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LEARNING FROM THE VIRUS: THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON COMMUNICATION, MEDIA AND PERFORMING ARTS DISCIPLINARY FIELDS
A Round-Table

Abstract

From a sociological point of view, this is a truly challenging time: a time of 'revelation' as well as possible 'revolution', capable of revealing many of the pathologies of our lifestyle. The Coronavirus crisis has exposed the way our society works in a sort of a global social experiment, which provides the opportunity to question many of the categories and paradigms of our disciplines, as well as our way of life. More profoundly, the virus has exposed the structural tensions at the basis of our social, economic, political life. Our duty as intellectuals, as teachers, and as academics is today to find a way to inhabit this tension in a more integral, inclusive, fair way rather than to dream to solve it by removing or suppressing one of the aspects at play. It is therefore necessary to explore the many possible ways to exit this situation, transforming this crisis into an opportunity for positive change. This polyphonic article, stemming from a moment of common discussion kept online, aims to be a contribution to this effort.

1. THE VIRUS AS A MEDIUM

The Coronavirus crisis has exposed the way our society works in a sort of a global social experiment, which provides the opportunity to question many of the categories and paradigms of our disciplines, as well as our way of life.

We have suddenly shifted from high-speed mobility and connectivity to confinement. We have learned that a lot of the mobility we take for granted is not necessary, and that some things can be done from home in a much more sustainable way. We have found out that we are not individuals, we are connected, and not only through digital devices: in fact we cannot disconnect to one another. We have realized that the narra-

tive of individuality and individual survival – the narrative upon which the society of surveillance is constructed and justified – is not true. From a sociological point of view, this is a truly challenging time: a time of 'revelation' as well as possible 'revolution', capable of revealing many of the pathologies of our lifestyle.

In a sense, the virus has worked as a *medium*, in a mcluhanian sense, because it has been able to modify completely and profoundly the rhythm and the forms of our daily life and of our relationships. Actually it has operated a true reversal, turning the features of our social model into their opposite: hyper-mobility suddenly and quickly has become confinement, hyper-sociality turned into isolation, consumptions stopped and so on. More profoundly, the virus has exposed the structural tensions at the basis of our social, economic, political life. Our duty as intellectuals, as teachers, and as academics is today to find a way to inhabit this tension in a more integral, inclusive, fair way rather than to dream to solve it by removing or suppressing one of the aspects at play.

Of course, the Coronavirus has been also a *message*, because it has monopolized the media information for months, spreading at the same time also the contagion of misinformation. In some countries, the data were hidden, while in other countries, like Italy, the data were so abundant and contradictory that it was difficult to grasp the full extent of the phenomenon and to have a real perception of it. More information is not more knowledge, we have seen it clearly.

What this article wants to stress is that a time of revelation is also a time of potential change – even though this change can be for the worse. It is therefore necessary to explore the many possible ways to exit this situation, transforming this crisis into an opportunity for positive change. This is the real challenge: to pursue what Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino called an *odology* of the present, a reflection on the possible ways (*odòs*) that open after a crisis, after something that breaks our routine and disrupts the world as we knew it. This polyphonic article, stemming from a moment of common discussion kept online, aims to be a contribution to this effort.

The first contribution is that of Jérôme Bourdon, who investigates the long recurrence of telepresence in a historical perspective. The massive use of online communication of all sorts has triggered many comments, mainly of two kinds: either its unprecedented character or its relation to loss and lack (loss of 'real presence', loss of 'public space' etc). Yet, in the long history of presence at a distance, many of the practices latch onto previous patterns, which encouraged the use of technology to connect to faraway persons and people. Looking at some examples from the past, Bourdon put the present crisis into the proper historical perspective.

Bourdon's final question (physical or telepresence?) is also shared by Nico Carpentier. In his contribution, Carpentier proposes a reflection on the opportunities and threats of online communication for Academia during and after the Coronavirus crisis, raising a plea for the development of hybrid models.

Kirsten Drotner also questions the impact of the pandemic on academic work and learning processes. Analysing the situation from her Northern European point of view, Drotner's contribution wishes for a holistic and grounded understanding of the correlation between technologies, communication and meaning-making practices.

