Face-to-Face: The Semiotics of Online Teaching (or, in Praise of the Classroom)[1]

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« La solitude est certainement une belle chose; mais il y a plaisir d'avoir quelqu'un qui sache répondre, à qui on puisse dire de temps en temps que c'est une belle chose ».

(Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac (1659) « Préface de l'Histoire du mois prochain » ou « Les plaisirs de la vie retirée », *Les Entretiens de Feu Monsieur de Balzac*)

Abstract

The paper consists in an in-depth semiotic analysis of the spatiality of present-day online teaching as compared with that of the traditional classroom. Its spatiality, the paper contends, cannot be properly digitalized, because it is strictly dependent on embodiment. The embodied spatiality of a classroom, it is argued, is nevertheless fundamental to bring about the ritual transfiguration that underpins the didactic experience and its socio-cultural functions. Hence, the urgent need to rethink digital teaching environments in relation to these crucial lacks, which only semiotics, with its specific attention to non-verbal elements of communication—including spatiality—is fully equipped to detect.

Keywords: online teaching, classroom, spatiality, temporality, edusemiotics, COVID-19, digitalization

1. The Semiotic Centrality of Space in Teaching

Online teaching entails a semiotics of space that is considerably different from that of traditional teaching.[2] Various forms of distance teaching have existed in history; it could actually be suggested that the beginning of the possibility of teaching and be taught without any face-to-face interaction coincided with the beginning of writing; the invention of this technique, and the extraordinary opportunity to transcribe through a graphic form the sound and meaning of a living voice implied also the possibility of transmitting the contents of a teaching far in space and time. More recently, many modern media, from the postal service to the radio, have widened the spectrum of distance teaching, with various forms of institutionalization, from 1950s radio higher education courses until the present-day online universities. All these modalities of distant teaching and learning, though, have always been considered as complementary and actually secondary in relation to a more traditional setting, involving the presence of one or more teachers, of one or more students, sharing the same time and space. These two elements, which are actually two dimensions, the temporal and the spatial one, should be always taken into account when talking about the semiotic effects of online teaching and, more in general, when talking about the digitalization of any activity. It is improper to say, indeed, that digitalization works at its best with two of the five senses, seeing and hearing, but works still imperfectly as regards touch and smell, does not work at all with taste, and it is still at trouble with proprioception. That is only part of the truth. The picture indeed should include also time and space.

Digitalization deeply alters the temporal and spatial dimensions in which human activities usually take place. Thus, in the case of teaching, the fact that teacher and student share the same space is not only necessary, but means that such space becomes an inevitable and essential semiotic element in constructing the communicative context of teaching, as well as the conditions of its enunciation, as semioticians would say. Differently from time, moreover, space can uneasily be thought of in purely abstract terms (although, as it shall be seen, the abstractedness by which the temporality of teaching can be imagined is somehow an illusion too). When it is said that a teacher shares the same physical space as the student, the two are not imagined in a vacuum, but in a place, that is, they are imagined as surrounded by a space that is already material. Teaching can "take place" in various "places", and history has recorded many variations to the physical materialization of the

abstract space of teaching into specific places, from streets to squares, from convents to jungles. Most present-day individuals from technologically advanced countries, however, will probably imagine teaching as inextricably connected with the idea and the concept of a classroom. I myself, as a professor, if I imagine myself teaching, tend to picture myself doing it in a classroom, although my first university lecture actually took place in a movie theater in Siena and sometimes it has happened to me to teach in alternatives places, from woods to mountains, from kitchens to running cars. A classroom, though, must not be exclusively thought of as physical space, endowed with its stereotypical furniture. Again, most contemporary individuals would probably furnish their imaginary classroom with a chair, and a blackboard, and some desks and chairs. They would imagine the classroom as a well-lit, squared room, with few functional items hanging from the walls, or either they would imagine a wide wooden amphitheater. It really does not matter. It does not because, from a semiotic point of view, the spatial semiotics of a scene of teaching is not constituted by the shape or size of the classroom; by the quality and quantity of the furniture therein; by available teaching technology, from old blackboards to more modern projectors. That is not essential. Of course, a teacher might be attached to some of these items, and consider to be able to teach better if the classroom has a certain shape and size; if the furniture is of a certain kind; if a certain technology is available. I myself like giving my lectures in a small classroom with essential furniture and a traditional blackboard. Yet, again, looking into the matter in-depth, that is not essential at all. The spatial dimension of the classroom is not semiotically built and does not essentially function because of these elements.

