

THE CINEFICATION OF MUSEUMS: FROM EXHIBITIONS TO FILMS. THE CASE OF TATE MODERN

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Abstract

Since the end of the 20th century, museum institutions have been adopting the logic of communication, promotion, and administration typical of cultural industries, mainly Cinema. In 1994, Andreas Huyssen argued that the museum, as an elitist place of preservation of canon and high culture, gave way to the museum as a mass medium. Cinema became the paradigm of contemporary cultural activities whose new exhibition practices respond to the changing expectations of the public and their constant search for stellar events.

This process is evident in the increasing use of banners, marquees, and all manner of resources aimed at promoting the temporary exhibitions gaining their place as the main attractions of art museums. Moreover, with the advent of social media, the phenomenon of *cinefication* of the museum has accelerated. Exhibitions are now titled, conceived, promoted, and

distributed as films, while artists, adorned by the figure of the genius, are presented as parts of the art history star system.

In order to highlight this phenomenon, we present an analysis of the programming and promotion of temporary exhibitions at Tate Modern, the paradigm of 21st-century museums. This institution not only titles its exhibitions in a cinematographic manner but also produces trailers and posts them on its website and social media. Our work focuses on one exhibition in particular: *Picasso 1932, Love, Fame, Tragedy*. To this end we observed both the curatorial discourse and the communication strategies applied by Tate.

This paper is part of a research project that includes MoMA, Malba, Centre Pompidou, and Reina Sofia. The study of this phenomenon will provide an overview of the epochal style of modern art museums in the conception and communication of modern and contemporary art exhibitions.

Keywords: modern art museums, museums communication, semiotics of space, contemporary art exhibitions, cinema, cultural industries, exhibitions trailers

Blockbuster exhibitions and the transformation of art museums

The emergence of the so-called blockbuster exhibitions in the 1970s highlighted the development of a new paradigm which would govern the museum system in the 21st century. It would impose new ways of exhibiting, promoting, and making works of art and collections available to the public but also of conceiving the museum institution itself.

Emma Barker (1999) exposes the complex situation of museums by including this format, considered as a phenomenon which emerged in the early 1990s and encompassed all types of exhibitions, including the so-called “masters of painting.” This type of show, financed by sponsors, enables institutions to cover production and promotion costs and attract a more considerable number of visitors. In fact, their main characteristic is the success in terms of attendance (to be considered as such, they require at least a minimum attendance of 250,000 visitors) (Barker 1999: 127), and as part of their promotion, secondary products and services are included, among them, the pre-sale of tickets which allows visitors to gain access without queuing.

Blockbuster exhibitions not only establish relationships between museums and private capitals but also between cultural institutions. Consequently, they tend to be itinerant. The first exhibition considered as such

was “The Treasures of Tutankhamun,” exhibited for the first time in 1972 at the British Museum in London (with a historical record of visits) following its tour in the United States (from 1976 to 1979) where it was exhibited in Washington DC, New York, Chicago, New Orleans, L.A., Seattle, and San Francisco. The “itinerancy effect” poses a complex problem: the ambition of “universality.” Museums try to present the history of art and artists according to themes and ideas “shared by all.”

Although the term “blockbuster” may sound very familiar to us, it does not belong to the history of “fine arts” but rather to the field of film studios. It refers to films produced by commercially successful American studios in the post-war period using the name of a powerful bomb of mass destruction employed during World War II. What is interesting is that the description of this type of film, as we will see below, describes blockbuster exhibitions in a similar way.

Some claim that these exhibitions promote the democratization of culture since they attract people who usually do not go to museums. Others maintain that this is an “illusion.” The former assert that “they serve to educate and entertain the public, bringing prestige and profit to the host institution” (Alber Elsen (1986) cited by Barker 1999: 127). The latter argue that “the huge crowds attending the exhibition and the hype surrounding it mean that visitors are unable to have any meaningful or even enjoyable contact with the works of art” (Baker 1999: 127).

Criticism of these exhibitions also focuses on their commercial character and goal of making profits through souvenirs, merchandising, and catalogues. The latter is crucial since the intervention of companies in the conception of exhibitions has extended to the publication of their catalogues: “some commentators contend that art museums are reluctant to mount “revisionist” or “critical” exhibitions because they fear antagonizing their business sponsors and other donors” (Barker 1999: 133).

Nevertheless, the critique of blockbuster exhibitions does not always directly attack the shows themselves, but rather the transformations in the museum system accompanying their emergence. From this perspective, Paul Preciado (2017) highlights the inclusion within the system of cultural industries, taking as a metaphor the illumination of the museum (close to concerts, cinema, and advertising). In that sense, he claims that the current museum must be called a *Necromuseum* that displays emptied, devoured, or destroyed artworks.

Preciado argues that, in the 21st century, cultural institutions aim to transform themselves into semi-corporations with a good credit perspective. This is why they ask “info-workers” to exhibit under a *big-name* logic, and this

leads us directly to blockbuster exhibitions. This results in the emergence of a baroque-financial museum, a semiotic machine that produces “a meaning without history, a single sensory, continuous and smooth product in which Björk, Picasso, and Time Square are interchangeable.” For this reason, he suggests the creation of a turned-off museum: to “turn off the lights so that, without the possibility of spectacle, the museum can begin to function as a parliament of another sensibility” (Preciado 2017: 59–61).

Terry Smith (2012) mentions the same symptoms: museums not only enjoy the triumph of temporary exhibitions, but this is the strategy they must adopt, if they are interested in participating in the global market. Even museums established during modernity are committed to continually review and amend their collections, making every effort to become exhibition spaces for art that does not necessarily have modernist premises. Such is the case of Tate, which, for positioning reasons, has unified all its venues under the Tate brand. The former British art gallery had to adapt to the contemporary logic imposed by its modern art venue, hosting the most significant number of blockbuster exhibitions and, of course, visitors.

Nevertheless, it seems that the lights should remain on as long as “super exhibitions” are presented as an effective solution to the increasing financial pressure faced by museums. Although some decades ago, curators and directors doubted the longevity of this format (given the insurance costs, the risks involved in the transatlantic transportation of masterpieces, and their exposure to various atmospheric conditions). The increasing privatization of museum institutions, due to the measures adopted by the conservative governments of American and European countries, have turned blockbuster exhibitions into an economic necessity (Barker 1999: 129).

However, it is not only the number of visitors, the marketing and communication resources, or the size of the museums that define a blockbuster exhibition. Nowadays, this concept designates a phenomenon that crosses museums worldwide and dictates how “museums think about their temporary display”. Today, even middle-sized museums borrow expensive works from abroad and focus on their marketing methods when promoting exhibitions, in order to reach a broader audience by using attractive titles and loans for their exhibitions (Knol 2020).

