of the practical work:

1. Creating *Deepfake* images and video using the *Stable Diffusion Automatic1111* interface, *Reactor add-on*. The task is designed to promote understanding of deepfake content and its creation and the ability to identify it.
2. Learning to train two models and summarizing the results. (Training a model with *Hypernetwork*⁶ and *LoRA (Low-Rank Adaptation)*⁷ model training – in the open-access interface *Kobya*). Setting – training a person (human being) model using *the Stable Diffusion stable-diffusion-xl-base-1.0* base model, training it with portrait photos, using an average of 50 training images and an average of 100 regularization images in .jpg or .png format. The task is designed to create an understanding of the possibilities of training a person model and further manipulation – placing it in different environments, situations, and roles.

⁶ *Hypernetwork* training is a technique that allows you to train an additional layer of a model to adjust the behavior of the model without having to change the entire model. The layer created by the hypernetwork adapts by learning to generate images that match the training data while maintaining the general capabilities of the original model (for example, the *stable-diffusion-xl-base-1.0* model used).

⁷ *LoRA (Low-Rank Adaptation)* is a technique that allows training AI models efficiently using relatively small data sets and requiring less computing power. The technique offers many opportunities to optimize model parameters to achieve higher quality of generated content.

3. Training art style *LoRA* model in the open-access *Kohya*⁸ interface, using the stable-diffusion-xl-base-1.0 base model, using illustrations as data – an average of 100–150 images in .jpg or .png format. One of the primary settings and tasks is to focus specifically on the training art style, allowing students to prototype ideas further to create sketches using text input and the interface parameters used to control the plot in the form of an image or animation.

Focusing on the reproducibility of the art style and the students' results, the process yielded stylistically different outcomes, depending on each student's handwriting characteristics. The most successful results in the context of animation were for students who had trained models with illustrations or used their work of art as a reference in which specific characters and objects were readable), whose data was well-thought-out and uniform, and in which stylistics were not diversified (there was no variation with different methods and stylistics; the data was uniform, clearly defined).

Since the central issue in the study is the optimization of creative work by training an AI model with your data, the following will describe the method of training the model with the *Kohya* utility, using the stable-diffusion-xl-base-1.0 diffusion model developed by Stability AI as a base, which is adjusted according to the new data, training a new *LoRA* model. *LoRA (Low-Rank Adaptation)* is a technique that trains large models, such as Stable Diffusion, more efficiently and with fewer resources. When trained with *Kohya*, *LoRA* allows you to adjust only specific model parameters, which reduces training time and required resources. *LoRA Hypernetwork* is a training technique that trains additional layers in the *Stable Diffusion* model to generate specific styles or adjust images. When trained with the *Kohya* utility, it is a faster and more resource-efficient method for adapting the *Stable Diffusion* model, keeping the primary model unchanged and training only the necessary parameters.

To better understand the principles of artificial intelligence training, students initially learned how to train a person model (Figure 1) in the *Kohya* interface with their portrait photos. In training an object or person *LoRA* model, it is necessary to prepare 25–50 images as a basis for training the model. To improve the quality of the model, it is additionally possible to use regularization images that determine the type of object or character. Accordingly, if the image contains a person who identifies as a woman or a man, it is necessary to prepare images using *Stable Diffusion Automatic111* with the help of text input, which represents a woman in various poses, situations, and roles. This method allows the character to be trained in a specific style (3D, illustration, etc.) or to utilize a realistic person model for further work in various styles chosen by the student.

⁸ *Kohya* is a *Stable Diffusion* tool designed for model training and manipulation, focusing on individual, specific needs. The easy-to-use interface allows you to train and customize models with your own datasets, including training AI models with your own artwork photos or illustrations.



Figure 1. Author: Dagnis Stikāns. Results of the trained model in the Kohja interface with the *stable-diffusion-xl-base-1.0 diffusion* model as the base model, 2023.

Training an artistic style is similar to training a character AI model. Instead of portrait photographs, it is necessary to prepare an average of 50–100 images representing the artist's handwriting in a similar style. Care should be taken to ensure that the data represents a specific artistic style, paying attention to the relationships of lines, areas, colours, and line thickness, choosing one type of technique, and the images depicted in illustrations. In training in an artistic style, it is also possible to use photographs, images of spatial objects, and other images representing an artistic style. The training process takes from half an hour to several hours, depending on the power of the computer hardware, the data amount, and the parameters set. For example, using the computer hardware available at the Latvian Academy of Arts with an *AMD Ryzen 9 7950X 16-Core 4.50 GHz* processor and *Nvidia 4090 24 GB VRAM* video cards, training an art-style model using > 100 images takes up to 1 hour. The training result is an AI model in *.safetensors* format, which is then inserted into the *Automatic1111* interface (allowing for use in other applications such as *Comfy UI*, or in combination with other programs), further, with text input and parameters controlling sketches and prototypes in the style of a particular artist.

In the case of Katrīna Kate Kucina-Arbidāne (Figure 2), a highly successful imitation of imagery and stylistics was observed, particularly in replicating the characters' facial expressions, emotions, types, and colour tonality. When conducting a test within the framework of the Teacher Professional Competence Improvement Program *Generative Artificial Intelligence. AITools for Optimizing Creative Processes* for general education and art education teachers (*Program coordinated with the Alūksne Municipality Education Board on 4 March 2024, protocol No. 2, coordination No. 2*),

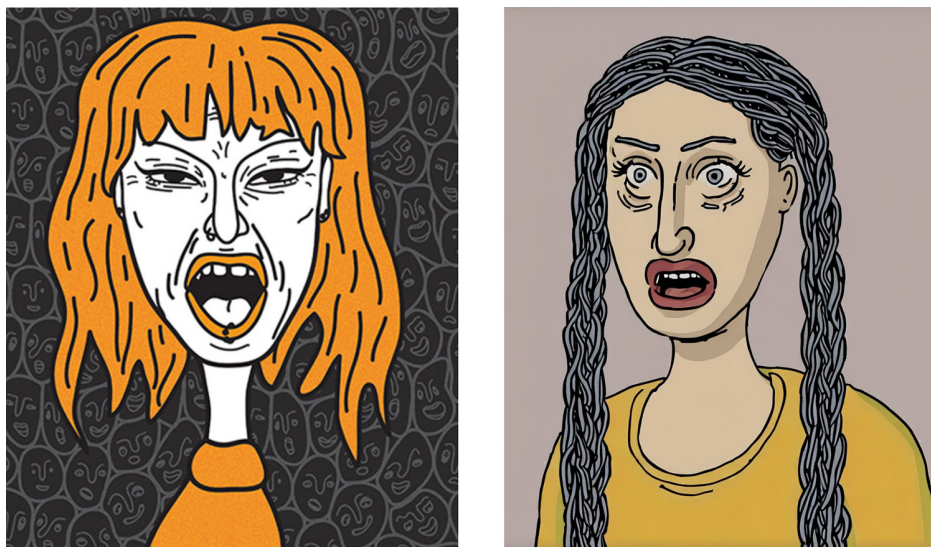


Figure 2. Author: Katrīne Kate Kucina-Arbidāne. Image 1 from the left – original work, hand-drawn digital illustration. Image 2 from the left: artificial intelligence-generated interpretation.

Katrīna's (Figure 2) – image created by artificial intelligence from the original work was recognized by 7 out of 16 respondents.

Another successful, yet stylistically distinct, example is the model trained by Katrīna Kovaļuka, featuring hand-drawn illustrations. The explicit imagery and stylistics allowed the trained dataset to consist of fewer images (on average around 50) than recommended. The trained artificial intelligence *LoRA* model successfully imitated the images, varying them in various scenes invented by the artist with a combination of text input and numerical parameters while preserving the specificity and peculiarities of artist's visual language. (Figure 3)

The second-semester course program used trained models for creating plots, sketches, and animations – moving images. Being aware that video tools in the specific period are incomplete, students were instructed to use existing models for creating animation frames (allowing the use of the *Chat GPT* language model for plot development). Along with the rapid technological development, various animation tools and programs became available in parallel with the course, which opened up opportunities to focus on experiments with moving images – and animation in the spring semester. Tools such as *RunwayML*, *Pica Labs*, and derived Stable Diffusion tools and techniques provided opportunities to animate the frame plan generated by students, further manipulating and editing the video to realize the 2nd semester assignment – a short film, animation, or animation application or trailer.



Figure 3. Author: Katrīna Kovaļuka. Image 1 from the left – original work, hand-drawn illustration. Image 2 from the left: artificial intelligence-generated interpretation.

After learning the complexities and strategies of the AI training process, 2nd year and 3rd year undergraduate students in the third semester were invited to research specific AI instruments of their interest to learn in-depth usage and **strategy** of their chosen tool. The task was to use the explored tools to create an individual artistic project. Projects resulted in a diverse range of topics and technical methods. **Students' projects revealed diverse directions – some developed speculative animation scenes, and others created visual narratives embedded with emotional tone, surrealism, or symbolic language.** Two students turned their attention to a new tool called AI videogrammetry (by *Pica Labs*) that allowed video to turn into a three-dimensional point cloud object (*Gaussian splatting technique*), later processed and animated in 3D software *Blender* (see Figure A4). One of the students also chose to use this technique in other modules during the autumn semester of 2024 and the spring semester of 2025. The specific student was amazed by the artistic appearance of scanned material, which resembled painting values while creating cinematic scenes. During the semi-structured interview and discussions, the student admitted that this discovered AI tool has become interesting in creating works of art lately. It should be noted that the student deliberately chose a more complex method of solving the course tasks in order to get closer to the desired aesthetics. During the interview, the student says:

“It is interesting to research specific techniques in depth. [...] Now I find it very interesting to combine handmade objects with digital technologies (scanning them using the Gaussian splatting technique).”



Figure 4. Author: Lūcija Dzenīte. Image 1 from the left: frame of animation.
Image 2 from the left: Sketch later turned into 3D objects.

In the spring semester of 2025, second-year and third-year students, using their gained knowledge, were tasked with creating a short film (1–10 minutes short) for the AIFF 2025 – *Runway's third annual AI Film Festival (Screenings for finalists planned to be on 5 June in NYC at Alice Tully Hall in Lincoln Center at 7 pm ET and on 12 June in Los Angeles at the Eli and Edythe Broad Stage at 6 pm PT.)*. The lecturer's task was to thematically reflect an individual or collective experience with a deeper meaning, using any AI tools. The Festival allows the use of any AI tool while allowing the combination of classical methods. Students' projects revealed diverse directions – some developed speculative animation scenes, and others created visual narratives embedded with emotional tone, surrealism, or symbolic language. Students chose different technical methods; some used their work as a base, emphasizing originality, and later manipulated and animated original drawings with AI tools. For instance, one of the 3rd-year students drew frames with a hand and used *Runway ML* to animate them. The animation was based on a student's own fictional story about a selfish artist who tries to achieve perfection by creating his self-portraits. Another student used sketches to create 3D objects using AI instruments; later, they rendered frames from different viewing angles in *Blender* and experimented with lighting and atmosphere (Figure 3 and Figure 4). Later, prepared frames were animated in *RunwayML*. The student turned the story to exploring parallel worlds, creating abstract, moving beings with consciousness.

Another interesting technique employed by one of the students involves using the felting method to create handmade objects, which are then scanned with AI tools to produce a painterly animation. Another student used her trained model and an open-access plasticine open-source *LoRA* model to create a story about social



Figure 5. Author: Betija Jakaite. Image 1 from the left – a character made with *Stable Diffusion* in *Automatic1111* interface. Image 2 from the left: trained *LoRA* character model combined with plasticine opensource *LoRA* model.

media identities (Figure 5). Further operating with the *Stable Diffusion* interface *Automatic1111*, rich, expressive scenes were created with various characters invented by the artist.

While creating an animation for the film festival, students applied their acquired knowledge of training artificial intelligence models and utilizing and combining other tools to bring their ideas to life. Within this framework, students explored ways to better control AI tools, planning the framing plot and animating them, understanding how artificial intelligence tools function, and discovering new strategies and techniques. Animation ideas differed, depending on the interests and stylistics of the students. Although not all of them utilized their trained models, it was noticeable how the students considered logical solutions to control the AI tools and achieve the desired result to the maximum extent.

The course “Speciality and Practice: Generative Technology Studies” functioned as a pedagogical experiment and a cultural inquiry into emerging forms of co-creation between humans and machines. It encouraged students to critically evaluate their role as authors and curators of their visual language.

Results and discussion

The results of the four-semester experiment, conducted during the course “Speciality and Practice: Generative Technology Studies”, reflect a diverse range of student experiences and learning outcomes. Based on qualitative observation and thematic analysis of student reflections, it became evident that participants

developed a heightened sensitivity to the influence of dataset composition on visual outputs. Students shifted their perception of AI **from a passive image generator to a co-creative partner**, capable of extending and mirroring their stylistic thinking. In critique sessions, several students referred to AI-generated “hallucinations” – unexpected or surreal outcomes – as either aesthetic surprises or training errors, depending on the context. While some students sought to achieve the cleanest, most controllable results in completing the tasks, others used AI-generated hallucinations as an artistic effect.

Several individual projects demonstrated strong stylistic fidelity. One student trained a *LoRA* model using narrative-based digital illustrations featuring emotionally expressive characters. The model produced new scenes that preserved both line quality and emotional tone. While temporal coherence remained a technical challenge, these experiments revealed how hybrid practices can provoke new modes of visual storytelling. During the discussion, the student described her trained model as her “baby” that must be “taught and understood”. The student was truly surprised by the creative results and imagery (Figure 3). She believed that the model perfectly represented her inner world.

Between 11 March 2024, and 20 March 2025, a structured image recognition test was conducted among young scholars, students, art, culture, and general education educators, with six independent semi-structured focus groups (Focus Groups: 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9). Each session involved viewing 12 slides, each presenting a pair of images: one original illustration by a student and one generated by a personalized *Style Diffusion* model trained on that student’s data. The total number of respondents was 104, aged between 11 and 67 (with an average age of 28.4). Results showed that participants correctly identified the AI-generated image in only **54.9%** of cases – effectively a chance result – indicating a limited ability to distinguish machine-generated reproductions from original artwork. **This suggests that stylistic imitation achieved through training was highly convincing and successful.** Although the highest recognition rate was observed in Focus Group 8 – 2nd-year bachelor’s students from the sub-programmes Environmental Art and Visual Communication at the Art Academy of Latvia, who achieved a correct identification rate of 67.71%, this numerical advantage is not considered statistically significant. Given the small sample size ($N = 8$) and the lack of consistent trends across other groups, the result is likely coincidental rather than indicative of a meaningful correlation. Overall, no clear relationship was observed between the ability to recognize AI-generated content and participants’ age, educational level, or affiliation with the arts, culture, or other professional sectors. Recognition performance appeared to be independent of demographic or disciplinary background.

Despite technical successes during the studies in the course “Speciality and Practice: Generative Technology Studies”, students (Focus Groups: 1, 2) faced recurring challenges, including overfitting due to limited training data, inconsistent output resolution, and sensitivity to prompts. These limitations led to valuable troubleshooting processes, during which students adopted iterative testing strategies and began to treat model training as a form of visual scripting and aesthetic inquiry.

Furthermore, emotional and cognitive responses to AI interaction were varied. Some students (Focus Groups: 1, 2) expressed frustration when the model failed to capture the nuances of their style, describing a sense of alienation. Others experienced a sense of empowerment and discovery, particularly when seeing their visual language articulated algorithmically. These responses underscore that the creative use of AI tools is not neutral – it reshapes the artist’s role, prompting reconsideration of authorship, intention, and aesthetic control. Some students expressed that the training helped define and understand their artistic style in semi-structured discussions. Most students agreed that it was interesting to watch how the algorithms interpreted their artistic style or character models. Students confirmed that although it was sometimes difficult to control the models, the training process helped them better understand AI systems and find new ways to control them. One of the students confirms that training a model (especially a person model) is like a mental process where you get to know yourself and learn how the algorithms see you. To the question of whether model training can be considered a reflective experience, one of the students answered:

“As a person who didn’t succeed at first, and... seeing that others succeeded, you look at your model differently when it succeeds. [...] Then there’s that uncanny valley moment; it’s your face, but it’s still not yours.”

Students (Focus Groups: 1, 2) describe embellished versions, frightening feelings, and dark undertones, which some perceive as valuable, while others experience them as an alienating experience.

Both groups of students are aware of shared authorship. There is talk about the moral dilemma: you don’t feel complete authorship. One of the students during the discussion commented:

“I have to choose from the options **it** offers, which one I work with next. It’s not exactly what I want, but I choose the best option.”

At the same time, both groups of students (Focus Groups: 1, 2) that were interviewed raised the question of digital art and conventional digital tools: Why should AI tools be distinguished from tools like *Adobe Photoshop*, which offer effects or other capabilities?

The findings indicate personalized AI model training can catalyse technical growth and critical reflection among emerging artists. When embedded in a supportive pedagogical framework, generative tools become not just instruments of replication but arenas for experimentation, self-definition, and conceptual exploration.

Conclusion

A. Insights from pedagogical practice

This study demonstrates that when embedded in a reflective educational framework, personalized generative AI training can be a valuable strategy for supporting emerging artists in navigating their visual language. Through empirical observation and student feedback across four semesters, it became evident that teaching machines to imitate one's artistic style also becomes a process of rediscovery and refinement of that style.

Stable Diffusion open-source latent diffusion model, (implemented in *PyTorch*) developed by *Stability AI* offers several interfaces for content generation with ready-made or one's own, improved models with their database, offering training of a person, object, image model, or training of one's handwriting, artistic style. *Stable Diffusion* models, which utilize generative artificial intelligence (*GenAI*) technologies, can generate new content, such as images, using large datasets and previously learned structures. For example, the *LoRA* training method allows you to adapt models to specific stylistic or visual tasks. However, unlike the DMN in the human brain, *Stable Diffusion* creativity is algorithmic and based on data and predetermined patterns. It cannot form intuitive associations on its own or use emotions like a human. *Stable Diffusion* models generate content by building on the structure of previous data and synthesizing it in new ways. Still, they do not have the consciousness, imagination, or self-reflection capabilities essential for human creativity. The DMN in the human brain and *Stable Diffusion* models can generate new ideas or visualizations using previously accumulated knowledge or data. A person spontaneously combines ideas, much like *Stable Diffusion* models generate new visual compositions using previous datasets. This "creative process" uses existing information to create something new in both cases, but their operating principles differ. Although *Stable Diffusion* models and the DMN in the human brain can generate new solutions, they operate on fundamentally different principles. The DMN in the human brain is associated with spontaneous, emotional, and intuitive thinking. At the same time, *Stable Diffusion* is based on data and statistical models that create a mechanical simulation of creativity. Creativity in the human brain is deeply subjective, whereas creativity generated by artificial intelligence is based on algorithms and training datasets, such as the *LoRA* model training technique.

While students (Focus Groups: 1, 2) gained practical skills in dataset preparation and AI model training during the module “Generative Technology Studies”, the greater value lay in their increased critical awareness of authorship, randomness, and control. The generative tools introduced were not treated as final solutions but as media through which students explored identity, aesthetic intention, **and the tension between automation and originality**. In this respect, AI became not a substitute for the artist but a mirror – a reflective system that required careful calibration, interpretation, and ethical engagement.

In discussions and surveys, students (Focus Groups: 1, 2) know shared authorship with AI systems and indicate that authorship depends on the type of AI applications. Students expressed the opinion that, when used correctly, AI tools can be considered auxiliary tools, just like any other digital content creation program. AI remains an imperfect but generative collaborator. Students learned to treat training as both a technical task and a curatorial and conceptual one, positioning themselves as active co-authors of algorithmic processes.

Most students who participated in the course “Speciality and Practice: Generative Technology Studies” (Focus Groups: 1, 2) see the potential for further using the AI model of style in artistic processes, sketching, and process creation. Emphasis is placed on prototyping, less on creating an autonomous work of art.

