6. Elevating inclusivity. Film's role in redefining museum engagement at Brera

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6.1 Pandemic, reimagining museum-visitor dynamics

The pandemic has shown how important it is for every cultural institution to develop digital communication tools (Parry, 2013; Dal Pozzolo, 2021). The COVID-19 crisis has provided the impetus for a complete rethinking of museum visits, museums' engagement, and the differences between interactions with the public. An extraordinary circumstance occurred: the pandemic encouraged museums to reconsider their relationship with their collections, spaces, and community. Museums were obliged to shut their doors and mitigate the closure this through a predominantly online, socially distanced dialogue with their public. It had an impact on the demand side as much as the supply, generating possibilities and scenarios for cultural experiences that could coexist with the traditional modes (Bollati *et al*., 2024). Museums' responses have increasingly involved designing and shaping their digital experiences, shifting their focus from a mere online presence to crafting compelling narratives that truly engage

people both cognitively and emotionally. Also, museums have learned that neither the total number of visitors nor the revenue are appropriate parameters to measure the value of a great cultural institution. Quantity does not correspond to quality. Since:

> **many museums, however, have suffered the forced closure unprepared, without the skills and technological equipment to successfully implement the necessary changes (Solima, 2021, p. 37)**

the Pinacoteca di Brera decided to revolutionize the museum visit. This included introducing the *BreraCard* in substitution of the conventional museum ticket, and launching the *BreraPlus* platform: a special channel committed to replacing the *traditional* model of the museum visit with a wider subscription that recognizes the museum's work both in situ and online. In effect, this changes our perception: from the museum as a noun – a space to be visited – to the museum as a verb – a hub for cultural production. By purchasing the BreraCard, similar to a library card or an online newspaper subscription that lasts for a set time, people can access the museum physically for three months from the date of their first entry and enjoy the *BreraPlus* online content or participate in city events for one year. Thanks to these changes, the Pinacoteca is redefining the museum experience, transcending the boundaries of traditional visits, in the hopes of fostering a deeper connection between the people and the museum, empowering them to tailor their experiences according to their preferences, and building a sense of intimacy and familiarity with the museum's spaces and collections over time.

6.2 *BreraPlus*, an *open* digital narrative experience

BreraPlus is a new museum experience available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and it is accessible to the public from anywhere, and at any time. It is a cross-media platform that extends the Pinacoteca experience in space and time with specially crafted content, new

voices and novel perspectives. It is an online and dynamic platform that reproduces the characteristics of a live museum experience (Wittgens, 1956) even when the museum building itself is closed; a way to transcend the physical and conceptual thresholds (Parry *et al.,* 2018) of the institution.

With this *open* narrative interaction, the users can determine their cultural exploration however they like and for as long as they like. This makes for a more flexible and dynamic user experience with the *BreraPlus* multimedia content offered on the platform, as if it were an endless game, initiated and sustained by the user, just as the autonomous museum visitor shapes their own learning experience. For instance, while a film follows a predetermined linear structure with fixed emotional peaks, a museum visit offers a flexible duration characterized by chance encounters with both works of art and other people.

Similarly, *BreraPlus* allows for diverse exploration methods; its content is varied, interconnected, and can be consumed continuously or in a stop-start manner. Each video is accompanied by supplementary multimedia content, extending and enriching the narrative experience. Comparable to embarking on a train ride, users can navigate through the entirety of the main content or pause at intermediate stops along the way, exploring the depth that the journey offers.

BreraPlus presents new content each month, enhancing and complementing the knowledge and experience offered by the museum during a physical visit. Since its inception in 2021, *BreraPlus* has expanded steadily, encompassing over one hundred multimedia items, organized into seven distinct sections that serve as a repository of memories, voices, videos, images and music. Among these sections, *FilmPlus* features experimental films by Pinacoteca di Brera, while *DocPlus* offers untold stories with interactive elements. *MusicPlus* explores and researches the intersection of visual arts and music with performances by top musicians, while *StoriesPlus* delves into Brera's oral history. *Once Upon a Time Plus* presents multilingual tales read by renowned figures, and *High Resolution Plus* showcases high-definition masterpieces. Additionally, *ChatPlus* facilitates user engagement through discussions and insights shared in front of a high-resolution painting, representing the platform's latest addition.

If *DocPlus* stands as the section that most accurately embodies the

train metaphor, *FilmPlus* hosts two experimental film self-productions, a notable exception for a museum: *Great Men* (2021) and *Peregrin and the Giant Fish* (2022).