In the same line as Kirsten Drotner, Dana Renga examines some of the effects of Coronavirus on academic work. Bringing some practical examples related to her daily work, Renga's contribution introduces an American perspective on the impact of the pandemic on Academia and illustrates the effect of the crisis on her daily working practices.

Lastly, Andrea Virginás in her contribution examines the impact of the Coronavirus crisis on film production and theatre activity in Hungary and Romania, as parts of the

Eastern European landscape, focusing on the different measures adopted by the creative industry during the evolution of the pandemic.

(*Chiara Giaccardi*)

2. THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS AND THE LONG HISTORY OF TELEPRESENCE

The experience of communication in the times of the Coronavirus can be connected to the *longue durée*. Precisely: the longue durée of technologies of presence at a distance (telepresence), starting with correspondence in the antiquity. While during the present crisis academic debates have focused on online teaching, this is just the tip of an iceberg of activities which have been increasingly managed online: be they professional (e.g. psychotherapy), personal (conversation, family 'reunions', 'parties'), political ('assemblies'), cultural (online 'visits' of museums), among many others. Quotation marks are used all along, for using the words without reservation would mean to accept the idea that those are real 'visits', etc. They are not, no less that an exchange of letters was a conversation, to use an age-old metaphor.

This situation is just a new episode of a very long history, an episode which could be called the first massively connected pandemic, which combines ancient fear and practices (the medieval lockdown being the most striking example) with the massive use of modern technologies of communication (including pre-internet ones: radio, television, and the telephone, although all those now combine with the net in various degrees).

Four points are worth considering:
1. The discourses about Corona-telepresence;
2. The scholarly conceptualization of telepresence, prior to the pandemic;
3. Criteria for historicizing telepresence;
4. The specificity of Coronavirus telepresence.

2.1. *The discourses about Corona-telepresence*

Unsurprisingly, the celebration of telepresence has been made by the representatives of Big Tech, who benefitted directly from the situation. The story of the phenomenal increase of the value of the Zoom share is well-known. More generally, promoters of technology of presence have rejoiced. A typical quote, from Anuja Sonalker, the CEO of Steer Tech, a driverless-car company: "There has been a distinct warming up to humanless, contactless technology. Humans are biohazards, machines are not" (quoted by Naomi Klein[1]). This is not (only) cynical capitalism: Big Tech gurus believe that their technologies are intrinsically good for mankind. They are happy tech-prophets in pandemics times.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, we could probably place… ourselves. The general lament on pedagogues forced to quickly go online has been an international phenomenon. Beyond *pedagogy*, two fields mainly have been said to suffer from the move to online communication: *intimate relations*, and *politics*. Regarding intimate relations, the loss of direct eye-contact (in online conversations we don't look at each other, but either at a black hole of the camera, or at a picture on screen) long commented by re-

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[1] N. Klein, "How Big Tech Plans to Profit from the Pandemic", *The Guardian*, May 13, 2020.

searchers about videoconferencing, and, especially, of touch, has been a key theme. The value of touch has been repeatedly praised, for example by Eve Ensler, the author of the *Vagina Monologues* ("What will we become without it?"[2]). As for politics, the lockdown and distancing rules have made difficult a key action of protest: demonstration. More generally, various theorists have claimed that face to face debate is key to the good functioning of the democratic, deliberative assembly. *A la* Habermas, they have lamented a new blow to an already agonizing public space.

With Corona-telepresence, did we lose the class, the hug and the assembly?

2.2. *Conceptualizing telepresence in communication scholarship*

Specialized academic research has long discussed presence at a distance through technology. I used the term 'telepresence' as the most general one, but its history is convoluted. Marvin Minsky, from the MIT, coined it in 1980. He meant, especially, technologies allowing physical intervention in a faraway space (for example 'telesurgery'). The coinage 'telepresence' caught on. In 1992, an academic journal was created: *Presence, Teleoperators and Virtual Environments*. 'Presence' started being used as short for 'telepresence'. This choice was highly ideological: if presence is telepresence, then technological presence is as good 'as the real thing', as Minsky wrote[3]. However, 'presence' came to encompass, backwards, other uses of technology, mainly the experience of the presence at a distance of other *humans*, first analyzed by Short *et al.* (1976)[4], who used the term 'social presence' for this.