B. Broader implications for AI in art education

The research also highlights a broader need within art education to incorporate AI literacy – not only in terms of software use, but also in developing the philosophical, ethical, and cognitive understanding necessary to engage with intelligent systems critically. This entails integrating AI-related content directly into both existing and newly developed study modules across higher education institutions.

Surveys conducted among students (Focus Groups 3 and 5), who were familiar with textual AI tools (e.g., *ChatGPT*) but unfamiliar with AI model training and its creative potential, revealed a narrower conceptualization of artificial intelligence. Their responses reflected limited awareness of how generative AI can be adapted for personalized or stylistic output. Interestingly, a notable divergence in attitudes emerged between the two groups. Bachelor’s students from the Latvian Academy of Culture (Focus Group 3), surveyed prior to participating in the course “Introduction to AI Tools for Creative Industries”, generally held more open and optimistic views toward AI’s potential in artistic fields. Conversely, master’s students at the Art Academy of Latvia, who also had no experience with training AI models, or other more in-depth knowledge (Focus Group 5), despite their higher proficiency, expressed more cautious, critical, and sometimes sceptical positions, particularly concerning the role of AI in artistic authorship and cultural production. Furthermore, the comparison between

multiple groups, ranging from general education participants to postgraduate art students, revealed that neither age nor professional background alone determines AI recognition accuracy or openness to its integration in creative practice. Instead, the findings suggest that structured exposure to AI tools within a critical pedagogical framework plays a crucial role in shaping understanding and engagement.

In contrast, students from Focus Groups 1 and 2, who had hands-on experience training AI models, demonstrated deeper insight and more nuanced critical thinking, particularly regarding authorship, the interpretation of their individual style, “artistic handwriting”, and the potential for optimizing creative processes through AI tools.

By integrating creative AI tools and critical thinking into the study process, students can develop a nuanced understanding of the potential and limitations of these technologies. This ensures emerging artists are tool users and informed, adaptive thinkers in a rapidly evolving cultural and technological environment. As generative technologies continue to grow, such literacy becomes essential for sustaining artistic autonomy.

Ultimately, this study suggests that AI can enrich creative practices when thoughtfully implemented by provoking questions about **representation, authorship, and meaning**. Rather than replacing creativity, it can extend it – offering new frames to see, question, and shape artistic futures. Students (Focus Groups: 1, 2) confirm that working with AI tools requires cognitive effort to control the system. For some students, creating art by hand can be more straightforward than training and using AI models. Here, we can link the idea of meta-cognitive abilities to stimulate and develop our cognitive abilities, enabling us to work skilfully with artificial intelligence tools.

Acknowledgments

This research is funded by the project “Cultural and Creative Ecosystem of Latvia as a Resource of Resilience and Sustainability” / CERS (No. VPP-MM-LKRVA-2023/1-0001) (2023–2026) and Culture Capital Foundation (KKF).



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Appendix

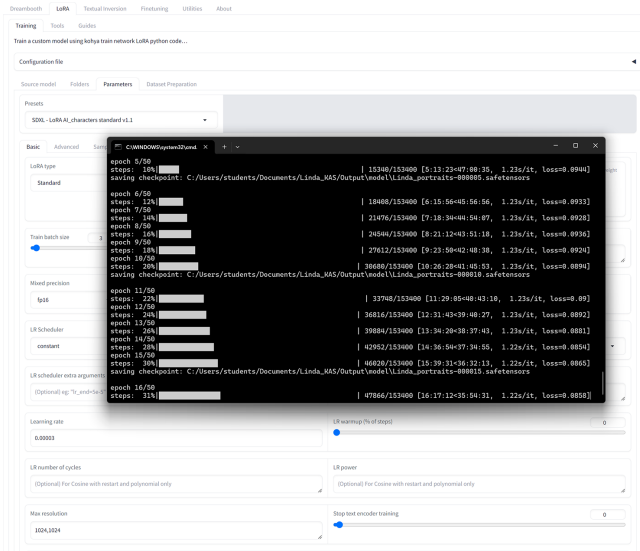


Figure A1. Training process in the *Kohya* interface using the *Stable Diffusion XL* base model. This figure illustrates the workflow of training a personalized *LoRA* (*Low-Rank Adaptation*) model, based on a dataset of student-created artworks.

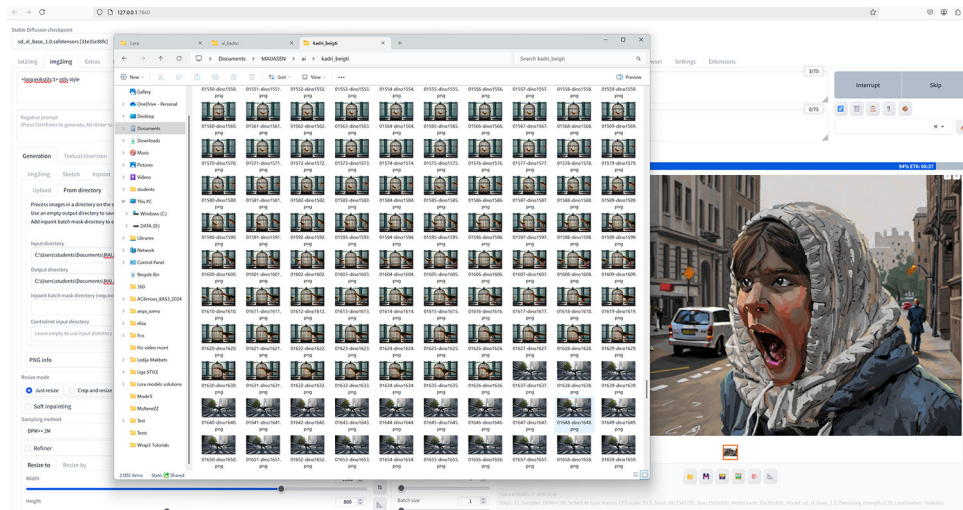


Figure A2. Example of the *Automatic111* interface – frame-by-frame video processing using the Batch animation option. This figure illustrates the use of the *Automatic111 Stable Diffusion* interface for transforming video sequences into a consistent artistic style through batch processing. The workflow involves importing an input directory of sequential video frames (shown in the file explorer window), applying a selected *LoRA* model and diffusion parameters, and exporting the processed frames in an output directory.

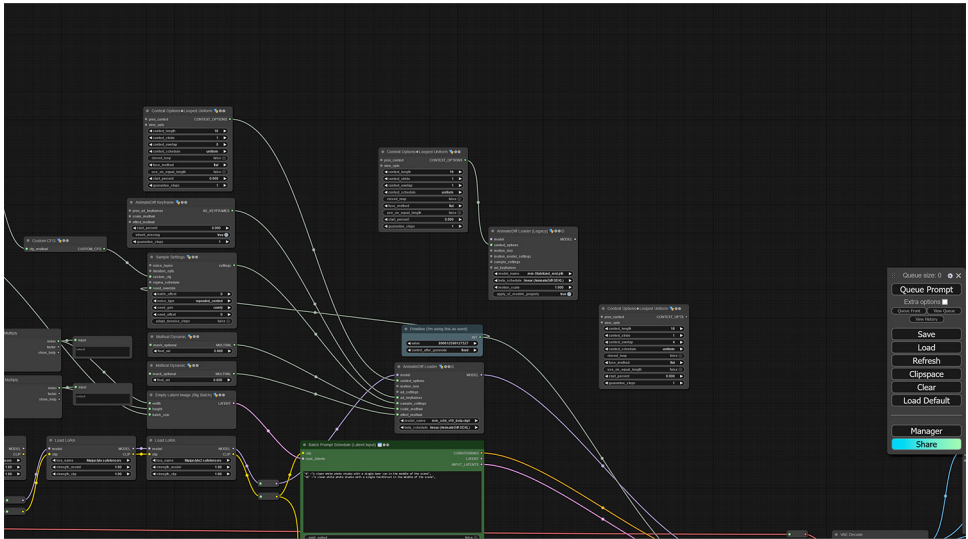


Figure A3. Example of an alternative interface – *ComfyUI* workflow. This figure demonstrates the use of the *ComfyUI* node-based interface for controlling and customizing generative processes in Stable Diffusion. Unlike text-prompt-driven environments such as *Automatic1111*, *ComfyUI* allows users to build complex visual pipelines by connecting modular nodes that define prompts, *LoRA* models, latent image initialization, and sampling parameters.



Figure A4. Gaussian splatting technique – animation still by Ance Dalmane, 2024. This figure presents a frame from an experimental animation created by student Ance Dalmane using the Gaussian splatting technique. The method transforms video material into a three-dimensional point cloud structure, where spatial information is represented through dense clusters of “splats” (2D Gaussian primitives).

DEALING WITH AI IMAGE GENERATORS IN THE DESIGN STUDY PROCESS

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Abstract

The authors of this article pay particular attention to attitudes toward AI image generation capabilities and their relevance to the outcome of the design study process. This study seeks to investigate how AI can be used in a goal-oriented collaborative way to enhance the study process for future graphic and interior designers. The research question is: What are the key prerequisites for the involvement of AI in the study process for future designers? Data were collected using structured electronic e-mail expert interviews (N1 = 4) and two student surveys (N2a = 87, N2b = 64; one sample, two different times). The researchers use a mixed-method research design with case study features and conclude that design education should provide an opportunity to familiarize oneself with the possibilities of using AI tools sufficiently comprehensively, so that designers can compete in the labour market in their professional lives. Design value criteria are important for evaluation of variously created images and the use of AI tools to their advantage. AI involvement should follow when students have mastered the basics of professional activity and visual art. Considering that several

Culture Crossroads

Volume 33, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol33.553>

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ISSN 2500-9974



students completely reject the use of AI, special attention should be paid to solving motivation problems. Future research should develop and explore the best methods and forms for integrating AI into the design study process.

Keywords: *attitude toward AI, collaboration with AI, design education, image generation.*

Introduction

AI is becoming inevitable in the studies of future designers and teachers of design and technology. Educators should change teaching methodologies, develop new tasks and assessment criteria, define the boundaries between permitted and unauthorized use of AI, and seek opportunities for purposeful and effective engagement and collaboration. Although this example originates from Latvia, a significant contribution comes from the latest scientific theory, which provides fundamental ideas and understanding of the international comparability of design studies and the labour market, thus broadening the study's relevance beyond a local case study to engage a wider audience.

The use of AI in both the creative process and education in general is an integral part of the process, and there is reason to believe that the benefits can be significant as the combination of pedagogy and AI provides the opportunity to broaden the informational possibilities for tasks traditionally associated with creativity, such as art, design, and entrepreneurship. In design studies, communication and empathic conversational dynamics between students and between students and AI help explore the conceptual knowledge space and foster creativity capacity [Lim et al. 2023].

This study aims to investigate how AI can be used in a goal-oriented collaborative way to enhance the study process for future designers. Accordingly, the research question is: What are the key prerequisites for the involvement of AI in the study process of future designers? Previous research has shown that further study and active involvement of educators are needed to promote the purposeful and productive use of the creative potential of human-technology interactions in education [Vartiainen et al. 2023].

It is important to recognize that human interactions involve context-specific justifications for actions or decisions. In contrast, although integrated into social structures, AI systems primarily rely on algorithms and cannot offer explanations for step-by-step decision-making processes. It can be argued that the explainability of AI systems is at the intersection of technology and human reasoning. While the two are socially connected, the search for solutions in different socio-organizational contexts risks yielding technological solutions that prove ineffective and even potentially harmful [Ehsan et al. 2021].

Theoretical considerations

AI differs from other digital technologies in that its use can significantly reduce the cost and time required for design processes and solutions, so a new strategy needs to be developed in design education [Dehouche and Dehouche 2023; Tang et al. 2022].

The decision-making process inevitably raises the question of who owns the copyright of works created with AI involvement and how originality can be determined. Creativity and originality are directly related to the author's personality and the action taken by the viewer but cannot be defined as an intrinsic property of an object or as a property determined by information theory [Sarkar 2023]. In the creative industries, AI will be most advantageous when created to enhance human creativity rather than replace it [Anantrasrichai and Bull 2022]. While AI tools can assist artists in the formative stages of the idea-testing and art-making process, they cannot replace human creativity [Hutson and Lang 2023].

It is important to recognize that AI cannot create something based on fundamentally new principles or anything not found in the data used to train it [Hughes et al. 2021]. AI systems can create 'new' images (in the sense that the image in question did not exist before), but these are still statistical mergers of existing images. They do not allow for conceptual innovation. It can even be argued that the models are based on a dataset derived from human-made art and are degrading creativity [McCormack et al. 2023]. Critical thinking, fact-checking, and comprehension skills are essential for using AI tools in learning environments [Fathoni 2023; Jauhiainen and Guerra 2023]. Thus, when evaluating human-AI co-creations, more attention should be paid to emotional communication than formal features and semantic relevance [Lyu et al. 2022]. For example, AI cannot give emotion to a work of art or create imaginative details unique to a human work [Hutson and Lang 2023].

However, as several studies have highlighted, the focus in design and art education should be on the creative decision-making process, the idea, and its rationale, not just the final product, as well as the phases of the creative process [Fathoni 2023], as, for example, generative AI imaging can only promote students' critical reflection if it is consciously guided by educators [Vartiainen et al. 2023]. Research has shown differences in how AI tools are used and results evaluated by those with previous experience and education in art and design and those without such experience [Lyu et al. 2022]. At the same time, it should be stressed that higher input image quality, more diverse shortcuts, and faster modification modes are needed to develop AI image-generation tools and increase user satisfaction [Xu et al. 2023], while design companies should take care of educating their employees, as people with higher AI tool literacy have more positive attitudes toward using these tools in their professional work [Du et al. 2023].

Looking at the possibilities and limitations of human-AI tool collaboration, AI facilitates the formation of co-creation networks and provides a new way to foster imagination and creativity [Vartiainen and Tedre 2023]. The involvement of AI systems can also be seen as an extension of human cognitive activity with the potential to enhance and support our creativity [Oppenlaender 2022]. At the same time, increased interaction and engagement with co-creative systems may influence our behaviour, language, knowledge, and skills. Continuous learning and adaptation are necessary to facilitate people's interaction with generative AI in educational and work settings, as well as to update their skills as AI continues to reshape our daily experiences [Fui-Hoon Nah et al. 2023].

As a result of continuous learning and adaptation, AI in education has undergone several paradigm shifts in its short history, reflecting changes in understanding and attitudes toward human interaction with generative AI in education. By linking this process of change to existing theories of education and learning (behaviorism, cognitivism, social constructivism, and connectivism), three paradigms can be identified: "AI-directed, learner-as-recipient, AI-supported, learner-as-collaborator and AI-empowered, learner-as-leader" [Ouyang, Jiao 2021].

Such insights raise the question of how to perceive the AI involved in communication – as a tool, as a subjective object (illusory partner), or as a quasi-object (imaginary partner) whose generated result offers an obviously flawed and even illogical solution (thought-provoking feedback to design ideas). This interactive innovation can provide new ideas for AI-driven design experiences in everyday life and further contribute to deploying creativity-enabled tools in real-life applications. It is important to recognize that the AI 'error' provides a new perspective that differs from human judgment. This perspective challenges the notion that AI 'error' should be avoided and opens opportunities to reassess how AI 'error' can demonstrate its design value. Rather than pushing AI technology to the altar, it is essential to maintain a high degree of critical thinking in the unstoppable process of AI evolution [Liu and Chilton 2022].

Methodology

This study uses expert interviews as a qualitative research method and a student questionnaire in a mixed-method research design with case study features. Students' responses and qualitative data from the expert interviews were analysed to explore students' and experts' experiences and views on using AI in image generation, including the process of engaging with AI image-generation tools and the attitudes they evoke. The research is descriptive, capturing the experts' experiences, which are then compared with findings from theory. The student survey questions were based on the theory researched and practical tasks carried out by the students in the spring

semester of 2024. The data were used to extend and complement the overview of the current situation and set the preconditions for the future development of the problem under study.

The overall research period was from January to December 2024, while the data collection from students and experts took place from April to June. The procedure involved: 1) researching the theoretical background; 2) developing and testing interview and questionnaire questions; 3) obtaining the opinion of the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Latvia; 4) the first student survey; 5) interviews with experts; 6) developing tasks using AI for image creation; 7) validating the tasks in relevant study courses; 8) the second student survey; 9) data processing and analysis.

Factors such as the expert's field of activity and experience with AI tools were considered when selecting experts.

Rūta Briede (E1) is an illustrator, cartoonist, scenographer, puppet show designer, and author of children's books. She is an assistant professor at the Latvian Art Academy for BA and MA programmes and art editor of the publishing house *Liels un mazs (Big and Small)*, which received the International Bologna Children's Book Fair Award in the category *Best Publisher of Children's Books in Europe* in 2022.

Mārtiņš Linde (E2) is a graphic designer who helps people gain a competitive advantage in the connected world with brand strategy, design consultancy, and graphic design. He is a teacher and coach for graphic design and visual editing at the Latvian Academy of Culture and the Latvian College of Culture.

Kristīne Kampmane (E3) holds a Master of Science in Engineering degree. She works as a researcher at the Educational Research Institute of the University of Latvia. Kampmane's research interests are related to students' non-cognitive skills, digital skills, and digital tools that help students achieve better results. During her Master's studies, Kampmane acquired theoretical knowledge in AI and is currently actively improving her knowledge of using AI in education and research.

Miķelis Baštiks (E4) is a graphic designer, typographer, and one of the founders of the design studio *Asketic*. This studio approaches business branding services that combine strategy with creativity and beautiful aesthetics with tactical execution to drive business success.

The expert experience data were collected using structured e-mail interviews [Creswell and Guetterman 2019: 227]. Informed consent was obtained from all experts interviewed. Each expert was assigned a code (E1–E4). Seven open-ended questions were used to elicit experts' views on collaboration with AI in design and education: 1) Where does AI fit into the design ecosystem? 2) What kind of collaboration with AI should be encouraged in the study process? 3) What can be gained by using AI? 4) What is (or could be) lost by not controlling the use of AI in the study process? 5) What is your attitude toward AI, and how would you

formulate the presence of AI in your work? 6) How can individuality be maintained, and what is the place and role of originality in graphic design? 7) Do you have any conclusions (or recommendations) for students about the experience of using AI in their creative work?

The analysis of the expert interviews considered Castañer and Oliveira's three dimensions of organizations' collaboration: attitude, behaviour, and outcome [Castañer and Oliveira 2020]. These can also be applied to the collaboration of designers (including future designers and teachers) with AI. The interview analysis employed a deductive approach to qualitative content analysis [Pipere 2021], recording the content items related to the three characteristics of collaboration with AI (attitude, behavior/action, and outcome) in a matrix. Content items were reviewed, analysed, and grouped several times.

The student surveys were developed using Google Forms, and the introductory part included the participants giving their informed consent. The surveys were managed twice – at the beginning of the study and after the practical tasks with AI. The surveys were administered to students of the professional bachelor's study programmes *Art* (prospective graphic and interior designers) and *Teacher* (prospective design and technology teachers) at the University of Latvia.

This paper examines participants' responses to a single open-ended question from the initial survey related to the use of AI in image generation. It then analyses the respondents' answers to nine questions from the second survey on students' experiences and attitudes toward AI tools (five questions) and planning future activities with AI (four questions). Two questions used a Likert-type scale, five were multiple-choice, and in the last open-ended question, respondents were free to express their opinions on AI image-generation tools. The responses to the open-ended questions in both questionnaires were analysed using the inductive approach of qualitative content analysis, a process that involves open coding, category construction, clustering, and generalization [Pipere 2021: 404]. The responses to the eight multiple-choice questions from the second questionnaire were analysed quantitatively.

This study is exploratory and the survey is non-representative.

Results

First, data from the expert interviews were collected and grouped according to the three dimensions of collaboration.

