Teaching in the Time of COVID-19
Reflections on Teaching Italian Film during the Pandemic

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In Spring 2020 I taught remotely for the first time. I didn't track the time I spent planning my university classes — but like so many colleagues throughout the country, to prepare for remote teaching I attended numerous webinars which placed a lot of emphasis on time: hours (or rather minutes) devoted to synchronous teaching, length of asynchronous activities, time for preparation, a calendar for administering self-reflection surveys, suggested duration for discussions in breakout rooms, reminders about how frequently to post Canvas announcements and schedule Zoom meetings, etc. You might argue that such online course planning does not differ much from careful planning for a face-to-face standard course, but I'm not alone in understanding that, working and teaching from a home office during the Spring of 2020, time surrounding our regularly scheduled Zoom classes assumed an uncommon level of prominence (conscious and subconscious) and required more "management" than usual. (Surprisingly, however, in other areas of daily life it seemed as though time had stopped; every-day-the-same as my family and I, like so many others, were stuck at home during what felt like a never-ending quarantine.)

Something else comes to mind when I consider my experience last Spring interacting "remotely" with groups of people: Zoom can drastically increase the propensity of individuals to be acutely aware of their appearance. Indeed, Zoom meetings can turn into mirror-staring sessions. This is probably neither a positive nor a negative aspect of online teaching, but for me (thanks, perhaps to a vain or self-deprecating streak) watching oneself lecture or talk can have major narcissistic (on a good day) or depressing effects. My guess is that such "self-regard" also has a negative effect on students for, perhaps, less trivial reasons.[1] Not only do students have to overcome the common fear of speaking in front of a group of relative strangers, they must do so while staring at themselves on a computer screen that in my course was also being recorded. So much for "verba volant, scripta manent"! Every aspect of my online classes was captured during Spring quarter so that the recordings were available to students who couldn't "come to class" and to particularly motivated learners who wished to review what had been said in the meetings.

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[1] But perhaps not so trivial, if one thinks of Luigi Pirandello's novel *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, where the protagonist's profound existential journey starts when he realizes that his perception of his own physical appearance differs from what others see: leave it to a simple comment on a bent nose!

In my course on Italian cinema, having to negotiate meaning, express opinions and make hypotheses about complex concepts through a computer screen, all while speaking a foreign language before an audience, made things challenging for my students. While they contributed successfully with great motivation and enthusiasm to our numerous class conversations, I suspect virtual environments like Zoom hinder communication. Perhaps this is a personal view and, depending on individual personalities (mine, by the way, is far from shy), the consequences of virtual communication may vary greatly.

Among the unforeseen consequences of group Zoom sessions, I would like to briefly mention the shift in participants' rapport between privacy and place when we expose ourselves to screen-mediated gazes at home. I find it intriguing how quickly homes and in some cases bedrooms (often our most intimate spaces) become visible to strangers in an online remote "classroom" context and bring to the fore information on socio-economic status and its potential impact on learning. Additionally, the replacement of a traditional school setting with a less hierarchical physical configuration of the instruction-learner interaction might have positive or negative effects within a learning environment. Finally, I do wonder what psychological ramifications this sudden intrusion into private life has on education and more broadly on society.

When discussing Zoom's effects, I could easily indulge further in reflection on aesthetics, self-perception, and privacy in the time of COVID-19 but, since the purpose of this article is to report on my remote teaching experience, I will get down to the nitty-gritty of the course I taught this past quarter. My Spring class "Cinema italiano: lingua e cultura" had both primary and secondary goals and was designed with Content-Based Instruction (CBI) in mind.[2] In particular, when planning this course, I prioritized content on language instruction according to the following main objectives:

1. introduce students to film analysis in Italian and facilitate the acquisition of field-specific vocabulary and conceptual tools to identify formal cinematic elements in the movies I selected for the class;
2. raise awareness of past and current social issues in Italy within three main thematic areas: Migration, Gender and Sexuality, and Regional Representations and Stereotypes; I also aimed at fostering intercultural reflection on these topics.