Blockbuster exhibitions are a visible part of the structural changes that institutions have undergone. Museums are facing new modes of management and administration, increasingly closer to cultural industries, global tourism, and politics. Simultaneously, these institutions constantly redesign both exhibition spaces and intermediary spaces, i.e., the façade, the esplanade, and the entrance hall which must display all the services of-

fered¹. These changes involve the development of new strategies to identify, segment, and attract potential visitors, as well as to engage with them and build their loyalty.

Museums in the 21st century

Andreas Huyssen (1994) presents a journey through the changes in the museum resulting from what he calls the phenomenon of “musealization,” that is, the development of a massive “museum sensibility” between the 1980s and 1990s. The author designates the desire for socialization as one of the leading causes exacerbating interest in visiting museums which, paradoxically, developed at the same time as television broadcast.

Huyssen argues that the museum as an elitist place of preservation of canon and high culture has given way to the museum as mass media becoming the paradigm of contemporary cultural activities. The new exhibition practices respond to the changing expectations of the public and its constant search for “stellar events,” instead of a laborious appropriation of cultural knowledge (Huyssen 1994: 14).

He polemically proposes the concept of “acceleration” to characterize exhibition design and the speed of “disciplined” bodies inhabiting the exhibition space. The objective is to increase visitor statistics by applying pedagogical tools such as the audio guide or an even “more brutal” tactic: crowding the exhibition rooms which results in the invisibility of what the visitor has come to see. Also, he ironizes by saying that this “new invisibility of art” has become “the last form of the sublime.”

Huyssen, like Preciado, has observed “the lights of the museum” as a symptom of *spectacularization*: these “stellar events” are announced through large posters placed on the façade and entrance halls of museums in the same way as a film. In turn, long queues at the entrances of buildings and exhibitions (as well as the desire to avoid them) accompany these graphic resources, thus underlining the spectacular nature of these events.

The two authors also agree on the relevance that “thematic” temporary exhibitions and curators have acquired. The concept promoted by the work of specialists in design and *spectacularization* provides more visibility to the institution (Canclini 2010: 135). Indeed, thematic exhibitions also became museums, such as Harald Szeemann’s *Museum of Obsessions*, and museums became blockbuster exhibitions, for example, MoMA in Berlin.

¹ Rosso, A. A. 2022. What Do Museum Visitors Leave Behind? The New Experience and the New Visitor in the Twenty-First Century. In *What People Leave Behind*. Cham Switzerland: Springer, 93–108.

Tate Modern, a museum of modern and contemporary art, has great relevance because it imposed a thematic curatorship of its entire collection based on its user experience in an unprecedented and successful way. This is why Robert Fleck (2014) proposes this institution as the paradigm of *21st-century museums*. The concept designates the institutions positioned according to branding strategies.

This tendency toward conceptualization is of particular interest to the present research. Our hypothesis sustains that *thematization* is the main feature of the process of museum *cinematization* put in evidence with blockbuster exhibitions conceived, communicated, and organized as “new Hollywood” films. In this way, they replicate the narrative structures of this type of film, presenting the artists through the figure of the artistic genius, appealing to visitors’ passions, and configuring a sort of *star system* of art history, mainly modern art².

Moreover, these exhibitions, like blockbuster films, are transmedia, allowing the public to experience this “story” through different channels: exhibitions, trailers, documentaries, books, catalogs, merchandising, and even gastronomic experiences. A clear example of this phenomenon is Tate Modern, which forms the case study of this article.

The transmedia phenomenon refers to the narratives that integrate diverse media experiences occurring amongst a variety of platforms. According to Gambarato (2013: 82): “a transmedia narrative tells altogether one big pervasive story, attracting audience engagement. It is not about offering the same content in different media platforms, but it is the world-building experience which unfolds content and generates the possibilities for the story to evolve with new and pertinent content”. In this way, both media industries and media users collaborate and co-create contents “according to the interests and goals of the parties involved” (Alzamora and Gambarato 2014: 9).

From blockbuster movies to blockbuster exhibitions: art, shop, eat

Although the appropriation of the war concept in the cinematographic field dates to the Postwar period, contemporary authors agree that the film product known as blockbuster appeared in the United States in the 1970s with the productions by Steven Spielberg and George Lucas. They were both two dominant figures of what theorists have called “the new Hollywood” which has since imposed itself as the symbol of American cinematic hyperpower (Biskind 2002). This type of film “is distinguished by an im-

² That is slowly spreading to contemporary art with the help of other media devices, for example, bio documentaries on platforms such as Netflix.

pressive technological mastery, marketing effort, and massive distribution, designed to crush the competition” (Vincenot 2014: 271).

One of the most exciting issues with blockbuster films is that they can be considered as a transmedia phenomenon: “Though the industrial history of transmedia, storytelling has been traced to the dawn of the twentieth century, the early construction and expansion of the *Star Wars* universe in the late 1970s encapsulates a number of the developments and—notably—challenges now associated with the telling of stories across multiple media” (Freeman 2017: 62).

Andrew J. Friedenthal (2017) calls this phenomenon “retroactive continuity,” a strategy with roots in the comic book industry. Successful film companies use the complexity of their fictional universes to refresh narratives and maintain the audience’s interests across multiple media platforms – novels, games, television, and movies - in turn, individual authors adapt the character to fit the plot, medium, and merchandising opportunities.

Museums exploit the complexity of the artists’ universe, in order to refresh narratives about them and promote catalogues, merchandising, clothing, children’s books, documentaries, design objects inspired by these artists, and even special menus inspired by the star exhibition (it is a common strategy of Tate Modern). Even the boutiques located at the exit of exhibition rooms contribute to the expansion of the museum experience.

In the case of Tate Modern, its building was conceived for the public to visit the galleries but, above all, to leave it. The spatial routes include at least eight stores selling books, design & gift shops, and children’s playrooms strategically located to avoid traffic jams. The spatial design combines “the enjoyment of art and consumption” (Fleck 2014: 31–32). Visiting Tate during the first decade of the 2000s implied living a “complete cultural experience” which included, at an equal level, *art, shop & eat*.

As expected, it is in this institution where the phenomenon of *cinefication* is most clearly visualized. Tate Modern spectacularly announces and organizes its exhibitions and creates merchandising and activities related to its themes. Simultaneously, visual materials placed in its esplanade, entrance hall, and façade highlighting the stars or the scores with which the critics have rated each exhibition; a classic strategy of film criticism applied in the promotion of films. Finally, these resources highlight the sponsor that finances and baptizes the temporary exhibitions: “EY Exhibition.”