1. Attitude toward cooperation with AI. The experts generally have a positive view of controlled collaboration with AI in design education. According to the experts, a person (designer) needs to define values and answer the question of what can be gained by using AI. It is crucial to prioritize the role of human professionals

and recognize that AI should not replace critical thinking and education. AI is an assistant, a tool that can generate ideas or solutions. E1 compares AI to a colleague who is open to sharing ideas but recommends that AI should be deliberately used sparingly and more for reproductive activities. Staying informed about the rapid advancements in AI is crucial. In design education, it is essential to start by mastering professional skills to truly understand them. Once the fundamentals are well-established, AI can be effectively and professionally utilized. In addition, E3 warns of extreme situations where electricity is unavailable; the designer must be able to work professionally without technology. Overall, AI can be used at all stages of the design process when employed intelligently. Universities should not ignore AI to avoid becoming irrelevant and uninteresting for young people (E2). These findings are consistent with the conclusions of Upol Ehsan and Jeongki Lim and their colleagues' publications and are evidence that the expert opinion generally aligns with global views [Ehsan et al. 2021; Lim et al. 2023].

2. Behaviour/action when dealing with AI. The experts recommend working with AI creatively and thoughtfully (“Experiment and look for applications where AI is useful. [...] AI tools are just tools, like a knife, which we should use responsibly, wisely, and for good purposes”, E2). It is important to offer students tasks that promote critical thinking and decision-making in collaboration with AI (E2). Students should practice using different AI tools (E2–E4). These expert opinions align with the ideas expressed by Vivian Liu and Lydia B. Chilton [e.g., Liu and Chilton 2022].

3. Outcome of cooperation with AI. The experts view the outcome of AI cooperation in two ways: controlled or uncontrolled. The outcome of controlled cooperation is essential in the study process. The experts emphasize that the outcome can be assessed in two ways – in terms of student growth (i.e., process) and in terms of the design solution or product (i.e., result). In terms of growth, the student should acquire a deeper understanding of AI, including the processes of building AI tools in the field, how these tools work (E3), and how AI material is produced (E4). The result would be an educated student with the skills to use AI tools purposefully and intelligently at all stages of the design process.

The experts predict that standardized design products will become more common, cheaper, and more accessible with AI. The value of original works will increase (E4). AI tools can generate many ideas to choose from, produce good or even high-quality results quickly, and save time. E1 points out that AI tools can produce unexpected results, including humorous and funny outcomes. The experts also provide concrete examples of what can be achieved with AI, such as cutting objects out of the background, automatically adding subtitles to videos (E2), and processing photographs (E3). At the same time, the creation of relatively new works

is based on the work of existing authors (E4). New design disciplines can be created as a result of collaboration with AI (E4).

Conversely, uncontrolled interaction with AI can cause people to lose their ability to think (E3), their understanding of how things work, and their understanding of techniques and performances (E4). People may also lose the ability to create and experience creative torment (E1). In addition, they may lose the ability to use different tools to solve the same problem (E3). Finally, E2 warns of potential conflicts related to copyright, plagiarism, and fraudulent activities. These expert opinions on the outcome of cooperation with AI highlight human reasoning, creative potential, and the overall importance of originality in future design education quality criteria [Ehsan et al. 2021, Vartiainen et al. 2023, Fathoni 2023, Hutson and Lang 2023].

Following the expert interviews, data were collected from student surveys. Eighty-seven respondents answered the first survey, of whom the majority (81.6%) were aged 18–22. Most respondents were first- and second-year students (41.4% and 46.0%, respectively). Sixty-four respondents took part in the second survey, of whom 91.0% were in the 18–22 age group. 58.0% of the students were in their first year of studies, and 42.0% were in their second year.

First, the responses to the eight multiple-choice questions (with single-select (S) and multi-select (M) answer options) in the second questionnaire were collected and analysed quantitatively.

Question 1 (S). The fact that AI image-generation tools offer many ideas to choose from makes the design process easier for exactly half (50.0%) of the respondents, has no impact on the process for 41.0% of the respondents, and makes the process more difficult for 9.0% of the respondents.

Question 2 (M). When a student creates multiple images with AI, several factors could make it difficult to decide on one of the versions in the subsequent design process: the vagueness of the author's initial idea, a vague vision of the result, an unclear objective, and the lack of defined evaluation criteria. Given the rise of AI tools in the field of design, it is crucial to educate individuals on how to critically evaluate images created by AI. This is essential not just in design education but across all educational levels and disciplines. Accordingly, the students were asked, *What do you think helps to critically evaluate images generated by AI image-generation tools?* Respondents indicated areas where background knowledge would be useful (see Figure 1). Previous experience with various computer graphics and image processing software (73.4%), knowledge of composition (67.2%), and drawing and painting skills (60.9%) were noted as most important, followed by knowledge of cultural and art history (34.4%) and experience in photography (31.3%).

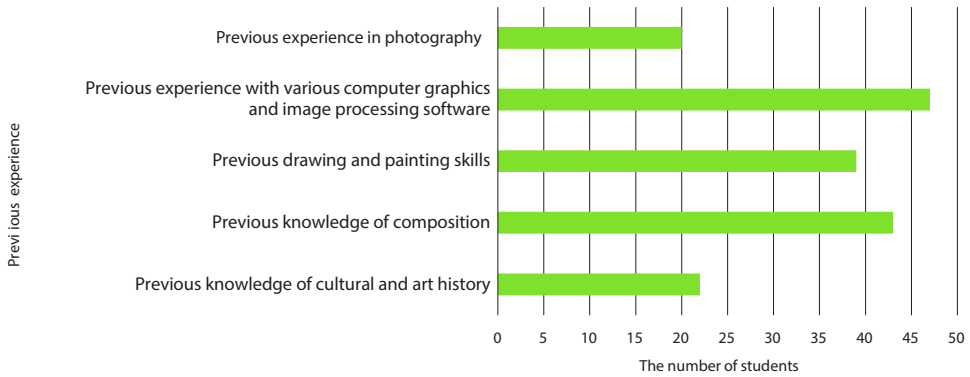


Figure 1. Respondents' answers to the question *What do you think helps to critically evaluate images generated by AI image-generation tools?*

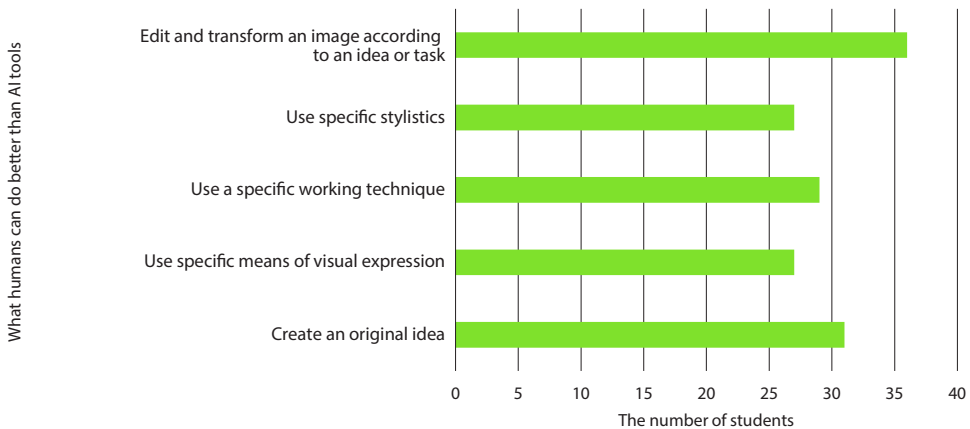


Figure 2. Respondents' answers to the question *What can you do better than AI image generation tools?*

Question 3 (M). When asked what they think humans can do better than AI tools, most students (56.3%) answered “Edit and transform an image according to an idea or task”. This points to the current impossibility of editing specific parameters in the extracted images (this is a technical aspect that is likely to be solved shortly). This response was followed by “Create an original idea” (48.4%), “Use a specific working technique” (45.3%), “Use specific stylistics” (42.2%), and “Use specific means of visual expression” (42.2%). This shows that more than half of the respondents consider AI-generated images original and distinctive enough to compete with designer-generated images (see Figure 2).

Question 4 (M). Answers to the question *What do you think are the current shortcomings of AI image-generation tools?* best outline the students' communication with AI and highlight the shortcomings of this communication (Figure 3).

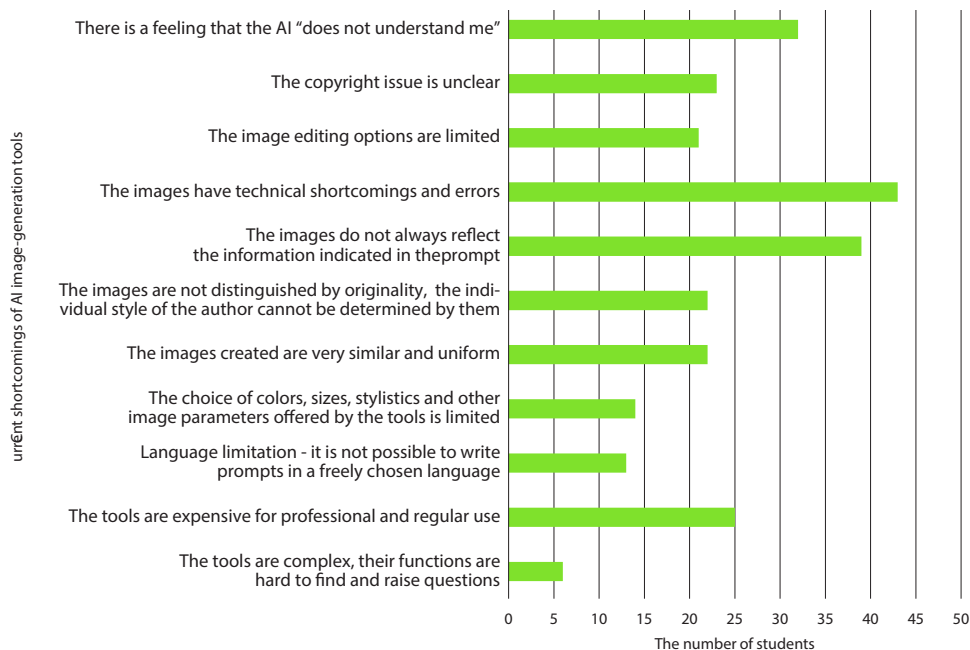


Figure 3. Respondents' answers to the question *What do you think are the current shortcomings of AI image-generation tools?*

The technical shortcomings of the images produced by AI are highlighted first (67.2%), followed by the fact that images do not always reflect the information provided by the prompt (60.9%). Here, a question might arise about the students' knowledge and skills in writing prompts according to the design of the AI tools. The third most popular answer ("I feel that the AI does not understand me", 50.0%) also shows that there are still many questions and uncertainties in the communication between a human (in this case, a future design professional) and the AI tool. These can probably only be addressed through training, in parallel with theoretical background knowledge about AI. Significantly, more than a third of respondents (35.9%) are unclear about copyright issues, indicating that legal and ethical issues are also relevant.

Question 5 (M). Answers to the question *What other knowledge and skills would you need to work with AI image-generation tools?* show the directions in which students see opportunities to improve their skills with AI. Almost equal numbers of responses indicate that students would like to improve their understanding of the design and functions of AI image-generation tools (48.4%), their understanding of the ethical use of these tools and image copyright (48.4%), and their prompt formulation skills (50.0%). Around a third of students (35.9%) would like to learn more about image acquisition and editing skills using the different features of AI tools.

Question 6 (S, Likert-type scale). Furthermore, 60.9% of respondents strongly or somewhat agree that a specific course on working with AI should be included in the study program. Worryingly, 26.6% somewhat disagree with the need for such a course, while 12.5% strongly disagree.

Question 7 (S, Likert-type scale). A similar situation emerges in the answers concerning whether students see an opportunity to use AI tools in their future professional activities: 68.8% see such an opportunity, 23.4% do not quite see it, and 7.8% definitely do not see it. The number of affirmative answers is higher than in the previous question on the need for a study course. This means that students are aware of the impact of AI tools on the design field, even if they do not want to study it as part of their design education.

Question 8 (S). When presented with AI image-generation tools, 45.3% of respondents perceive them as communication tools in the creative process to help develop ideas, 26.6% as tools for technical tasks, 20.3% as a threat to creative professions, and 7.8% as entertainment tools only.

The qualitative analysis was based on responses to an **optional open-ended question** (“On the use of artificial intelligence in image creation, I can add that...”) from both the first and second surveys that sought students’ views on AI tools. In total, 47 respondents wanted to add something to the open-ended question (respondents to the first survey were coded SF1–SF28, and respondents to the second survey were coded SS1–SS19).

Overall, opinions are mixed, ranging from full support for AI tools to complete denial and scepticism about using them in design and art. Summarizing and generalizing respondents’ views, three main categories (C) can be identified. It should be noted that several respondents’ answers fell into more than one category.

- AI image-generation tools threaten creative professions and do not foster creativity (C1)
- AI image-generation tools are professionally useful in design (C2)
- AI image-generation tools are unnecessary in art and design and do not deliver the expected results (C3)

(1) AI tools threaten creative professions and do not foster creativity (C1). Several students expressed the view that AI threatens creative professions, including design (“Every month, I think about whether I should continue my studies as a graphic designer, fearing that AI will significantly reduce the number of jobs in this position in the future”, SS 19).

Alongside this, students see AI tools as not fostering imagination, creative thinking, and action (“I don’t like that it is used to create ‘original images’ that people show as their own”, SS4; “It would make the job easier, and perhaps expand

the possibilities, but they would no longer be original ideas”, SF3; “AI offers a lot of possibilities, but it limits, stops people’s ingenuity and imagination”, SF4).

(2) AI tools are professionally useful in design (C2). Students consider the use of AI tools to be useful in the professional activities of designers. They are already being used, and students are aware that more could be used in the future (“But I think it would be good for every designer to know how to use these tools”, SF5). Students also pointed out specific techniques that can be used with AI, e.g., it can be used to create and blend details (SF16) or create realistic images (SF10). Students emphasize that AI is useful when used at certain stages (“It can be useful if used correctly and not used fully for all your work, SF18; It is a good way to enhance your work, but I would not use a generated work as a final work because it is difficult to achieve what you want using AI alone”, S24). However, students who expressed the attitude that AI is useful pointed out that AI cannot replace designers professionally. Students are aware that they need to learn to use AI (“Using AI requires specific skills, SF21; I want to learn how to work with several types of AI to use in my work”, SS5).

There are conflicting answers about time consumption when working with AI image-generation tools. Some students note that using AI saves time (“It is a quick and easy way to generate the material you need for your own or others’ needs”, SF17), while others feel that it takes a long time to get a result (“It takes quite a long time for the AI to understand what I want and produce an image that looks a bit like it”, SS6).

This category also includes the views of students who do not currently view AI tools very positively but recognize that they will be a necessity in the future. Students see that AI tools still have room to grow and develop (SF26) and that the process of working with AI is interesting, while the ideas and results generated by AI can be unusual. Some students, therefore, see the application of AI in entertainment rather than in professional activities (“Everything is acceptable and interesting as long as it is entertainment, SF12; AI is interesting, but I think artists can do without it just fine”, SF6). There is also the view that it is important not to use AI often (SS 14).

(3) AI tools are unnecessary in art and design and do not deliver the expected results (C3). Students who answered that AI is unnecessary believe that the results produced by AI are not professionally valuable (“Using AI does not guarantee the intended result”, SS3; “AI cannot be considered as art, producing poor quality images is not a special skill. I do not use AI”, SS17). Declining to use AI is also related to the fact that some students enjoy creating and drawing ideas (“I do not see the point of it because I draw to create my ideas myself. Besides, I like the process of drawing”, SS17; “I prefer to create my own work”, SS15). In response to the open-ended question, several students also expressed concern about copyright infringement (“Copyright may be infringed by describing other authors’ styles and publishing without attribution, permission”, SF28; “I do not support it if it is done by ‘stealing’

real drawings or artworks and if it starts to replace the need for human drawn/created drawings”, SF13).

When coding the experts’ interviews, three interactional dimensions were revealed: attitude, behaviour, and outcome. Additionally, theoretical studies prove that internationally comparable common sets of research problems have already been detected in design education. Grouping the student survey results showed that they correspond to the same dimensions. The first category (C1) corresponds to the attitude dimension, which shows students’ concerns, fears, caution, and feelings of threat. The second category (C2) – behaviour – reflects the students’ decision to deal with AI image generators. This category includes the responses of students who are already working with AI or show interest in working with AI in the future and understand the need for education in this field. The third category (C3) refers to the outcome – students expressed their opinion on the results obtained in cooperation with AI. It should be noted that some of the responses in C2 also correspond to the outcome dimension, as they indicate the positive benefits of working with AI image generators.

Discussion

The responses of design students and experts were reviewed and compared to answer the research question: What are the key prerequisites for the involvement of AI in the study process of future designers? Both experts and a large number of students believe that it is necessary to include explanations of how AI tools work and aspects of their use in the studies of future designers. This confirms the finding of previous studies that designers need an understanding of AI [e.g., Du et al. 2023]. However, the fact that some students believe the inclusion of AI in design education is unacceptable cannot be ignored.

The experts warned that there may come a moment when those who have not trained to use AI as part of a designer’s professional activities will lose out in the workplace. It is important to recognize the experts’ prediction that new design industries can be created in collaboration with AI, which is consistent with previous research that AI will redefine people’s lives [Fui-Hoon Nah et al. 2023]. Students’ refusal to use AI tools is probably due to their past experiences of encountering many images of poor quality and uniformity on the internet. Emerging designers emphasize the importance of human ideas and technical performance in the design process. Perhaps by introducing samples of artists using AI-generated imagery creatively and conceptually, and as technology develops, students will also be able to see the benefits of working with AI.

Design education should aim to equip students with comprehensive knowledge of AI tools that are shaping the creative industries. By framing AI as a supportive

rather than a substitutive tool, students are encouraged to approach emerging technologies with confidence rather than resistance. Moreover, it is essential to define new evaluation criteria that account for the use of AI in creative work. Educational institutions must prioritize the development of frameworks that assess the originality, intent, and conceptual strength of AI-assisted outputs. These frameworks should reinforce the central role of human creativity, positioning AI as an instrument that extends rather than replaces artistic vision.

It is important to define and assess the value of professional human work before students use AI. This was recommended by the experts and highlighted by many students, who pointed out the specific skills they know better than AI. According to experts, it is vital not to lose one's inherent ability to create. This is consistent with the notion that AI should not completely replace a creative professional [Hutson and Lang 2023]. E1 shared their experience of deliberately using AI sparingly because the inherent human ability to experience creative torment and the experience that results from it is considered a value. Similarly, SF18 said that AI should be used sparingly. However, the experts said AI can be used at all stages of the design process, although not all students see opportunities for using AI in professional activities. Nevertheless, students and experts see AI image-generating tools as both a means of communication in the creative process and tools for performing technical tasks. Responses from both students and experts suggest that unusual solutions are being assessed in their collaborations with AI, which is consistent with previous studies [e.g., Liu and Chilton 2022].

Students' responses show that they perceive AI differently. Some responses indicate that students perceive the AI tool as a subject ("I don't use it, it's kind of a distraction", SF11; "It takes quite a while for the artificial intelligence to understand what I want", SS6). This was also evident in the quantitative analysis question on the shortcomings of AI tools. Other responses show that AI is perceived as an object ("It is a TOOL that should be learned by both students and teachers. Using AI requires specific skills to master it as an auxiliary tool in one's life, not as a replacement for one's work", SF21; "There are different AI tools with different functions and problems; some tools are more advanced than others", SS13). Among the problems identified by the study participants that should be addressed are copyright and usage ethics issues, as well as the technical shortcomings of AI-generated images.

Limitations

This study is limited by the rapid development of AI image generators, as the situation was changing even while the study was being conducted, especially in terms of their technological capabilities. The results were also influenced by the fact that students had different experiences of using AI.

The inherent subjectivity of evaluating creative output is another limitation. In the absence of standardized criteria for assessing AI-generated design work, there is a risk of personal bias influencing evaluations. The lack of established benchmarks for originality, coherence, or conceptual depth in AI-generated visuals makes consistent assessment difficult.

Additionally, the findings may be influenced by the specific tools used during the study. Different AI platforms vary in terms of output quality, user control, and creative flexibility. If the study relied on a limited number of platforms, the results may not be generalizable to other AI tools or future technological developments.

