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DISTANCE TEACHING AND TEACHING 'AS' DISTANCE. A CRITICAL READING OF ONLINE TEACHING INSTRUMENTS DURING AND AFTER THE PANDEMIC

*Enseñanza a distancia y enseñanza 'como' distancia.
Una lectura crítica sobre los instrumentos
de la enseñanza online durante y después de la pandemia*

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to read through a critical lens the digitalization of schooling caused by the COVID-19 epidemic. The emergency has forced European governments to close the schools and consequently, all the schooling activities have been transferred online. Referring to some works of Giorgio Agamben, Paul Virilio and Walter Benjamin the authors propose some critical remarks on the transformation of schooling space and schooling time that characterizes the practice of distance learning. This transformation pertains not only to accidental aspects of schooling but affects the very identity of the schooling experience. In a completely digitalized school, time is characterized by instantaneousness: time as duration is replaced by the «time of exposure», as stated

by Paul Virilio. In addition, the school completely dematerialized, is reduced to the two-dimensional space of the screen. The article aims to show that instantaneous time and dematerialized space make the experience of «crossing» difficult. Therefore, following some remarks by Jan Masschelein and Gert Biesta, it is maintained that the experience of «crossing» endangered by the digitalization of schooling is essential to an authentic experience of schooling. It is not intended to refuse the digital innovations as such but to «put them on the table», in order to suspend their immediate use and analyze them critically.

Key words: distance teaching; online schooling; Walter Benjamin; Paul Virilio; educational space; educational time.

RESUMEN

Este documento pretende revisar con una visión crítica la digitalización escolar causada por la COVID-19. La emergencia ha forzado a los gobiernos europeos a cerrar los colegios y, como consecuencia, todas las actividades escolares han pasado a ser online. Haciendo referencia a algunos trabajos de Giorgio Agamben, Paul Virilio y Walter Benjamin, los autores proponen algunas observaciones críticas a la transformación del espacio escolar y del tiempo escolar que caracteriza la práctica del aprendizaje a distancia. Esta transformación no solo se refiere a aspectos escolares accidentales, sino que también afecta a la propia identidad de la experiencia escolar. En una escuela completamente digitalizada, el tiempo se caracteriza por su instantaneidad: el tiempo como duración es sustituido por el «tiempo de exposición», como argumentaba Paul Virilio. Además, el colegio completamente desmaterializado se reduce al espacio bidimensional de la pantalla. El artículo tiene por objeto demostrar que el tiempo instantáneo y el espacio desmaterializado dificultan la experiencia de «cruzar». Por tanto, siguiendo algunas observaciones de Jan Masschelein y Gert Biesta, se afirma que la experiencia de «cruzar», amenazada por la digitalización escolar, es esencial para vivir una auténtica experiencia escolar. No se pretenden negar las innovaciones digitales en sí, sino «ponerlas sobre la mesa» para suspender su uso inmediato y analizarlas de manera crítica.

Palabras clave: enseñanza a distancia; educación escolar online; Walter Benjamin; Paul Virilio; espacio educativo; tiempo educativo.

1. INTRODUCTION

The «state of emergency» declared by most European States to oppose the spread of the Coronavirus epidemic has obviously involved public schools along with all the productive systems. Due to the impossibility for teachers and students of gathering in the scholastic buildings, most of the school's activities are now transferred online: Zoom meetings, video calls, podcasts and chat rooms have currently replaced

classrooms, ringing bells, blackboards, notebooks and face-to-face discussions. Due to the emergency, the school has been totally transferred to the digital space.

These kinds of measures are — mostly — understood as temporary and limited to the most critical moment of the pandemic. Schools — governments are now saying — will be reopened when the curve of contagion will be sufficiently flattened. Nevertheless, will everything really go back to «business as usual» when the spread of the virus will be, at least, contained?