6.3 *Great Men*

Great Men (2021) marks the museum's debut film, and its title suggests an unconventional exploration of the lives of Napoleon Bonaparte and Dante Alighieri. It draws significant connections be-tween the experience of forced separation – geographical, cultural or spiritual – and familial relationships. Written by Emily Renée, a young English playwright esteemed as a writer, director and actress, the two-act play reveals a nuanced plot revolving around parental, human, and intimate relationships. While Napoleon's initial exile to Elba meant that he never saw his eldest son, Dante experienced exile alongside his two sons. These figures, with their notable reputations and dis-tinct experiences of parenthood, fuel a curiosity to understand and empathize with their offspring. Thus, the narrative is told through the lens of two contemporary young men, Thomas and Bijan. While chatting during a Skype call, these lifelong best friends navi-gate a rapidly evolving world and their unresolved bonds with their fathers. The onset of the pandemic prompts them to confront their inner thoughts. Thomas arrives in Milan in pursuit of his father, while

Figure 1.
Great Men, theatrical performance in the Gallerie D'Italia, Milan.

Bijan finds himself confined at home with his. *Great Men* underwent an unusual evolution, starting as a covert theatrical performance and later transformed into an innovative online experience. Initially, the performance took place in secrecy at Brera's Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense and the Gallerie D'Italia, where the audience was recorded and seamlessly integrated into the final film.

Subsequently, the recorded performance became available for online viewing through the *BreraPlus* platform. What sets this online rendition apart is its interactivity: viewers can experience the narrative from two distinct starting points, following either Thomas or Bijan's perspectives. This innovative approach transforms the film into an immersive and engaging experience, blurring the lines between spectator and participant.

6.4 *The Giant Fish*

Peregrin and the Giant Fish (2022) stands as a pioneering marionette opera, drawing inspiration from a 1923 tale authored by Tom Seidmann-Freud, the niece of Sigmund Freud, unfolding in the aftermath of the Habsburg Empire's collapse after World War I. Comprising original music by Andrea Melis and a libretto inspired by the original text, the opera ingeniously utilizes marionettes, echoing the historical significance of puppets in the avant-garde movement.

Under the direction of Francesco Fei, the opera was captured on film and released on *BreraPlus* and in selected Milan cinemas on December 26th, perfectly coinciding with the Christmas period. The narrative follows Peregrin, the young protagonist who dreams of a utopian realm, as he is transported by a colossal red fish, which serves as a poignant reflection on post-World War I society. The avant-garde marionettes, meticulously crafted by the Compagnia Carlo Colla, bring Freud's original illustrations to life, complemented by creative set designs made from paper and cardboard like a huge pop-up book.

Moreover, marionettes have historically played a vital role in modernist literature and theatres, representing a transition evident in the works of Cocteau, Picasso, Schnitzler, El Lissitzky, Meyerhold, and Brecht, all of whom utilized marionettes – either metaphorically or lit-

erally – to move from actor-driven theatre paradigms to director-driven ones. Similarly, in this film, puppets continued to serve as a medium through which directors assert greater control over the narrative and visual elements. Replacing live actors with marionettes introduces a new cinematic dimension where puppet gestures and movements take precedence. In line with Tom Freud's storytelling approach, the film's fusion of adult themes with the captivating world of marionettes challenges common misconceptions, elevating the puppets to a more sophisticated level beyond only associating them with childhood.

Figure 2.
***Peregrin and the Giant Fish*, a frame from the film.**

6.5 *Filmplus*, cultivating new connections

Even at first glance, and despite their different traits, *Great Men* and *Peregrin and the Giant Fish* reveal several parallels and exhibit several resemblances. These can be categorized into three overarching levels of comparison.

1. Firstly, *their plots draw inspiration from the past and translate it into our present*. They concentrate on historical narratives but reveal themselves as deeply contemporary works. If the former reinterprets the stories of two key historical characters, linking them to the challenges of the pandemic era, the latter, originating in the aftermath of World War I, remains relevant, reflecting modern-day shadows. *Great Men* features the lives of Napoleon Bonaparte and Dante Alighieri, juxtaposing their experiences of separation and familial

relationships against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic era, mirroring the isolation felt during the lockdowns, while *Peregrin and the Giant Fish*, exploring life and society after the Habsburg Empire, offers a century-old story with contemporary echoes. Produced at the end of 2022, it spans 100 years from 1923 to 2023, and reveals resonances with more recent historical events, such as the war proximity felt with the outbreak of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict and the accompanying sense of uncertainty, reigniting fears akin to the shadows of the corrupted world from which Peregrin flees.