Conclusion

- The possibility that designers will be able to work in complete isolation from AI in the future is quite small, therefore the process of learning AI should be included in design education. Students have to gain practical experience with AI design tools, understanding both their capabilities and limitations.
- The task of design education is to provide the opportunity to familiarize oneself with the possibilities of using AI tools in a sufficiently comprehensive way for designers to be able to compete in the labour market in their professional lives. Design education must reflect the trends of this industry, including broader case studies and applicable software.
- It is essential to create design value criteria during studies to evaluate created images and use AI tools to one's advantage. Design education must focus on setting new standards that ensure that AI tools support rather than replace the human creative process.
- AI should be used only when students have mastered the basics of professional activity and visual art – the ability to sketch, draw, create, and develop an idea on their own, critically evaluate images created with AI, and purposefully develop them according to their original idea. This is consistent not only with the opinion of the experts but also with the conclusion drawn from the study of theoretical sources that critical thinking, fact-checking, and comprehension skills are essential to using AI tools in the learning environment.
- Students' refusal to use AI tools is related to their previous experience of encountering a lot of poor-quality and uniform images on the web. AI-generated images often depict distortions, unrealistic lighting, or impossible proportions. Students need to learn to critically analyse AI outputs, detect the shortcomings and errors, and make corrections.
- Lecturers need to keep up with the development of AI, which is a challenge and imposes new responsibilities. Considering that several students completely deny the use of AI, special attention should be paid to solving motivation problems. One

way to do this is to encourage students to process the AI-generated result with their personal style and creative judgment, emphasising the importance of originality.

- Future research should develop and explore the best methods and forms for integrating AI into the design study process. By setting new, suitable design evaluation criteria, students will develop the ability to critically engage with AI-generated content, ensuring that AI is a tool for improving the achievable results.
- The obtained results are applicable not only to the educational process of future designers and design and technology teachers but also to any profession that involves working with images. Although the study was based on design education guidelines in Latvia, the results can be used in other countries. Attitudes and reactions to the introduction of AI in design include relatively universal issues.

Acknowledgment

This work was supported by the University of Latvia (grant No. ZD2010/AZ22) as part of the research project “Human, Technologies, and Quality of Education”.

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LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND TRANSLATION

PHRASEOLOGY AND PAREMIOLOGY ACROSS CULTURES AND LANGUAGES: CONCEPTUALISATIONS AND METAPHORICAL IMAGES OF LOYALTY PROVERBS

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Abstract

The article is dedicated to discussion of phraseology as a field of study, highlighting key figures and landmark works in English, Latvian, Italian, and Spanish.

Initially introduced by Charles Bally, phraseology gained prominence in the 20th century, mainly through Viktor Vinogradov, who established classifications of phraseological units based on the degree of semantic cohesion. Today, phraseology is interdisciplinary, with contributions from various fields such as folklore, anthropology, cognitive linguistics, and cultural studies.

With this theoretical background, the analysis of LOYALTY proverbs is comparative, focusing on selected case studies from four languages – English, Latvian, Italian, and Spanish – to identify recurring themes.

Comparative case studies of specific proverbs reveal universal themes and cultural insights regarding loyalty, social and mutual protection, and recognition among peers. These findings demonstrate that the use of animal metaphors, along with references to social hierarchies and supernatural beings, conveys dominant cultural values and perceptions of the world.

Studying proverbs is crucial for cultural and linguistic research, as it provides a deeper insight into language aspects through cultural conceptualisations that organise the social reality of different cultures. Moreover, this study suggests

Culture Crossroads

Volume 33, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol33.523>

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ISSN 2500-9974



that the concept of LOYALTY¹, mutual protection, and social recognition are fundamental to human social behaviour, transcending cultural and language boundaries.

Keywords: *paremiology, classification of phraseological units, cultural conceptualisations, Latvian, English, Italian and Spanish proverbs.*

Introduction

Phraseology is a branch of linguistics with a tradition dating back more than a hundred years. The Swiss linguist Charles Bally introduced the term “phraseology” (*phraséologie*) in his *Treatise on French Stylistics*. Bally’s ideas were not immediately developed further until the 1940s when Viktor Vinogradov (*Виноградов Виктор Владимирович*) took them up. This led to the creation of numerous works on Russian material. Phraseology became an internationally recognised discipline and expanding area of research in the 1970s [Bally 1909, Burger, Dobrovolskij, Kühn, Norrick 2007]. Phraseology studies different types of formulaic language, for instance, collocations, idioms, and other lexical multi-word units², including extensive research on proverbs [EUROPHRAS 2024].

Idioms can also be explored within a cognitive-linguistic framework. Andreas Langlotz addresses the complexities of idioms, emphasising their dynamic nature and the cognitive processes involved in their understanding and usage. There are two key questions: one is about cognitive processes that influence and determine how idioms are represented; and the other one is about how these processes establish the boundaries and possibilities for systematic variation of idioms in real-life communication. Idioms are framed as products of cognitive processes and cultural contexts [Langlotz 2006].

It has to be stressed that paremiology, the study of proverbs, is interdisciplinary: folklorists, linguists, literary scholars, and anthropologists have contributed to the development of its research. Andreas Buerki highlights the rapid growth and diversification of phraseological research over the past 25 years from a relatively obscure field to a vibrant and multifaceted area of linguistic inquiry. From being

¹ Mental concepts are represented by using all capital letters to distinguish them from verbal concepts and indicate that they are not just a matter of language but rather concepts that belong to the realm of human thought. This convention is commonly used in cognitive linguistics.

² See Alison Wray’s book *Formulaic Language and the Lexicon*, for numerous terms that designate phraseological units [Wray 2002: 9].

a niche interest, the field has become a diverse network, connecting many different areas with their own histories, philosophies and goals [Buerki 2020: xiii].

For centuries, scholars have explored paremiology as a subfield of phraseology, seeking to understand the nature, origins, and uses of proverbs. The history of paremiology dates back to the Sumerian cuneiform tablets, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, the Renaissance scholars, e.g., Erasmus of Rotterdam ([1466?] 1469–1536), and leading to modern folklorists like Wolfgang Mieder, a leading scholar in paremiology, Archer Taylor (1890–1973), an American folklorist, with a special interest in cultural history, literature, proverbs, and riddles, Adélékè Adéèkó, an academic who has made significant contributions to the study of proverbs and their role in African literature and culture, and Shirley Arora (1930–2021), a scholar who advanced the academic study of proverbs and folklore, particularly in the context of the Spanish-speaking world [Mieder 2004; Hrisztova-Gotthardt, Varga 2015].

In Spain, paremiological research has developed in different trajectories. A landmark in Spanish research was the founding of the journal *Paremia* by the *Asociación Cultural Independiente* in 1993. As the first Spanish journal dedicated to proverbs and proverbial expressions, *Paremia* significantly enhanced scientific exchange and became a crucial meeting point for experts in paremiology. Sevilla Muñoz's contribution to the development of proverbial studies in Spanish deserves special mention. She, together with C.A. Crida Álvarez, developed a classification which is based on the consideration of proverbs as archilexemes of short phrases and on the application of a series of criteria: genetic (origin), pragmatic, morphological, and semantic. The first major division of the proverbs is determined by their origin (known or anonymous) and their use (cultural or popular). Thus, a parable can have a known origin, but be ignored by most speakers, and have a very frequent current use, i.e., be a very popular parable [Sevilla Muñoz, Crida Álvarez 2013].

Historically, the tradition of Italian proverbs dates back to a common European cultural background, with collections documented as early as the 13th century. The Unification of Italy and the positivist school led to a scientific approach to the study of proverbs. In the 20th century, paremiological studies produced rich and functional dictionaries in Italian [Lapucci 2007; Soletti 2011].

The first researchers of Latvian phraseology were German scholars who wrote about the Latvian language because of the historical and linguistic connections between the two cultures and languages. There are writings from the 17th century, for instance, Georg Mancelius (1593–1654) *Phraseologia Lettica* [Mancelius 1638; Kessler 2018; Vanags 2024].

Kārlis Mīlenbahs (1853–1916) and Jānis Endzelīns (1873–1961) created the *Dictionary of the Latvian Language*. It is considered a landmark work in Latvian linguistics and culture, comparable to Samuel Johnson's dictionary for the English

language [Endzelīns 1923–1932; Endzelīns, Vanags 1934–1946; Kļaviņa 2023; Druvieta 2024]. The dictionary also included a large stock of Latvian phraseology, including numerous proverbs, which was a significant contribution to the formation of the Latvian phraseological system [Endzelīns 1923–1932; Endzelīns, Hauzenberga 1934–1946; Kļaviņa 2011; MEV 2000–2024].

Latvian phraseology as an important field of academic study was developed by Alīse Laua (1914–1994) by her comprehensive study and analysis of Latvian idioms and phraseological units, aiming to identify the unique characteristics and origins of Latvian phraseology. Her work has been instrumental in preserving and promoting the understanding of Latvian phraseological heritage, which is an essential aspect of the country's linguistic and cultural identity [Laua 1992; Laua, Ezeriņa, Veinberga [2000] 2017; Urbanoviča 2014].

Theoretical framework

In terms of proverbs research theoretical framework, not only linguistic and semantic aspects are considered but also cultural phenomena in figurative language, and cultural conceptualisations.

To investigate conceptual-cognitive and cross-cultural aspects, through the lens of proverbs, a complex approach is needed to provide a comprehensive analysis and give the insight of the proverbs' meaning.

Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen suggest that for the understanding of the figurative language, it is essential to uncover the types of knowledge that create links between the underlying mental image and the actual meaning of figurative units. Empirical data from various languages indicate that many significant properties of figurative language can only be explained through specific conceptual structures, referred to as cultural knowledge [Dobrovol'skij, Piirainen 2022].

The approach proposed by Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen, termed Conventional Figurative Language Theory, is cognitive, as it uses different types of knowledge to explain linguistic phenomena. The theory's main task is to explain the meanings and functions of expressions in relation to other conceptual and semiotic phenomena, rather than explaining specific expressions. The theory posits that the image component, a specific conceptual structure linking the lexical structure to the actual meaning of a figurative unit, is crucial to its content plane. The underlying mental image is stable and intersubjective to some extent, for instance, the proverbs: LV *putns³ putnam aci ārā neknābs*, EN *birds of a feather flock (fly) together*, IT *gli uccelli si appaiano con loro pari*, and ES *todas las aves con sus pares*, the proverb idea

³ The bold font is used to highlight the metaphorical image of the proverb.

is mapped on the metaphorical image of the bird. Despite the fact that these proverbs are semantically different, they are united by the same conceptual structure.

Considering cultural phenomena is crucial when describing figurative language from a cross-linguistic perspective. Different languages use different “literal” material to denote a concept figuratively, and sometimes reinterpret the same material in varied ways, leading to different meanings for similar figurative expressions. There are variations, stemming from cross-cultural differences; however, the cognitive principles are universal. Culture characterises groups of people who share a social, historical, and physical environment, enabling them to interpret experiences homogeneously. Culture is seen as a set of shared understandings within these groups, aligning with contemporary anthropological thought. Although this definition does not cover all cultural artefacts and practices, it emphasises the shared understandings that are essential to these cultures [Kövecses 2005].

Classification of phraseological units

According to Viktor Vinogradov’s classification, phraseological units can be divided into three main groups based on the degree of semantic cohesion between the components. There are three main groups: 1) **phraseological fusions**⁴ are completely non-motivated word groups; the meaning of the whole cannot be deduced from the meanings of the individual components; they are highly idiomatic and have fixed structure, for instance, to die: LV *doties aizsaulē*, EN *to join the choir of angels*, IT *andare all’altro mondo*, ES *irse al otro mundo*, 2) **phraseological unities** are partially motivated word groups; their meaning can be guessed from the metaphorical meaning of the whole unit; they have a relatively high degree of stability in the lexical components, for instance, to become confused, leading to irrational behaviour: LV *zaudēt galvu*, EN *to lose one’s head*, IT *perdere la testa*, ES *perder la cabeza*, and 3) **phraseological combinations** are fully motivated word groups; their meanings are easily deduced from the meanings of the components; one component is used in its literal meaning, while the other one is used metaphorically, for instance: LV *nākt pie varas*, EN *to come to power*, IT *salire al potere*, ES *llegar al poder*. This classification remains one of the most influential and widely applied approaches to categorising phraseological units in linguistics [Vinogradov 1947; Laua 1992; Urbanoviča 2014; Lisciandro 2020; Sevilla Muñoz, Crida Álvarez 2013].

According to different studies, proverbs are part of research objects of phraseology research, and they correspond to Vinogradov’s classification of phraseological fusions as they are highly idiomatic and have fixed structure.

⁴ There are also other terms in English that describe the same groups: **pure idioms**, **figurative idioms** and **restricted collocations** [Pawley 2007: 10].

Case studies

The objective of this research is to systematically compare and analyse proverbs relating to loyalty across Latvian, English, Italian, and Spanish, to identify the main conceptual themes and cultural insights that underlie phraseological expressions in each language. The empirical steps undertaken include: selecting proverbs with specific elements from each language, classifying them according to established types of phraseological units, and examining their metaphorical images and cultural conceptualisations through a cross-cultural analysis. The methodology draws from conceptual metaphor theory and paremiology, employing cognitive-linguistic frameworks and classification schemes such as Vinogradov's, to ensure methodological transparency and reliability. This approach allows for both qualitative and comparative examination of the collected material, leading to a deeper understanding of how cultural and linguistic factors may shape the expression of loyalty in different languages and cultures.

We adopt a practical approach by starting our analysis of proverbs across different cultures and languages with our mother tongue. Elza Kokare's extensive research on Latvian proverbs has revealed the Latvian language being rich in proverbs that conceptualise the idea expressed by the English proverb "birds of a feather flock together," meaning that members of the same group or species will not harm one another, showing a sense of solidarity or mutual protection among peers [Kokare 1980; Kokare 1988].

The analysis of proverbs across Latvian, English, Italian, and Spanish reveals several key themes and cultural insights regarding LOYALTY and social dynamics⁵. There are three conceptual bases: 1) group identity and LOYALTY, 2) mutual protection, and 3) recognition among peers.

Many proverbs emphasise the idea that individuals of similar backgrounds or characteristics tend to associate and support one another. For example, the proverb LV *putns putnam aci ārā neknābs*, EN *birds of a feather flock (fly) together*, IT *gli uccelli si appaiano con loro pari*, and ES *todas las aves con sus pares*, is mirrored in all four languages, illustrating a universal recognition of the tendency for like-minded individuals to unite. The Latvian linguist Laua points out that the imaginative basis of phraseology is most often the so-called metaphorical picture, which concerns a virtually unlimited range of phenomena. It is important to note that it concerns a human being in all their actions and attitudes [Laua 1992: 29]. This means that these metaphorical paintings are based on human experience, including cultural

⁵ Full table of our collected empirical material on LOYALTY proverbs in Latvian, English, Italian, and Spanish can be found here: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1S7bnXWfsiiFp-fny4aC02BNKRdUrArSa8N6gDZ_G89o/edit?usp=sharing (viewed 15.07.2024.)

conceptualisations. It is essential to stress that there is often what is known as synonymy, i.e., proverbs can be considered synonyms if they share a large degree of meaning but differ in their figurative basis and are used in different linguistic and non-verbal situations, acquiring both positive and negative connotations.

Proverbs such as LV *vārna vārņai acīs neknābs*, EN *one crow will not pick out another's eye*, IT *corvo con corvo non si cava gli occhi*, ES *cuervo con cuervo no se quitan los ojos*, reflect a cultural understanding of loyalty and protection within groups. This suggests that members of a group often refrain from harming each other, reinforcing social bonds.

The concept that individuals can recognise their own kind is prevalent, for instance, LV *pašu mājās zaglis nezog*, EN *one thief knows another*, IT *in casa di ladri non si ruba*, ES *en casa de ladrones no se hurta*, highlight an awareness of shared traits or behaviours within specific groups, whether they be thieves, devils, or other entities.

Cultural insights are connected with animal symbolism as animals frequently feature in these proverbs, serving as metaphors for human behaviour, for instance, crows, dogs, and wolves are commonly used to illustrate loyalty and social dynamics, suggesting that these animals hold significant cultural symbolism in the respective societies.

Social hierarchies are reflected in the presence of proverbs related to social classes, such as LV *bagāts bagātu aizstāv* and EN *nobility helps nobility*, indicating an awareness of social hierarchies and the tendency for individuals to support those within their own class or status.

References to supernatural beings, such as gods and devils, in proverbs also indicate a cultural dimension where moral and ethical considerations are intertwined with social loyalty. This suggests that beliefs in the supernatural may influence social behaviours and group dynamics: LV *velns velnam ragus nelauž*, EN *one devil knows another*, IT *dio li fa e poi li accoppia*, ES *dios los cría y ellos se juntan*.

The study of proverbs in these four languages highlights a shared understanding of LOYALTY, mutual protection, and social recognition. Through the use of animal metaphors and references to social hierarchies, these proverbs incorporate cultural values and social norms that emphasise the importance of community and belonging. The similarities across languages suggest that these themes are fundamental to human social behaviour, transcending cultural boundaries.

Cultural conceptualisations reveal a cohesive cognitive system within cultural groups, known as cultural cognition. This system comprises shared beliefs and values and is characterised by several unique features, for example, the so called emergent system in which cultural cognition evolves from interactions among group members over time and space, highlighting its diachronic nature [Sharifian 2008].

Conclusion

Exploring proverbs across different cultures and languages reveals shared human experiences and unique cultural conceptualisations that shape our understanding of the world. The study of proverbs related to LOYALTY has highlighted the intricate relationship between phraseology and paremiology, emphasising how proverbs serve as cultural artefacts that epitomise collective values, norms, and beliefs.

Through a comparative analysis of Latvian, English, Italian, and Spanish proverbs, for instance: LV *putns putnam aci ārā neknābs*, EN *birds of a feather flock (fly) together*, IT *gli uccelli si appaiano con loro pari*, and ES *todas las aves con sus pares*, and the like⁶, we identified three primary themes: group identity and loyalty, mutual protection, and recognition among peers. These themes demonstrate the universal tendency for individuals to seek solidarity within their own communities, reflecting cultural conceptualisations that go beyond linguistic boundaries. The use of animal metaphors and references to social hierarchies in these proverbs further illustrates the cultural significance of loyalty and social bonds.

The findings suggest that studying proverbs is not merely a linguistic endeavour but an interdisciplinary approach combining insights from cultural studies and cognitive linguistics. By examining proverbs through the lens of cultural conceptualisations, a deeper understanding of how language shapes and is shaped by the social reality of different cultures can be gained.

By demonstrating the relevance of proverbs in understanding cultural identity and social behaviour, future studies could expand this analysis to include additional languages and cultural contexts, further enriching our understanding of the complex interplay between language, culture, and human cognition.

Limitations of this research should also be noted. Although the comparative analysis of Latvian, English, Italian, and Spanish proverbs highlights significant thematic similarities, suggesting similar cultural patterns, it remains impossible to precisely trace the historical processes or quantify the degree to which these cultures and languages have influenced one another. The complicated interplay between language and culture is shaped by a wide range of factors, including historical language contacts and parallel social developments, which often leave limited linguistic evidence. Consequently, while the findings reveal shared conceptualisations of loyalty, definitive conclusions about specific influence or the directionality of cross-cultural impact cannot be established within the scope of this study; the parallels of historical processes and linguistic correlation could be a subject of our future studies.

⁶ See table: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1S7bnXWfsiiFp-fny4aC02BNKRdUrArSa8N6gDZ_G89o/edit?usp=sharing.