The Italian case is in this regard an interesting one. The Ministry of Education of one of the most hit countries in Europe has already openly declared that schools will not reopen in September as usual: too many students could overcrowd the classrooms and too many people will need to take trains and buses to go to school (both students and teachers), increasing the risk of a new wave of contagion. The school — they say — needs to be renewed and needs to alternate forms of «in-presence» teaching and distance teaching, so to reduce to the minimum needed the physical contacts among people.¹ Many different proposals have already been made in this regard, but the core of the question is how to combine the necessary re-opening of the schools with the need for sanitary safety of students and teachers, the latter guaranteed by forms of distance schooling. Consequently, we can already foresee that many of the above-mentioned digital instruments will not just disappear from the educational environments when the COVID crisis will be over, but — on the contrary — they will certainly have a heavy role in shaping the post-pandemic schools.²

Of course, such instruments are not invented anew for the Covid-19 emergency but have been experimented in different forms in the past years.³ Nonetheless, the emergency has been the occasion to apply them massively and uncritically. As digital schooling instruments have been forcefully and suddenly applied in schools, it could become progressively harder to criticize them and eventually put a limit on their use. This is not to say that there could have been another way to manage schools under this unprecedented global health crisis, but that we need not to abandon a critical posture facing this crisis.

1. An interesting summary of the Italian situation regarding public schools and the epidemic can be found in <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/24/italy-home-schooling-coronavirus-lockdown-what-weve-learned>.

2. See for instance <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-schools-europe-policy-conundrum/>.

3. See Alirezabeigi, Masschelein & Decuyper (2020a; 2020b); Hung (2017); Cochrane, Antonczak, Keegan, & Narayan (2014) for some examples of research concerned with the spread of digital technologies in the classroom. The adoption of such instruments has been in some countries in the last years fast and accompanied with an enthusiastic rhetoric of «innovation». An interesting example is the 2014 rapport by the Italian Ministry of Education entitled *La buona scuola* («The good school»): in this document the implementation of digital instruments is painted uncritically as the main way for the school to evolve. See Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca (2014).

The aim of this article is to propose some critical remarks on digital schooling. Specifically, we want to underline two aspects of schooling that are radically modified when schooling is transferred online: the experience of the schooling space and that of schooling time. Referring in particular to the works of Giorgio Agamben, Walter Benjamin and Paul Virilio, we will try to show that the digital experience of time and space makes it more difficult to articulate the experience of schooling, which is characterized by qualitative differences and interruptions. Indeed, the experience of schooling, as described by Jan Masschelein and Gert Biesta for instance, needs a radical differentiation from the other spaces and times of the student's everyday life. We maintain that preserving such differences is harder when school is completely transferred online. The public debate around schooling seems nowadays split between two opposite standpoints: on one side the enthusiasts of digital innovation who see in the development of such technologies the only possible way for the school to progress. On the other hand, are those who fear that technological innovation itself is a threat to the school's identity and so reject it in the name of the «good old times». The point is not to find a compromise between opposite standpoints but to take a step back and put the digital «on the table»⁴, in order to enlighten how technology affects the schooling experience. Assuming that technical changes have always been part of the history of the school, and being aware of the pervasiveness of the digital, it is crucial nowadays to raise critical awareness.

Considering this, the paper intends to address the following question: do the transformations, caused by the current digitalization of schooling, imply only formal changes, or is it radically transforming the school and its educational aim? To answer this question, we try to analyze the impact of digitalization in teaching and learning activities through two key-concepts that seem to distinguish school from other kinds of experience: the idea of time and the idea of space.

2. THE INSTANTANEOUSNESS OF A «NEVER-ACTUAL-TIME»

In the current situation, the school loses its materiality, its physical character and its rhythm. Indeed, although the buildings are forcedly closed, teaching and learning activities continue through digital instruments and platforms. In such a way, there is no longer a particular place that teachers and students have to reach for schooling. The school can arrive directly into the student's home. Nor teachers

4. The metaphor refers to Masschelein and Simons (2013, pp. 39-41): the authors describe the core of the *scholastic* as the act of «putting something on the table», it is to say to make some content public and questionable.

neither students have to move to a shared place, but both can interact from their own home, within the digital space.

Digital instruments like video-calls seem to be able to create a very similar space to that of the school. Therefore, they risk to radically transform not only the shape of the school but also its proper purpose and aim. We could affirm that apparently secondary aspects such as the closing of classroom doors and the rhythm of time articulated by the bell are not mere material accidents but help articulating the schooling experience of time and space.

Observing how digital instruments are modifying different aspects of social and personal life, we can see that one of the main questions entails our relationship with time.

Referring to some works by Paul Virilio, Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben what we want to show in this section is that this kind of temporality, although it has to do with a pure instantaneousness, it is a time that is never actual. This kind of time is unable to actualize itself.