2. A Network of Attentions

A classroom is made possible by gazes. The space of teaching is composed through paths of looking. That could be said in an even more abstract way, in order to take into account that the spatiality of teaching can take shape even when actual gazes are not present, for instance in the case of a course for blind students. Also in the case of blind students, the space of the classroom is composed by gazes, because what is fundamental in these gazes that construct the semiotics of the spatiality of teaching is not actually sight; the eyes of the teacher, as well as those of the students, are just an embodiment of a more abstract principle underpinning the functioning of space-

constructing gazes, and this principle is actually directionality. Directionality is the key element behind the constitution of the place in which teaching happens. A classroom is actually nothing but the physical embodiment, through a series of figures (chairs, tables, blackboards, etc.), of a network of directionalities. The figures might well change (students sitting on the ground, teachers standing on a desk like in the movie *The Dead Poets' Society*, overhead projectors instead of blackboard, etc.), yet the oriented directionality that these figures manifest must be present. In a nutshell, and essentially, the spatiality of teaching is constituted by the fact that a human mind or, more often, more human minds, direct themselves through their bodies, and therefore also through their senses of hearing and seeing, towards a common source of knowledge. The space of teaching results from a physical convergence of embodied attentions. In the network of gazes—which is a network of directionalities, which ultimately is a network of embodied attentions—that compose the spatiality of teaching, an abstract spatial asymmetry subsist even when the teacher is silent, even when she or he has not yet spoken or has finished to do so; moreover, the network subsists even when the teacher is no longer there, when the students have egressed; entering an empty university classroom one has often the impression that potential words of teaching are always lingering in the empty air, as one has always the feeling that the sublime tension of desire for knowledge that underlies the network of teaching is still there, innerving the space of the classroom even when it is empty.

It should be emphasized, moreover, that as it is often the case with functionality, it frequently turns into the ground for a semiotic relation: the umbrella is an object whose morphology results from the need to protect the human body from dangerous agents falling along the force of gravity (rain, snow, hailstones, but also sunrays in Asia and tomatoes in failed concerts or with hostile audiences), yet this morphology then turns into the signifier (or the representamen, to say it with Peirce) of the same function that originated it: an umbrella becomes a sign of the need to protect oneself from something (to the point that superstition in Southern Italy sees umbrellas left open at home as a bad omen, as a sign of a forthcoming evil against which one is meant to protect oneself through the umbrella). Similarly, the classroom exists as a place because its morphology has evolved over time in order to be spatially and sensorially suitable to the effective constitution of that network of oriented directionalities that the space of teaching ultimately is; yet this morphology, in the culture in which it has taken place, becomes a sign of its function; as soon as one

enters a space that is arranged as a teaching place—that is arranged as a classroom—one immediately has the feeling that that is a place for teaching; that that space must be a space where human minds, through their bodies, are directed towards another human mind in order to enable the systematic transmission of knowledge; the passage of culture from generation to generation; the constitution of the non-genetic memory of humankind.

3. The Spatiality of the Classroom as Creator of Educational Roles

But there is more. It is not just that, by entering a classroom, one has the impression that teaching and learning take place there. By entering a classroom, one also has the feeling that he himself or she herself will become part of that network, of that network of oriented directionalities, of that place of gazes, that founds the spatiality of teaching. That happens not only to students but also to teachers. In the same way as students, by crossing the threshold of the classroom—a symbolical but physically and architecturally material threshold, which divides the classroom from the outside world, from the corridor, for instance—enter not only in a space but also in a place, that is, in a space that is physically and semiotically thus arranged that actually favors their transformation into learning bodies, into bodies that will orient themselves so as to facilitate the passage of information from the body of the teacher to them, so analogously, by crossing the same threshold, the teacher sees his or her entire persona completely altered; he or she is not an individual anymore; he or she is a teacher; one might suggest that a teacher is always one, even outside of the classroom; and that a classroom is actually not necessary for an individual to become and act like and be a teacher; that seems to be evident in the frequent professional deformation that has teachers talk as such even when they are with friends, with a lecturing tone that can be actually annoying sometimes; and yet, that professional deformation exists, and even the resulting annoying tone exists, exactly because they have both taken shape through teaching, and they have been created precisely in the frame of that oriented network of directionalities that ultimately is the spatiality of teaching. In other words, it is true that one can be a teacher outside of the classroom, and that often one is such even despite him- or herself, yet the professional assurance of the teacher is also a consequence of the spatiality in which it has been created.

4. The Classroom as Sacred Place

The idea that this network of oriented directionalities, that this asymmetric structure of attention can "take place without taking place in a place" is a sort of idealist dream; it involves the prejudice of a word that is able to become teaching, and education, and memory, and ultimately culture, while remaining entirely immaterial. It seems to reproduce, in the sphere of education, the old dream of a sacred that stays such without any relation to a specific place. But is there a sacred without sacred place? In some of the most influential religious cultures of human history, that is not the case. There is no Catholic sacredness without sacred Catholic space; without Catholic places. But that is also true for Protestantism, which was able to purge from human religion the ideas of relic, of sainthood, of icons, but not that of place. Protestants have their temples too. It is impossible to rule out the idea that the way in which many of the fundamental cultures of human history have imagined the space of sacredness, as essentially and inextricably related to the possibility of circumscribing some places, to the possibility of separating the place of the sacred from profane space, has deeply influenced the ways in which the same cultures have imagined and created the spatiality of teaching.

