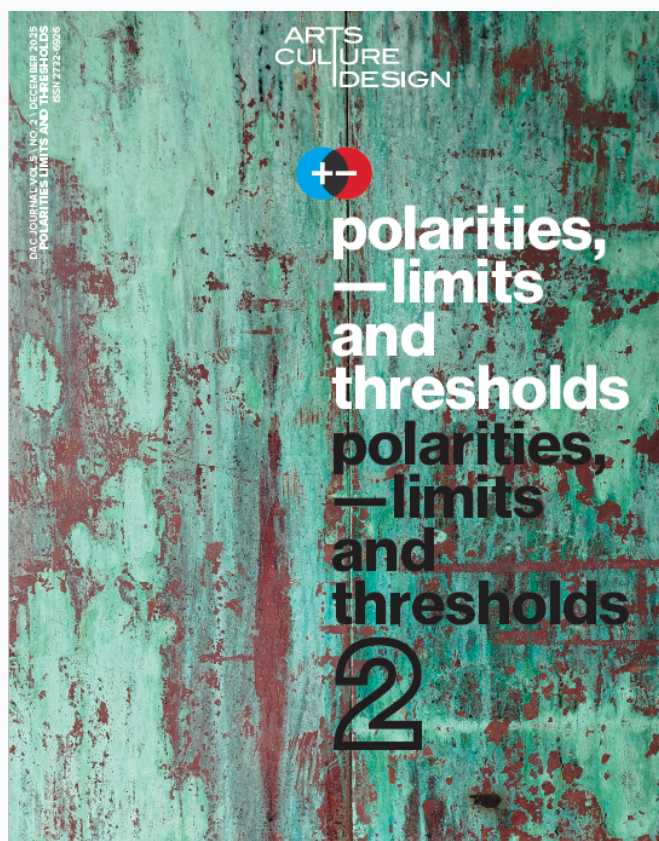# Design/Arts/Culture

POLARITIES, LIMITS AND THRESHOLDS

CULTURAL METAMORPHOSIS: KAFKA AND THE THRESHOLDS OF EDITORIAL DESIGN

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VISUAL ESSAY

CULTURAL METAMORPHOSIS: KAFKA AND THE THRESHOLDS OF EDITORIAL DESIGN

ABSTRACT

In 2024, the centenary of Franz Kafka's death inspired a collaborative academic project between the University of Design, Innovation and Technology (UDIT), Madrid and the School of Arts and Design (ESAD), Matosinhos. The initiative, entitled Kafka 2024, reinterpreted The Metamorphosis (1915) through editorial design as both a tribute to Kafka and a pedagogical experiment. The project was developed in five phases: an online workshop, a shared editorial briefing, six weeks of remote collaborative production, a public presentation at ESAD, and the final synthesis in a bilingual publication.

This article analyzes the experience in relation to the theme "Polarities, Limits and Thresholds". Results show that cultural and media polarities functioned as generative dialogues, institutional and temporal limits operated as catalysts for innovation, and pedagogical thresholds facilitated the transition from local classroom learning to international collaborative practice. Beyond the printed outcomes, the project fostered intercultural competencies, critical reflection on design processes, and reinforced institutional networks.

The study demonstrates that editorial design can serve as a laboratory for applied research, capable of producing both creative artifacts and transferable pedagogical models. The collaboration between UDIT and ESAD illustrates how canonical literature can be reactivated as a framework for contemporary design education, where metamorphosis becomes a metaphor for learning in transition—from local to global, from theory to practice.

INTRODUCTION

In 2024, the centenary of Franz Kafka's death was commemorated. Kafka is one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century, whose work has inspired not only literature but also philosophy, cinema, and the visual arts. Among his most emblematic texts,

The Metamorphosis (1915) occupies a central place due to the symbolic power of its narrative and its capacity to engage diverse audiences across a century. The story of Gregor Samsa, who awakens transformed into a monstrous and undefined creature, remains a paradigmatic account of alienation, transformation, and the fragility of human identity.

On the occasion of this anniversary, the University of Design, Innovation and Technology (UDIT), Madrid, launched an international academic project and invited the School of Arts and Design (ESAD), Matosinhos, to participate. The initiative, carried out during the 2023/24 academic year, aimed to reinterpret Kafka's work through a collaborative exercise in graphic and editorial design, culminating in the production of a bilingual magazine conceived both as a tribute to Kafka and as a pedagogical experiment.

The project brought together students and faculty from both institutions in a process articulated in two complementary phases. First, an online collaborative workshop was organized, focused on analyzing The Metamorphosis, its historical context, and its cultural references. To support this work, participants were provided with a creative kit designed as a tool for experimentation, serving as a starting point for generating ideas for the editorial project. This workshop constituted the first contact between the two universities, fostering mutual understanding and laying the foundations for collaborative development.

The following stage consisted of six weeks of remote work, structured through collaborative production dynamics that enabled the advancement of editorial proposals. Subsequently, in April 2024, a group of students and faculty from UDIT traveled to ESAD in Matosinhos to present the final results in the institution's auditorium. This face-to-face encounter included the public exhibition of the collective magazines, spaces for academic dialogue, and detailed feedback, significantly enriching the learning experience.