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BINOMINALS IN *DER SANDMANN* BY E. T. A. HOFFMANN AND ITS TRANSLATIONS INTO LATVIAN, ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN

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Abstract

The famous work *Der Sandmann* by Hoffmann abounds with binominal phraseological combinations, which represent a special type of phraseological units, e.g. ‘in Saus und Braus’, ‘kurz und gut’, etc. The present article discusses the formal and semantic aspects of binominals, analyses the binominals in *Der Sandmann* and their role in Hoffmann’s literary framework, and provides an overview of various translation and compensation techniques employed in the translation of the story into Latvian, English and Russian. The research stresses the importance of preserving the paired structure of binominals and the role of the translator as a cross-cultural communicator.

Keywords: *translation, communication, phraseological units, binominals, Hoffmann, Der Sandmann.*

Language and translation theorists of the 20th century often indicated the connection between language, translation and communication. As translation and interpretation are both ways of working with language, whose major function is the communicative function, the connection may seem self-evident; however, profound discussions of the issue are necessary to revise translation theories of the past

Culture Crossroads

Volume 33, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol33.518>

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ISSN 2500-9974



century, the time which saw the beginning of Translation Studies as an independent research discipline and brought the reader of the target text into general focus. One such recent discussion attempts to introduce extra clarity about translation as communication. In their editorial to *Translation and Interpreting as Communication: Issues and Perspectives*, Binhua Wang and Chonglong Gu refer to translation as a form of communication [Wang and Gu 2023: 4], while Yifeng Sun sees translation of literary texts as “a means of communication between different worldviews and cultural experiences” [Sun 2023: 41]. As a tool or means of communication, translation is employed to work with the recreation of meaning in the target language. In this task, it is also important not to ignore formal aspects of language, which may also contribute to meaning construal, especially in working with literary texts. In more basic terms, what is communicated in literary texts and their translation may be as important as how it is communicated. This article is devoted to an example of this, E.T.A. Hoffmann’s short story *Der Sandmann* [Hoffmann 1984].

Hoffmann’s world-famous story *Der Sandmann* was first published in 1816, then included in the collection of the so-called *Night Pieces (Die Nachtstücke)* in 1817. These stories explore the darker side of human nature, juxtaposing the good and evil forces that equally contribute to the formation of Hoffmann’s characters’ personalities, resulting in the outcome beyond human control or understanding and failing in the characters’ striving for the ideal, the latter being characteristic of late German Romanticism. *Der Sandmann* tells the reader about the life of a young man named Nathanael, who suffers from a childhood trauma caused by mysterious alchemist Coppélius. The traumatic experience continues to haunt Nathanael for the rest of his life. Nathanael is faced with the clash of two realities, the irrational inner traumatic reality manifested in Coppélius and the orderly external reality of his fiancée Clara and her brother Lothar. On multiple occasions, Clara and Lothar attempt to calm Nathanael and help him preserve sanity; nevertheless, the story ends with the protagonist’s death. The duality in Nathanael’s life and the dichotomy of good and evil are also expressed linguistically. Hoffmann intentionally employs numerous phraseological and non-phraseological pairs, i.e., binominals, to express the duality explicitly.

The present paper analyses the use of binominals in Hoffmann’s short story *Der Sandmann* and its translations into English by J. Oxenford [Hoffmann 2010], Latvian by A. Aumale [Hofmanis 1993], and Russian by A. Morozov [Гофман 1994]. The selected translations were common with the 20th century readership and illustrate the communication of Hoffmann’s literary intentions across different cultures. The translations also ensure an insight into the different techniques and strategies that translators employ in the translation of binominals.

Although binominals are in general no different in their function from any other phraseological units (PUs) and can be defined as “stable, cohesive combination[s] of words with a fully or partially figurative meaning” [Naciscione 2010: 254], some German phraseologists believe that these expressions should be viewed as a separate category of PUs [Burger 2010; Hofmeister 2010; Müller 2009]. Researchers of Russian discuss the matter of pairing or doubling (*парность, удвоение*) as an essential aspect of the language system in general, which can also be manifested in phraseological expressions [Артамонова 2009, Колесов 1999: 256]. In their typology of idioms, M. T. Espinal and J. Mateu refer to binominals as a kind of idiomatic expressions, “typically of the form X-Conjunction-Y [...] or of the form Noun-Preposition-Noun” [Espinal and Mateu 2019]. Binominals are formed by two equal constituents, which Burger metaphorically refers to as *Zwillingsformeln*, i.e., twin formulas, and serve to intensify the quantity or quality of something. As such, pairing is a natural characteristic of any language which exists at the conceptual level. The following are some examples of phraseological binominals in German, English, Latvian, and Russian with their meanings indicated in brackets: *gang und gäbe* (common, usual), *now and then* (occasionally), *roku rokā* (in mutual agreement), *без шума и пыли* (quietly).

The binominals in *Der Sandmann* can be categorised as follows: 1) binominals in core use, i.e., as recorded in phraseological dictionaries; 2) instantially used binominals, i.e., transformed by the author and thus different from their base form; 3) non-phraseological pairs, which the author uses with the aim to extend the pattern of pairing in his text. The present research has identified fourteen cases of core use of binominals, nine cases of instantially used binominals and thirteen cases of non-phraseological pairs in the original text. Examples of binominals from each category are provided below. For a full list of binominals in Hoffmann’s *Der Sandmann*, see Bormane 2014.

The following passage is an example of the binominal ‘kurz un gut’ [Duden 2020: 455] in core use:

Kurz und gut, das Entsetzliche, was mir geschah, dessen tödlichen Eindruck zu vermeiden ich mich vergebens bemühe, besteht in nichts anderem, als dass vor einigen Tagen, nämlich am 30. Oktober, mittags um 12 Uhr, ein Wetterglashändler in meine Stube trat und mir seine Ware anbot.

Hoffmann 1984

Instantial use of binominals in the original can be observed in the author’s changing of the order of PU constituents, e.g., ‘starr und stumm’ (base form) [Hofmeister 2010: 23] → ‘stumm und star’ [Hoffmann 1984], employment of base form derivatives, e.g., ‘mit Sang und Klang’ (base form) [Duden 2020: 644, Hofmeister 2010: 20] → ‘Gesänge und Klänge’ [Hoffmann 1984], and substitution

of one of the base form constituents with a different word, e.g., ‘Sinn und Verstand’ (base form) [Duden 2020: 703–704, Hofmeister 2010: 22] → ‘Sinn und Gedanken’ [Hoffmann 1984].

The following passage is an example of a non-phraseological pairing in Hoffmann’s text. The adjective pair ‘Entsetzliche und Schreckliche’ (Eng. cruel and terrifying) is a free collocation.

Geradeheraus will ich es Dir nur gestehen, daß, wie ich meine, alles Entsetzliche und Schreckliche, wovon Du sprichst, nur in Deinem Innern vorging, die wahre wirkliche Außenwelt aber daran wohl wenig teilhatte.

Hoffmann 1984

Phraseological pairs in the short story pose a major difficulty for the translator. There are several factors contributing to the complexity of the issue. First, the translator must identify phraseological pairs and recognise them as part of the author’s literary framework of both phraseological and non-phraseological binominals, rather than as a set of isolated expressions that can each be translated separately from the rest. Another factor is the translator’s inability to make a hard choice between linguistic form and meaning. In E. A. Nida’s terms, the translator cannot prioritise dynamic equivalence over formal one, hoping to produce the same effect on the reader of the target language (TL) as the original produces on the reader of the source [Nida 1982: 22–24]. Translators of *Der Sandmann* are faced with the challenge to preserve the duality in Hoffmann’s form of expression as much as to communicate the meaning that this form is endowed with. Third, phraseological pairs are metaphoric expressions, which P. Newmark describes as a triad of object, image and sense, with the latter resulting from the interaction of the first two [Newmark 1988: 104–105]. Phraseological binominals consist of two equally important objects and corresponding images. Translation of these, “using idiom[s] of similar meaning and form”, as proposed by Baker [Baker 2011: 76–78], may be possible in a rather limited number of cases, e.g., in the case of universal binominals, i.e., those formed by core vocabulary such as ‘hand in hand’. In many other cases, however, reproduction of the dual object of a binominal phraseological metaphor is rarely possible and requires techniques of compensation. The majority of translation researchers and theorists agree that if the translator cannot find a direct equivalent of a PU in the TL, a different PU with a similar meaning must be used [e.g., Albrecht 2005: 118]. Baker also proposes a strategy of “using an idiom of similar meaning but dissimilar form” [Baker 2011: 78–79]. However, such approaches, which clearly prioritise meaning over form, result in the loss of the formal structure of the original PU, which is a critical loss in the translation of *Der Sandmann*.

The next section gives five examples of the diverse solutions to the problem of translating phraseological binominals in *Der Sandmann*, offered by the translators mentioned above. Their solutions are, as follows: 1) use of direct equivalents with a paired structure, 2) use of free collocations with a paired structure, 3) employment of meaning-intensifying paraphrase, 4) introduction of non-equivalent phraseological binominals in the broader context of the target text, 5) employment of other structural or stylistic characteristics of language in order to communicate pairing, e.g., parallel grammatical forms, alliteration etc.

The first example illustrates the rare case of using a direct equivalent with a paired structure. Aumale uses the Latvian binominal 'šad un tad' (Eng. (every) now and then, from time to time [The Free Dictionary's Idioms Dictionary 2003–2024]) as equivalent to the German 'dann und wann' [Duden 2020: 156–157], which is certainly present in the long-term memory of native Latvian speakers today, though not recorded in the Latvian phraseological dictionary, the most recent reference source devoted specifically to Latvian PUs [Laua, Ezeriņa un Veinberga 2000].

*Er stellte sich und Klara dar, in treuer Liebe verbunden, aber **dann und wann** war es, als griffe eine schwarze Faust in ihr Leben und risse irgendeine Freude heraus, die ihnen aufgegangen.* Hoffmann 1984

*Šajā dzejojumā viņš attēloja sevi un Klāru, saistītus uzticīgas mīlestības saitēm, taču šķita, ka **šad un tad** viņu dzīvē iesniedzas melna dūre, lai nolauptu ikvienu viņiem dāvāto prieka mirkli.* Hofmanis 1993: 103–104

The next example illustrates Aumale's use of the free, i.e., non-phraseological collocation 'no sava prāta un domām'. In doing so, the translator preserves the paired structure of the original phraseological binominal 'Sinn und Verstand' [Duden 2020: 703–704; Hofmeister 2010: 22], which Hoffmann uses instantially, 'aus Sinn und Gedanken'. Aumale's translation is essentially a calque; the phraseological value of the original is lost.

*...Coppeliuss ist ein böses, feindliches Prinzip, er kann Entsetzliches wirken wie eine teuflische Macht, die sichtbarlich in das Leben trat, aber nur dann, wenn du ihn nicht **aus Sinn und Gedanken** verbannst.* Hoffmann 1984

*...Kopēliuss ir ļauna, naidīga ideja – viņš var darboties kā velnišķīgs spēks, kas redzamā veidā ienācis pasaulē, bet vienīgi tad, ja tu viņu nepadzen **no sava prāta un domām**.* Hofmanis 1993: 103

Our third example is a paraphrase by Oxenford, which uses the adverb 'entirely' to preserve the meaning-intensifying function of the original PU 'ganz und gar' [Duden 2020: 257], which is in core use in the original text. The translator does

not offer a direct equivalent; however, manages to communicate the meaning of the binominal descriptively (Eng. absolutely, completely, entirely) to the reader. In the same opening passage from the story, Oxenford uses no direct equivalents of the other two phraseological pairs ‘in Saus und Braus’, core use [Duden 2020: 647–648] and ‘Herz und Sinn’, which is a case of instantially used ‘mit Herz und Hirn / Herz und Verstand’ [Hofmeister 2010]. The former is translated descriptively as ‘in dissipation’; the latter is translated figuratively, i.e., using the non-phraseological metaphor ‘deeply imprinted on my heart’. In his metaphor, Oxenford reproduces only one of the components of the original PU, ‘Herz’ → ‘heart’.

Mutter zürnt wohl, und Clara mag glauben, ich lebe hier in Saus und Braus und vergesse mein holdes Engelsbild, so tief mir in Herz und Sinn eingepägt, ganz und gar. Hoffmann 1984

My mother, am sure, is angry, and Clara will believe that I am passing my time in dissipation, entirely forgetful of her fair, angelic image that is so deeply imprinted on my heart. Hoffmann 2010

The fourth example is of interest due to the fact that to compensate for the loss of the phraseological pair ‘kurz und gut’ [Duden 2020: 455], which the translator reproduces as the PU ‘одним словом’ [Федоров 2008] (Eng. in a nutshell, in short, in brief) with no pairing in its structure, Morozov introduces another PU, ‘просто-напросто’ [Федоров 2008], which has a paired structure, yet expresses the meaning of the original phrase ‘nichts aderem, als’ (Eng. nothing else but...); these are underlined below.

Kurz und gut, das Entsetzliche, was mir geschah, dessen tödlichen Eindruck zu vermeiden ich mich vergebens bemühe, besteht in nichts anderem, als dass vor einigen Tagen, nämlich am 30. Oktober, mittags um 12 Uhr, ein Wetterglashändler in meine Stube trat und mir seine Ware anbot. Hoffmann, 1984

Одним словом, то ужасное, что случилось со мною и произвело на меня смертоносное впечатление, от которого я тщетно силюсь избавиться, состояло просто-напросто в том, что несколько дней тому назад, именно 30 октября, в полдень, ко мне в комнату вошел продавец барометров и предложил мне свои товары Гофман, 1994

The fifth and last example discussed in this paper illustrates the translator’s attempt to reproduce pairing in the target language using non-phraseological means. In the following passage, Oxenford uses the emphatic comparative structure ‘no sooner... than...’, which expresses immediacy of action in English, just as the binominal ‘gesagt, getan’ [Hofmeister 2010: 29] does in the original text. Although the phraseological

value of the original is lost, the paired form of the original PU is expressed by means of English grammar.

Gesagt, getan! Beide, Nathanael und Klara, stiegen herauf...

Hoffmann, 1984

No sooner said than done. Nathaniel and Clara both ascended the steps...

Hoffmann 2010

To conclude, translation of PUs and binominals in particular is a serious challenge for the translator, as such translation has to communicate both the figurative (metaphoric) meaning and the form that expresses it. The five examples selected for analysis in this paper illustrate the diversity of techniques that can be employed in the translation of binominals, though this is by no means intended as an exhaustive list. Although the translators demonstrate their ability to recognise binominals as an issue and employ various techniques of reproduction or compensation, the choice of translation strategy remains an open question. Prioritising meaning over form or vice versa will inevitably lead to the loss of a binominal. Omission or addition of binominals in the target text are a matter of academic debate and, most importantly, the translator's choice. The task of translating binominals is also complicated by the fact that the translator's own linguistic memory and awareness remain invaluable tools in communication with the target reader. This emphasises the importance of the translator as a communicator.

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CULTURAL HERITAGE

CONTEMPORARY MANIFESTATIONS OF TRADITIONAL SKILLS AND LOCAL CRAFTSMANSHIP IN LATVIAN CERAMICS

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Abstract

This article examines the significance of traditional skills and local craftsmanship in Latvian ceramics, with a particular focus on their contemporary expressions in amateur art. Modern ceramics are diverse in their forms and applications, but author here focuses on the preservation and application of traditional skills. A qualitative case study approach is applied here, analysing specific cases in Riga and Ogre to assess the role of conventional skills in contemporary ceramics in Latvia. Despite the availability of distance learning opportunities, territorial belonging is still characterised by local preferences regarding ceramic materials, processing and firing technologies, as well as close links with regional traditions. The knowledge and skills of local craftsmen, passed down from generation to generation and acquired through training, are also important. The author aims to determine whether contemporary ceramicists employ traditional techniques and their specific features in the local context, and to analyse the economic, social, and aesthetic aspects of these skills.

Keywords: *ceramics, ceramist, craftsman, traditional skills, case studies, local craftsmanship, contemporary manifestations.*

Introduction

A craft product combines both art and craft. The aesthetic appeal of an object is as important as its functionality. The object environment around us evokes certain emotions and allows us to trace and explore the interaction between traditional

Culture Crossroads

Volume 33, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol33.606>

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ISSN 2500-9974



techniques and innovation [Buckley 2022]. Although the everyday ceramic object may be simple or even seem visually primitive, it contains the artist's perceptions, emotions, life and creative experiences, and particular tastes that change under different circumstances. Today, a craftsman is not only a master who creates material values with his hands but also an artist, designer and entrepreneur.

The artisan often serves as a mediator, facilitating cooperation between the local community, business and socio-economic objectives [Pret and Cogan 2018]. The role of the artisan has expanded considerably today, as ceramic objects have evolved from everyday household necessities to interior design elements and lifestyle symbols. Consumers' desire to resist globalisation and the uniformity of mass production is fuelling demand for artisanal products, which embody handmade quality, creativity, and thus become a unique aesthetic asset. The product also acquires the value of its territorial and cultural origin, local aesthetic traditions, and close connection with local materials and craftsmanship. Ceramic artists also embody these values, creating a national identity narrative. Using craft methods, raw materials and compositional principles typical of peasant culture, they preserve traditional craft skills and create a link between the past and the present, thus strengthening the collective sense of belonging [Sirica 2024]. The different visions of the craftsmen ensure diversity.

In ceramics, as in any craft, tradition is a body of knowledge and skills constantly renewed and reinterpreted. It is a changing process that evolves with time and society, ensuring the continuity and relevance of tradition across all ages and cultures [Bronner 2011: 30]. Therefore, the ceramicist creates objects in the material and preserves, maintains and updates the intangible cultural heritage, continuing the tradition and becoming a carrier of local identity. Ceramics acts as a powerful and distinctive channel of cultural information that simultaneously incorporates traditions, present trends and visions of the future, forming close links with other applied arts [Sessions 1997]. Ceramic craftsmanship is the continuity of the maintenance and inheritance of tradition, which ensures the continuity of culture and the transmission of knowledge between generations.

Handicrafts reveal the tastes and perceptions of a society in a particular era, as well as the ceramic craftsman's technical mastery and prevailing creative solutions.

The aim of the article is to investigate the traditional knowledge and skills that have been preserved in contemporary ceramic practice in Latvia and to analyse whether and how they are distinguished from modern skills, to promote their preservation as intangible cultural heritage.

Today, there is a growing interest in crafts and the preservation of traditional skills; however, scientific research on the ceramic sector in Latvia remains limited. Traditional knowledge and skills, passed down from one generation to the next or acquired through craft training, form an integral part of intangible cultural heritage.

It is therefore essential to determine whether contemporary ceramicists can identify and utilise these skills in their practice, and how they manifest themselves in a specific local (regional) context. Such research contributes to understanding the sustainability of traditions, cultural diversity and the importance of craft in contemporary society.

The number of craftspeople and participation in various types of fairs are increasing. The Latvian Ethnographic Open-Air Museum's fairs – “The Folk Applied Arts Fair” in June and the “Contemporary Crafts Market” in early September – have become very popular and well-received events. Many Latvian craftspeople attend both fairs, which provide an opportunity to get acquainted with a wide range of traditional craft skills, various creative methods, materials, and creativity. In addition, regular fairs are organised in practically all regions of Latvia, with the participation of ceramic artisans being very active. Finally, the public's interest in crafts and ceramics is stimulated by the increasing number of workshops organised by craftsmen. The public is actively involved in this process, both in terms of demand for the craftsmen's products and their willingness to learn new skills by taking part in masterclasses organised by the craftsmen themselves.

Nowadays, ceramics show an increasing rapprochement and connection with global aesthetic trends. However, in recent years, we have also seen the emergence of other professions as craftspeople, for whom ceramics is only one part of their creative and economic activity or even an episodic one. In this situation, the professional level of the craft is declining, the variety of products is decreasing, and a narrow specialisation of the craftsman's skills is taking place. The artistic quality of individual products also declines as perceptions change significantly. Whereas previously it was believed that the quality of a product was determined by the craftsman's practical skills and experience, today every product is valued for the simple fact that it is handmade.

Handmade crafts are becoming increasingly popular today, and one reason for this is the difference between art as an intellectual process and craft as a physical activity [Markowitz 1994]. In a digitised world, where art is increasingly being transferred from tangible form to virtual environments, there is a growing desire for physical presence and material experience [Enhuber 2015]. Contact with the material provides a sensory experience that promotes psychophysiological balance and contributes to a subjective sense of satisfaction and physical well-being.