It could actually be even suggested that both trends, a certain way of imagining the sacred as inseparable from a circumscribed space, from a sacred place, and a certain way of imagining teaching as taking place (both physically and conceptually) in a classroom are actually but manifestations of a same deep-seated anthropological dynamic, one of the most fundamental functions and results of which being the possibility to confer a spatial role to designated human beings. It is true that the priest is not necessarily the one that can access the sacred space, yet the fact that he or she might do so is quintessentially related to his or her being transmogrified into a different persona, into a persona that is not simply an individual any longer but one that embodies a function. That is why it should perhaps be suggested that the existence of a threshold, which being a threshold is often a normative one— a symbolical but also a spatial line trespassing which can occur only under specific circumstances—is actually fundamental to the creation of that network of oriented directionalities, of that structure of attention, that is teaching. Teaching needs a classroom; but the classroom needs a threshold, a more or less material line that marks the beginning and the end of the circle of teaching, or at least the perimeter beyond

which a teacher ceases not to be one, because that would not be possible, but ceases to act as one. The classroom door that is closed before the lecture starts is like the lines that delimit the soccer field. In order to have a proper game, those lines must be there. In order to have a proper Batesonian teaching game, with its appropriate roles of teacher and student, the classroom's door must be closed. That is not incompatible with ideologies advocating the democratization of teaching. And, simultaneously, underlining the importance of that door is not conservative either. Those voices that, especially from the second half of the twentieth century on, have proclaimed the ideological need to open the classroom to the outside world, and have actually promoted the abolition of all lines circumscribing its place (a parallel trend occurred in religion too), deeply misinterpreted the idea of openness and democratization; they were actually ideologically bad voices; they were proposing to open a place by dissolving it, yet being given access to a desert is not enfranchising at all; advocating the democratization of the spatiality of teaching should not mean eliminating the classroom's door or walls; that is a very simplistic and, actually, demagogic way of interpreting the famous "wall" at the center of the homonymous album by the Pink Floyd.

On the contrary, a democratic education means building a classroom big enough to let everybody come in. Dissolving the symbolical perimeter of education, which is also an architectural perimeter, into the illusion of a teaching space that never becomes place, that stretches as far as the entire conceivable spatiality of the world, means diluting that network of oriented directionalities, that structure of attentions that is constitutive of both teaching and learning. Education needs classrooms, as well as religions need temples, because the function of handing down culture from one generation to the next, of transforming information into new knowledge, and knowledge into new culture, is as delicate and actually sacred as the function of the priest. The material spatiality of the classroom is essential to symbolically sustain the delicate formation of the teacher's role as the material spatiality of the temple is to symbolically support the fragile constitution of a role that is more than a persona, and actually more than an individual, because as the latter is called to connect two otherwise mostly separate and mutually untouchable dimensions, that of transcendence and that of immanence, thus also the former is called to preside over the equally transcendental passage of culture from generation to generation. Culture is the human transcendence of nature. Teaching is the priesthood of such transcendence. And the classroom is its temple.

5. A Digital Temple of Teaching? From Classroom to Class Room

5.1 The "intentio auctoris" of online teaching places

But what about the possibility of a digital temple of teaching, learning, and education? Can such a temple of digits actually work? And if it does not, what are the deep reasons for such failure? Saying that online teaching has no spatiality would be inexact. Nothing has no spatiality, including time, as contemporary physics knows. The spatiality of online teaching, however, is different from that of face-to-face interaction between teacher(s) and student(s). That sounds like a triviality, but only if it is not analyzed in-depth in all of its components. First of all, online teaching features physical space too. Teachers and students do not connect from a vacuum, but from a material space, which is inevitably furnished with a series of figures, each bestowing a particular semiotic nuance on the space itself, thus turning it into a space, into a place with a personality, into a spatial role and sometimes even actor (if one follows Algirdas J. Greimas's semiotic theory). In most cases, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the physical place of both teachers and students was a private space, usually a house. Here the famous distinction formulated by Umberto Eco among three different kinds of "*intentio*", or meaning intentionality, comes in handy. Such domestic physical space of connection is loaded, first, with an "*intentio auctoris*", that is, with the meaning that the "author" of the space itself wants to attribute to it in order for it to be received by its potential and the actual observers.

Here comes the first important difference with the space of the classroom. This place too is, in a way, authored. Yet such author is mostly impersonal and collective. The shape and furniture of the classroom are determined by state and local regulations, by administrative rules, by bureaucratic needs and initiatives, more or less in keeping with a certain "fashion" in public and, specifically, school architecture. For those with a trained eye, it will not be very difficult, upon entering the space of a classroom for the first time, determining with a certain degree of precision to which epoch and style it belongs. One's personal memories and, as a consequence, imaginary of how a classroom looks like are probably shaped around the visual and architectural script characterizing a classroom in a certain age (frayed wooden chairs and desks in melamine-formaldehyde resin—"Formica"—are likely a must in the classroom imaginary of those who entered one for the first time in the 1970s). Then, this teaching and learning place shaped by a public, institutional, bureaucratic, and architectural-

fashion agency is also at least partially modified by users' behaviors and, above all, practices of writing, which might be seen, as Michel De Certeau did, as inflecting the public place with personal touches. It should be said, however, somehow pace De Certeau himself, that these never completely escape fashion (graffiti on classroom desks, and even chewed chewing-gums pasted underneath them, follow specific although mostly unconscious fashion trends, evolving throughout time). Students' clothes hanging at the walls, their books and notebooks, their pens and pencils, as well as their own bodies, complete the visual furniture of the classroom, which nevertheless always results from a collective agency and never from a personal one. That is proven in a spectacular way every time that a public regulation for the organization of the classroom place is contradicted by a personal or corporative agency. A typical example is the periodic initiative by such or such individual to remove the crucifix or the picture of the President of the Republic from the walls of an Italian classroom, where they compulsorily must feature according to the Italian law).