This article analyzes the experience in relation to the theme "Polarities, Limits and Thresholds". It argues that the UDIT–ESAD case constitutes a revealing example of how international collaboration in design can be interpreted through these three categories. The research questions that guide this study are as follows:

— How did the cultural, temporal, and media polarities of the project contribute to enriching the creative experience?

— In what ways did the academic, formal, and organizational limits transform into catalysts for innovation?

— What pedagogical and conceptual thresholds did the students cross in their transition from the local classroom to an international, professionalizing project?

It is hypothesized that polarities, limits, and thresholds did not operate as obstacles, but rather as generative structures that enhanced both the creative outcomes and the development of intercultural and professional competencies.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This theoretical framework brings together the conceptual perspectives that allow for the interpretation of the Kafka 2024 project. Four dimensions are addressed: cultural polarities and thresholds, design pedagogy and collaborative learning, editorial design as an

experimental laboratory, and creativity under constraint. These axes provide the basis for analyzing both the creative processes and the learning outcomes generated.

3.1. CULTURAL POLARITIES AND THRESHOLDS

The concept of cultural thresholds has its roots in the studies of van Gennep (1960 [1909]) on rites of passage, in which the stages of separation, transition, and incorporation were distinguished. This structure was later expanded by Turner (1969), who emphasized the importance of intermediate moments in which ordinary social categories are suspended, giving rise to states of indeterminacy where new forms of identity emerge. From this perspective, polarities—old/new, local/global, individual/collective—are not rigid oppositions but generative tensions that stimulate transformation.

Building on these foundations, Bhabha (1994) transferred the debate to cultural studies through the notion of "in-between spaces." These intermediate spaces are understood as sites of negotiation and hybridization where identities are not eliminated but reformulated, resulting in hybrid cultural configurations. In the educational field, this vision makes it possible to understand international design projects as border environments in which students learn to operate at the intersection of diverse languages, traditions, and methodologies.

More recently, Castells (1996) has demonstrated how the network society multiplies these dynamics of hybridization in a globalized context characterized by the digital circulation of information and cultural references. In this scenario, cultural thresholds are not produced only in rituals of passage or face-to-face encounters, but also in virtual and transnational spaces that define much of contemporary experience.

The collaboration between UDIT and ESAD can be interpreted in light of these approaches. The project positioned itself at a cultural threshold between institutions and countries, embodying the dynamics described by Castells: fluid academic identities, the digital circulation of references, and the hybrid production of visual knowledge. In this way, Spanish and Portuguese students constructed a shared space that overcame linguistic and institutional differences, producing editorial works that reflected a transnational aesthetic.

3.2. DESIGN PEDAGOGY AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

The teaching of contemporary design is increasingly oriented toward active methodologies in which learning is constructed through practice, research, and collaboration. In this regard, Kolmos and de Graaff (2014) highlight the value of project-based learning (PBL) and problem-based learning (PBL) as strategies that place the student at the center of the process, confronting them with complex situations that require inquiry, prototyping, and creative problem-solving.

These proposals dialogue with Schön's (1983) vision of the reflective practitioner, who learns through action and critical reflection on action. This perspective is particularly relevant in graphic design, where each visual decision involves not only a formal aspect but also a conceptual justification linked to processes of communication.

In the same vein, Biggs and Tang (2011) emphasized the importance of constructive alignment, understood as the coherence between learning objectives, activities, and evaluation. From this perspective, the Kafka 2024 project can be considered a clear example of how design pedagogy integrates formative competencies with tangible professional outcomes: the production of a bilingual magazine with a real briefing and international deadlines.

In the Spanish context, Hernández (2008) has stressed the need to incorporate educational practices that promote creativity, collaboration, and the connection between theory and practice in art and design teaching. These reflections reinforce the relevance of experiences such as the UDIT—ESAD collaboration, which placed students in an intercultural and experimental learning environment, transforming the classroom into a space of shared research and creation.

3.3. EDITORIAL DESIGN AS AN EXPERIMENTAL LABORATORY

Editorial design has historically been a space of aesthetic and conceptual innovation. Drucker (1994) demonstrated how the typographic avant-gardes of the early twentieth century transformed the page into a field of experimentation, challenging the linearity of text and proposing new forms of reading. In a complementary line, Lupton (2004) argued that typography and editorial design should be understood as an autonomous visual language, capable of producing meaning beyond the mere transmission of verbal content.