The study of presence at a distance has considerably expanded. It is far from being a unified, coherent field. Without referring telepresence theories, some historians have studied the long history of presence, through electronic technologies, from the telegraph[5], or through analogue ones, starting with correspondence[6]. And authors who do not use the notion of presence may have something similar in mind. One could also argue that mediatization theory, and, especially, the 'deep mediatization' thesis[7], which claims that we are now experiencing the world, massively, through entangled digital technologies, and much less directly experiencing our immediate 'here and now', could be rephrased as a claim about the massive rise of telepresence(s) in daily life.

In short, before the crisis, telepresence had much… presence in academic research, and increasingly so. Importantly for us, the place of history in such research was, overall, marginal.

2.3. *How we can historicize telepresence fruitfully in order to better appreciate it*

The gist of the argument is as follows: what we have recently experience is not the discovery of telepresence but a sharp and forced increase of already established practices,

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    [2] E. Ensler, "Touch Saved Me from Loneliness. What Will We Become without It?", *The Guardian*, April 21, 2020.
    [3] M. Minsky, "Telepresence", *Omni*, June 1980: 45-51.
    [4] J. Short, E. Williams, B. Christie, *The Social Psychology of Telecommunications*, New York: Wiley, 1976.
    [5] J. Sconce, *Haunted Media. Electronic Presence, from Telegraphy to Television*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
    [6] E. Milne, *Letters, Postcards, Emails, Technologies of Presence*, London: Routledge, 2012.
    [7] N. Couldry, A. Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, Cambridge: Polity, 2017.

for the most part. This gave the double sense of a *discovery* (sometimes positive, but mainly as compensation), and a *loss*.

Telepresence has been central to the history of modernity since the early 19th century (with the massive use of correspondence, the rise of the mass press, the telegraph...), but has started thousands of years ago, with correspondence, which quickly followed the invention of writing[8]. What is a letter but the earliest form of technological presence at a distance? From the start, letters writers have been reflecting on the best way to be present while absent. The year is minus 1350, and the king of Babylon writes to Pharaoh, in cuneiform, the following letter (on a bloc of clay):

> Say t]o Naphu]rar[ey]a,[1] the king of [Egypt: T]hus Burra-Buriyas, the king of Karad[uniyaš]. For me all goes wel[l]. For you […] may all go very well. (8-24) – From the time of Karaindaš, since the messengers[2] of your ancestors came regularly to my ancestors, up to the present, they (the ancestors) have been friends. Now, though you and I are friends, three times have your messengers come to me and you have not sent me a single beautiful greeting-gift, nor have I for my part sent you a beautiful greeting-gift.

Beyond, obviously, the cultural significance of apparently similar practices, there is a core problem human agents have long had so solve: how to make themselves telepresent. Our king is discussing the body (health) and the sending of gifts: two classic strategies for 'presencing' the relations between absent people.

Beyond this single example, three criteria can be suggested to compare the different form of presence at a distance across history and technologies, assuming there will resonate for readers who are now massively, daily, exposed to the need to master telepresence. First, the *level of disembodiment*: it is massive for the email (which does not even offer the indexical sign of the *handwriting*), minimized in our Skype or Zoom conversation. Second, the *time lag*: from the synchronicity of telephone to the long time it takes (took) for letters to travel. However, speed is a relative feeling. To wit: across very different cultures, the postal systems (of Antique empires, democratized in the modern age) were the epitome of speed: witness the adverbial use of phrase like 'posthaste' (Shakespeare), or 'en poste' (Montaigne) to refer to the fastest actions. Third, the contrast entre intimate and interactive forms of telepresence, and more massive forms, less interactive, *dialogue versus dissemination*, to adopt Peters' terminology[9]. The distinction is not clear-cut, especially in the internet world. A Zoom class given to a huge audience tries to reintroduce interactivity with the use of the chat, or newspapers resorted to readers' letters. And an intimate Zoom dialogue is threatened by Zoom trolling (but also, by an undesired visitor entering your room); similarly, letters have long been opened, sometimes published, against the will of their senders and addresses.

2.4. *What has changed during the first connected pandemics?*

Telepresence is nothing new. Our massive dependence on it, both fast increased and revealed by the lockdown and the pandemics, is. We were dependent before but preferred

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[8] J. Bourdon, "From Correspondence to Computers. A Theory of Mediated Presence in History", *Communication Theory*, 30 (2020): 64-83.