The physical space of online teaching and learning, on the contrary, is by definition composed by two separate places, that of the teacher, and that or rather those of the students, each arranged according to a mostly private "*intentio auctoris*". In those cases where the web camera is on, thus partially showing the background behind the teacher / the student, this usually features a place that is not public and collective, but private and personal. Fashion as always creeps in, with its various desires of distinction, including the distinction of ostentatious indistinction, yet it is a less compact fashion, one that is not filtered by state regulations and administrative rules, but interpreted according to a multifaceted logic obedient to a much wider spectrum of sociological factors, including class. Whereas the classroom is the space of the class, where all share the same place with the same level of aesthetic and, therefore, socio-economic distinction, the space, or rather the many places of online teaching are the space of class, meant as socio-economic and power categorization and ranking of human beings. Of course, richer and poorer classrooms do exist, with older or newer furniture, with more or less advanced technology, with fancier or more banal stationery, with better or worse dressed people, yet all those who physically share the space of the classroom are confronted with the same place, surrounded by it, and invited to consider it not as their own individual educational space, but as the educational space of a group, of a small community connected with the wider societal

community that has been determinant in shaping that place itself. Such semiotic community effect of the classroom has been considered so important that, in some circumstances—in Italian classrooms in several historical epochs, for instance—a uniform was imposed on children (and their families) so that their individual clothes would not mar, with their inevitable zest of distinction, the class homogeneity of the classroom. As this homogenous physical classroom is fragmented and diversified into many heterogenous physical places of connection, these immediately and inevitably become a matter for interpretation and, potentially, distraction. A student might well "interpret" the space of the physical classroom upon entering it for the first time, yet with the passing of hours, days, and weeks, that space ceases to be an object for interpretation and turns into a "spatial habit", that is, a place whose semiotic nature does not bring about a new interpretive semiosis anymore but turns into neutral background and, in addition, becomes the spatial, sensorial, and visual epitome of its function.

The process is better explained through comparison, once again, with a church. Upon entering a Catholic church for the first time, one's attention might well be caught by the novelty of the place, of its morphology, of its plastic arrangements, of its furniture and figures; yet, going to mass to the same church again and again, it inevitably turns into a "spatial habit" too; even the most sumptuous church, even the Basilica of Saint Peter in the Vatican, becomes the place of its function, not any longer an object to be interpreted through a new chain of interpretants, but a habit, the spatial container of a ceremony. When the spatial habit of the physical classroom is fragmented into its online counterparts, instead, one is never fully sure what kind of background, if any, will appear beyond the interlocutor. That becomes, as it was said, a matter for interpretation and, as a consequence, also the object of a range of communication strategies and signification effects. It was curious to see, during the COVID-19 lockdown and the ensuing multiplication of online activities, including teaching, how many teachers, and sometimes even students, chose to place themselves in front of the webcam with a background of bookshelves. The new aesthetic habit quickly turned into a fashion trend, then into a cliché and, with the usual frantic speed of the web, into an object for irony and its foremost digital genre, the meme. The cliché as usual also gave rise to an anti-cliché that, albeit more sophisticated in its intentions, was also readily turned into another "underdog" (countercultural, or rather, counter-class) fashion trend, and subsequently into a cliché; young researchers who

would not own a big library, or who would own one but adopt an "underdog" style of distinction, would prominently deliver lectures from their kitchens, the water heater looming in their back as a metallic reminder of counter-cultural shabby chic.

In any case, the passage from public and collective spatial habit to private and personal spatial representation reintroduces, in the spatiality of online teaching and its semiotics, a dynamic of class, meant as socio-economic ranking. Many professors could afford teaching from their private studies, visually and acoustically well isolated from the rest of the house, sheltered from the potential intrusions of their family members and especially kids; occasionally, some of these kids, or elegantly annoyed cats, would come in front of the web camera, yet that was the exception and was even exhibited as a further, even more sophisticated sign of distinction, as an element in the spatial, visual, and semiotic script of "the scholar's study", involving a cat and a controlled and of course always "artistic" modicum of chaos. The chaos threatening the online connecting spaces of less affluent teachers, with bigger and noisier families, or of students in dorms, would be of a totally different genre; it was a chaos one could not completely eliminate, and that was always looming over the concentration of online education, marring its audibility, distracting oneself and the interlocutors, impossible to be perceived by either of them as a voluntary sign of distinction and immediately turned, instead, into a nuisance.