These perspectives have been extended in later debates on design as a cultural and critical practice, in which Bonsiepe (1999) emphasized the possibilities of the editorial medium as a site of inquiry and reflection. In this way, editorial design is configured not only as a vehicle for communication but also as a laboratory of aesthetic and conceptual exploration.
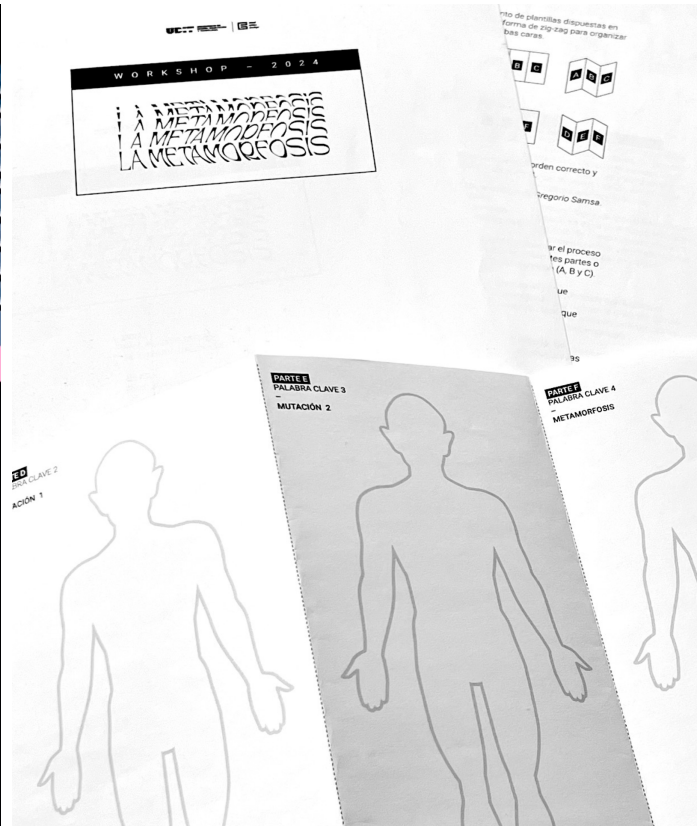
The Kafka 2024 project can be read as an update of this experimental tradition. The integration of heterogeneous techniques—collage, illustration, photography, animation—enabled the creation of a visual laboratory in which print and digital media intersected. The polarity between literary text and graphic image became the generative core of a hybrid discourse that not only reinterpreted a literary classic but also explored new forms of editorial narrative in an intercultural pedagogical context.

3.4. CREATIVITY UNDER CONSTRAINT

Numerous studies have demonstrated that constraints can function as stimuli for creativity. Stokes (2005) argues that innovation arises precisely from working with limitations that compel creators to seek original solutions, while Amabile (1996) maintains that intrinsic motivation increases when challenges combine freedom and structure.

In the field of design, Brown (2009) emphasized that well-defined problems generate fertile environments for innovation, in line with the tradition inaugurated by Simon (1969), who conceived design as a discipline oriented toward the creative resolution of problems.

The Kafka 2024 project illustrates how restrictions can be transformed into catalysts of visual exploration. The editorial briefing, which established dimensions, typography, and a commemorative logo, provided a framework that encouraged experimentation. Added to this were the temporal and organizational conditions of an international collaboration, which required students to articulate clear and efficient proposals within a limited timeframe and in dialogue with another institution. Far from

being perceived as obstacles, these constraints enhanced the search for contemporary graphic languages to update a 1915 text, confirming that creativity in design thrives on the tension between norm and innovation.

4. METHODOLOGY

The Kafka 2024 project was developed in five main phases that articulated the collaboration between UDIT (Madrid) and ESAD (Matosinhos). A total of 60 students participated in the experience —30 from UDIT and 30 from ESAD—, supported by faculty members from both institutions. To encourage intercultural interaction, participants were organized into mixed groups of ten, composed of five Spanish and five Portuguese students. The collaborative work unfolded over a total period of six weeks, combining virtual and face-to-face dynamics.

4.1. ONLINE WORKSHOP

The project began with an online workshop divided into two sessions. The first introduced students to Kafka's The Metamorphosis (1915), its historical context, and a selection of visual references from diverse creative fields. The second session took the form of a practical workshop, in which students received a creative kit designed as a tool for experimentation. The kit encouraged them to explore the theme of metamorphosis through the protagonist's transformation, using graphic resources as a starting point for generating editorial ideas.

This workshop constituted the first contact between the two institutions, promoting mutual understanding and establishing the foundations for collaborative development. As a closing activity, a multimedia animation was produced that integrated the students' contributions, symbolizing the ongoing transformation of the character and reinforcing the central theme of the project.