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[2] I am using Content-Based Instruction (CBI) in this context but I could also refer to Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), as these denominations are sometimes employed interchangeably in language pedagogy and foreign language acquisition. In *Modern Languages Across the Curriculum*, Michael Grenfell points out that CLIL, a term more commonly used in Europe, is also synonym of Modern Languages Across the Curriculum (MLAC). It is worth noticing that some draw a distinction between CBI and CLIL, based on the priority instructional methods give to content over language instruction and vice versa.

My secondary goals (closely related to the primary objectives) focused on language proficiency:

1. provide opportunities to practice formal language within an academic register, primarily in speaking and writing;
2. expose students to a variety of sociolinguistic features, in order to broaden their knowledge of Italian language and culture.

Attention to form was of secondary importance in this class, but by the end of the quarter students showed noticeable improvement in their language proficiency, including accuracy, the ability to self-correct, strategic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic competences, and fluency. Mine was a mix-ability group of learners, with a wide variety of language proficiency that ranged roughly from Intermediate High to Advanced High (Superior in the case of one student) according to the ACTFL scale, with some learners being heritage speakers. By the end of the course, all students had honed their language skills, without class time being devoted specifically to grammar and vocabulary instruction (although I provided frequent corrective feedback, scaffolded activities which often included contextualized vocabulary, and opportunities for formative assessment).

While discussing Content-Based Instruction, Richard Donato advocates for the "transitioning from skill-based programs to a curriculum in which language development emerges in the context of academic subject matter learning" (Donato 26). I saw the great benefits of such an approach in my class and experienced firsthand how acquisition of interdisciplinary knowledge (film, historical, sociological, and gender studies) can become a springboard for communication in the target language. Before introducing cinema classes into the curriculum of the Italian language program I direct, I had conducted a student survey about whether to offer my film classes in English or in Italian, and responses had unanimously requested the latter. The survey added to my motivation to expand instruction beyond the imposed barriers of a two-tiered system, thus contributing to bridge the gap between language learning and the teaching of products belonging to Culture with a capital C, which traditionally coincides with literature in many departments. The Modern Language Association's exciting call for interdisciplinarity and its criticism of the "two-tiered configuration" resonated in my head. In its 2007 report "Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World," the MLA recommended to move away from "the organization of literary study in a way that monopolizes the upper-division curriculum, devalues the early years of language learning, and impedes the development of a unified language-and-content curriculum across the four-year college or university sequence" (236).

As in a previously taught course on Italian cinema ("Women and the Mafia in Contemporary Italian Cinema"), my class last Spring aspired to be an exciting journey through cinematic representations of social issues such as inequality, geopolitical exploitation, imperialism, patriarchy, and misogyny. It

also presented great opportunities to identify and question stereotypes shared by my students about Italian culture and to talk about Italy from a realistic, often unflattering perspective — one that is constantly omitted in textbooks where Italian culture is presented mostly in a positive light. Discussing social issues through representations offered by contemporary Italian films fostered higher-order thinking and sparked conversations that allowed my students to question a unidimensional perception of Italy that primarily or exclusively favored its attractive cultural aspects.

This class delved into many pedagogical areas, by offering me valuable moments of reflection on how to best facilitate the integration of content and language learning through online teaching, an entirely new and initially daunting experience. With the primary goals of this class in mind, I decided to devote most of my Zoom meetings to learner-led discussions, which I conceived as opportunities to help my students develop critical thinking and display creativity in language use while communicating in Italian.