[9] J.D. Peters, *Speaking into the Air. A History of the Idea of Communication*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

to ignore it, and, with some exceptions (families of migrants), thought we could come to face-to-face communication when we wanted it.

This may explain the strength of the anti-tech position. From a historical point of view, we must qualify this. Being physically together allows the eruption of violence, the cult of the charismatic leaders. The question, then, is not to choose between physical and telepresence, but to *reclaim* and *combine* both, depending on our needs as humans, to create and maintain relevant emotional collectives. That is the task: it takes us directly from a quiet historical musing, to the turmoil of politics.

(*Jêrome Bourdon*)

3. RESISTING THE ZOOMIFICATION OF ACADEMIA

This is also a good moment to start thinking about how this new set of online practices actually affects academic work. As a starting point, it can be argued that the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen both as an organic crisis, to use a Gramscian concept, or as a dislocation, to use a Laclauian concept. On one hand, of course, a pandemic is a deadly and traumatic experience, and we should pause and reflect about the loss of life. On the other hand, an organic crisis or a dislocation is a window of opportunity – it's the moment when things start to happen or, to use Laclauian terminology, it's the moment when sedimentation become politicized and it opens up opportunities for change. It is equally important to remember that the window of opportunity often closes quickly, and the de-sedimentations become sedimented again very. Of course, if we have new sedimentations, there is no guarantee that the situation beforehand is any better than the situation afterwards: an organic crisis is in that sense neutral, with (de-)sedimentations moving in many possible directions. Social change is not earmarked to be necessarily beneficial.

This stance is important if related to what is happening in Academia during the ongoing Coronavirus crisis. If we consider the context of neo-liberal universities, with their many "hidden injuries"[10], we see the discussions about redundancies erupt, in some cases only announced as a worst-case scenario[11], in other cases becoming very material. For example, Australian universities see their financial model jeopardized now that Chinese students are not allowed into the country, with Deakin University, for instance, cutting 300 staff positions[12].

We need to discuss and consider how the state of emergency can slide into a state of exception[13]. Of course, in the state of emergency, we are all flexible and keen to help, but if the present condition shifts into the state of exception, articulated with neo-liberal logics, then maybe we should critique and resist. We need to be very careful because the state of exception also implies a temporal change: it risks becoming a permanent exception, which is different from what is still considered to be the state of emergency. In particular, we need to be careful that the precarization of academic work, which

[10] R. Gill, "Breaking the Silence: The Hidden Injuries of Neo-Liberal Academia", in R. Ryan-Flood, R. Gill, eds., *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*, London: Routledge, 2009, 228-244.
[11] A. McKie, "Cambridge v-c: Crisis Could Lead to Job Cuts in Worst-Case Scenario", *Times Higher Education*, May 26, 2020.
[12] G. Masien, "Hundreds of University Jobs Lost Already Due to Pandemic", *University World News*, May 26, 2020.
[13] G. Agamben, *State of Exception*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

was already a serious problem, is enhanced at different levels: the progressive individ-ualization of academic workers is weakening their power position in relationship to their employers. We also see an increased workload, for instance, in relation to online teaching, with the need to split lectures in smaller components, the need to subtitle our lectures, not to mention the people who feel compelled to build their private studios for online teaching at home (and in many cases actually make private investments to do so)… This additional workload, without many additional resources made available by universities, gives cause for concern. It's fascinating to see these changes, but we need to ask how this will affect the professional situation of academics, and who is expected to pay for that. Is this free labor, and if so, is this acceptable? Additionally, there are the traditional questions about telework and the traps which have been widely documented: the creation of techno-stress, the difficulties in maintaining some degree of separation between the professional and the private, the re-definition of 'academic home' and what it means to be at home if home is also the workplace, and the permanent emphasis on online meetings simply because it is now easier to have meetings. And there is the risk of the second reconfiguration of academic infrastructures, moving away from the horror of open offices into the absence of offices.

We should not be overtly negative: This situation offers huge opportunities which we should be able to embrace. Yet, the enthusiastic discourse about these new oppor-tunities[14] is absorbing too many of our critical stances – This discourse represents all academics as being so terribly happy to be able to do all these wonderful things online, which sometimes makes one wonder whether there are any critical professors left on this planet. Obviously, there are, but their voices don't always circulate well.