Beyond its ability to extend the “museum experience” and “market” exhibitions in other media supports, the most important factor to analyze in the *cinefication* of the museum is the link between curatorial discourses and narrative structures typical of new Hollywood cinema (which, as we

shall see, sustains structures of classical cinema). As we shall suggest, the narrative transposition from cinema to the exhibition³ functions in an “indirect” way since it is not a conventional transposition⁴ such as, for example, the transposition of a literary work to its film version, but rather the transposition of the modes of narration proper to one media support and from one artistic language to another. The production of exhibition trailers which circulate on the web, including YouTube channels, and Tate’s social media shows this transmedia phenomenon.

Hence, the transposition that operates in blockbuster exhibitions could be thought of as “global” in that it is not a matter of one text but of multiple discursivities (materialized in different media, genres, and artistic languages). These exhibitions recover texts from the history of Western art in general, from artists, and from certain artworks, especially those considered to be masterpieces.

If the concept of *cinefication* designates a particular mode of transposition, we may find its particularity by applying the theory of adaptation developed by Linda Hutcheon (2006: 22):

“A doubled definition of adaptation as a product (as extensive, particular transcoding) and as a process (as creative reinterpretation and palimpsestic intertextuality) is one way to address the various dimensions of the broader phenomenon of adaptation. An emphasis on process allows us to expand the traditional focus of adaptation studies on medium specificity and individual comparative case studies in order to consider as well relations among the major modes of engagement: that is, it permits us to think about how adaptations allow people to tell, show, or interact with stories”.

Hutcheon proposes three modes of audience engagement which are arguably “immersive,” though to different degrees and in different ways: “the telling mode (a novel) immerses us through imagination in a fictional world; the showing mode (plays and films) immerses us through the perception of the aural and the visual (...), the participatory mode (videogames) immerses us physically and kinesthetically” (Hutcheon 2006: 22).

³ This statement is a hypothesis that will be pursued in future works.

⁴ Oscar Steimberg (2013, 115) defines *transposition* as an operation that includes changing the medium or language of work or genre and argues: “I reserve the denomination of “transposition” exclusively for operations that include this passage between language or media.”

The author clarifies that even if perceiving and interpreting a direct representation of a story on the stage or screen is in any case passive; “both are imaginatively, cognitively, and emotionally active”. In contrast, the modes in which audiences also engage physically with the story are not more active “but certainly active in a different way”. At the same time, each mode “has at its disposal different means of expression – media and genres – and so can aim at and achieve certain things better than others” (Hutcheon 2006: 23–24).

The intertextual (and transmedia) phenomenon mentioned by Hutcheon is even more evident in art exhibitions where the three modes of engagement operate in parallel in the story narrated by the institution (which is always polyphonic: each exhibition overlaps institutional, curatorial and the artist’s or the artwork’s enunciation). We are immersed in a place where we can read, hear, touch, see and create contents.

Hutcheon’s (2006) concept of adaptation defined as a process and a product enables us not only to analyze how the museum appropriates certain narrative strategies typical of blockbuster cinema, but also to understand the modes of reception of this type of art exhibition.

The blockbuster: a stylistic phenomenon?

Although certain authors characterize blockbuster films, several theorists have sought to include this category within film genres. However, in this article, we consider “blockbuster” as a style, a way of understanding and creating cultural products and making them available to their audiences. This “way of doing” originated in the world of cinema and expanded to the world of art exhibitions, giving rise to what we call the *cinefication* of the museum.

In order to study how the phenomenon is evidenced is materialized at Tate Modern. We propose to study them under the notions of genre and style as proposed by Oscar Steimberg (2013). The semiologist defines genre and style as two opposing and complementary sets of discursive organization, the first member of which we could say operates as a *mold* and the second as a way of *filling it*.

According to Steimberg, the genre has a relatively stable nature that constitutes it as an institution. It is understood as “classes of texts or cultural objects discriminable in any language or media support that present systematic differences among themselves and that, in their historical recurrence, institute conditions of predictability in different areas of semiotic performance and social exchange (2013: 49).

In this sense, we should locate the semiotic performance field of film productions on one hand, and art exhibitions, on the other. For example, it is possible to identify genres such as comedy, romantic comedy, and action when thinking of cinema; or retrospective, collective show, if we think of exhibitions, thus establishing the specific horizons of expectations and highlighting a specific condition of predictability of the genre.

This condition is crucial when considering that genres establish systematic relationships and positions of figure-ground, primacy, dominance, replication, and counter-replication. Even anti-genre works can become a genre due to the “stabilization of their metadiscursive mechanisms when they enter into an established and socially predictable circulation” (Steimberg 2013: 87). An example is the emergence of certain types of exhibitions at a given moment, such as the author exhibitions conceived by renowned curators in the 1980s.

Steimberg (2013) has pointed out that, due to its repetition and reference to characteristic production modalities, the notion of style enables diverse cultural objects to be associated with each other. This way, he states that styles are trans-semiotic; they are not circumscribed to any language, practice, or signifying matter – in Verón’s (1998) terms. This point is fundamental given that the phenomenon I propose to analyze is observable in different types of museums, institutional, authorial, regional, and even epochal styles.

On the other hand, styles historically exhibit the centrifugal and expansive condition of a “way of doing” (Steimberg 2013), which is why they always present a conflictive relationship with their era. Styles are articulated with internal and external meta-discursive operations that, although contemporary, are neither permanent nor universally shared in their spaces of circulation. Such is the case of blockbuster films and exhibitions. They have been criticized, attacked at the time of their release, and even, in the case of exhibitions, their continuity over time has been doubted. Steimberg explains that styles do not make systems synchronically because this conspires against their expansive and centrifugal condition (2013: 79).

Reviewing the definitions of genre and style proposed by the semiotician, with its rhetorical, thematic, and enunciative dimensions, it is possible to postulate the notion of blockbuster, and by extension the *cinefication* of the museum, as a style that highlights a “way of doing” manifested both in Hollywood cinema and in the mega-exhibitions of Western art museums.

By rhetorical dimension, Steinberg means not the ornamentation of the discourse but its organization, the essential dimension of an act of signification, the “combination of features” that enables it to be differentiated

from others. Rhetorical features must circumscribe their enunciative effects as thematic features as well.