5.2 The "intentio lectoris" of online teaching places

Even for those who could afford a bookshelf in their background, or who could transform the lack of it into a sign of underdog distinction, the semiotic result of place arrangement in the interaction was never sure. Indeed, Eco's semiotic theory of interpretation is clear about it: not always the "*intentio auctoris*", the author's intentionality of meaning, does coincide with the "*intentio lectoris*", that is, how the receiver ends up appropriating the meaning that was attached to a message. Thus, snobby professors wishing to signify their distinction and cultivation might have their bookshelves read as a mark of empty arrogance; shabby-chic young researchers could pass for unkempt individuals without any underdog redemption; moreover, in this particular communication too there was no possible zero degree background: some videoconference platforms would offer the option of turning one's background into a blurry image, or even to replace it with a tropical scenario, yet in both circumstances there was no way to avoid to be received as someone whose actual background image

had something wrong, something to be hidden. Similarly, turning one's camera off was acceptable only if accompanied by the excuse that the connection was too bad to allow the transmission of video. In some cases, however, that was actually the truth. Especially in the beginning of the pandemic lockdown, teachers and students, as well as education institution leaders, would still dream about setting up a sort of new panopticon in which all teachers and all students could actually be visible to each other and look at each other as if they were in the physical space of a classroom, with the only inevitable limitations of the cameras' angles; soon it was realized, however, that such panopticon was a delusional pre-pandemic dream of digitalization; the width of connection was in most cases insufficient to let people show the moving image of their faces; many were surprised by the lockdown with scarce or no familiarity with tools for videoconference and online teaching; they were caught in places with insufficient or no connection; the first lacuna was hastily dealt with by stitch-up introductory courses, often complemented by advice anxiously sought for from more expert relatives and friends; the second gap, instead, was much more difficult to fill; it was not easy and was in many cases very costly to arrange a fiber internet connection; a further class difference therefore emerged in the digital class, where individuals with slow connection started to be dreaded in meetings of all kind, their video sketchy, their voice intermittent, their messages too more and more associated with poor delivery conditions. A new kind of bluff started to take place, in which it was very easy to avoid showing one's face on video, or even talking, or skipping a whole meeting altogether, with the excuse that "the web connection is poor today".

5.3 The "intentio operis" of online teaching places

Semiotics then points out that exchange of meaning does not involve only an "*intentio auctoris*" and an "*intentio lectoris*" but also an "*intentio operis*", the meaning that exudes from the message's structure itself given the community of interpreters in which it circulates. It is evident that, however teachers and students might arrange the physical abode of their virtual interlocution, whichever background they might choose, and whatever strategy they might adopt, they could not fight against an intrinsic limit of the "*intentio operis*" of online teaching: a house is not a school; a professor's private study is not a university; a student's kitchen is not a classroom; no matter how the rhetoric of the virtual encounter between the teacher and the student might emphasize its normality, and the continuity with face-to-face classroom

interaction, there is no way that, during the pandemic, either teachers and students could forget that they were online from their home exactly because a pernicious virus was preventing them from meeting where they were supposed to, that is, in a designated place, in the place that history, culture, and above all the result of their sedimentation, that is, a community of interpreters, designated as the place where education must actually take place, where individuals can be transfigured into teachers and students, where they can meet not as individuals with their bookshelves and kitchens and water-boilers and cats and children but as social actants, as embodiments of cultural macro-functions; as senders and receivers in the narrative process, overarching more generations, of handing down the non-genetic memory of humanity across time. A scholar's private study might well have walls, and a student's kitchen might indeed have a door, yet trespassing on those walls, or crossing that door, does not entail the symbolic efficacy ritual that is necessary to operate the transformation of a person into a teacher, of an individual into a student. The online teacher might well be or rather remain such, yet that is by virtue of the memory of what that teacher was in the physical world, before the pandemic, when he or she would enter the classroom and be transfigured into an incarnation of the function of teaching. With the passing of time, and should the impossibility of going back to face-to-face teaching persist, such memory could become paler and paler, progressively fade away, become a cultural relic, until the point that it gets evacuated by the community of interpreters and their semiosphere.

6. The Shared Temporality of Teaching

Indeed, the transfiguration of individuals into teachers and students is guaranteed by the presence of a socio-culturally dedicated physical space in which such transfiguration is meant to literally and metaphorically "take place", but also because the physicality of such space ensures that the ritual crossing of the threshold, the symbolical trespassing beyond the classroom's door, "takes time", co-occurs for both students and teachers in a shared temporality. A classroom, indeed, is not only partaken spatiality for cultural transmission; it is also shared temporality for inter-generational memory-building. By stepping into the same symbolical temple at the same time, teachers and students abide by a non-written law according to which a community does not reconstruct its entire semiosphere ex-novo at each generation but

treasures at least partially the semiosphere handed down by the previous eras.