To go into a very practical case, the IAMCR 2020 conference was originally planned in Beijing, then it moved to Tampere (Finland) and then it moved online, labelled an event "from Tampere University and wherever you are". This situation had some un-deniable advantages, because people who could not travel, because of restrictions, but also because of financial limitations, were able to present their papers. In a considerable number of cases, the amount and thoroughness of participant feedback exceeded what can be witnessed at face-to-face conferences. But then, you can consider the ECREA case as a counterexample: ECREA decided not to organize a virtual conference but to postpone the conference that was scheduled in Braga (Portugal), opting for "a physical conference as a way of renewing the bonds that bring together a scholarly communi-ty that are difficult to achieve through various online tools and virtual conferences"[15]. I think they do have a point as well. But this should not be an either/or discussion. We seem to be stuck in a Hegelian logic where we moved from the thesis to the antithesis, but we have failed to reach any kind of synthetical reflection.

There are two dimensions in this dynamic that can be underlined. The first point is the absence of hybrid models: we have to figure out how to integrate face-to-face meetings and online meetings. Of course, we might want to be careful to uncritically and thoughtlessly continue our academic jet-setting in a time of climate destabilization: there is a serious issue when it comes to face-to-face meetings and travel, related to the ecological footprint that we're leaving behind[16]. The ecological privilege that we have

[14] S. Lynch, "How Professors Are Teaching in a Coronavirus World", *Stanford Graduate School of Business*, March 18, 2020.

[15] https://www.ecrea2020braga.eu/postpone-of-the-8th-european-communication-conference/.

[16] J. Nevis, "Academic Jet-Setting in a Time of Climate Destabilization", *The Professional Geographer*, December 1, 2010.

had as academics, for a very long time, might need to come to an end, as we need to reconsider a number of these practices anyhow. At the same time, we need to be able to engage with colleagues face-to-face, to be able to discuss our work, and to both enjoy and use the serendipity that face-to-face meetings entail. This produces the need for hybrid models and formats of knowledge production, that combine and balance face-to-face and online encounters. We have a considerable amount of reflection ahead of us to develop these.

Second, in the current zoomified academic culture, there is a very strong emphasis on liveness and immediacy: the *zoom-ergo-sum* very much reminds of Nick Couldry's work on media rituals[17], where he argues that media position themselves as the societal center through the logic of liveness. It seems that we're doing the same in academia: we're generating self-importance through this emphasis on liveness and immediacy, without having any reflections on the complexities of knowledge production – whether this kind of dialogue is actually to be privileged, whether this kind of teaching is actually working well. Also, we don't think about the possibilities and the risks of adding more overload to the overload – how are we going to decide which webinar is actually relevant? Who will curate this content? More importantly, there is a structural absence of the discussion on slow science[18], which needs to be defended: We need to de-rush Academia, because we need time to think, to ponder, and to fail – and going into a zoomified world moves us into the opposite direction.

(*Nico Carpentier*)

4. THE ADDED NEED FOR RESEARCH-BASED MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY

The Corona crisis has given media and communication scholars a wonderful chance to revisit some perennial questions about the correlation between technologies, communication, and media. In Europe, within a very few days, about a third of the population was obligated to switch from face-to-face interaction into digital interaction – not only academics but also students and teachers, from kindergarten through university. This dramatic but interesting adjustment demonstrates ways in which we can begin to analyze the breakdown of binaries that have existed for a long time.

First, a kind of very normative binary can be addressed, where a technology-led approach often ends up in some hierarchical, normative discourse and practice. Before the Coronavirus, there was a binary conception according to which 'screen-time was bad' and 'face-to-face teaching was good'. Suddenly, during the Corona crisis, the talk about screen time being bad was disregarded, because it was all we had: in this way the Coronavirus enforces a revisit of this old technology-led approach.

Second, the Coronavirus and the pandemic also make us revisit old binaries in terms of communication, where the binary is between 'face-to-face analog communication' and 'mediated communication' – which means communication that is somehow conveyed through some sort of technology. The pandemic was a situation in which it could no longer be upheld. Those who work in media and communication studies are

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[17] N. Couldry, *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*. London: Routledge, 2003.
[18] I. Stengers, *Another Science is Possible: A Manifesto for Slow Science*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018.

aware of social encounters in mediated forms of communication, even though there aren't physical encounters. So, it is necessary to complexify our binary discussion about the crisscross between analog and digital, and also between social and physical: we may have a feeling of a lack of embodiment, but we have to disentangle embodiment from being social.