By thematic dimension, Steimberg means “actions and situations according to historically elaborated and related representational schemes before the text” (Segré in Steimberg 2013: 52). The theme differs from the content, since it is external to the text and circulates in culture. It also differs from the motif recognized in the text fragment and is included in the theme that is detectable in its globality.

Finally, enunciation is understood as “the effect of meaning of the processes of semiotization by which a communicational situation emerges in a text, through devices that may or may not be linguistic”; and which, in addition, could include the relationship of an implicit “sender” and an implicit “receiver,” not necessarily customizable (Steimberg 2013: 53).

As the author indicates, we must present the enunciative analysis after examining the rhetorical and thematic dimensions which contribute to informing the enunciative scene. So, before describing the process of *cinefication* of the museum, we must determine whether the blockbuster is a film genre or a contemporary style, and we will do so through the methodology postulated by Steimberg.

Rhetorical, thematic, and enunciative dimensions of “the” blockbuster

In a collective work devoted to blockbuster films, Stringer (2017: 2) asserts that “the cinematic blockbuster is a multifaceted phenomenon whose meanings depend on the presence of a series of both internal and external discourses” and, as such, it functions as a method of classification, i.e., a genre. However, this genre cannot be defined or described by its stable properties but rather by its “differing purposes and the resultant differences in generic categories, labels and uses” (taking up Rick Altman (1999)).

With regards to the thematic dimension, Stringer points out that, because of globalization, the blockbuster is often a transnational product and, as such, several of these films prioritize themes of “cross-cultural contact and understanding.” The fetishization of “exotic” locations or anthropological themes is also resorted to, for example, in action-adventure titles (e.g., *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and *The Mummy* (1999)). Stringer suggests that “the Hollywood blockbuster continues to enjoy close and ongoing relations with the global culture that spawns and sustains it” (2017: 10).

Furthermore, as King (who proposed the concept of “New Hollywood,” 2002) points out, the dominant genres of the contemporary blockbuster

tend to be strongly male-oriented and, for this reason, the thematic of power is recurrent as part of male discourse.

Some authors point out that, in rhetorical terms, the organization of blockbuster films pursues the narrative structures of classical cinema, i.e., linear, cause, and effect. As Lavik (2009: 163) has pointed out, “all indications are that audiences expect blockbusters to conform to classical norms of unity and coherence, to integrate the spectacle into a causal structure with identifiable interests and motivations.”

At the same time, the industry’s discourses stress the importance of subordinating everything from nudity to special effects to the so-called “demands of the story,” inviting audiences and critics to evaluate their production according to the classical scheme rather than an alternative model (Lavik 2009: 163). Likewise, we might consider certain dominant rhetorical features “the size factor and bigness and exceptionality” (Stringer 2017: 7).

As for the thematic dimension, a linguistic study on the scripts of several of the classic contemporary blockbusters, McIntyre (2012: 38–45) identified the following narrative scheme: a Western heterosexual man must fulfill a mission that, I add, progresses through two plot lines, the personal (romantic) and the professional, the denouement in one of the planes implies the resolution of the second. Thus, he identifies lexemes such as release, unlock, confine, and let-out commonly linked to male prowess and heroism, evidencing “a degree of institutional sexism inherent in most blockbusters” (McIntyre, 2012). In turn, “the high degree of spectacle and excitement associated with blockbusters is perhaps intensified by being motivated by life-or-death scenarios.”

Regarding the enunciative dimension, Stringer (2017) argues that these films “speak aloud”, so that one of the main features of the blockbuster, if not the most important, is the enunciative pact configured with the viewer: these films are announced as different from the others and are announced as an experience never experienced before. These films must propose something unique, novel, rare, memorable, and spectacular. This enunciative effect of *spectacularism* is undoubtedly the contract that “the” blockbuster must maintain.

Blockbuster exhibitions

In 1999 Emma Barker analyzed some of the most successful blockbuster exhibitions of the 20th century for modern artists: *Picasso and the portrait* (1980) at MoMA, *Claude Monet: 1840–1926* (1995) at the Art Institute of Chicago and *Cézanne* (1996) at Tate Britain.

The author points out that only exhibitions dedicated to canonical Western, male artists, especially painters, tend to achieve the status of a blockbuster exhibition⁵. Blockbuster exhibition proposals (re)construct the image of artistic genius overlaid with a passionate construction of the man behind the artist.

In rhetorical terms, these exhibitions are usually organized chronologically under the structure of a biographical narrative, the transformation of which unfolds through works but also archival objects. In this sense, their rhetorical strategies include exemplification, enumeration, and accumulation. The accumulation operates in a double sense: on one hand, to give the impression of a “total work of art” through the assembly of paintings, sculptures, drawings, and sketches. On the other hand, it introduces the man through his objects (letters, personal objects, photos, and work tools).

As for the rhetorical dimension, the curatorial discourses are lineal, establishing nuclei which justify the passage from one stylistic, experimental moment to another (cause-consequence). Likewise, they appeal to the empathic, euphoric level of the *destinataire*, applying rhetorical strategies which highlight the revolutionary nature of the artworks but also the passion of the artist, his fears, his efforts, and his struggle “against death” (against his death or death in the art world). They always resort to themes easily assimilated by “uninitiated viewers and, as such, obvious blockbuster material” (Barker 1999: 141).

As in blockbuster films, the main character is a heterosexual man who must fulfill a mission: to break with the canon, renew art, and transcend history. Also, as in the films, two storylines are at work: it is not only about a brilliant and innovative artist, but a passionate man and, usually, a romantic womanizer. Again, the machismo emerges. As in blockbuster movies, the exhibitions repeat “the mythology of the artist as a womanizing genius (Berker 1999: 138).”

As for the thematic dimension, when it comes to exhibitions dedicated to a particular period of an artist, they usually present groupings of works according to the most recognizable genres in the history of art: landscape, portrait, still life, appealing to a simply enjoyable contact with the works of art, recognizable, without appealing in depth to the formal level of the

⁵ In the last decade, retrospectives or group exhibitions of women artists have begun to be held (ex. In *Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2012, or *Elles font l'abstaction*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2021) but these rarely achieve the success of a retrospective of a modern male artist. Also, the narratives that frame the careers of women artists are often introduced in connection with their husbands or masters.

artworks (Barker 1999). In this sense, it is possible to see similarities with the “global” character of cinematic themes, i.e., the fetishization of “exotic” places or of anthropological themes (the artist himself appears as an anthropologist who observes his time, his people, his culture).