Albeit increasingly sophisticated, virtual spatiality for online teaching does not provide participants with an effective liminal experience. Despite the proliferation of metaphoric denominations seeking to mask off the difference between real and virtual spatiality of teaching, entering a "virtual room" does not entail the same semiotics as entering a classroom. It might well be emphasized, as it now happens in many virtual university courses around the world, that "teachers and students" get into the virtual space of education in order to share a lecture; in reality, no matter how strong this rhetoric of virtual liminality can be, teachers and students will continue to be embodied and irresistibly feel that their real personae, as well as their minds, are actually going nowhere, across no threshold, into no shared space, but are remaining exactly where they are, in the private, personal, and idiosyncratic space of their study or kitchen, shared with nobody else, except those (spouses, children, pets) that are inadvertently there while they should be elsewhere. Some of the most awkward moments that videoconference platforms have been experiencing in the last months, especially in situations of teaching and learning, have precisely been the liminal ones.

6.1 An awkward proxemics

In the real world, bodily distance globally adopted as a defense against the spreading of the virus has radically altered the human proxemics everywhere; among the many radical changes that have been introduced, one is particularly striking: the traditional ways developed by human cultures in order to signify the beginning and the end of an interaction among two or more interlocutors are now unviable; it is now unadvisable and frowned upon, or even altogether illegal, to kiss, embrace, shake hands, or touch in any possibly dangerous and contagious way when meeting someone else; yet, that leads to a sort of semiotic impasse, for in many human cultures the beginning and the end of a conversation are actually marked by non-verbal signs exactly so as to give a precise signal of when an interaction starts, of when it ends. After the pandemic, facial expressions and gestures not implying contact have actually showed a tendency to become more and more emphatic exactly in the effort of replacing the now lost semiotic function of contact: I shake your hand, therefore you exist for me as an interlocutor; I shake your hand again, and you leave the scene of my conversation. Also in most educational proxemics, the teacher's stepping into the shared symbolical space of the classroom was marked by special signs; students stand up in the most

formal circumstances, acknowledging the arrival not of the individual, but of the social actant he or she personifies, exactly in the same way in which the arrival of the priest, the religious authority, is saluted when it enters the sacred space of the church. But even in the most democratized or even demagogic educational proxemics, some form of salutation would mark the beginning of the interlocution between teachers and students. In digital platforms for videoconference, on the contrary, one may always enter as a private avatar, unseen and unheard by anybody else in the same "virtual room" until he or she decides to activate the camera and the microphone. The result is that even the shared virtual space of the online classroom can be "privatized" at will in any moment; at any moment, the avatar might turn into a ghost, and be there without actually being there; any absence, moreover, will always be by definition excusable, qua imputable to such or such technical problem.

6.2 Strategies of absentmindedness

Any teacher, and also any student, has had the experience of a boring lecture when the mind of the student actually leaves the classroom and meanders elsewhere, outside, in another imaginary world, where more interesting things happen. The history of educational spatiality could actually be written by considering the opportunities for absentmindedness and distraction offered to the students of each culture and generation; novices in a convent could have their mind escape only secretly, since even the position of their bodies and minds was strictly regulated, and diverting the gaze from the book was not allowed or even punished; in modern schools, possibilities for distraction increased through the two escape ways characteristically offered to students: the bathroom and the window. The student could either claim to be in need of going to the toilet so as to escape a boring lecture or a looming exam, or look outside the window (or at the spectacle offered by other students).

The introduction of mobile phones and other devices for digital distance communication dramatically multiplied the spectrum of possible escape ways: any teacher after the 2000s has had the experience of struggling to keep the attention of students who at any instant can dive into the screens of their smartphones. Yet distraction still had a limit, which was given by the body itself of students. Students were looking at their smartphones, yet they were still physically there, in the shared educational space of the classroom. As the classroom has turned virtual with the pandemic, the digital window through which students can now escape from the

classroom has become almost as big as the classroom itself; it has actually replaced the classroom; the proportion between concentration and distraction has been inverted; a virtual lecture is an online background to which one can return from time to time when bored by other virtual activities; the two dimensions, moreover, that of concentration on the lecture and that of distraction from it, increasingly blur; in the past, students could draw funny pictures of the teacher, but the risk of being caught and punished was still very high; now, they can post-produce on the spot an entire live digital lecture by adding to it funny special effects that the teacher will never see; never in the past has it been easier to parody teachers and teaching. Online lectures constantly risk to turn into funny intermissions into a continuous stream of virtual entertainment and gaming. Faced with this tragic prospect, many teachers have actually given up the illusion of the virtual shared spatiality of education altogether and have opted, instead, for asynchronous teaching; if students now leave the classroom as they please, perhaps proposing recorded lectures, instead of live ones, will encourage them to go back to lectures, at least as the examination period is approaching.