The flow of information, feedback, and contents in general that we are able to collect in a few minutes was unimaginable only fifty years ago. The possibility to know what happens thousands of miles away in the so-called «real time», is one of the elements that describe the current age: we are able to collect every kind of information, without the need to go out of our home.

Paul Virilio is one of the most acute scholars to have investigated the influences of technological progress on the understanding of time. For this paper, we will especially focus on one of his essays, titled *Open Sky*, in which he explores the consequences that the speed proper to global electronic media provokes on our relationship with time and space.

According to Virilio, our modern real-time transmission media are characterized by an absolute speed that implies a radically different way to dwell time. In the age of absolute speed, chronological time characterized by the succession of past, present and future, is replaced by the so-called «time of exposition». This kind of time should be understood as «an order of 'exposure', that is, of the instant in which phenomena are lit up by, or exposed to, the light of speed.» (James, 2007, p. 38). In other words, it is no more the succession of moments to build the sense of time and duration, but the «presentation» or «exposition» of a single instant to the gaze.

Thus, according to Virilio (1997), in the contemporary age, time is no longer defined by its duration, but by its exposure. This dynamic is better understood when compared to what happens with the light-time of photography:

Now, what the technology of photosensitivity introduced and Rodin had not yet noticed, is that the definition of photographic time was no longer the same as time passing, but essentially a kind of time that gets exposed, that 'breaks the surface' — surfaces; and

this exposure time then succeeds the classic time of succession. The time of the sudden take is accordingly, from the beginning, time-light.⁵ (p. 27).

What is at stake is a time without history, therefore a time that is only about the present instant. Consequently, the instant as time of exposure is freed from duration, and it does not care about its previous instant and about its following's one.⁶

In this kind of temporality, there is no space for duration: the news must be always «new» and immediate. An eternal present is the only horizon that the digital world can conceive. As Virilio (1997, p. 37) writes in the same book:

The time of the present world flashes us a glimpse on our screens of another regime of temporality that reproduces neither the chronographic succession of the hands of our watches nor the chronological succession of history. Outrageously puffed up by all the commotion of our communication technologies, the perpetual present suddenly serves to illuminate duration.

Trying to move forward from the critique of the «time of exposure» towards some more reconstructive insights on the question of time, we can turn to the works of Walter Benjamin. The author, in his book named *On the Concept of History* (2005), intends to propose a concept of time that strays from a linear and progressive understanding, typical of modernity. In this way, according to Benjamin the actualization of time is related to the possibility itself to connect the Present with its Past, and its Future. Indeed, as Benjamin (2005, p. 395) writes:

History is the object of a construction whose place is formed not in homogenous and empty time, but in that which is fulfilled by the here-and-now [Jetztzeit]. For Robespierre, Roman antiquity was a past charged with the here-and-now, which he exploded out of the continuum of history. The French revolution thought of itself as a latter day Rome. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a past costume. Fashion has an eye for what is up-to-date, wherever it moves in the jungle [Dickicht: maze, thicket] of what was. It is the tiger's leap into that which has gone before.

5. Regarding Virilio's understanding of light-time, James (2007) writes that: «The existence of figures or forms in photographic images is clearly inseparable from this instantaneous quality of exposure. They do not communicate an experience of duration, since they cannot record neither the flow of light which precedes the moment of exposure nor an anticipation of that which may follow. For Virilio light-time describes an experience of temporality in which phenomena are lit up in the manner of photographic exposure. We perceive sensible appearances in the instant of their exposure to light just as the photographic image is formed in the instant of its exposure as controlled by the camera shutter.» (p. 39).

6. Regarding this relationship between the digital and time Vlieghe (2014), referring to Flusser's thought, speaks about a *posthistorical condition*. In this regard, he writes that «the transition from an alphabetic to a digital culture also implies the transition towards a posthistorical era [...] We enter a posthistorical *condition*, because time will no longer be experienced in terms of eras, or even better a *postposthistorical condition*, as the very idea of history will not make any sense for those who live it.» (p. 527).

What constitutes the present «here-and-now»⁷ is its relationship with the past, not just as a memory of what happened before, but as a possibility of an actual relationship between Present and Past. Hence, the Present as «here-and-now» is an instant full of the possibility of an actualization in the Present of what happened in the Past. Exactly such a relationship between Past and Present actualizes the instant.