2. The two films offer *distinct modes of multidisciplinary experience and engagement*: *Great Men* through theatre performances, and *Peregrin and the Giant Fish* with marionettes and music. *Great Men* starts with live theatre shows, involving the audience in a new cultural experience before becoming films. In *Great Men*, the use of technology transforms the spectator into an actor, directly involving him or her in the cultural experience. This approach not only brings audiences closer to contemporary theatre, but also opens up new opportunities to transmit theatrical experiences beyond the traditional physical confines of the theatre and into the digital realm. The interaction between presence and distance, between observers and the observed, emphasizes the importance of exploring the possibilities offered by the convergence of different forms of artistic expression. On the other hand*, Peregrin and the Giant Fish* offers an equally innovative experience through the integration of cinema, opera, puppet theatre and paper-based set designs. This fusion of media enables engagement with a broad audience of all ages, conveying complex themes through accessible and engaging visual language. The combination of different disciplines and languages challenges traditional artistic conventions, inviting people to explore new perspectives and topics, and to confront deep existential questions.

3. Moreover, they realize the Brera project's desire to break out of institutional confines, engage diverse audiences and cultivate new connections, especially with people who are

less inclined to visit physical museums. Making their way to cinemas (Pusnik, 2015), these productions connect with the local community and the urban audience. In the case of *Peregrin and the Giant Fish*, the film has been requested in other cities, neighbourhood cinemas, and other museums, expanding its reach nationwide.

Great Men initially premiered on *BreraPlus,* making the artistic experience accessible to a wider audience. Following its online debut, the film moved to the outdoor setting of Cinema AriAnteo during the summer months, offering audiences a unique open-air cinematic experience in the Chiostro dell'Incoronata. This outdoor screening, indeed with a double screen, provided an immersive environment for the viewers. In this way, in line with the *BreraPlus* interactive experience, people could choose to watch the film from the point of view of either Thomas or Bijan.

In contrast, the distribution strategy for *Peregrin and the Giant Fish* took a different path, debuting directly in Milanese cinemas, particularly around Christmas – the 26th, 27th and 28th of December. Following its cinematic release, *Peregrin* was made available online on *BreraPlus*, ensuring continuous access to the performance beyond the cinemas. This multi-platform approach effectively reached cinemagoers, museum visitors and digital audiences, maximizing the film's exposure and audience engagement. Moreover, following the success of this first experiment at Anteo, additional requests were made for more showings, leading to the film being screened at Cinema Orione in Bologna, during the spring of 2023. Then, in January 2024, the marionette opera made its way to Rome, where it was showcased at MAXXI as part of a film festival titled *C'era una volta... favole al cinema* (*Once upon a time... fairytales in the cinema*), thereby further broadening its cultural influence to reach new audiences and territories.

6.6 Elevating inclusivity, greater access and new opportunities

The essay extrapolates replicable strategies from these two experiences, challenging the notion of conventional museum engagement

and approaching the ongoing change of the cultural landscape in an unconventional way. It contemplates hybrid cultural consumption, exploring the nuances between tangible and intangible, touchable, and untouchable interactions. It argues how these films – and the broader *BreraPlus* platform – can be read as catalysts for encountering new people, stimulating curiosity for a diverse audience, and, in the end, sparking interest in in-person visits. They highlight the importance of film and digital accessibility while underscoring the irreplaceable authenticity of physically experiencing the museum and its collections.

Great Men and *Peregrin and the Giant Fish* embody a paradigm shift, redefining museums as dynamic hubs of informal learning rather than static repositories of artifacts. Embracing not only Sherman Lee's notion of museums as «permanent storage batteries» (personal communication, 1992) but even Nelson Goodman's vision of them as «institutions for the prevention of blindness» (Goodman, 1985), these films facilitate a seamless transition from mere display to knowledge transfer. The decision to showcase these films in local and city cinemas highlights the significance of community engagement and cultural resonance. Coupled with the option to view the films online, it exemplifies the notion that museums should think globally while acting locally (Bradburne, 2001), while becoming dynamic centres of informal learning and cultural exchange. *Great Men* and *Peregrin and the Giant Fish*, as clear examples, demonstrate that museums need to evolve through the activities they create, breathing new life into their collections. In essence, *BreraPlus* is deeply connected to what Pinacoteca di Brera does – not only to the collections it displays.

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