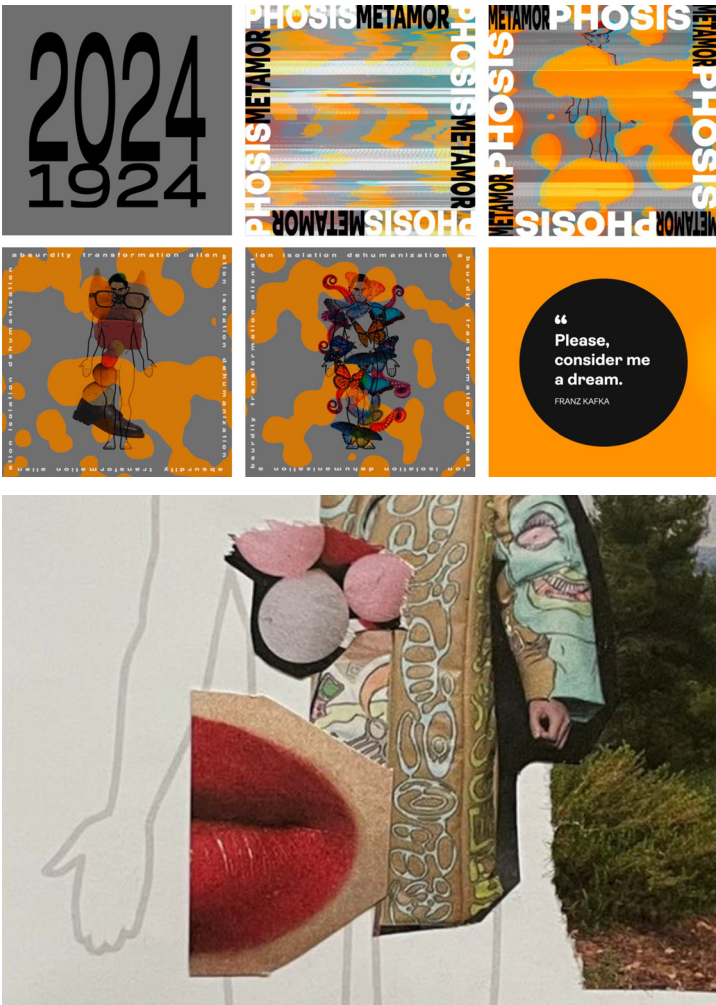#### 4.2. EDITORIAL PROJECT BRIEFING

Following the workshop, students were organized into mixed working groups combining participants from both Spain and Portugal, and the editorial briefing was presented. The assignment consisted of creating a collective magazine that reinterpreted The Metamorphosis (1915) in a bilingual format.

The briefing specified key design parameters—format, number of pages, and the inclusion of a commemorative logo marking Kafka's centenary—while granting students freedom in the use of creative techniques (photography, collage, digital illustration, vector graphics, among others). In addition to the visual proposals, students were asked to produce a reflective essay exploring the symbolism of the work and its relevance to contemporary contexts.

At UDIT, the project was integrated into the second-year curriculum of the Multimedia and Graphic Design degree, within the course on Editorial Design and Layout.

4.3. REMOTE PRODUCTION

Over a six-week period, the groups advanced their editorial proposals through collaborative dynamics supported by digital tools. This phase required students to coordinate schedules, share files, and negotiate design decisions in an intercultural and multilin-

Figure 1/2/3
Overview of the international project The Metamorphosis, presentation by Professor Renato Seixas exploring the symbolism and artistic context of Kafka's work; communication and promotion of the workshop through social media; and the creative kit that served as the starting point for students to develop their visual concepts.

gual environment. Remote collaboration not only facilitated the comparison of ideas and progress but also functioned as training in professional competencies related to teamwork and project management in international contexts.

4.4. ON-SITE PRESENTATION AT ESAD

In April 2024, students and faculty from UDIT traveled to Matosinhos to present the results at the ESAD auditorium. This event represented a moment of academic and professional validation, offering students the opportunity to publicly exhibit their collective magazines and justify their design decisions before a specialized audience.

The session included academic dialogue, critical feedback from faculty, and intercultural exchange, reinforcing the international dimension of the learning process.

4.5. SYNTHESIS AND DISSEMINATION

The final stage involved compiling the results into a publication that documented both the creative processes and the pedagogical dynamics of the project. Beyond serving as an academic record, this publication operated as a closing product that consolidated learning, enriched students' portfolios, and enhanced the institutional visibility of the UDIT–ESAD collaboration.

4.6. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study is framed as a qualitative case study (Yin, 2009), aimed at analyzing the Kafka 2024 experience through the categories of polarities, limits, and thresholds. These categories serve as interpretive lenses for examining both the editorial outcomes and the learning processes derived from the collaboration.The analysis also incorporates pedagogical criteria—interculturality, collaborative competencies—and design criteria—creative processes, editorial solutions, and graphic experimentation. This dual perspective positions the project at the intersection of academic training and professional practice in design.

5. ANALYSIS

The analysis of the Kafka 2024 project is organized around the categories of polarities, limits, and thresholds, as proposed in the ESAD call for papers. These categories operate as interpretative frameworks for examining the creative and pedagogical dynamics of the project, showing how international collaboration in design was articulated through tensions, constraints, and transitions.

5.1. POLARITIES

The Kafka 2024 project engaged a series of polarities that functioned as creative drivers. Culturally and geographically, the interaction between Spanish and Portuguese students enabled a productive crossing of pedagogical traditions and aesthetic approaches. Temporally and conceptually, a literary work from 1915 was reinterpreted from the cultural horizon of 2024, updating its symbols for contemporary audiences. On the level of medium and message, textual essays were combined with graphic explorations in both printed and digital formats. Finally, at the individual and collective level, personal contributions were synthesized into a joint publication.

Figure 4/5/6
Student engagement during the opening workshop, alongside examples of the creative outcomes produced. These results culminated in an animation that brought together the students' contributions (video available at https://vimeo.com/942717045).