Every genre of a blockbuster exhibition, collective exhibitions, or those dedicated to movements or schools is usually devoted to those moments in the history of art identified as mainstream “from Impressionism to Surrealism,” always highlighting the names of the best-known artists, usually men. For example, the exhibitions about artistic periods present them under the themes of revolution, progress, change, and rupture. At the same time, modern artists are presented under “the familiar narrative of a heroic avant-garde pursuing its own artistic goals without regard for conventional expectations” (Barker 1999: 139). As Barker highlights, “if this mythology did not endow the canonical modernist figures with a special aura of bold innovation and comprising integrity, they would surely not have attained their current supremacy in blockbuster stakes”. In general, the idea of the “canonical artist as an object of veneration” is reiterated and reinforced (Barker 1999, 138–139).

Barker suggests that these exhibitions appear as enemies of the development of art-historical scholarship. Although, in our days, we have begun to witness the rise of exhibitions devoted to women artists. Unfortunately, the imaginary of male geniuses continues to operate even in these cases. Barker (1999) illustrates these subjects through the following image (Fig. 1):



Fig. 1: Cartoon from *Art in America*, June 1986. Copyright Henry Martin.

“Any institution that puts on one devoted Monet runs the risk of being accused of being motivated largely by financial considerations” (p. 136). The problem is also that such exhibitions trivialize the complex works of these artists by reducing them, as it was mentioned, to a biographical exhibition, and this is even worse in the case of women artists whose unhappy lives are more relevant (and saleable) than their works, always in the shadow of some male figure (usually their lovers).

As for the enunciative dimension, these exhibitions tend to configure an intimate scene; they allow us to be “next” to the artist, which means a once-in-a-lifetime experience (Barker 1999: 141), and it must assure the enjoyable apprehension of knowledge: the promise of the grandiose but accessible. Its addressees are both people who never visit museums and specialists. These exhibitions must provide information about the artist, but his persona must take precedence over a formalistic approach to his work.

From this perspective, the promise of accessibility and enjoyment is one of the arguments usually presented in favour of these exhibitions since they “provide cultural capital for a socially aspiring middle class” (Barker 1999: 140). However, as Huyssen (1994) has pointed out, the number of people visiting museums and touring exhibitions makes adequate contact with the works of art impossible: “this problem encapsulates the paradox inherent in the mass viewing of Works of art” (Barker 1999: 140).

Therefore, can the blockbuster style expand to museums? Can we then speak of *cinefication* of museums? As Steimberg’s (2013) intensive work indicates, styles are transemiotic, and we have seen that “the” blockbuster presents similar characteristics whether we are talking about films or exhibitions. However, the semiotician argues that, in the genre, unlike style, thematic and rhetorical features tend to be predominant over enunciative features, which is characteristic of the style. Although certain thematic stabilities stand out in the blockbuster cinema, the authors who propose it as a genre focus on the enunciative dimension, that is, on the pact with the spectators, on the promise of *spectacularism*, of a unique experience. According to Steimberg’s method the predominance of enunciative particularities matches the style (2013: 51).

Likewise, we have seen that both exhibitions and blockbuster films have a somewhat conflictive relationship with their own time. Not only can they become hits, but they can also be rejected at the moment of their launching and revered afterwards which corresponds precisely to the phenomenon of style. There are enemies and protectors of “the blockbusters”, the arguments of each position tend to extremes. The former denounces a lack of reflection, a flattening of art history, the commodification of the work, and the exhibi-

tion space and the public as a critical agent. The latter argue that blockbuster exhibitions democratize art, and museums increase the number of memberships. Unfortunately, this argument is somewhat fragile since many people who join, in order to see these exhibitions without queuing do not renew their subscriptions the following year. This situation puts pressure on institutions to quickly schedule another exhibition of this kind, even if they cost money, and finding sponsors is not an easy task (Barker 1999).

Therefore, by observing the rhetorical, thematic, and enunciative recurrences of blockbuster films and exhibitions, we consider “the blockbuster” as a style, that is, as “a way of doing” which crosses different genres and cultural productions performing in a specific semiotic field (ways of filling the “moulds”). This results in the establishing of an enunciative pact that promises not only novelty but also an unforgettable experience.

In the case of exhibitions, this style fills the mould of genres such as retrospectives, group exhibitions, exhibitions dedicated to periods or artistic styles (just as the Impressionist style cuts across genres such as portrait or still life). In the case of cinema, the blockbuster style crosses genres such as comedy, drama or thriller. The blockbuster is also characterized by a spectacularization achieved by the use of technical resources and the presentation of figures of the star system (we can clearly identify a star system of modern artists, for example).

Let us analyze then how the blockbuster style operates in the exhibitions dedicated to Tate Modern’s star system of modern painters. Since the Spanish painter, Pablo Picasso, is always in the eye of the storm when talking about this format, we shall focus on the exhibition *Picasso 1932, love, fame, and tragedy*, both in the exhibition space and in the institutional programming. Since the incorporation of mega exhibitions, the museum has experienced a phenomenon of *cinefication* observable both in the creation of trailers and curatorial discourses. They follow the logic of the blockbuster style, including the transmedia factor: the production of merchandise, books, catalogs, and even gastronomic experiences.

Museum’s *cinefication*: Tate and its trailers

The emergence of the trailers of Tate Modern’s exhibitions shows, among other phenomena already mentioned, the *cinefication* of this institution. These audiovisual pieces distributed on the institution’s website and its social media (mainly Facebook and YouTube) have a stable narrative structure corresponding to the characteristics of blockbuster exhibitions and the description of films of the same *style*. These observations derive from the analysis of at least a dozen trailers by Tate (both Britain and Modern) be-

tween 2018 and 2022, which allow us to find their rhetorical, thematic, and enunciative recurrences (Steimberg 2013).

Trailers resort to a sort of recreation of the moment and place of artistic creation. We see the atelier, the models, the brushes, the gesture of “painting” placing colour on the palette, moving the brush agitatedly or gently on the canvas, observing detail. These shots provide an enunciative scene of intimacy, in which we occupy the place of witnessing observers. The framing puts us in a position of closeness where we are almost spies, creating an enunciative effect of intimacy. This enunciative pact will be the same in the exhibition hall, where the genius becomes present not only through the work but also through the curatorial discourse filled with archives and objects, giant prints, and recreations of spaces that, as in the trailer, refer us to the artist’s creative performance.

When it comes to modern artists who make up the star system, by which we mean the significant male representatives of Impressionism to Surrealism (with some contemporary exceptions such as Andy Warhol and some female exceptions such as Frida Kahlo), Tate employs the photographic or audiovisual record. This way, games of absence-presence and past-present complete the causal path: genius-inspiration-creation-masterpiece. According to the curatorial discourse, the artist is the source of the artworks that we will have in front of our eyes, and, in an opposite movement, the artworks will allow us, through the exhibition, to reconstruct the path that gave rise to the work, traced by the artist.