Third, we can also think in terms of the old binaries in the field of media studies, a contextualized, cultural studies tradition where media is very much thought of in terms of meaning-making practices of a particular type, namely practices that are semiotically conveyed. Media studies have been undoubtedly corded up in modes of meaning-making often to the detriment of also thinking in terms of the variations between the actual technologies that go into meaning-making. All of these familiar binaries from communication studies, from media studies, from technology studies have been radicalized – not only in public discourse but also in actual practices.

The major claim, therefore, is that we need a much more holistic understanding and a much more grounded analysis in how virtual learning practices have played out during the pandemic. There are several projects now studying this from an empirical point of view. We need to ground these empirical studies much more firmly across the three traditions mentioned above. For example, many teachers stated, ''we want to get back to the analog classroom as soon as possible, because it's just not the same, it's dehumanizing, it's disembodied'' – and of course, these play into a familiar communications discourse. Teachers have also talked about the efficiency of the technological approach compared to being in a physical classroom. This speaks into a familiar technology-led understanding of learning according to which if it is online, it's efficient learning – and very many teaching resources are built up from that. So, we need to ground our empirical analysis in a firm understanding of how these commodified big players latch on to the technology-led understanding of what learning is about. Finally, many teachers have expressed that online teaching is very much based on the repetition of what is called reproductive learning, meaning that in terms of meaning-making is to repeat what others have already said and done. What is lacking, is often the more creative and productive ways of learning.

This concludes to the final claim: if we pursue these more holistic approaches and ground them in some theoretical understanding across media, communication, and technology, then we will see how the pandemic has called into question the existing teaching – not only teaching practices but also teacher training. In Northern Europe, they have a very high pickup of virtual learning resources: both students and teachers have long-standing opportunities of accessing virtual learning resources, but to use them in creative ways for productive learning is very much lacking – so it's not a lack of technology, but a lack in how to apply technology. Sometimes students have been much more playful and creative than their teachers would allow them to be/perform, for the simple reason that teachers identify these as playful instances and could't figure what was going on.

A three-layered approach is necessary: we need a much better theoretical grounding; we need a holistic understanding of what has happened with virtual learning during the pandemic; we need to bring these insights back into policy discourses about how teacher training can pick up on what many students have done with the learning resources they got during the pandemic.

(*Kirsten Drotner*)

5. HUMANITIES RESEARCH RECOVERY IN THE ERA OF COVID-19

These brief comments addresses the opportunities for humanities research in the era of COVID-19 (not *post*), responding to the prompt "What could be the role of Academic research in the field of media, film and TV, performing arts studies, during the recovery period and which kind of agenda should we embrace", from a situated perspective, as the Chair of the Department of French and Italian, and the Co-Director of The Film Studies program at The Ohio State University, one of the three or four largest Universities in the USA in terms of student body.

Recently I turned in a massive document which details all of the cuts that would be made in order to reduce our budget by 10%. The 'low hanging fruit' are supplies and services, a vague term under which we list research expenses (archive, travel), visiting speakers, meals, book purchases and the like. Those funds are likely to disappear (hopefully not forever), with the exception of a bit of funds for tenure-track Assistant Professors so that they can further their research portfolio and get promoted, and hopefully meager funds for faculty to take part in virtual conferences and pay registration fees, while aiding in reducing fossil fuels. A group of chairs put forth a petition to our dean to endorse such limited spending, encouraging College leadership to consider attendance at virtual conferences, as 'essential' for all faculty and advanced graduate students:

> It is a long-held value that academic and professional conferences are vital places to disseminate academic research and to network with other scholars. The better conferences offer peer-reviewed affirmation of the quality of research and they are venues where feedback is collected and connections are made.

> Virtual conferences, which have replaced face-to-face meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic, are likely to become the wave of the future. Even when travel is no longer discouraged, the ability to participate in conferences without the expense and environmental impact of travelling to engage others will continue to provide a more sustainable option. The impact of a presentation at a virtual conference is likely to be heightened by the increased attendance that the (sometimes) modified fees encourage.

Finally, like with most universities in the world, our libraries are still not functional, we have not had access to our offices for months, and all research funds have been suspended.