Clear examples of this interplay were observed in the heterogeneous techniques employed: some students worked with manual collage inspired by historical avant-gardes, while others explored digital collage in Photoshop and vector illustration in Illustrator. The result was a dialogue between visual languages that enriched the project with a distinctly transnational aesthetic.

5.2. LIMITS

Constraints also played a central role in the pedagogical dynamics. At the formal level, the briefing established parameters such as page count and the inclusion of a commemorative logo. At the organizational level, the project had to be completed within six weeks, combining virtual phases with a final on-site presentation in Matosinhos. At the creative level, the initial kit provided a common framework that each student interpreted in their own way.

Far from acting as barriers, these restrictions became stimuli for exploration. This was evident in the typographic reinterpretations of the logo, the conceptual photography experiments, and the hybrid solutions that combined traditional and digital techniques. In this sense, limits functioned not as obstacles but as catalysts for innovation.

5.3. THRESHOLDS

The project also made it possible to identify different thresholds of learning and creation. On a pedagogical level, students moved from literary analysis to the complete production of an editorial artifact, experiencing the passage from theory to practice. On a technological level, digital platforms such as Zoom and WhatsApp were integrated with face-to-face dynamics, producing a hybrid learning environment characteristic of contemporary education. On a conceptual and cultural level, Kafka's symbols were reinterpreted as metaphors for current issues—alienation, digitalization, and contemporary anxiety—granting the project both critical and cultural resonance.

This transition was not only technical but also identitary: students shifted roles, moving from local participants to agents in an international project, with implications for both their academic formation and professional development.

6. RESULTS

The results of the Kafka 2024 project can be examined on multiple levels—creative, pedagogical, institutional, and cultural—articulated through the categories of polarities, limits, and thresholds proposed in the ESAD call for papers.

6.1. POLARITIES AS CREATIVE DIALOGUE

The crossing of cultural and aesthetic traditions from Spain and Portugal generated a space of exchange materialized in the bilingual magazines produced collectively. These magazines embodied a productive tension between tradition and contemporaneity: a 1915 literary work was reinterpreted within the cultural horizon of 2024 through contemporary graphic languages.

The combination of text and image—reflective essays alongside visual explorations—resulted in a hybrid discourse that positioned editorial design as a medium for experimentation. Some groups employed manual collage techniques inspired by histor-
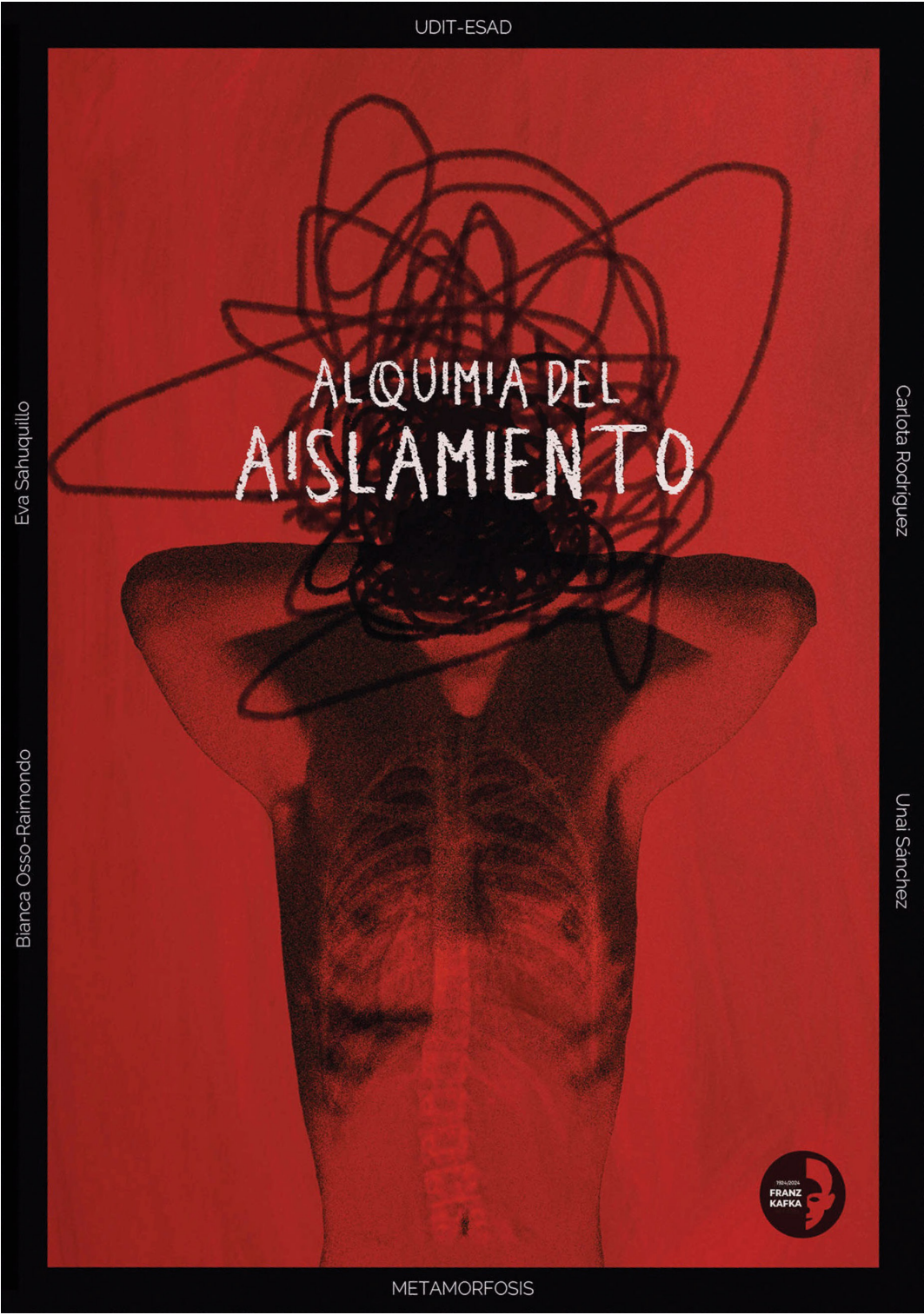