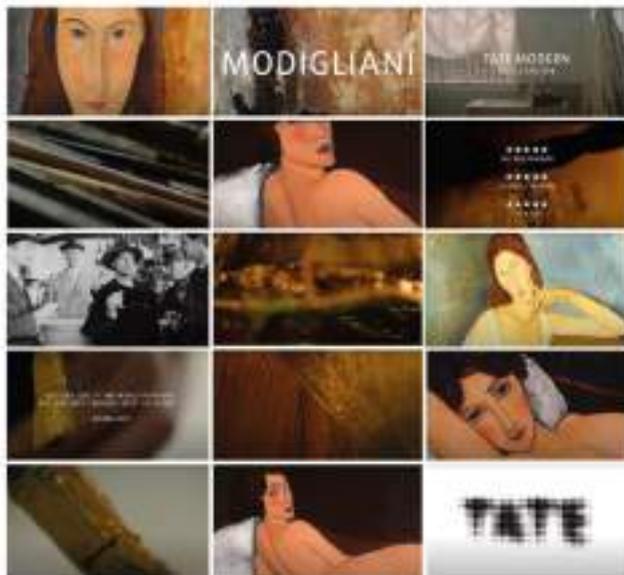


Fig. 2: Trailer exhibition: Modigliani (2017–2018) Tate Modern.

In this sense, the two major themes emerging from these visual materials are the creative genius and the artistic revolution. The meeting point of these two great themes is the life of a passionate man who gives his life for a cause, to create a masterpiece, to revolutionize the art world. In order to achieve this journey, the brilliant white Western man loves, betrays, suffers, is destroyed, mutates, moves away, loses himself, returns, triumphs, and finally dies.

The enunciative pact proposed by these trailers is the promise of intimacy, learning, and enjoyment. We will be able to access the work of these artists intimately through the drama of their lives, knowing their passions, miseries, and their glory; hence one of the resources used is the quotes from the artists. The exhibition offers the unique possibility to live this unmissable experience, the only possibility to discover the artist's universe in such a direct way.

Let us look at the case of the trailer concerning the exhibition *Picasso 1932: Love, Fame, and Tragedy* (2018). First, we can follow the narrative sequence in the stills: Picasso looks at us. Immediately we slip into the intimacy of his atelier, hide behind the mirror, see his model, and perceive his sexual desire condensed in the mouth and curves of the women he immortalizes in his paintings. Next, we can reinstate his creative performance through metonymic strategies: the detail of the agitated brush, the paint dripping on the palette, in that game of presences and absences is Picasso, the creative genius, passionate, loving, human, mortal, and immortal.

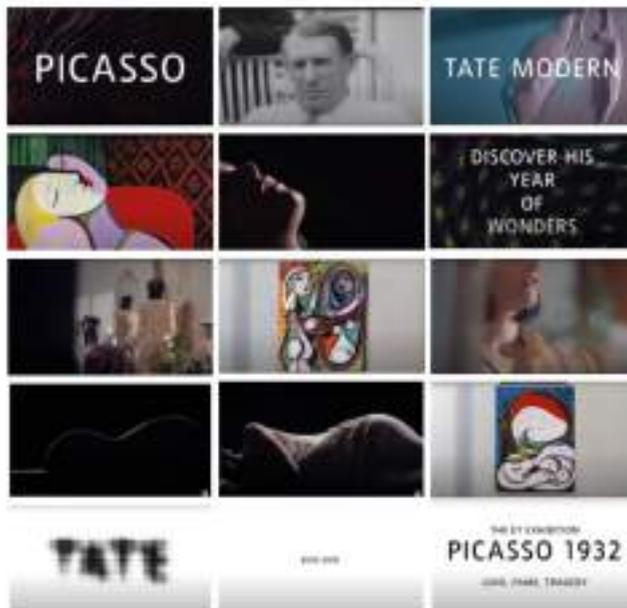


Fig. 3: Trailer exhibition: *Picasso 1932: Love, Fame and Tragedy* (2018) Tate Modern.

During the trailer, Spanish music brings us back to the painter's origins, as well as the textiles framing the name of the exhibition that will allow us to discover just one year of his life and work: 1932, a year of love, fame, and tragedy, his year of wonders. The next step is to analyze how this promise of intimacy and discovery materializes in the exhibition room.

#Picasso1932 or the interactive exhibitions

We are on the third floor of Tate Modern. At the entrance of the exhibition room, we see a gift shop displaying merchandise dedicated to the Picasso exhibition: catalogues, books, bags, notebooks, and objects (the museum also offers a special menu inspired by the artist served in the museum's restaurant).

We enter the exhibition with the programme we acquired at the entrance. It is a small book which includes curatorial texts illustrating the relevance of 1932 to the artist's career. Its pages also include some of Picasso's phrases that complement those placed in the exhibition hall turning the program and the exhibition into a personal diary: "The work that one does is a way of keeping a diary", (Picasso) professes.

The exhibition display is chronological, and its montage adopts rhetorical operations typical of "contemporary curatorship," which uses various montage resources: the white cube, the reconstruction of his atelier, and a concatenation of several discrete rooms displaying paintings and some cinematographic references. Then, in the middle of the tour, we find the reconstruction of the retrospective self-curated by Picasso in 1932. In this space, the classic set-up of the Salon des Beaux-Arts: the walls in red characterizing it, several Beaux Arts frames, and a layout seeking to recompose the dialogue between the works established by the Spanish painter. In the centre, the showcases display information of historical fact from photographs, newspapers, letters, and books, among other archival materials. Then the *mise-en-scène* closes the exhibition with a hashtag: #Picasso1932 (Fig. 4).

This small paratext condenses the numerous rooms divided into ten thematic nuclei, and, in a forceful, familiar, and complicit way, the museum invites us to share the images taken during the exhibition on our social media. Likewise, the hashtag condenses the vast number of texts in the room whose linear narrative organization (cause-effect), as we move through the space, explains the evolution of different periods of the career of this artistic genius.



Fig. 4: Picasso 1932: entrance, exhibition room's exit, and hashtag Instagram results.

The paratexts introduce Picasso's voice in the exhibition rooms through phrases installed on a large scale, reinforcing the enunciative scene: a personal diary. These quotations operate as "maxims" on the artistic endeavor that make up the "Picasso manifesto."