What does this mean for the future of Humanities research in the COVID-19 era? Many faculties who are working on visual culture are rapidly adapting their research portfolios, for example, through tracking media representations of viral terminology, mapping migrant communities food consumption and foodways via social media, tracking bodies in virtual viral space, or revisiting cultural fascinations with disaster films, and Catherine O'Rawe, a colleague and collaborator at Bristol, just began working on questions of intimacy as activism as applied to Italian actors and social media in the lockdown, and her main focus is Alessandro Borghi.

Several of these research pivots are strategic. For example, at OSU, the only funds available to apply for Arts and Humanities Researchers fall under the *COVID-19 Special Grants Initiative*, which funds projects showcasing the distinctive affordances of the arts and humanities in addressing this global crisis. As the call notes,

> The current pandemic is a stark reminder that innovative and compassionate responses are essential to address the wide range of consequences for individuals, communities and na-

tions and to craft sustainable responses. Collectively, we hope to chart new ways to address pandemic-revealed disparities and pandemic-related research that reveals that neither crisis nor remedy exist without culture.

To this it can be added: neither crisis nor remedy exist without *collaboration*. From the perspective of someone living in Ohio who is anticipating a massive state deficit which will negatively impact OSU's budget, and ability to funds Arts and Humanities research for years to come, Arts and Humanities research recovery will only be possible with innovative collaborations across institutions and across continents.

(*Dana Renga*)

6. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CREATIVE INDUSTRY IN ROMANIA AND HUNGARY

The aim of this section is to describe the impact of the pandemic on film production and theatre activity in Romania and Hungary, following the timeline of the spread of Coronavirus:
   1. The initiating phase: January-February 2020;
   2. The crisis phase: March 2020;
   3. Early coping strategies: April 2020;
   4. Strategies in a COVID-world: from May 2020.

6.1. *The initiating phase: January-February 2020*

Throughout January and February 2020 both cultural industries and their audiences were functioning as usual: festivals took place and premieres were held. Although present in Eastern Europe, streaming content remained a relatively niche activity – with teenagers and youth using Netflix, and more sophisticated audiences watching HBO GO or Transilvania International Film Festival's own streaming platform, TIFF Unlimited, which was launched in summer 2019.

On newspapers and specialized magazines, news were about the Oscars or box office successes – interestingly, in the last three years, domestic box office numbers increased in Eastern Europe: crisis seemed a distant prospect, although there were already disruptions at Berlinale 2020, there were massive film productions halted, and there were hits having their premieres pushed back. Yet in Hungary and Romania cultural industries were still going on unproblematically. News like how Chinese delegation could not attend Berlinale, or how the production of *Mission Impossible 7* in Venice was halted, or how the premiere of the new James Bond film was pushed back reached me as really strange news.

6.2. *The crisis phase: March 2020*

The crisis started with a temporal slip between Eastern Europe and global phenomena of COVID-19. Information about Eastern European creative industry being disrupted started to appear in March, showing the decrease of 75% of production opportunities throughout 2020 in Czech Republic or the understanding of Polish producers that the

VOD platforms needed to be used much more. In Hungary and Romania, the first official COVID-19 cases were recorded at the end of February 2020. As consequences, mid-March performances were prohibited in theatres, while by the end of March film and television productions were halted, and cinemas closed. This was particularly painful as especially outsourced film and television production in Hungary has been on the rise for the last three years, and box office numbers for domestic film productions have been also climbing since spring 2017 in Hungary and spring 2019 in Romania – the most popular domestic films surpassing 100.000 viewers.

However, the crisis hit in different ways within Eastern Europe countries. There has been some differences between the Polish major national cinema or the Czech film industry, which is much more globally oriented and has a lot of outsourced Hollywood productions, as compared to both Hungarian and Romanian film industries, being small national cinemas, and indeed less structured than former Yugoslav industries. With many professionals being active in both theatre and film in Hungary and Romania, the blow was particularly strong on the level of individual lives. This also because Government helping packages did not appear – or indeed they did only in May 2020, after insistence from industry, as I illustrate later.