Research into the development of craft is essential because it offers a new perspective on the nature of art and shows that previously undervalued practices can become part of the contemporary art world [Kaijzer 2022]. Craft skills have historically been undervalued in terms of their standing as an essential part of art due to the fear that their inclusion in the discourse of art could threaten its hierarchically superior status.

The question of the meaning and integration of traditional skills into contemporary ceramic practice is fundamental to preserving traditional values.

It is necessary to analyse the extent to which contemporary ceramic craftspeople use traditional skills and techniques in their professional activities and to identify the presence and impact of these skills on the development of ceramic crafts. This issue is linked to ensuring the continuity of traditional cultural elements and their adaptation to the contemporary context. Which ceramic skills do craftspeople highlight as locally traditional skills?

Countries with extensive and long historical traditions, such as Indonesia and China, also emphasise the need for knowledge of traditional skills. New-age ceramics are highlighted as more design-oriented but do not necessarily fully incorporate the cultural context of conventional ceramics. It seeks to combine the principles of contemporary culture and art with the heritage of traditional ceramics. At the same time, it emphasises the artists' independence and freedom of creative expression, using modern technologies and techniques to create original and unique works [Zhang and Xuemin 2022]. Indonesian researchers emphasise the integration of the needs of contemporary society into ceramics while preserving traditional and local features. This approach attracts buyers in different markets and stimulates people's interest in the craft sector, thus preserving and passing on traditional skills [Safiri, Retnowati and Prihadi 2020]. The municipality of Jingdezhen, China, established a group of experts in 2020 to systematise and collect information on ceramic handicraft skills, and the experts carried out a classification of skills. A 2024 study suggests that this decision has significantly contributed to structuring the system and establishing a unique group system for inheriting skills [Zhang, Tan, 2024]. These examples underline the close relationship between art, design and craft, which allows the needs and demands of contemporary society to be integrated into ceramic products. At the same time, they also highlight the importance of preserving traditional values and the different approaches to ensure the continuity of cultural heritage and the basic knowledge for integrating innovation in the sector.

Methods

The study uses a qualitative case study methodology, which allows for an in-depth analysis of the transformation and preservation of traditional skills in contemporary ceramic practice in Latvia. A case study is particularly appropriate when the research aims to understand complex processes based on real-life contexts in which cultural, social and material interactions are important [Yin 2014; Stake 1995]. The methodology is based on an interpretive approach that emphasises the production of meaning in a particular cultural and social context [Gertz 1973].

Five qualitative interviews were conducted with various community members to gain a deeper understanding of the logged-in issue and to illustrate the situation within the sector. The empirical data and insights obtained served as the basis for

analysing and interpreting the research themes. A qualitative case study approach was used, focusing on the study and analysis of a specific “limited case”. The research was conducted in Riga and Ogre between May and October 2024. It was essential to include a comprehensive view of the ceramists, teaching staff, organisers, sellers, and buyers. To this end, a purposive sampling approach was used to select respondents, considering the following criteria: occupation, location, working age, different educational backgrounds, main occupation of ceramics, and different practices of selling ceramic products. A total of six interviews were conducted, lasting between 90 and 120 minutes. Five of them were conducted face-to-face, and one was conducted remotely. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with persons aged between 35 and 60. Three craftswomen were interviewed – ceramist artist O-TP-1, from Ogre, and ceramicists R-TP-2 and R-TP-3, from Riga – the opinion of a professional teacher from R-TP-4. The study includes information and data on the markets held in Ogre provided by the organiser, Ogre Culture Centre. The owner of the retail chain of shops, O-TP-6, was interviewed and provided information on ceramic products sold in the chain’s shops – the interview with O-TP-5.

The conversation reveals the ceramics buyer and the various markets visited from the perspective of a ceramics buyer and a visitor to multiple markets. A qualitative content analysis method [Mayring 2000] was used to analyse the data. The data from the interviews were initially grouped into thematic categories using an inductive approach procedure, which enabled nine categories (vocational training of craftsmen, importance of place of residence and work, specifics of occupation, materials used, target audience of consumers, marketing mechanisms of ceramic products, understanding of local tradition, traditional skills used, transfer of skills) to be created from the interview transcripts. A deductive categorisation approach was applied based on the established schema, in which themes were grouped according to the defined purpose. This approach highlighted the link between the categories created and the notion of tradition, deepening the understanding of the problem under study. The research captured each respondent’s experience and opinion, analysing the similarities and dissimilarities. To ensure the ethical use of the data, an agreement was signed with the participants, allowing their names to be used in this research and publication.

Traditional and contemporary ceramics: A theoretical view

The sustainability of tradition in a rapidly changing environment raises questions about preserving tradition and the conditions for its transmission. The logical question is: What exactly is tradition or traditional in ceramic crafts? Nowadays, it is difficult to define this concept precisely: tradition is present in the everyday life of ceramists as much as it is integrated into the cultural perception of society. Tradition is not a direct reflection of the past but a model of the past created in the present.

This symbolic construct has emerged through interpretation [Handler and Linnekin 1984]. In practical work, traditional techniques are closely merged with incoming innovations and different possibilities, which makes it difficult for the craftsman to distinguish between the conventional and the familiar.

However, in the twentieth century, and especially at the end of the century, approaches to studying tradition underwent significant changes. Folklore studies, anthropology, and sociology, in particular, became the dominant disciplines, shifting research toward an interdisciplinary perspective. At the same time, interest in tradition grew from more than an abstract cultural phenomenon. Tradition helps organise human communities, and individuals actively participate in its implementation. This means that the contemporary understanding of tradition emphasises preserving historical values while adapting and transforming them in a rapidly changing era (Bula 2011:159). The modern understanding of tradition as a dynamically evolving phenomenon enables a broader society to practice traditional skills.

Intangible cultural heritage was first proposed as equivalent to tangible cultural property at the 1982 World Conference in Mexico City, emphasising the importance of preserving the diversity of traditions and cultural practices [UNESCO, 1982]. This approach highlights the close connection between intangible cultural heritage and tradition as a crucial element of identity and cultural sustainability. To strengthen these principles, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was adopted on 17 October 2003 and entered into force in Latvia on 20 April 2006 [UNESCO 2003]. This Convention protects not only the traditions themselves but also the living heritage as a whole, which forms the identity of communities and ensures its sustainability through the creation, transmission and transformation of cultural practices [Seitel 2001]. The Convention highlights the importance of master practitioners in preserving and transmitting traditional skills.

The concept of tradition has been interpreted in various ways in historical and academic contexts. Tradition is a set of practices and beliefs linked to the past, accepted by a particular group, and serves as an element of identity formation for that group [Green 1997: 801]. In the 21st century, traditional research emphasises a multidimensional approach to understanding the concept, identifying five key elements characteristic of tradition: reproduction of the past, continuity, fluidity, implementer and symbolism [Treimane and Vinogradova 2018]. These characteristics underscore the tradition's dynamic and adaptive nature, which simultaneously maintains a link with the past while contributing to its relevance in contemporary society.

The debate on globalisation and identity in research particularly highlights the relationship between identity and territory. Two approaches are highlighted in the discussion: the first argues that globalisation leads to the disappearance of

cultural differences and the emergence of global similarities. Thus, globalisation can mean a worldwide homogenisation of culture [Hannerz 1991], which can be interpreted as a decline in the importance of traditions or the disappearance of local cultures. On the one hand, globalisation and the preservation of traditional culture may seem contradictory, but they can also be interpreted as different dimensions of development [Anttonen 2005: 120]. Today, the conventional category has become a global construct, especially in the worldwide tourism, trade, and symbol production markets related to traditional music, arts, and crafts [Anttonen 2005: 120]. Thus, tradition is often used as a symbol of the past. Still, it is not sufficiently appreciated that tradition can also be politically, ideologically and socially dependent, changing how it is used in contemporary discourses.

In *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett analyses the importance of craft as a form of work, emphasising its fundamental character in human professional and creative development. He defines craft as a process in which an individual integrates technical skill, innovation and deliberate dedication to create high-quality products. According to Richard Sennett's theoretical framework, the prerequisite for excellent working practice is continuous competence development and reflective learning through practical experience. Craft involves not only manual activity but also cognitive engagement that fosters a deeper understanding of the materials and dynamics of the working process [Sennett 2008: 238]. Motivation and the pursuit of quality determine individuals' career paths. Social conditions significantly influence the development of this motivation [Sennett 2008: 252]. The researcher's issue of quality assessment is relevant in the scientific discourse. The problem of quality assessment arises from conflicting approaches: one based on precision and absolute standards, the other based on practical experience and established practices. The divergence of these approaches leads to institutional conflict, as universal quality criteria often conflict with standards established in practice [Sennett 2008: 52]. Historically, quality criteria have served as a differentiating factor that has set craftsmen apart from other ceramic practising communities in terms of the quality of their work. However, given the diversity of contemporary ceramic objects, it is challenging to distinguish craftsmen from other material practitioners based on specific criteria.

The quality of a ceramic object is determined by its material and the skill with which it is worked. Glenn Adamson argues that the specific relationship of art to the material is its essential difference from modern art, which aims to transcend physical boundaries [Adamson 2007: 39]. The author critically examines the notion of the insignificance of skill in the art-making process. The researcher analyses why skill is often interpreted as problematic or marginal in contemporary art discourse [Adamson 2007: 69]. Glenn Adamson also examines the cultural inferiority

attributed to home craft, contrasting it with hobby craft and the avant-garde [Adamson 2007: 139]. The author notes that amateur craftsmanship undermines the value of craftsmanship in the arts, producing low-quality and imitative works.

However, the contemporary understanding of craft promotes the view that craft skills are primarily based on tacit, intuitive, and experiential knowledge that can only be acquired through practical activity. Adamson argues that this distinction between theoretical thinking and pragmatic execution is a modern construct, as such a juxtaposition did not exist in the making process before the Industrial Revolution [Adamson 2013: 74]. The importance of handmade work in the post-industrialisation phase is increasing, giving objects a personalised and exclusive character. Handmade crafts are essential today, contributing to the enduring appeal and unique status of the craft in various cultural contexts.

The German philosopher and art theorist Boris Groys argues that contemporary aesthetics and art are becoming communication practices. Contemporary art audiences are more accepting and willing to embrace the concepts and emphases created by mass media, just as modern art often follows the entertainment media and mass communication. In Boris Groys' view, the formation of postmodern taste is market-driven, with its direct source being the globalisation of the information, media, and entertainment markets. The aesthetic taste characteristic of postmodernism is very inclusive, open and even democratic [Groys 2015: 203]. Yet, it often questions community, tradition and cultural identity. Postmodernism's aesthetic preference gradually transforms the particular into the universality of the other, blurring all boundaries [Tang 2021]. Contemporary aesthetics demonstrates the ability to integrate and accept diverse visual expressions accepted by the wider public and actively represented in the media. In this context, the evaluation of ceramic art objects no longer primarily focuses on their functional significance and material quality. Instead, it is the conceptual significance of the idea and its ability to attract attention and shape discourse in the public space that dominates.

Traditional skills in contemporary crafts

Traditional skills are based on the continuous application and transmission of skills to future generations, ensuring the preservation of traditions. The tradition of ceramic craftsmanship is carried on by enthusiasts of diverse interests and varying levels of training, creating a varied and vibrant picture of contemporary traditional ceramics. The totality of his skills determines the excellence of the craftsman and the quality of his work. Knowledge of conventional techniques, such as turning and reduction techniques, the specific characteristics of engobe and glazing, and even wood firing, is essential, especially if these skills are specific to a particular area. Although a broad knowledge of technology and material processing offers unlimited

creative possibilities, some craftspeople are only familiar with specific techniques, working within their comfort zone. Whereas ceramics were previously judged on their utility, practicality and functional qualities, today's traditional craftsmanship places much more emphasis on the aesthetic and artistic aspects of the work. It should also be noted that modern ceramic crafts have access to a much wider range of materials and technologies, which enable the use of material interactions in new firing processes, thereby expanding the visual variety of ceramic products. Traditional crafts also respond to the needs and tastes of today's buyers, who are markedly different from the views and demands of society in the past. Craftsmen in both Riga and Ogre are equally adaptable in responding to societal needs and offer a diverse and varied range of ceramic products.

Material as meaning in ceramic practice

The research gathered the opinions of actively working ceramists on using traditional skills and the possibilities of incorporating them into their creative work. The ceramic artists interviewed particularly emphasised the importance of choosing a conventional material. Clay is the most typical material in Latvia. However, it is essential to note that ceramists no longer produce their own clay but rather purchase it, and the material tends to originate from various regions and countries. As professional craftsmen and craftswomen, they pay particular attention to the plastic properties of the material and its stability during the working process. The territoriality and origin of the material are not as important as the quality of the material itself. Ceramic craftswomen partly use locally sourced material, and from this point of view, the tradition of using only Latvian clay is no longer stable in contemporary ceramic crafts. The ceramic artists interviewed also admitted paying attention to purchasing economically viable materials. The wishes and demands of society also influence them. To this end, white and brown clay, which has a relatively lower cost and a lower firing temperature than stoneware and porcelain, is used. These factors significantly impact the final price of ceramic products, making them more affordable for buyers. In some cases, however, there is a personal and emotional connection to a particular ceramic material, which, alongside practical considerations, may influence the final decision on the material.

“Clay is the closest to my heart, and it has a great deal to do with where we were born.” [personal archive, recording_7, O-TP-1, 11.10.2024.]

“I use white clay for craft production, but in principle, I work with stoneware and porcelain. I would like to work more with porcelain, but the buyers' purchasing power does not allow me to expand my operations.” [personal archive, recording_8, R-TP-3, 15.10.2024.]

R-TP-4 is a lecturer at the LMA and an active, creative artist who sees clay as a means to foster modern man's connection with nature. She believes that using local clay is crucial in the context of resource conservation and sustainability. Still, she acknowledges that the pace of modern life and urbanisation processes often encourages craftspeople to choose industrially prepared materials with less attention to their origin. However, some artisans still prefer to use local clay by purchasing it from local suppliers who extract and post-process it, such as *Raunas ceplis* or *Jelgavas keramika*, or by extracting it themselves, as is the case with masters in Latgale.

Traditional knowledge and skills

The next stage of making ceramic objects is shaping. According to conventional skills that have been known and used in Latvia for a long time, various techniques are employed, including moulding, casting, and turning. The ceramists interviewed utilise these skills extensively in creating their pieces. However, they all mentioned turning as the most characteristic and traditionally appropriate skill. This technique must be regularly practised in their daily practical work to maintain the quality and craftsmanship of turning. All respondents stated that they use turning regularly, as it is essential to maintain a high professional level, ensure the quality of their work, the precision of their workmanship, and the possibility of repeating their work in small quantities. All three ceramicists mentioned that the material's specificity should be considered a quality, all the more so because it allows the local tradition to be highlighted; however, R-TP-2 particularly stressed the need to work regularly to develop and improve her skills and produce a quality ceramic product. R-TP-3. and O-TP-1. It was essential for them to be familiar with the entire set of technological processes and traditional craft skills, as this fosters an in-depth understanding of the ceramic sector and the practice of quality knowledge transfer.

“The ability to practically apply the craft's skills also helps future ceramic artists realise much more interesting ideas during their studies.”

[personal archive, recording_9, R-TP-4, 18.10.2024.]

“It won't be a big problem if future ceramicists don't know how to make a traditional pot or a candlestick; there are plenty of them in museums. However, the problem is that they won't be able to pass on these skills when they become educators.”

[personal archive, recording_8, R-TP-3, 15.10.2024.]

“In Europe, many art schools no longer have teachers who can teach practical traditional skills, and in crafts, the role of the craftsman is even more important.”

[personal archive, recording_9, R-TP-4, 18.10.2024.]

The fact that Latvia will soon also have to face this problem is evidenced by the survey of participants in the Latvian Ethnographic Museum's Folk Applied Arts Fair held on 1 and 2 June 2024 [Dumpe 2024], as well as by statistics on the number of people registered as ceramists in 2021 and 2022 [Latvian official statistics portal]. The current market participant questionnaires showed that only 39% of practising potters are younger and aged between 30 and 54, with a much higher proportion in a different age group: 57% of practising potters are between 55 and 82. These craftspeople have received a quality education, possess traditional skills, and can apply them in practice. However, there are very few young craftsmen in the ceramics sector, which raises the question of ensuring the continuity of future skills.

Further transfer of craft skills into modern practice

Today, other options are also used to transfer traditional skills. Ceramists and craftspeople regularly organise masterclasses for children and adults to introduce the art of ceramics, educate, or have fun. However, workshops can rarely be called a complete learning process. Ceramists R-TP-3 and O-TP-1 mentioned in their interviews that workshops provide up to 80% of their income. If workshops are an essential source of income for the participants, they are often their first contact with the material and a source of creative inspiration. However, it must be acknowledged that some participants consider these workshops to be a sufficient and high-quality form of training. There is a tendency for participants who have attended several workshops to consider themselves sufficiently professional and capable of organising their own workshops and producing ceramic products, which are often of very low quality.

“I observe at the markets that the masterclasses are often given by dilettantes with little to no knowledge or practical experience. And the people who attend such workshops are not in a position to judge the teacher's professionalism.”

[personal archive, recording_8, R-TP-3, 15.10.2024.]

The ceramicists interviewed have no apprentices willing to learn and practice traditional crafts. However, the respondents employ a self-directed approach to enhance their knowledge and skills in new materials and current technologies. They utilise various digital platforms and participate in symposia to enhance their creativity and professional development. O-TP-1 reads and researches traditional ceramic techniques from Latvia and other regions, then experiments to find our region's pure forms and processing techniques. She is particularly fascinated by wood-firing techniques but lacks the knowledge and skills to implement them qualitatively. R-TP-3, on the other hand, admits that she lacks knowledge of marketing, advertising, and sales platforms, or the use of existing ones, to develop a successful business.

The buyer's perspective on traditional ceramics in the contemporary context

Market-goer O-TP-5 has a critical view of conventional ceramics, as unglazed or brown-glazed ware does not appeal to her emotionally. She feels that such ceramics are too uniform and boring and do not appeal to modern buyers. O-TP-5 doubts about whether anyone will buy such products anymore. However, she enjoys buying ceramics – the opportunity to experience the market atmosphere, talk to the craftsman, and feel the vessel's texture. The experience of being in the room is so vital to O-TP-5 that she will only buy any craft after direct contact with its maker. O-TP-5 is convinced that crafts are essential to our identity, territorial belonging and creativity. In addition, she feels it is necessary to support local craftsmen and thus contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage. At the same time, she expressed the view that our traditional ceramics are unwieldy and do not evolve with the times. She mentioned the presence of nature in the decoration of the vessels – the imprints of flowers, leaves and other parts of plants on the surface, the range of colours and textures, which give the products a more original look, as a feature that is in keeping with modern times.

The impact of market demand on contemporary ceramics

Regular events and fairs featuring ceramic craftsmen are held in nearly all regions of Latvia, including Riga and Ogre. One of the most widely attended events is the Ethnographic Open-Air Museum Fair, where craftspeople from Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia participate. Despite the large number of participants and visitors, craftspeople face several problems. The first one, mentioned by ceramists R-TP-2 and R-TP-3, is that the criteria for selecting, evaluating, and thus approving craftsmen for participation in the fair are unclear. All the ceramicists in the interviews noted that the high participation fee, which increases yearly, is also a problem. It is also worth noting that visitors to the market are required to pay an entrance fee. Nevertheless, both O-TP-1 and R-TP-3 stress that the Ethnographic Open-Air Museum's fair is one of the most financially successful, while elsewhere, they only sell 1–20% of their products. Therefore, despite the large number of regional markets, all ceramicists carefully evaluate their participation in them to avoid financial losses due to high participation fees and low sales based on their experience.