The concept of "discussion" brings me back to the opening of this article, my reflection about time during the pandemic. As Franco Cassano observes in *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean*,

> In a society dominated by the fundamentalism of speed, democracy constitutes an unbearable waste of time, another of the patterns of experience that, authoritatively stamped with being "post," it seems we should consign to the past. Yet, the most precious gift of our tradition is precisely the habit of discussion, this wasting time that we see at play even just by leafing through Plato's *Dialogues*. (Cassano xliv)

Discuss, from Latin *discutere*, composed of *dis-* "apart" and *cutere* for *quatere* "to shake", was exactly what I was hoping my students would do with their ideas and points of view but also with the films and assigned readings. I invited them to examine themselves and the films we studied, by questioning their initial thoughts on the subjects or themes of the course, as well as by taking apart the films and readings (complex cultural products), selecting and analyzing scenes and arguments to discover something new through dialogical encounters of their and other classmates' perspectives. A substantial part of class time was thus devoted to collective reflection and interpersonal communication rather than lecturing, as I encouraged my students to embrace the idea of learning as cooperative exploration, not just knowledge acquisition. Moreover, when planning, facilitating, and mediating conversations, I tried to find a balance between flexibility and the ever-present time constraint to create an environment conducive to collaborative learning and inclusivity.

The thematic areas I chose for this class acted as a springboard for discussions on social issues and cultural changes in Italy, and engaged my students in in-depth intercultural reflections on the course materials as well as on the world we live in, through interactive tasks that encouraged them to draw on and share their own views. In a time of pandemic, financial crisis,

and Black Lives Matter protests, the discussions on films and readings acted as an effective bridge between the course and real life. The use of Zoom breakout rooms, combined with the implementation of Google Docs, proved to be a key tool for course discussions during our virtual contact hours. Because of the small size of the groups organized in breakout rooms, students felt more at ease when sharing their ideas, which resulted in a lower affective filter and frequent participation. The use of Google Docs allowed me to scaffold activities for breakout room conversations by providing visual support (e.g., questions, topics, and quotes as starting points for student-led discussions), as well as an opportunity to summarize in written form what would be later reported to the rest of the class by each group. As with face-to-face instruction, there is a vast array of possibilities to facilitate student interaction in breakout rooms.

I favored the use of prompts provided to students before entering their breakout rooms and made available to them while there. I also experimented with task-based activities such as coming up with questions or observations on specific film scenes or topics for other groups to discuss. Before class, I sent out prompts based on the weekly course materials in preparation for our class discussions; in breakout rooms students would share their own thoughts based on those prompts and would jot down on the assigned Google Doc additional questions or observations for comments by members of the other groups; each group would then access another group's Google Doc and would respond to the questions or would comment on the observations provided there by their peers; finally all students would reassemble in the main class and representatives from each breakout room would summarize their group's conversations. Except for the major limitation of the instructor's lack of ubiquity (one can't be in multiple breakout rooms at the same time), Zoom virtual rooms can be an effective way to facilitate small group discussions within a socio-centric approach to teaching. Now that I think about it, the term "breakout" evokes some peculiar scenarios (breaking out of the prison-like main classroom, for a start) and, if coupled with the video platform Panopto (I wonder if the reference to the panopticon is indeed intentional), one might end up with a pretty gloomy feeling. Fortunately, judging from course evaluations, my students didn't seem to mind this terminology and enjoyed the conversational nature of the class which Zoom breakout rooms helped provide.

Another helpful tool in this online teaching adventure was Discussions in Canvas, which offered additional low-stakes opportunities for my students to practice all three modes of communication: interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational. Students were required to complete a minimum of two written comments of about 300-400 words in length and one video comment, as a way to reflect on the course materials and stimulate class discussions. In particular, they were asked to discuss formal aspects and themes of the films and call attention to issues raised by the weekly readings. The posts on the Canvas discussion board also served as formative assessment in preparation for the midterm and final papers, as I provided individual feedback to each student post. Finally, they were a great tool to build a sense of community (so needed

in online classes and especially during these challenging times!) and to help students organize their thoughts to present later in class.

To conclude this reflection on the past Spring quarter, I should mention that remote teaching was for me — and probably many of my colleagues — a complex process made of trials and adjustments, which required commitment and flexibility on the part of all participants. It was also a very rewarding and unique communal experience. Empathy shone through discussions, and emotions made it through computer screens. Finally, from a purely instructional perspective, it has helped me further reflect on the role of critical pedagogy within education and the benefits that addressing concepts such as justice, human rights, equity, and democracy can have on learners whether in a virtual or traditional classroom as they grow to become empowered citizens.

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