6.3 The dangers of asynchronicity

Asynchronous online education, however, endangers an aspect of the didactic experience that was jeopardized also in the passage from the real to the virtual classroom. Teachers often complain when they have too many students. That implies indeed a lot of work in terms of examinations, graduations, etc. Yet teachers are also usually proud when they complain so, especially if their lectures are not compulsory but are actually taken out of free choice; and they feel uneasy when, on the contrary, the number of their students declines too much. They dream of Oxford, where they imagine professors sitting in their studies with half a dozen of their disciples, yet are dissatisfied when the classroom looks too empty. That is the case because, granted, teaching does certainly not need the spatio-temporality, the physicality, and the proprioception of a crowd: teaching to crowds has always had something suspicious about it, something resembling more indoctrination than teaching, more a political speech or a religious sermon than a lecture, for teaching is, after all, directed to individual minds, not to minds that tend to lose themselves into the indistinction of a collective identity; yet it should be underlined that, if teaching is not for the crowds, it is not for individuals either; the teacher does not teach single personae, at least

not in the usual setting of present-day education; one-to-one teaching and learning is an activity that belongs mostly to the past, when teachers were actually tutors for the scions of affluent family; but it is something that also periodically tends to come back, when socio-economic (and today also technological) inequalities again single out privileged single learners out of a majority of people with no access to education; in the democratic school, however, as well as in the democratic university, teachers do not teach the crowd but they do not teach individuals either; they teach a peculiar human group that goes under the specific name of "class"; and how many students should there be in a class? That is not possible to define, yet definitely not the 5,000 individuals that, for instance, Facebook sets as a limit to the number of "friends" one is allowed to have in the social network; the ideal number of a class, indeed, is that which allows reasonable spatio-temporal, bodily, and proprioceptive coordination among the group of students and the teacher. Classes that take place in two separate spaces, one with the actual lecture, and a second one with a live video-projection of the first on a screen, already create an inacceptable inequality between those privileged that can see the teacher in flesh and bones and those who cannot.

But the ideal measure is not simply determined by the visibility of the teacher by the students. It is also vice versa. It is important that the teacher might see his or her students, although it is also equally important that he does not see them simply as individuals, but as members of a class. What is class, indeed, if not a group where human beings are meant to learn as individuals, as individual minds, yet they are put in the conditions of doing so in coordination with other students? On the one hand, one might think that the presence of one teacher for many students might be just an economic arrangement; indeed, there unfortunately are universities that, for economic reasons, are forced to pack an increasing number of students in a classroom. That does not rule out, however, that also the situation of one-to-one teaching is to be avoided. That is the case because, if traditional teaching usually involves a face-to-face interaction, that should not come down to the single face of the teacher addressing the single face of the student. For teachers, indeed, it is a common experience that they see the faces of students not as individual visages, but as a mysterious visual entity, collective yet composed of individuals as well, a sort of young and, hopefully, benevolent hydra. It would be inappropriate, of a teacher, to stare at the face of one particular student during the entire lecture, for it would immediately mean that that one face has been singled out from the class and transformed into a privileged object

of observation, thus altering ipso facto also the visual and interactive relation with the rest of the class. Even when students single out themselves in the group, by asking a question, for instance, it would be better and it is usually advised that teachers do not reply by addressing only the face of the individual who asked the question but rather start from there in order to then sweep with a more encompassing gaze the rest of the class.

7. Learning Togetherness

That is the case because individuals in a class learn better than individuals alone; or at least, they learn differently. The difference is a result of the peculiar spatio-temporality that is brought about by the physicality of the classroom, which is in turn a product of such conditions of space and time; after all, it is not so difficult, in normal times, without the threat of the virus, to give rise to a classroom and to a class therein: a limited time during which people should convene; a limited space in which people should get together; a teacher; a group of students; an essential conversational rule according to which the teacher should have predominant control in presiding over the discourse in the classroom. Of course, as it is increasingly trendy especially in the US, students can participate and provide themselves the discourse of the lecture; yet should the teacher be unable to at least frame such contributions, the very idea of the lecture would start to collapse, falling into a different discourse category, that of a discussion among students.

Other conditions are accessory but are nevertheless important in codetermining the final result of the classroom. The teacher is usually allowed to stand up and move around the place, whereas students are usually not; a scene of lecture during which the teacher would sit quiet and talk while his or her students would roam around would be at least unusual; it would, indeed, transmit the idea that the essential discourse hierarchy of the lecture, which is also embodied, symbolized, and ritualized through control of body movements, has been upset. Of course some could dream and have done so about a lecture in which students talk and teachers listen, in which the former move around and the latter stay still, with a complete subversion of the usual semiotics of education; yet it should be emphasized that these legitimate utopias of subversion would be inconceivable and actually insignificant without contrast with the norm they contradict. They are welcome provocations advocating more freedom

and equality in education, yet they would probably become unbearable and above all non-functional chaos, should they be adopted as a paradoxical anarchical norm. Similarly, experimental theater struggling for the suppression of the "fifth wall", thus eliminating any diaphragm between the actors and the spectators, is a harbinger of creative freedom that can work as such only in contrast with traditional theater.