Figure 7/8/9
Alquimia del aislamiento
[Alchemy of Isolation] (2024).

Images from the magazine created by Bianco Osso-Raimondo, Carlota Rodríguez, Eva Sahuquillo and Unai Sánchez. Manual collage with digital treatment.
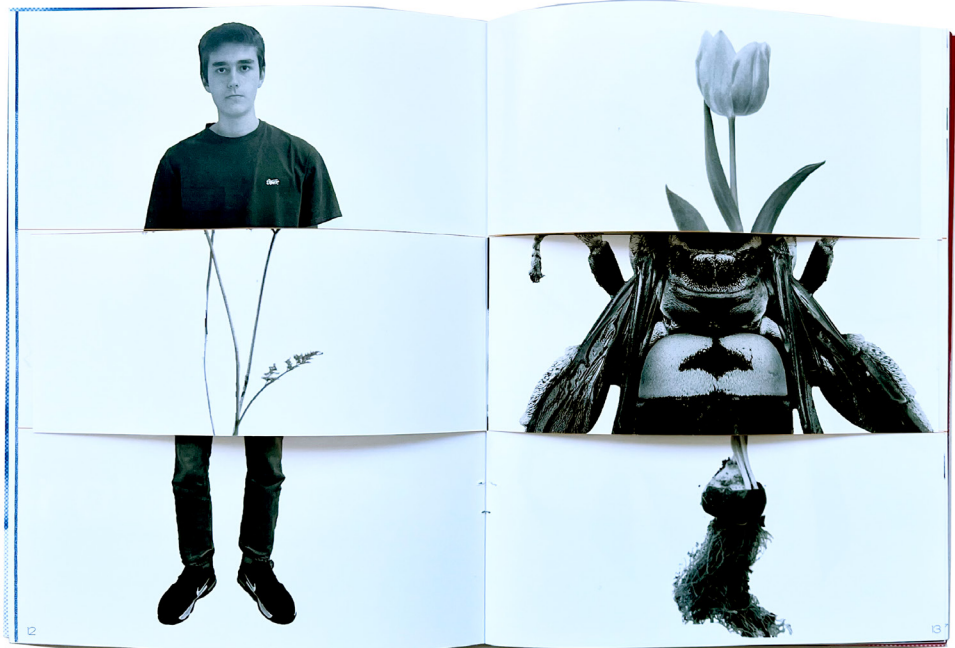
Figure 10/11/12
Viaje a través del cambio
[Journey Through Change]
(2024).