The enunciative pact is the same as that configured by the trailer: the intimacy with the man, the discovery of the artist's wonders. The enjoyable learning process arises progressively from rhetorical strategies that highlight thematic binomials: life-work, artist-man, public image-private life, but, above all, the idea of creative genius.

Thus, each formal analysis of Picasso's work accompanies a personal anecdote supporting two plot lines, as we have seen in blockbuster films. For example, the first core introduced the artist's situation in 1931, that is, the decline of his marriage to the Russian ballerina Olga Khohnlova appears overlapped with the decline of his artistic career: "critics openly discussed whether Picasso was more an artist of the past than of the future."

The painter would plan a retrospective, the heart of this exhibition, as a way out of this situation. This poses a tension typical of the blockbuster, the struggle between "life-death." In the exhibition room, Picasso tells us: "I feel like I am witnessing a retrospective vision of myself ten years after my death." Of course, a retrospective of a living artist was scandalous for the time, as these were dedicated exclusively to posthumous artists (Fig. 5). This moment is the curatorial discourse's climax and the conflict's denouement with the art critics who could not place Picasso in the current art scene.



Fig 5: Picasso 1932: exhibition room.

Rivalry is also one of the motifs that emerge in the curatorial discourse of the exhibition. It appears as one of the obstacles the genius must overcome, in order to self-improve. At the end of 1931, Picasso had to show his talent to the art critics. Later, at the beginning of 1932, he had to overcome Matisse's fame, and, towards the second part of the year, he had to conquer Surrealism.

The "global" anthropological themes to which films and blockbuster exhibitions resort are also present in this exhibition. The paratexts summarize the global socio-political situation of 1932 to assert that Pablo Picasso anticipated the catastrophe that was to come (the World War illustrated in *Guernica*). The curatorial discourse configures the image of an innovative genius and radical artist who renews himself and breaks with the history of art, even with his style, to create something new, a legacy of the historical avant-garde.

Thus, the exhibition presents specific works which operate as turning points for advancing the discourse. For example, *Woman with dagger* ("Christmas 1931") shows Picasso's exploration of the tensions between painting and sculpture, evidence of the "impulse to renew and reinvent himself" that made 1932 "Picasso's year of wonders." This stylistic shift in his work occurs thanks to the inspiration provoked by his secret love for the young Marie-Thérèse. Picasso tells us: "Basically, there is only love, whatever it may be." (Fig. 6)

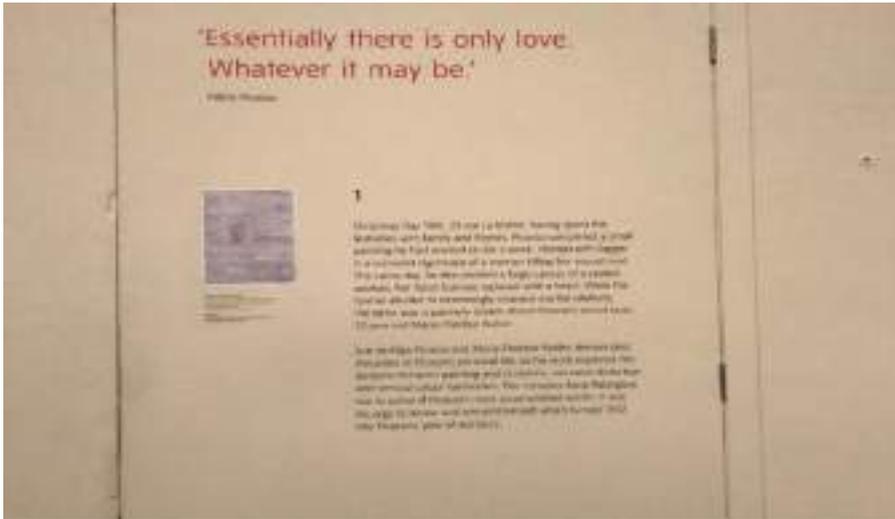


Fig. 6: Picasso 1932: exhibition room.

The trailer’s strategy of placing us as witnesses of the creative process appears in the exhibition space through the reconstruction of the sculpture workshop that Picasso had built in the stable of his Normandy mansion, “the place of his secret meetings with Marie-Thérèse (Walter).” The atelier emerges in the room from real-size photography, the worktable, and some sculptures. The room also includes a vitrine with photographs of the artist’s house and a showcase with letters and personal documents. Through metonymic games of presence and absence (mainly through the objects), the curatorial discourse enables the intrusion into the artist’s personal space and workspace, generating an effect of intimacy and closeness (Fig. 7).

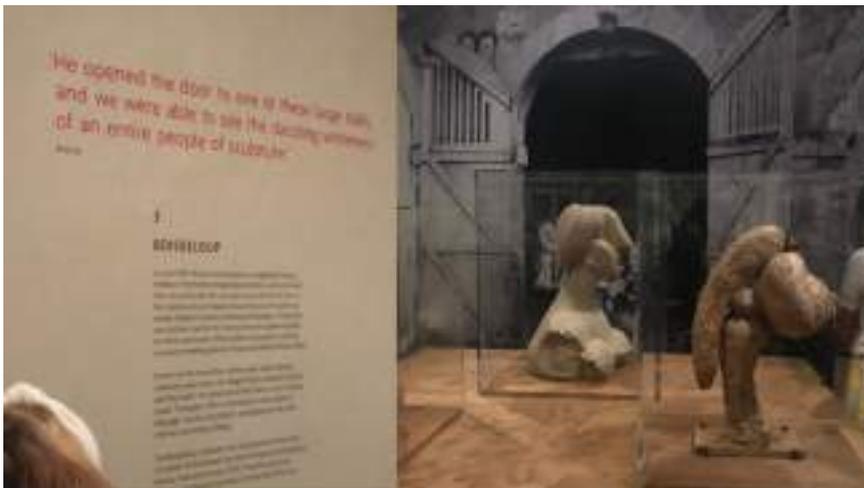


Fig. 7: Picasso 1932: exhibition room.

As Barker (1999) has mentioned, these exhibitions take on the organization of a biopic. The curatorial discourse of *Picasso 1932* includes the citation of people close to him who testify to the relevance of that year for his career. This polyphony contributes to sustaining ideas about “the canonical modern artist, the object of veneration” (Barker 1999): creative, innovative, groundbreaking, unique, brilliant, and hyper-productive.

The second part of the exhibition reinforces the ideas already mentioned. The opening of Picasso’s retrospective operates as the denouement of the main problem of the plot: the artist frees himself “from the weight of the expectations of the critics,” giving way to new creative periods. As Boris Groys (2008: 71) postulates, “the genuine modern artist was supposed to make a radical break with the past, to erase, to destroy the past, to reach that zero point of artistic tradition and, in doing so, to give a new beginning to a new future.”