According to Benjamin (2003), the relationship between Past and Present is not just a chronological relationship: the idea of time is not that of a linear progression that follows a chronological order, whereby past, present and future are three elements in succession. As Benjamin writes, the present is the instant that «is not a transition» but «in which time originates and has come to a standstill.» (p. 396) Hence, the present suspends the continuum and linear progression of time, and it is described as a time that, while it is arising, it has come to a standstill. The Present is a sort of suspension of the flow of the continuum of time, in which dwells an actual relationship between what has happened and what is going to happen.

Giorgio Agamben's understanding of Messianic time is very close to Benjamin's one, although it adds some important insights. In particular, we focus on one of his works dealing with the matter of time, *The time that remains* (2005), in which, while analyzing Paul's letter to Romans, he explores the concept of Messianic time and its relationship with the chronological one:

For Paul, the messianic is not a third eon situated between two times; but rather, it is a caesura that divides the division between times and introduces a remnant, a zone of undecidability, in which the past is dislocated into the present and the present is extended into the past. (Agamben, 2005, p. 74).

Messianic time is not another kind of time, but it represents a sort of exceeding that provokes a gap in the chronological time, introducing a zone of undecidability in which Past and Present are muddled up: «Here, the past (the complete) rediscovers actuality and becomes unfulfilled, and the present (the incomplete) acquires a kind of fulfillment.» (Agamben, 2005, p. 75). According to Agamben, Messianic time is a possibility to grasp in the Present an interruption of the linear progression of time. Hence, we can summarize that the Messianic «now» dwells the chronological time, or rather it dwells the «time that remains» between an *already* and a *not yet*. The dynamic between an *already* and a *not yet* also explains the Messianic conceiving of salvation. In this regard, on the relationship between time and salvation, Agamben (2005, p. 69) writes: «The Messianic event has already happened, salvation has already been achieved according to believers, but, nevertheless, in order to truly be fulfilled, this implies an additional time.»

7. It is interesting to note that the German word «Jetztzeit» is translated with the English expression «here-and-now» and not with the simpler «actual». Such a choice gives the idea of «Jetztzeit» a more specific meaning.

In addition:

The fact that we are not only dealing with a prefiguration, but with a constellation and a quasi unity between the two times, is implicit in the idea that the entire past is summarily contained, so to speak, in the present; this is how the pretense of a remnant as all finds an ulterior foundation. (pp. 76-77).

According to these authors, the Present as «here-and-now», as something authentically actual, happens only if it is possible to live a gap from chronological time, a sort of interruption from the linear progression of time. This allows us to dwell an excess from which to gaze what is *already* but *not yet*, within the waiting of its fulfillment. As Agamben (2005) writes: «The Messianic is not the chronological end of time, but the present as the exigency of fulfillment, what gives itself 'as an end'» (p. 76).

This kind of time is the proper time of threshold, that allows dwelling the Present as the possibility to wait for what is *not yet*, and so, as the possibility that something radically Other can occur: this kind of time is obviously qualitatively different from the «time of exposure» described by Virilio. This is the potentiality of a temporality of «here-and-now».

Consequently, the digital era, understood as the era of continuous flow of information, seems to be unable to conceive a different temporality from that of an eternal and immediate present.

The time of exposure, completely coinciding with the immediacy of the present, is a time that does not imply the experience of memory and waiting that characterizes the Messianic understanding of time. Memory and waiting are two experiences possible in a time in which something to record and something to wait for is still possible. Hence, a present that lives an actual relationship with its past and its future, allows us to dwell the Now as the possibility to grasp something that is *not yet*. A gap in the chronological time is the only chance not to reduce the present to the repetition of the Sameness, typical of a temporality completely reduced to pure instantaneousness.

This discussion about the actualization of the Messianic possibility of time is crucial to understand the schooling time. Indeed, the Messianic is the most proper time for schooling: it is the time when something *other* can emerge or when new possibilities can arise. The Messianic is the suspension between the *already* and the *not yet* which is typical of the schooling time and which is harder to realize in exclusively online spaces.

At this point it is interesting to analyze which kind of temporality is experienced in some forms of digital teaching. Indeed, teachers during this emergency experimented with very different practices of digital schooling, each one characterized by a particular temporality.