The Ogre Cultural Centre organises a market in the town several times a year. All vendors, including artisan ceramists, are charged a participation fee. The event is free for visitors, and there are many of them. However, according to the interview with O-TP-1 and the data provided by the Ogre Cultural Centre, the volume of ceramics purchases at the fairs was relatively small.

To gain an understanding of the situation in the retail sector, I interviewed the owner of a chain of shops, as ceramic objects are also commonly sold in souvenir shops. Still, the sales figures vary greatly depending on the location of the shop and its brand. O-TP-6, owner of the well-known retail brand and stores, agreed to the interview. She has created the brand, one of Latvia's most popular craft retail chains in recent years. The brand's origins date back to 2011, when the aim was defined to offer, first and foremost, the products of Latvian craftsmen and home producers to a wider audience in one place. The public has appreciated the creation of such a network of shops. There are eight shops in Riga and its surroundings, including one in Ogre. More than 300 products from a wide range of small producers and craftspeople are represented in the shops. In an interview, ceramicist R-TP-3 outlined the rules for an artisan to hand over their creations in the shop. The craftsman sets a product price, while the shop adds its markup. Both parties need to reach an agreement so that the final price is not too high and the products are available, as the local population's purchasing power is limited. O-TP-6, owner of the brand and shops, points out that, in her experience, ceramic products in shops are mainly bought by middle- and high-income buyers, both for personal use and as gifts.

In an interview, artist and LMA lecturer, R-TP-4, expressed her concern that craftspeople often indulge buyers' wishes so that their products are bought more. She has seen many products in markets and souvenir shops that have little in common with our traditional crafts and the high quality level. For example, a fair number of craftspeople opt for very simplistic solutions, employing unjustified distortions and gilding that have little to do with the object's function and artistic quality.

The information gathered in the study allows us to conclude that Latvian craftsmen today use a wide range of ceramic materials. Although craftsmen still produce sufficient household items, some are trying to switch to decorative ceramics to be more competitive in the non-Latvian market. In general, the skills of craftspeople are increasing as many realise that traditional education is insufficient and that a deeper understanding of global trends in conventional crafts and contemporary ceramics is necessary. All this can help craftspeople market their work more successfully here in Latvia and abroad. R-TP-4 acknowledged that similar trends can be observed elsewhere in Europe, where this approach is referred to as contemporary craftsmanship, which combines modern design, traditional craft skills, and a high-quality, highly professional approach to material processing.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the community was unable to clearly define what "tradition" and "traditional skills" meant in the context of contemporary ceramics. However, the importance of preserving traditional skills in both creative activity and in

strengthening cultural identity and national belonging was emphasised. Traditional knowledge and skills are seen as essential resources for the development of contemporary ceramics, which simultaneously build on historical heritage and encourage innovative approaches. Although “tradition” and “traditional skills” are not clearly defined, in practice they are identified through specific activities and materials, such as the use of regionally particular clays and traditional turning techniques. This allows a more apparent distinction between traditional knowledge and modern skills.

Also critical is a deep understanding of technological processes and material properties, which is paramount to ceramists. Knowledge and skills at a high, professional level of the craft give greater creative freedom. It was highlighted that working with clay, especially with region-specific materials and turning techniques, is considered a central component of traditional ceramic skills. Noteworthy is the craftsman’s ability to create locally specific forms, compositions, and colour aesthetics, which are highlighted as key aspects of traditional heritage in today’s ceramics.

The aspects mentioned above are spiritual, craft, and skill values that have been passed down from generation to generation and must be preserved. They are an essential part of the development of ceramic traditions, forming the basis of and maintaining the link with historical heritage while opening the way for innovation.

Several aspects and opportunities for the further development of traditional crafts were highlighted. Innovation is based on high-level craft knowledge and skills acquired here. In addition to improving their creative and professional skills, craftspeople often utilise various digital platforms, participate in symposia, and study traditional ceramic techniques in-depth from other regions of the world. They then experiment to discover less-used and alternative forms and processing techniques in their area. Latvian craftsmen successfully employed various ceramics and techniques, utilising local materials such as white or red clay from Spain or other regions.

Some craftspeople have started working more actively in decorative ceramics. These changes are designed to enhance the competitiveness of our products in the international market. Today, competition has become even fiercer, both domestically and globally. An essential aspect of a craftsperson’s work is an understanding of the prospects for future development, which is linked to the fact that nowadays a craftsperson is no longer just a master craftsperson, but also an entrepreneur, marketing and public relations specialist.

To a large extent, this kind of at least basic knowledge affects not only their ability to work regularly, to continue the tradition and skills of the craft, but also, more broadly, to pass on the tradition.

Contemporary crafts are a blend of traditional craft techniques, modern ceramic art, and design. Knowledge of current developments in these fields has also become

increasingly important. Several additional factors also influence the development of modern, traditional ceramics. Professionals and experts in contemporary ceramics, vocational training, intangible heritage, and traditional culture play a crucial role in preserving craft traditions and the successful development of the ceramics sector. The media must also be educated to raise public awareness of these values. Raising public awareness can be essential to promoting the supply of high-quality ceramic products, thereby stimulating demand for aesthetically and technologically superior products. The development process of traditional crafts is ongoing, and it is essential to get the emphasis right. One promising way forward is the integration of high-quality crafts into a modern cultural and design environment, which can strengthen the link with cultural heritage and contribute to the sustainable development of crafts.

In conclusion, both buyers of ceramic products and experts in the field believe that striking a balance between traditional and innovative approaches is vital to preserve craft traditions. This will ensure the sustainability of ceramic crafts in Latvia. Maintaining a balance between traditional and modern methods is recognised as essential for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage and the sustainable development of the ceramics sector.

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BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF MAPPING KAZDANGA

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Abstract

In this article, the authors examine the digital mapping of cultural heritage and place identity in Kazdanga, Latvia, employing an interdisciplinary approach that integrates historical, ethnographic, and digital humanities methodologies. Through field research, archival analysis, and community engagement, the research has been aimed at exploring the interaction of spatial, temporal, and social dimensions in shaping local identity. Using the *Palladio* tool for data structuring and visualisation, the authors critically assess the methodological challenges of representing heterogeneous and intangible cultural heritage data in digital formats. The findings highlight the significance of both material and immaterial heritage in constructing place identity, emphasizing the relationship between historical continuity and socio-cultural transformation. The research challenges the limitations of existing metadata standards in capturing the heterogeneous and dynamic nature of local heritage. By demonstrating the potential of digital visualisation for cultural heritage research, the authors advocate for participatory and reflexive approaches that integrate community perspectives into digital heritage initiatives, encouraging sustainable engagement with local history and identity.

Keywords: *Kazdanga, cultural heritage, place identity, data visualization, digital humanities.*

Culture Crossroads

Volume 33, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol33.572>

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ISSN 2500-9974



Introduction

Kazdanga is a small village in Latvia, in the Dienvidkurzeme (South Courland) region, which historically developed as the residence of the wealthy and politically influential Baltic German von Manteuffel family. The Kazdanga Manor complex (Katzdangen), which once belonged to the von Manteuffel family, has a unique value [Leja 1999: 10]. It was built in the classicist style at the beginning of the 19th century by the famous Western European architect Johann Georg Adam Berlitz [Šlipenbahs 2023: 125]. The manor complex and grand palace, built in the classicist style, has a cultural and historical significance not only for Kurzeme (Courland), but also for all of Latvia and the Baltic region. At the beginning of the 20th century, the painters Vilhelms Purvītis and Johann Walter visited the von Manteuffel family in Kazdanga several times [Leja 1999: 9, 24]. Many of V. Purvītis' landscapes were created in Kazdanga or inspired by this picturesque environment. In recent years, the number of visitors to Kazdanga has increased, including those in search of the creative legacy of Vilhelms Purvītis. Not far from Kazdanga, on the bank of the Alokste River, lies the archaeologically and historically significant Valāta (also Kazdanga) Hillfort, a fortified settlement of the Curonians [Brašņš 1923: 85–86]. A park was established around the Kazdanga manor in the early 19th century as a landscape park. Currently, the Kazdanga Manor Park is one of the largest and dendrologically richest manor parks in Latvia in terms of area (196 ha). It contains 47 different tree taxa and 7 specially protected species [Dabas aizsardzības pārvalde 2023]. The park has two circular crosses – a scarce type of grave monument in Latvia. Kazdanga was first in all of Tsarist Russia, where pond farming began around 1870, which is why there are many ponds in the Kazdanga Manor Park territory [Leja 1999: 290]. The park features marked walking trails, bike paths, well-maintained recreation areas, a labyrinth, a 190-metre-long jetty with a bird-watching tower over Dzirnezers lake, and swimming areas. Until 2009, the name of Kazdanga was closely associated with agricultural education. In 1923, the State Kazdanga Two-Year Agricultural and Fish Farming School was opened, but as soon as 1930, a secondary agricultural educational institution was founded, becoming the first agricultural high school in Kurzeme [Leja 1999: 5, 78, 83–84]. Since then, it has also been known by such names as the State Kazdanga Agricultural Technical School, the Kazdanga Sovkhoz Technical School of the Ministry of Agriculture of the Latvian SSR, and the Kazdanga Vocational Secondary School. The heritage of various cultural layers has been preserved in Kazdanga. On the one hand, it has been influenced by the von Manteuffel barons, who established a manor complex and its park and ponds. On the other hand, the Soviet period also had a significant impact, with the restoration of the Technical School and the development of sports activities and infrastructure. In

the consciousness of Kazdanga residents (*kazdandznieki*), not only historical places are important (besides the palace and manor parks, also Valāta Hillfort, Devil's Stone (*Velnakmens*), etc.), but also newly created places (*Kazbārs* (a bar), *Pīlādžu aleja* (Rowan alley), and others). Moreover, traditions preserved over generations, for example, dishes characteristic of Kurzeme (sour porridge, *sklandrauši* – small, round rye-crust pies filled with a layered mixture of mashed potatoes and carrots), folk medicine practices, sauna rituals, fishing in fishponds, various festivals and events (Summer Solstice, Park Festival, swimming competitions, etc.) form the place identity of the Kazdanga residents. In their consciousness, specific territories and traditions cultivated over the years have become values that bring them joy and pride.

Due to the fact that Kazdanga parish was included in the Dienvidkurzeme region, which was established on 1 July 2021, implementing the administrative-territorial reform, as a result of which eight previously existing regions – Grobiņa, Aizpute, Rucava, Pāvilosta, Durbe, Nīca, Priekule and Vaiņode [Dienvidkurzemes novada pašvaldība 2023] – merged, Kazdanga has partially lost the status of a historically significant centre. Throughout the 20th century, Kazdanga was one of the centres of Kurzeme, and the population of Kazdanga parish has currently decreased to 1142 residents. For comparison, in 1999, the population reached 2002 [Latvijas Republikas Ministru kabinets 1999]. However, in general, the residents of Kazdanga strive to cherish their heritage.

The objective of this article is to critically examine the process of mapping Kazdanga's cultural heritage and place identity through the use of digital tools, particularly the Palladio platform. The research aims to explore how both tangible and intangible cultural elements can be systematically documented, structured, and visualised to reflect the complexity of place identity. To achieve this, the researchers undertook several interconnected tasks: conducting fieldwork and interviews with Kazdanga residents to gather oral histories; analysing historical and literary sources to extract relevant cultural data; structuring these data into metadata across spatial, temporal, and social dimensions; and applying visualisation techniques to uncover hidden patterns and connections. This multifaceted approach is guided by key research questions: How can diverse cultural data be translated into structured digital formats? What challenges arise in the representation of narrative and symbolic heritage through digital tools? In what ways does place identity emerge from the intersection of people, places, and histories in Kazdanga? And how can digital visualisation serve not only as an analytical method but also as a form of engagement with local communities? By addressing these questions, the article contributes to broader discussions in cultural heritage studies and digital humanities about the potential and limitations of representing regional identity through structured data and visual media.

Approach to the research object

In the summer of 2023 and 2024, representatives of the working group of the project “Kazdanga – from place stories to community identity networking and cultural heritage digitisation”, supported by the research project competition “Development of Scientific Activities at the Latvian Academy of Culture” of the Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies of the Latvian Academy of Culture, conducted field research in Kazdanga, and also organized a seminar for Kazdanga residents. Initially, the focus of the research project was on the study of intangible or living cultural heritage in Kazdanga; however, as the work continued, attention was also paid to tangible cultural heritage, as well as community identity and place identity.

During both projects, several sources on the history and culture of Kazdanga were analysed in parallel with the fieldwork, and as a result of their processing, a list of events and descriptions of Kazdanga was created. In this project, they were supplemented with new literary sources and annotated according to cultural, institutional, and symbolic dimensions, adapted to the theory of place identity. The processed data set was visualized using the Palladio tool, which is designed for the visualisation and exploration of structured and described data in historical and cultural studies. To create a comprehensive digital data set that reflects the identity of Kazdanga, the project plans to develop a “Kazdanga Identity Map” and prepare it for use by local residents.

Living or intangible cultural heritage

Since the group of people under study has been defined as a living cultural heritage community in Kazdanga, it is worth noting some key aspects regarding the concept of intangible or living cultural heritage.

On 1 December 2016, the Intangible Cultural Heritage Law adopted by the *Saeima* entered into force. It defines intangible cultural heritage as “a part of the cultural heritage of Latvia, which represents the cultural traditions of Latvia and consists of the knowledge, skills, values and behaviour models passed down from generation to generation, defined by the surrounding environment and developed by interaction with history, nature and creativity, including oral traditions and expressions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge concerning nature and the universe, traditional craftsmanship, as well as instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith” [LR Saeima 2016].

Unlike the UNESCO Convention [UNESCO 2003], the law emphasizes the connection of intangible cultural heritage with the cultural and historical heritage of Latvia, and the definition of the Latvian law excludes UNESCO’s substantive emphasis on the fact that communities and groups constantly create heritage anew,

thus creating a rather static time-space framework for the formation of intangible cultural heritage in the law, which is focused on the past [Muktupāvela, Laḷe 2022: 65].

The law, unlike the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, also defines the concept of community, which means “a group of persons (for the purpose of this Law in some cases also private persons) characterized by a shared sense of identity and united by intangible cultural heritage and shared interest in its safeguarding and transmission to future generations” [LR Saeima 2016].

Concepts of identity

Identity, including that of a place, is greatly influenced by both material and intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, the meaning of the location and identity ideas provided in the article should also be explained in order to more fully represent the methodologies used to map Kazdanga’s identity and cultural heritage.

British geographer Doreen Massey believes that place is more related to an individual sense of belonging, while space is associated with the processes and relationships of a larger community – culture or society [Massey 1994: 146–155]. The concept of place will be used to understand the space inhabited and practiced by a person. Place is a process created by human interaction in space – moving, imagining, traveling, etc. [Massey 1994: 149, 185–189].

The concept of identity refers to an active, conscious process in which meanings are constructed based on individual or collective experience and interaction [Castells 2000: 6–7], thus confirming that identity is symbolic and conditional. The concept of identity includes two criteria for comparison: similarity, common belonging, and difference, which are the dynamic principles of identification [Jenkins 2008: 17]. Individuals can unite in broader groups based on shared values, beliefs, experiences, and interactions while also being aware of their differences (social status, gender, etc.). British archaeologist Christopher Tilley notes that a significant part of the construction of personal and social identity is non-verbal, but material objects, things, and places are also active agents of identity, rather than imperceptible reflections of already existing ideas and socio-political relationships [Tilley 2006: 17–18]. Over time, social identity, as that of the physical space that it pertains to, evolves as new buildings are constructed, landscapes change, technologies advance and historical events shape collective memory. These transformations are generally gradual, allowing place identity – similar to personal identity – to retain both continuity and permanence despite ongoing change.

Place identity is a concept that refers to the individual, community, and sense of belonging (ties) to a specific place, or cultural space [Peng, Strijker, Wu 2020: 2–4]. People have an emotional, psychological, and cultural connection to the place they live in or are closely associated with. Such a concept is implied in the term

“place identity”. Place identity researchers Jianchao Peng, Dirk Strijker, and Qun Wu distinguish two identity characteristics –

- place identity of a place, which is related to how a specific place is identified and distinguished in the context of other places;
- place identity of people, which refers to the residents of a specific place, and their subjective understanding of this place [Peng, Strijker, Wu 2020: 2–4].

The study of place identity is inherently interdisciplinary, involving fields such as geography, psychology, humanities, and social sciences. As a result, the theoretical framework surrounding place identity is highly multifaceted (as discussed by Peng). There is no single methodological approach for analysing place identity, nor a definitive set of criteria for selecting key aspects of the study. However, a common thread in place identity research is the interplay between subjective perceptions and objective classifications, and what seems to be consistent among all literature on place identity, is that identity is inherently spatial – any concept or idea is imagined within a physical space. Place identity changes over time, undergoing transformations in both meaning and symbolism and these changes do not occur autonomously – they are driven by social catalysts, including local inhabitants and other stakeholders.

The interconnection of spatial, temporal and social dimensions is a common thread in place identity, as well as cultural heritage theoretical framework. Cultural heritage values refer to the aesthetic, historical, research, social, spiritual, or other characteristics that current or future generations attribute to a particular place, object, or practice [ICOMOS 2002: 21], while place identity is a concept that applies to the inherent identity of a particular place and its culture and history. It is based on the idea that a particular place can be different from others and that its inhabitants have a special connection to this place, its history and culture. Understanding the identity of Kazdanga can allow for the purposeful promotion and preservation of living heritage, help in the development of place branding, and strengthen the community.

Developing a multidimensional approach to mapping Kazdanga

As stated previously, the initial project aimed to document and analyse Kazdanga's living heritage through fieldwork and interviews. To prepare, the research team reviewed Kazdanga's historical and cultural identity by selecting and annotating four literary sources [Leja 1999; Birzniece 2006; Mežsēta et al. 2008/2013; Šlipenbahs 2023] for relevant facts, descriptions, and events. This process balanced oral histories – which capture residents' subjective perceptions – with structured literary accounts, thereby establishing a framework for subsequent interviews. The literature review metadata table was also designed to establish a balanced dichotomy between the data sources: while the interviews captured residents' personal sense of place, the literature reflects

the intrinsic “place identity” of Kazdanga. While the findings from the interviews have been disseminated at conferences and in publications, the metadata annotations informed a further development of structured metadata to be eventually visualized through digital methods. By breaking down the content of the selected books into smaller, structured data components, the researchers were able to visualize complex relationships using the *Palladio*, an interpretative tool for historical and cultural research, which would enable the creation of diverse visualisations including maps, networks, and timelines that reveal underlying relationships and trends, thereby uncovering non-obvious data connections.

To prepare the dataset for visualisation in *Palladio*, the research team performed a thorough literature analysis to prepare the information for visualisation in *Palladio*, which initially produced more than 670 metadata records that captured important Kazdanga-related events and descriptions. Following a content analysis of each record, keywords were used to identify pertinent themes, including places, persons, eras, and general subjects. Following that, these keywords were categorized into organized groups that were appropriate for cultural heritage studies and compatible with *Palladio's* data visualisation features. In order to facilitate timeline visualisations, a temporal dimension was created by recording the referenced time of each occurrence, either an exact year or an approximation timeframe. Using a location dataset for *Palladio's* mapping functionality, referenced locations were linked to exact geographic coordinates to map spatial linkages. Referenced persons, which identified people connected to historical events and linked them to a different dataset used for *Palladio's* gallery feature, further reflected the social component. Through interactive timelines, maps, and networks, this systematic approach made sure that the metadata could be used for digital visualisations in an efficient manner, exposing historical and cultural relationships.

The absence of widely accepted metadata standards designed especially for intangible or semi-structured cultural data is a recurring issue with this methodology. Existing frameworks offer foundational guidelines, yet they may not be fully adaptable to intangible cultural practices or the nuanced local knowledge embedded in personal narratives. While there have been attempts on creating relational models between cultural heritage and place identity [Kermani et al., 2016], tools like *Palladio* demand data formats and relational structures that are very specific [Stanford Humanities + Design]. For example, genealogical or network-based visualisation requires very strict linking fields such as relationships, and place references. Yet cultural heritage data-rich in nuance and often quite incomplete in locations or dates is quite resistant to compressing into the relationship formats that tools desire. Given these constraints, a bottom-up approach was adopted in this project, allowing the structure to emerge organically rather than being imposed rigidly. This approach was informed by

theoretical literature, textual sources on Kazdanga, interview analyses, and, crucially, the embodied experience of Kazdanga itself, shaped by researchers' insights gathered during two fieldwork trips.