The discursive strategy of grouping the works according to the months of the year (enumeration and grouping) enhances the effect of hyper-productivity. In July and August, Picasso resumed the work he had abandoned to curate his retrospective and started to experiment with Surrealism from the fusion of female figures and marine species. In September and October, while vacationing on the beaches of Normandy, he worked on marine scenes and then focused on classic mythological themes, especially the Minotaur. Finally, November and December heralded the end of this year of “Picasso’s wonders” and finish with Marie-Thérèse’s illness (again, the battle against death), something which produced a radical transformation in the artist’s style. So, Picasso changed his technique (prints), palette (gray), and subject matter (fear of drowning).

The exhibition ends with the birth of a new Picasso and closes with the confirmation of the guiding ideas of the modern, renovating, and radical artist who found a new style, sustained his fame, found love, and announced the tragedy of war (Fig. 8).

Again, a work operates as genesis and synecdoche of a new period. “El Rescate” (1933), which shows a mother’s agony after her young son’s death, will be included in his masterpiece: *Guernica*. Finally, the last sentence closes our reading of Picasso’s diary: “I will never make art with the preconceived idea of serving the interests of the political, religious or military art of a country.”

The exhibition *Picasso 1932*, conceived in the blockbuster style, deals with the personal life of the genius by allowing us to read his diary and letting us into his atelier. Although very light, it also explains some questions about his technique, the languages he experimented with, the themes of his works, his innovations, and his creative and experimental process.

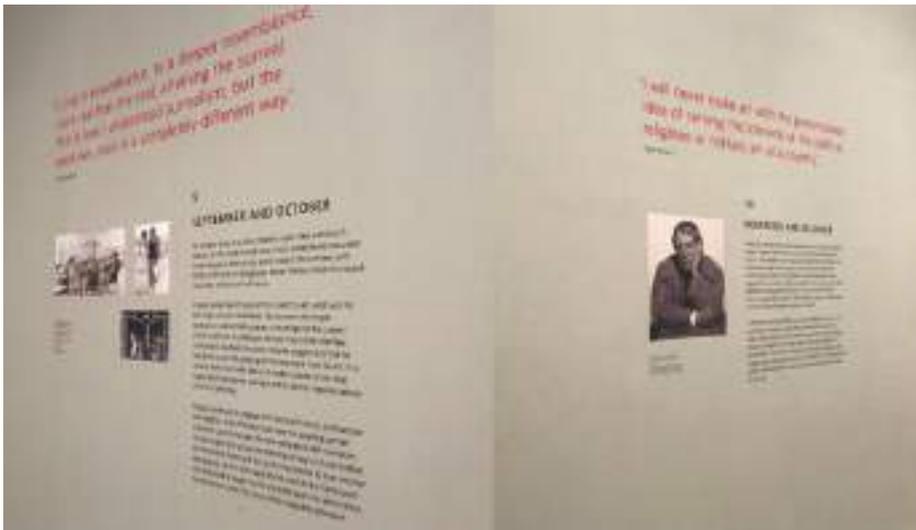


Fig. 8: Picasso 1932: exhibition room.

We could say that the exhibition fulfills the promise made by the trailer. We have discovered Picasso's year of wonders and learned about his work, but above all, we have uncovered his life, read his diary, and lived in his atelier. We have lived a unique experience worthy of being shared on our social media, as indicated by the photographs shared on Instagram during the exhibition, including the almost 9000 pictures posted with the institutional hashtag: #Picasso1932.

Museum's cinefication: some conclusions



Fig. 9: Tate's special menu.

The transposition of the “blockbuster” cinematographic style to art exhibitions devoted to modern masters (mainly) is what we have called the museum’s *cinefication*. This phenomenon includes the appropriation of blockbuster cinema’s narrative strategies and its modes of production which are specifically observed in the expansion of the exhibition universe towards other products (souvenirs, catalogues, restaurant menus, documentaries, social media content). The main evidence of the museum’s *cinefication* process is the production of trailers that promote these exhibitions as spectacular events.

Considering the blockbuster as a style that, in the terms of Steimberg (2013), crosses genres, media and artistic languages, allows us to observe its particularities and its functioning in different semiotic fields. In this study, we have focused on the exhibition and cinematographic fields⁶.

The *cinefication* can also be understood under the notion of adaptation postulated by Hutcheon (2006): the “global” adaptation of the blockbuster style, that is, of ways of narrating the history of art, artists and works, and we can also add, of museums.

Hutcheon’s theory allows us to reflect on the visitors’ reception of this type of exhibitions that involves the three modes of engagement developed by the author, i.e., telling, showing, and interacting with stories, which “allow for certain precisions and distinctions that a focus on medium alone cannot” (Hutcheon 2006: 27).

The *cinefication*⁷ process highlights new modes of organization and functioning of the institutions and evidences how they conceive their exhibitions. Following Steimberg’s (2013) method:

- a) In thematic terms: the universal anthropological topics (love, fame, tragedy, for example) are present in the image of the creative genius (western, male, white, womanizer, successful, passionate, talented).
- b) In rhetorical terms: spectacularization appears in terms of both technical resources and available budgets which allow institutions to exhibit a great number of artworks by great figures of the art history’s star system.
- c) In enunciative terms: these exhibitions offer a unique and unrepeatable experience in which the visitors are able to see both the masterpieces and the artist’s intimate life. The spectacular character given

⁶ In this style, one might think of the Broadway production *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, as an extension of Harry Potter’s universe.

⁷ In this style, one might think of the Broadway production *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*.

to the stories of these artists, enables institutions and their sponsors to expand the universe of the exhibition to other products from catalogs and tote bags to restaurant menus.

Nevertheless, this exhibition format is only a visible part of the current situation of museum institutions. The interest of visitors to live complex experiences which include activities involving spending more time in museums should be considered an opportunity. As Hutcheon maintains: “Stories do get retold in different ways in new material and cultural environments; like genes, they adapt to those new environments by virtue of mutation—in their “offspring” or their adaptations. And the littlest do more than survive; they flourish” (2006: 32).

We can assume that the museum has adopted the blockbuster style to the design of its exhibitions, making the public’s contact with the works more complex, although always responding to a certain mode of cultural expectations. In any case, we are undergoing a new period based on the visitor’s experience which should yield positive results in terms of enjoyment and cultural transmission, if decisions are not made based on prejudices about “the general public,” “tourism,” and, of course, artists.

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