Images from the magazine
created by Ayla Cano, Candela
Sobrino, Laura Lozano and Sara
Sánchez.
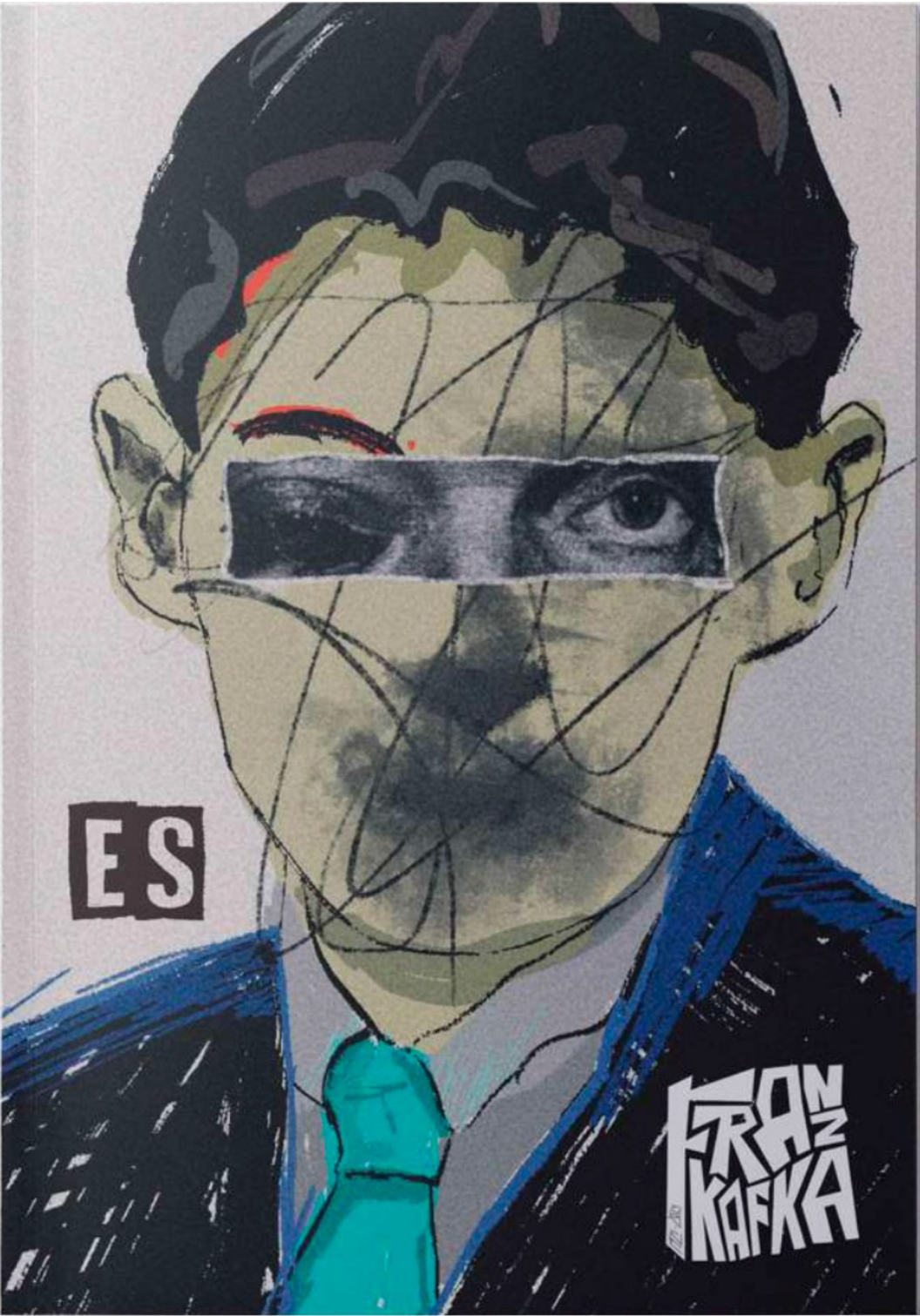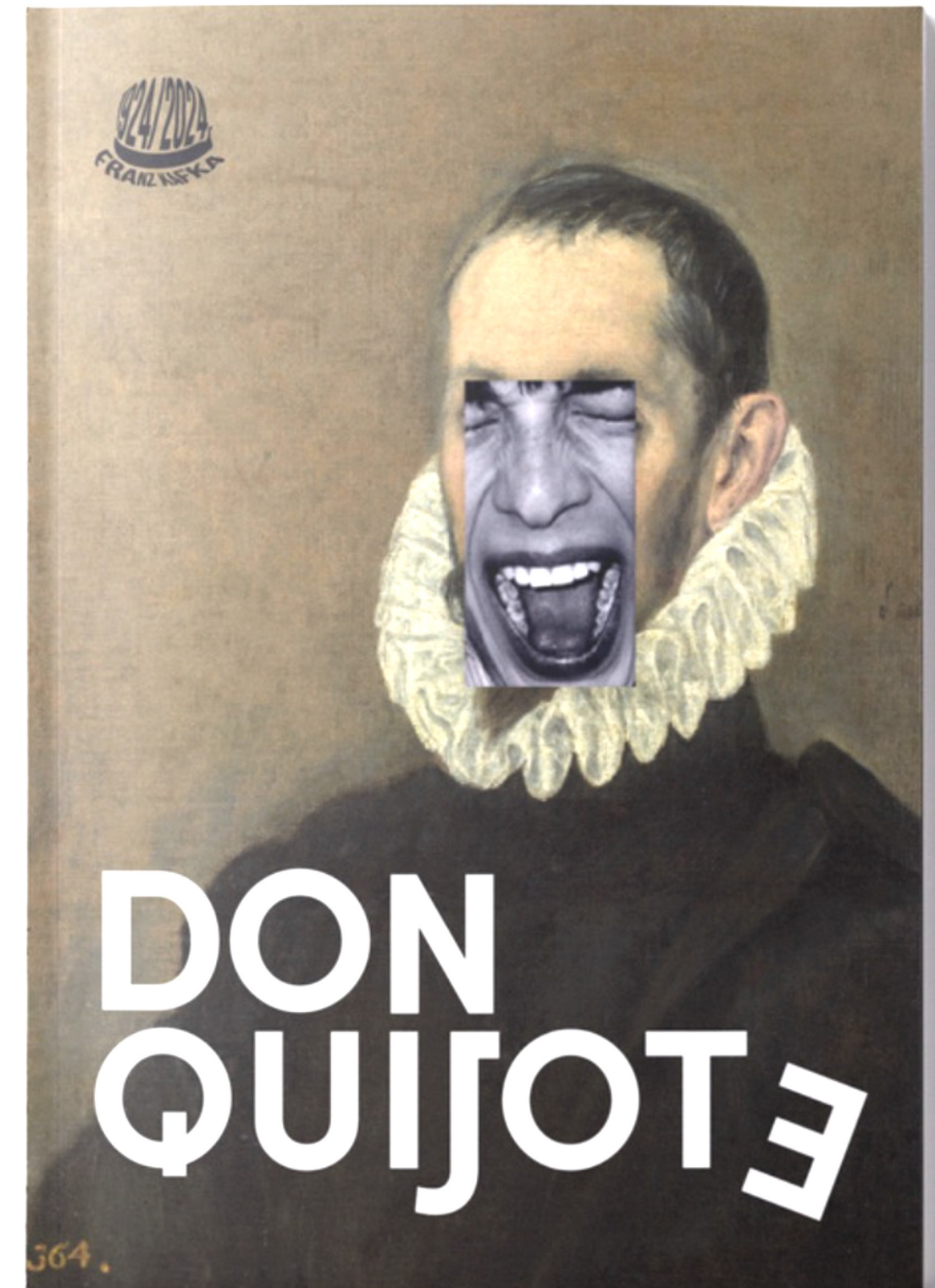Manual collage with digital
treatment.