The second phase of the project built upon the first by improving the geographical, temporal, and social components of the metadata framework and adding deeper insights from place identity theory. In order to represent the complex stories of Kazdanga's legacy, the place identity report needed mapping with exact geographic coordinates, linking to photographs for galleries, and interconnected data to reflect the layered narratives of Kazdanga's heritage. To achieve this, metadata categories were broadened to encompass natural landscapes, buildings, personal names, narratives, and occupations. The temporal dimension was enhanced by distinguishing between documented historical events – such as the abolition of serfdom and political revolutions – and symbolic or cultural transformations, including legends, folktales, and related figures like the White Lady. Spatial data was categorized not only by natural landscape features such as hills, lakes, and forests but also by human-made structures, institutional functions, and external references to places beyond Kazdanga, illustrating broader connections. Social metadata classification was similarly refined, identifying individuals by ethnic or national identity, social class, and occupation, while also recognizing how people actively shaped place functionality – transforming buildings into institutions through their roles and interactions. Additionally, institutions and cultural practices, from schools and folklore groups to festivals and communal gatherings, were systematically coded to capture Kazdanga's evolving identity. The complete structure of the metadata table can be observed in Table 1, where temporal dimension categories are coded pink, spatial dimension – in red, social dimension – in blue.

Table 1.

Kazdanga identity map metadata schema.

Literature Review		Referenced Places	Referenced People
Source ID		Place Name	Person Name
Data Entry – 1 event or description		GPS Coordinates	Lifespan
Mentioned Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural Practices • Institutions • Myths and legends 	Description	Description
Mentioned Places	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural Landscape • Artificial Structures 	Link to Image	Link to Image
Mentioned People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occupation • Social Class • Ethnicity 		

Interpretation of Kazdanga's identity through visualisation: A preliminary view

This experiment showed how metadata-driven visualisation might reveal previously undiscovered facets of Kazdanga's culture. Digital visualisation and structured categorisation combined to uncover historical trends, social networks, and physical relationships that provided important new information about Kazdanga's changing identity.

The dataset was further refined when the metadata categories changed, with person and places descriptions added, coordinate data checked, and several data entries combined, as well as supplemented with another literary source [Hänbergs 1970]. Consequently, there are currently 587 coded metadata entries in the dataset. In attempt to balance qualitative observations with automated data aggregation, a structured yet interpretative preliminary portrayals of Kazdanga's cultural heritage and place identity can be modelled.

Out of the 587 metadata entries, 454 are coded with referenced places, highlighting the strong spatial dimension of Kazdanga's cultural identity. Notably, when subdividing natural and cultural landscape objects, the dataset revealed 109 references to natural objects and 208 references to man-made structures. This observation suggests that artificial structures play a more prominent role in textual sources than natural physical objects. However, it is important to note that certain features – such as the park and pond – are in fact human-made, though they do not fit neatly into the subdivision of natural landscape and artificial structures.

When observing spatial patterns of Kazdanga's identity after mapping locations referenced in textual sources through *Palladio Maps* revealed that Kazdanga Castle/ Technical School and its park were the most frequently mentioned sites, spanning both the Baronial era and later periods influenced by the technical school. The historical development of the manor reflects the broader socio-political dynamics of the Baronial era, during which landownership was closely tied to feudal privilege and service. Initially granted as a fief in 1392 by the Livonian Order to the Giseler and Wigandt families, the estate in 1533 came under the control of Karl Soie (documented between 1520 and 1537) [Mašnovskis 2019: 215]. His lineage later adopted the noble name von Manteuffel-Szoega, and retained hereditary ownership of the estate for nearly four centuries – a period in the history of Kazdanga Manor commonly referred to as the Baronial Era. Among Karl Soies's descendants were Karl (d. 1578) and Johann (d. 1583), who successively inherited the property. The lineage concluded with Karl Wilhelm von Manteuffel (1872–1948), whose death marked the end of the Manteuffel family's long-standing noble lineage in the region. This indicates that as historical events and construction purposes evolved, their geographical position



Figure 2. *Palladio Maps* visualization of Kazdanga's places

stayed unchanged, so establishing a feeling of continuity in Kazdanga's cultural landscape. Upon completing the data structuring and refinement process, some differences emerged between the first and second phases of the project (see Figure 2). A significant alteration was the heightened visibility of Valāta Hillfort in the network visualisation, illustrating how additional annotations and broadened metadata categories offered a more accurate depiction of Kazdanga's geographical dimension.

The change in map visualisations can also be ascribed to the addition of another literary source, which offered additional references and new perspectives on the historical significance of the location. Additionally, during both field expeditions, locations were systematically documented, with coordinates recorded and images captured, forming the basis for a *Palladio Gallery* that can function as a visual catalogue of Kazdanga's places. See, for example, Figure 3, where referenced places are displayed with their respective titles, GPS coordinates, descriptions and images gathered during fieldwork. Upon clicking onto the entry a map displaying the geographical coordinates is generated, indicating the precise physical location of the site. However, it is important to note that data refinement primarily took place after the second expedition and many locations still require supplemental information regarding coordinates. Furthermore, even though Kazdanga is the primary focus of the information, it is important to recognize that some of the cited locations are outside of Kazdanga. These were also coded into the table in order to document broader regional and cultural connections of Kazdanga's identity in context with other places.

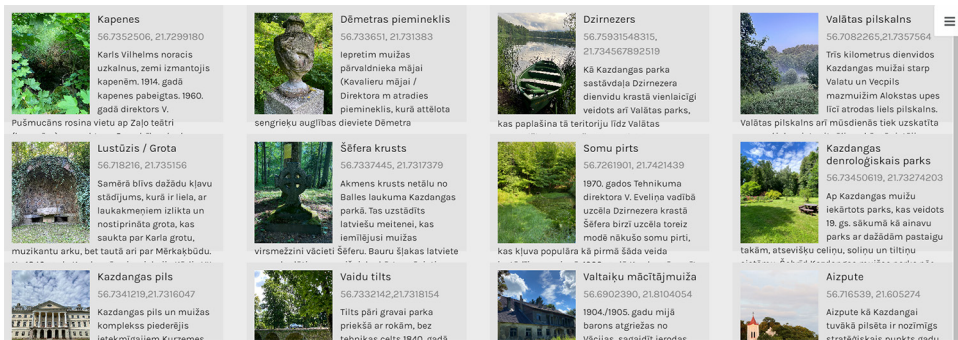


Figure 3. *Palladio* Gallery visualization of Kazdanga's places

Because it makes it easier to track historical continuities and changes within Kazdanga, the temporal dimension is essential to comprehending both cultural legacy and place identity. About 70% of the dataset's entries contain referenced time, and many of them give either exact dates or rough time ranges in cases where the exact years are unknown. While some events have only a single associated date, others span periods and were initially recorded with both a start and end date. To ensure compatibility with *Palladio*, such entries were extracted into a separate table and time coded into two columns ("from" and "to"), as *Palladio* does not support comma-separated values for precise date fields. By structuring the data in this way, the temporal dimension became more accessible for visualisation through *Palladio's* *Timeline* feature.

When events were organized chronologically, *Palladio's* *Timeline* visualisation highlighted several recurring themes, such as park development, sports events, and institutional activities, spanning the Baronial period, the interwar years, and the Soviet era, with World War II serving as a major turning point (see Figure 4). Key historical events included:

- Archaeological excavations at Valāta hillfort (1896, 1902, 1921, 1932).
- The establishment of sports facilities (1918–1940).
- Park landscaping and the foundation of an agricultural school (1930–1931).
- Technical school students' contributions to park maintenance (1944–1990).
- Volunteer activities by nature groups (1970–1980).
- The installation of tree plaques (1988–1989).

One intriguing observation was that both the earliest and latest records on the timeline related to trees – beginning with the park's establishment (1790–1820), followed by extensive tree planting (1890–1914), and culminating in the modern labelling of trees (1988–1989). This suggests that trees serve as a central and symbolic element of Kazdanga's evolving identity.

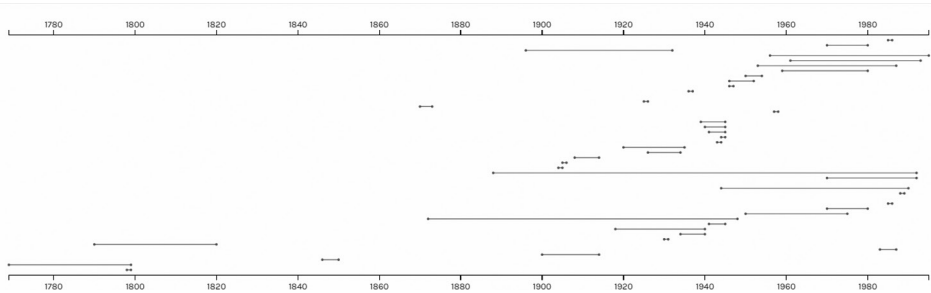


Figure 4. *Palladio Timespan* visualization of events in Kazdanga spanning several years

The importance of the social dimension in Kazdanga's historical narrative is demonstrated by the fact that 281 of the 587 dataset items make reference to particular people. Only 23 entries in this dataset specify nationality or ethnicity, but 188 entries referenced an occupation and 83 – social class. This distribution draws attention to a significant feature of the data: social hierarchies and occupational positions were more frequently recorded than national or ethnic identities. Given the small sample of the literary sources, which are subjective and interpretative in nature, this points more evidently to the fact that to the authors of stories Kazdanga's place identity may have been constructed more through professional and class-based associations than through overt cultural or ethnic markers.

Similar to the spatial visualisation of places, drawing from resources like Aizpute.lv, an interactive gallery visualisation that incorporates existing photographs and descriptions of Kazdanga's historical characters might be created, much like the geographical representation of locations. Furthermore, timespan visualisation is made possible by the years of birth and death of individuals, which may be in line with more general temporal trends in the dataset. A more detailed knowledge of how people's lifespans intersected with historical occurrences and institutional advancements in Kazdanga might be possible with this method.

However, differentiating between generations of the Manteuffel-Baron family, a lineage essential to Kazdanga's history, presents a significant structuring difficulty. The dataset includes multiple individuals with similar or identical names – such as Georgs Manteifeils, Kārlis Vilhelms Georgs, and Karls Gothards Ernsts – which complicates the efforts to differentiate them within network visualisations. While contextual clues can often help identify specific figures, the dynastic nature of this lineage presents a persistent issue in ensuring clear and accurate metadata visualisation.

Network analysis through *Palladio* revealed that Kazdanga's social structure can be visualized through clusters of interconnected individuals, representing micro-communities that played distinct roles in shaping the town's identity. For example,

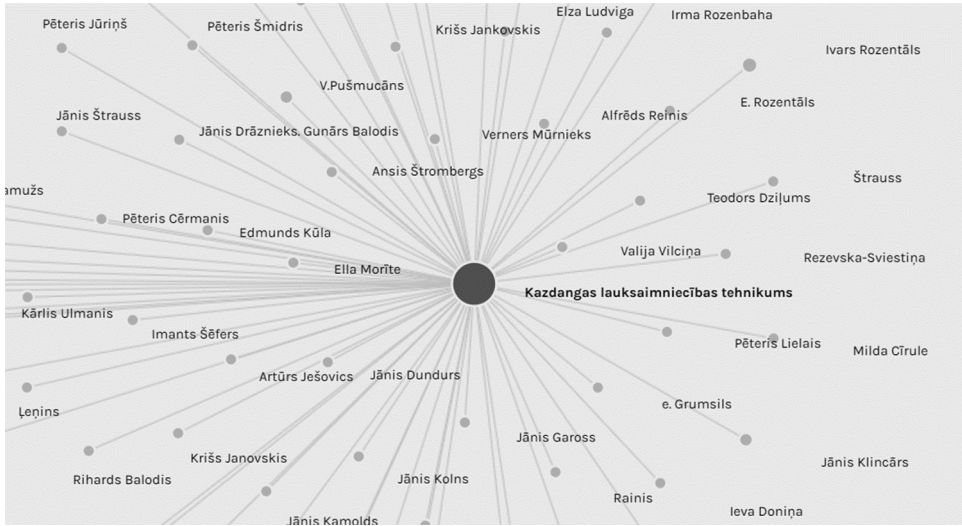


Figure 5. *Palladio* Network visualization fragment of referenced places and people

people related to Kazdanga Technical School through professional associations and educational institutions make up one network cluster (see Figure 5). By tracing the of those associated with the school and by providing additional information in Referenced People table might provide fresh insights into the school's historical relevance and its influence on local communities. Overall, the social dimension of the dataset provides a means to analyse historical relations anachronistically, allowing for a broader structural understanding of how individuals interacted across different periods.

Benefits and challenges of mapping Kazdanga

Cultural heritage data often originates from diverse sources and formats, ranging from stories and personal testimonies, which tend to be inconsistent, include human error, compared to periodical and historical documents with strict dating and a strong factual basis. Working with digital data visualisation tools like *Palladio* and producing cohesive visual representations are made extremely difficult by this variability. Clear metadata development and standardisation criteria are necessary to achieve uniformity in such datasets, especially when data organisation and exploration are done using visual tools like *Palladio*. While *Palladio* provided useful insights into the relationships among people, places, and events, the sparsity of data required some adjustments. In particular, competing geographical names and a lack of historical data made it impossible to ensure historical accuracy. Although more than 70 sites have been located and charted, some are still unconfirmed because of changing names and insufficient historical records.

Similarly, the personal data tables require further refinement, potentially through community-led archival research. A more thorough picture of people's histories might be possible by adding more specific information to the dataset regarding the social dimension, such as dates of birth and death, localities, jobs, and ties to Kazdanga. The spatial dimension is also yet to be strengthened by re-examining areas with missing coordinates and linking more images from data gathered during fieldwork.

Visualisation is not an inherently neutral process. The decisions made during data representation – such as what to include, how to categorize data, and the choice of colours or design elements – can introduce unintended biases. These biases shape how audiences perceive cultural heritage, potentially leading to skewed interpretations [Windhager et al. 2019: 2311–2330]. Projects involving intangible and semi-structured cultural data are especially susceptible to these biases, as strict classification runs the danger of oversimplifying or distorting local knowledge. Working together with the community to improve the dataset in ways that guarantee its beneficial usage for regional stakeholders is crucial in light of these difficulties. However, the degree to which the visualisation may be tailored to these requirements is limited by the design constraints of tools like *Palladio*.

While metadata standards provide structured fields for data entry – such as creator, date, location, and subject – they often fail to accommodate the interpretive elements embedded in local festivals, rituals, and oral traditions. As a result, project researchers had to redefine or create new metadata categories, which holds a risk to result in inconsistent documentation standards and fragmented data. Additional difficulties arise from *Palladio*'s strict data structure, especially when working with ambiguous or partial records, which results in a large number of empty fields that do not cleanly fit into its framework. One example of this limitation is the representation of Kazdanga Park, a large territory that includes both general references to the park as a whole and specific mentions of particular sites within it, such as the Grota or Stirnleja, each with distinct coordinates. *Palladio*'s framework, which is based on discrete point-based data, struggles to accommodate such layered spatial identities. Though instead of being limited by rigid physical definitions, these diverse perceptions of place identity can still be investigated in a more flexible, interpretative way by utilizing the dataset's interconnectedness. In this case, the challenge is mitigated by using a general “park” tag – classified under the “artificial structure” dimension – which links broader narratives and events associated with Kazdanga Park to more specific, geolocated sites within it.

Questions of data consistency and reinterpretation are brought up by the diverse nature of the dataset, which has been enlarged and altered throughout time by various researchers. Because individuals from a variety of backgrounds have contributed varied methods for gathering and labelling data, the dataset has expanded naturally.

This is especially clear in the records of individuals mentioned, where differences in documentation techniques (e.g., using initials rather than full names) indicate limitations in the source material as well as human error. While such inconsistencies might initially seem like data loss, they also offer opportunities for reinterpretation, as gaps in the dataset can be refined through additional research, substantial data cleaning, and supplementing that with placeholders of “best guesses”; every interpretation during data cleaning, however, diminishes the capacity of the material for its representation.

This ongoing development of the dataset illustrates the dynamic and contentious manner in which history is documented and interpreted, symbolically reflecting the fluidity of heritage and identity itself. This is consistent with the larger ‘data vs. capta’ debate [Drucker, 2020], which challenges the notion that data is an objective reality and emphasizes that it is always a result of representation, interpretation, and selection. As a work in progress, the Kazdanga Cultural Map offers a chance to critically interact with this discussion, showing how cultural heritage initiatives need to strike a balance between the subjectivity of historical knowledge and the structural nature of data.

The long-term maintenance of digital cultural heritage visualisations is also an important issue. Preserving digital values, especially in a constantly changing technological environment, requires ongoing investment and the allocation of resources that cultural institutions do not always have at their disposal. Recognizing that work with multiple format spreadsheets and applying *Palladio*, as well as other digital humanities tools, requires technical expertise, there is a need to develop accessible and sustainable solutions for both academic and community use. Two potential approaches include:

1. Developing an organized, navigable database of maps and galleries that is enhanced with metadata and descriptions to serve as a ready-made browsing catalogue for residents.
2. Collaborative data entry, organisation, visualisation, and interpretation could be facilitated by setting up workshops with nearby schools, guaranteeing that the dataset stays dynamic and representative of community viewpoints. Many entries on people remain incomplete, and local knowledge – particularly from long-time residents – could provide valuable missing details.

Visualisation of cultural heritage data can mediate between complex, large amounts of data and human perception and understanding, while also functioning as an accelerator for new, creative ways of exploring research paths. Data visualisation has the potential to enable fresh interpretations and meaningful interactions between researchers and their research objects, revealing previously unseen

patterns and connections, as well as creating qualitative, binding engagement with the audience. This approach not only enhances comprehension but also prompts new interpretations, as evidenced in the Kazdanga cultural heritage mapping project, where visualisation led to new research directions and, at the same time, highlighted significant challenges.

Conclusion

Through the integration of spatial, temporal, and social factors as they relate to a place identity, this study sought to document and depict Kazdanga's cultural history through structured metadata. The use of digital humanities tools, particularly *Palladio*, allowed for a novel approach to mapping and analysing historical and cultural data. The project offered several advantages by examining underlying relationships between various facets of place identification through the organizing of data from multiple textual sources. The dataset gave researchers a starting point for additional research into Kazdanga identity, allowing for a more complex comprehension of the connections between individuals, locations, and cultural narratives. For local stakeholders, such as business owners and institutional representatives, structured data can inform the strategic development of Kazdanga's identity and branding. Additionally, because the dataset might be utilized in partnership with the local government and schools to improve digital literacy and cultural involvement, the initiative offers the local people a chance to interact with digital technologies. Kazdanga's digital heritage effort can improve data integrity, conserve local knowledge, and encourage a sense of ownership among inhabitants by incorporating community engagement into the project's workflow. By doing this, the initiative adopts a dynamic, interactive approach to documenting cultural heritage rather than a static portrayal of the past.

In conclusion, there are opportunities and challenges associated with an experimental, multifaceted strategy like this one. Because historical and oral data are fragmented, a flexible approach is necessary, and although *Palladio* is a powerful tool, it must be carefully modified to accommodate qualitative and incomplete data. However, these challenges also open avenues for collaborative knowledge-building, engaging both researchers and the local community in an ongoing process of mapping, interpreting, and preserving Kazdanga's cultural heritage.

Acknowledgment

Project "Kazdanga – from place stories to community identity networking and cultural heritage digitization" is supported by the research project programme "Development of Scientific Activities at the Latvian Academy of Culture" of the Institute of Arts and Cultural Studies of the Latvian Academy of Culture.

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