8. The Dreadful Silence of Online Teaching

A limited space, a limited time, both constituting a spatio-temporal frame, an individual incarnating the role of the teacher, a group of individuals incarnating the role of students, some rules determining the constitution of both verbal and non-verbal discourse in the classroom: these are simple elements, yet they are essential to give rise to that learning community effect that is key to teaching and learning. Some of these elements, moreover, can be transmogrified into a digital form, but some others cannot, entailing a deep alteration of the educational scene. As a consequence of the pandemic, I may convene during a designated time together with my students in a digital platform, and such platform may well have some functions seeking to reproduce, within the digital format, the rules of discourse that govern the conversational exchange in offline lectures. The experience that most users have of these digital simulacra of conversational rules is, however, quite alienating. Raising one's hand in these platforms through clicking on the corresponding icon is not the same as raising one's hand in a classroom, a gesture with a very old tradition and deep-seated embodied meaning; digitally silencing voluntary or involuntary noisy students during a digital lecture has always something vaguely censorial about it, not to speak of those digital seminars in which the teacher only can speak, whereas students are confined to a silent limbo, from which they can emerge only if they are authorized. During a real lecture, students are supposed to stay quiet and listen to the teacher when he or she lectures, yet thanks God they are not forced to do so; their silence is voluntary, even in primary school, meaning that it is the acoustic byproduct of a moral choice, of the adhesion to a system of value, of the interiorization and embodiment of the belief that, in that space and time, it is actually better to stay quiet and listen to someone else, this someone else being the teacher. In digital platforms students might also well adhere to the same pedagogical credo, and stay silent, yet this silence of theirs is always mediated, and therefore robotized, by the voluntary action

of muting their microphones. This intermediation of silence introduces, like every intermediation, the possibility of an empty simulacrum; are students inaudible because they have actually decided to listen to their teacher, or are they so because they have simply muted the device that would allow them to speak, and they are actually inattentive to the teacher, talking to someone else in a somewhere else that is forever excluded from the virtual space of the digital conversation, forever uncontrollable by it? The body and voice of the teacher talks to the muted avatars of the students in the digital platform, but where are the actual bodies and minds behind them? Confined to a face and a voice, unable to move around, uneasily able to stand up and even gesture, the teacher talks to a void whose human content has the same uncertainty of the entire digital sphere. In the pre-pandemic world, the teacher was afraid that the students would not actually pay attention, he or she would be afraid about this possibility, which is the intrinsic failure of all teaching, even though a series of tricks and strategies were enforced so as to exorcise this fear. In the post-pandemic world, such fear has become panic; the teacher is constantly terrified that students might not be there, because their minds are elsewhere; because their eyes are elsewhere; because their bodies are elsewhere; because even their digital avatars are elsewhere, lost because of a pernicious technical failure, whose effects are always discovered too late, when too much real discourse has already been uttered, uttered to the digital wind, like a message in a bottle that nobody ever will be able to find.

9. Conclusion: The Solitude of Online Teaching

Despite the creation of a temporal frame and the digital simulation of a spatial interaction, indeed, the teacher feels alone. Maybe the student too feels alone. They both feel without each other. That happens because the space they inhabit and are supposed to share is disembodied. It is a space that is not able to transform the time of teaching into a synchronicity. Avatars convene all at the same time, but being all online, teachers and students, on the same educational platform for the same two hours is not tantamount to synchronicity. This takes place when it actually takes physically place, when bodies convene at the same time in the same space, so that that time becomes shared space and that space becomes shared time. Synchronicity indeed is more than simultaneity. It means that, in those two hours spent by a group of minds and their respective bodies in the space of the classroom, they are absorbed

by the same contemplation, which etymologically is the mental act of sharing a temple, of being engrossed by both the mental and physical thought of a resonation. When teaching is successful, the minds of students resonate with each other, and all together they resonate with that of the teacher; bodies, in this circumstance, become the quasi mystical incarnation of a symphony of minds. Only very bad teachers have never experienced it such moment in their professional lives, and all those who have actually experienced it then will probably admit that it constitutes a peak of existential satisfaction, a sort of didactic ecstasy, meaning that the teacher's and the students' minds are not only in their respective bodies but are led to linger in a shared spatio-temporality in which they respond to each other. It is a concert of minds, a concert that is more difficult to obtain than a concert of instruments because it is not bounded by codes and rules but results from pure will. In these circumstances, the minds of all those who are in the classroom are augmented by their resonance with the other minds, they are empowered by it, they transcend the limits of the body so as to attain an almost superhuman dimension. That is not the superhuman condition of Nietzsche, though, the one of the individual subjugating the other individual, but it is, on the opposite, a supra-humanity, one which does not emerge from the coercitive contact of bodies, from their physical actions and reactions, but from the pure force of words, meanings, and minds. It is the supra-humanity that brings about the transcendence of culture, the sublime ecstasy through which language allow human minds to project themselves beyond themselves, beyond space and time, across the generations, in a virtual place that is not virtual qua digital but qua virtuous, the best that humanity can offer to itself, the persistence of meaning through words and throughout time, the only opportunity of the humankind against the natural passing of time, the only possible survival.

Notes

the FRIAS—Freiburg Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Freiburg, Germany. I thank FRIAS, its director, Prof. Bernd Kortmann, its administrative team, and the research assistant, Dr. Roland Muntschick.

2   The critical bibliography on online teaching is rapidly expanding, especially following the worldwide spread of distance education as a result of the pandemic. A properly "edusemiotic" reflection on the subject, however, is still missing, especially as regards the transformation of the spatial aspects of teaching. Recent contributions include Smith and Rennie (2019), Cleveland-Innes and Randy Garrison (2020), Reich (2020), and Veletsianos (2020).

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