Figure 13/14/15
Distorsiones [Distorsions] (2024).

Images from the magazine
created by Blanca Ruiz, Lorena
Sánchez, Miguel Barahona and
Teresa García.
Manual collage with digital
treatment.

Figure 16/17/18
Don Quijote [Don Quixote] (2024).

Images from the magazine
created by Adriana Baena,
Alejandra Viveros, María Reyero
and Pedro Álvarez.
Manual collage with digital
treatment.

ical avant-gardes, while others worked with digital collage and vector illustration in software such as Photoshop and Illustrator. This interplay demonstrated how polarities, far from producing conflict, became engines of innovation and enriched the project with a transnational aesthetic.

6.2. LIMITS AS DRIVERS OF INNOVATION

The editorial briefing defined a clear formal framework that included parameters such as minimum page count and the use of a commemorative logo. These requirements, combined with the time constraint of six weeks and the coordination between two institutions in different countries, became stimuli for creative exploration. Students reinterpreted the logo through typographic variations, experimented with conceptual photography, and combined traditional techniques with digital resources. The outcomes showed that limits were not perceived as obstacles but as catalysts for innovative solutions in editorial design.

6.3. PEDAGOGICAL AND CULTURAL THRESHOLDS

The project also revealed the crossing of thresholds at different levels. Pedagogically, students moved from literary analysis of The Metamorphosis to the complete production of a professional-grade magazine, experiencing a situated learning process that integrated theory and practice. Technologically, digital platforms such as Zoom, WhatsApp, and shared online workspaces were combined with face-to-face dynamics, consolidating a hybrid model characteristic of contemporary education.

On a conceptual and cultural level, Kafka's symbols were updated as metaphors for current issues—alienation, digitalization, and contemporary anxiety—granting the project a critical and socially resonant dimension. This passage also implied a change in the students' roles: from local participants to active agents in an international project with institutional visibility.

6.4. VISUAL DOCUMENTATION

The creative outcomes were also synthesized into visual documentation that illustrates the variety of approaches explored by the student groups. These include bilingual magazines that reinterpret Kafka's narrative through hybrid editorial strategies. The following figures 1–12 present selected pages from the projects, highlighting the diversity of visual languages and the experimental use of collage, illustration, and digital media.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the Kafka 2024 project shows that polarities, limits, and thresholds did not operate as obstacles but as generative structures that enriched the learning experience in design. Cultural, temporal, and media polarities confirmed the relevance of negotiation spaces described by Bhabha (1994), fostering creative dialogue between diverse traditions and languages. Limits—whether formal, temporal, or organizational—validated what Stokes (2005) and Amabile (1996) emphasize: well-defined constraints can act as engines of innovation. Thresholds—pedagogical, technological, and conceptual—resonated with Castells' (1996) observations on the network society, where contemporary learning emerges at the intersection of the local and the global, the physical and the digital.

Beyond the specific results, the UDIT–ESAD case demonstrates that graphic design education can function as a laboratory of applied research, capable of producing not only editorial artifacts but also pedagogical knowledge. The model developed here is transferable to other international academic contexts, where the combination of real-world projects, productive constraints, and intercultural collaboration can foster meaningful learning and professional competencies.

At the same time, certain limitations must be acknowledged: the study was limited to a single project, carried out over six weeks and involving only two institutions, which restricts the generalizability of its findings. However, these limitations open the way for future research, which could replicate the model in other academic contexts, explore its application to different creative disciplines (such as fashion, video games, or music), or evaluate its long-term impact on students' professional trajectories.

Ultimately, the project reaffirms Kafka's continuing relevance as a framework for exploring processes of transformation. In this sense, metamorphosis extends beyond the literary character, becoming a metaphor for learning in transition: from the classroom to the world, from the local to the international, from theory to practice.

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