6.3. *Early coping strategies: April 2020*

As for theatres, April was a very peculiar moment in Romania: since it was Easter – in Romania we celebrate both Catholic and Orthodox Easter – the whole month was dedicated to the ritual needs of the population. Theatres somehow found very basic possibilities of mediatized connection with their audiences. One of the most recurrent practices was to put online pre-recorded performances – interestingly, recorded performances of theatre events that took place far in the past reached very high audience numbers. Furthermore, throughout April lots of creative videos were posted online for special events such as the Hungarian Poetry Day or the World Theatre Day, while many actors read bedtime stories on social media.

As for cinema, with production processes halted at once, outreach reactions were slower than in theatres. However, domestic audiences very quickly adhered to global streaming content providers: for example, the number of Netflix users increased considerably, and in mid-April the provider became much better valued on the stock market than Disney. There were also local efforts to share content online to reach local audiences who could not go to cinemas: for example, the Transylvania International Film Festival started few free programs, while the Hungarian National Film Institute opened its archive and started to stream 350 Hungarian classic films. Also, the arthouse cinemas of Budapest created Budapest distant cinema, an online platform where you could buy individual screenings of independent films.

What happened from late April is even more interesting, because Hungarian and Romanian film lovers could see their very first online premiere: *Treasure City*, a low-budget independent film, decided to go fully online, leaving outside festivals and cinemas. An even more interesting phenomenon was the released in May of *9 Stories of Love and Hate in Isolation*, the first Romanian 'pandemic movie', fully shot by actors in their homes with their mobile phones, and then shared on YouTube – where it gathered more than 70.000 views.

6.4. *Strategies in a COVID-world: from May 2020*

Which concrete steps did the official authorities and institutions take? The Hungarian National Film Institute created the Film Industry Help Fund of 150.000 euros dedicated to TV and film professionals who remained without work throughout the pandemic.

At the same time, in mid-May the Romanian filmmaker community gathered around an important initiative, asking for a very complex set of helping initiatives. Such acommon outreach activity, organized by 230 film companies and 20 film associations, was quite extraordinary. They were asking for the revival of the cash-debate scheme halted in November 2019 (20 million euros supposed to be spent in 2020); for a protection and prevention Fund (1 million euros managed by the Romanian Film Center); for a Backup Insurance Fund (estimated at 1.68 million euros). Romanian filmmakers were also proposing the elaboration of the legislative conditions to require the VOD platforms which are active in Romania but don't have a Romanian branch (Netflix, HBO, Amazon) to contribute to the domestic production through the Film Fund managed by the Romanian Film Centre. Another important request was to regulate the copyright legislation for authors and performing artists to allow the collection from monetised online distribution, and to enhance the digitalisation process of administrative procedures in the film industry.

Romanian film industry also organized in May *Scena9,* Bucharest cultural portal's roundtable, to collect the opinions of prominent Romanian professionals. Director Paul Negoescu alleged that migrating from the cinema screen to smaller formats has become the norm, with "the feature film format replaced by series and mini-series", while documentary film producer Monica Lăzurean-Gogan argued that Romanian films will all have their premiers in the fall of 2020,Gogan argued that Romanian films will all have their premiers in the fall of 2020, "cannibalizing" each other (a phenomenon feared by many in Hungary too). Veteran director Stere Gulea said that the budget of filming will increase, that visual storytelling will have to suffer ("how do you film a kissing scene with social distancing measures?"), and that black comedy will be the genre that will be able to accommodate all absurdities.

What other measures will be adepte in the immediate future? The Hungarian film industry decided to expand and modernize existing production facilities near Budapest to better accomodate the shooting of Hollywood blockbusters. Furthermore, in June theatres and cinemas remained closed, but previously mentioned online viewing habits and possibilities were reinforced. Film festivals in Romania have been programmed for July and august or they have been fully postponed. Film productions also restarted.

From an academic point of view, research in the field of Media, Film and TV, and Performing Arts, must consider the importance of comparative case studies, combining data science with soft methods of oral history and anthropological "shadowing" of researched subjects in both theatre and film or television.The domestication of global streaming giants is also a very important and urgent issue, involving national legislations, contribution to local cinema through taxing, setting up local production. And finally audience research must raise a question: do online viewing habits and feelings of community persist? And are these changes in aesthetics durable or will they disappear in the coming months?

Empirical research is much needed for under standing the possible way of facing this crisis and for learning from practices that can inspire new ways of facing this crisis.

(*Andrea Virginás*)