For instance, in some cases the lesson has been turned into a video recorded and sent by the teacher to students, who can watch it when they prefer, and choose if and how many times to watch it.

In this case, when the teacher makes a lesson by a video that she sends to the students, she establishes a precise temporality in the relationship between the students and the subject of matter. The digital material that the teacher puts on the digital platform loses the uniqueness typical of an event that happens.

The loss of uniqueness, in order to promote reproducibility, provokes a radical transformation regarding the temporality proper to the lesson. In this way, the lesson is no more an event that happens in a precise and delimited time that is connected with an historical temporality, but it becomes something that seems to be unable to actually happen.

According to what we have already maintained, the reproducibility proper to the digital material corresponds to a kind of temporality that we have named, quoting Virilio, the «time of exposure» that involves only an instantaneousness without any relationship with past and future.

If, according to Benjamin, what is actual is what is able to dwell a connection with the past and the future, the way to conceive the distant teaching as the sending of videos, always available, seems to be unable to conceive teaching as something like an event that is able to actualize itself. Moreover, if the practice of teaching is not an event, it loses its possibility to represent an interruption within the continuum of the flow of isolated moments, that makes the introduction of the so-called messianic time possible.

We do not want to say that the digital material in schooling is something to totally reject, but what we want to stress is the importance for an educational experience, of the possibility to dwell a different temporality.

Thus, what is at stake is not to eliminate any digital material from the schooling experience but is to put attention to the need that the school remains the space in which it is possible to experience a temporality of the event. Thus, the point is to recognize the impossibility to reduce the teaching to a digital material, because it would provoke the loss of the possibility to experience a temporality that allows that something other from what is always reproducible can occur. Therefore, a temporality, referring to Benjamin, that is able to actualize itself.

3. THE «OPEN» AND THE «POROUS»

As stated in the introduction, the digitalization of schooling implies also a change in the physical space of the school. In order to face this emergency, school as a physical place is completely replaced by one object: the screen.

The material aspects of the school, like its partition of space, its passageways, its doors, its gates and windows, are all elements that do not represent secondary

aspects of the school, but rather, they witness its deep aim: the possibility of a going through. The common gestures that we can experience when we go to school, such as going through passageways, closing and opening the doors, are proper to an experience of crossing which is also a typical experience of schooling.

To articulate the idea of school as an experience of going through, we refer to Masschelein and Simon (2013). As they precise, school is not a space of passage in which the destination is already established, but rather it is a space of «between» that makes all possibility of destination possible:

Rather, we must see the school as a sort of pure medium or middle. The school is a means without an end and a vehicle without a determined destination. Think of a swimmer attempting to cross a wide river. It may seem as if he is simply swimming from one bank to another (that is, from the land of ignorance to the land of knowledge). But that would mean that the river itself means nothing, that it would be a kind of medium without dimension, an empty space, at the opposite bank, but more important is the space between the banks — the middle, a place that takes in all directions. This kind of 'middle ground' has no orientation or destination but makes all orientations and directions possible. (p. 36).

Consequently, the crossing represents a metaphor of schooling as such: a space where it is made possible to depart from where we already are in order to go towards where we are not yet, and so to move away from what we already know towards what we don't know yet.

In this section, we want to focus on some specific material elements that circumscribe the space of the school as such (doors, windows, passageways etc.) and we will explore how the experience of schooling changes when those elements are replaced with the screen.

These artifacts that delimit the space, grant that school could be opened and closed. Just before the class start time, the caretaker opens the school gate, and after the beginning of the lessons, he closes it; when the teacher arrives in class, she closes the door that will be opened when the bell rings again. These are some actions that are possible in a delimited space that can be crossed: we can only access a place if there is a door that is possible that could be opened and closed. However, we can open something only if it is not yet completely open: in this sense the school is a place *already* open but *not yet* completely open, allowing a movement of crossing towards its space.

If we consider the school as a space of «between», it has to take the shape of a space that is able to be crossed. Hence, school should take place in a space that provides thresholds and borders to go through. To explore the importance of such kinds of spaces, we refer to a Benjamin's essay, *Naples* (2019), written with Asja Lacić, in which he makes an original description of the city of Naples. Illustrating the city, Benjamin defines it through a word: «porous». This term refers to a certain

non-definiteness that distinguishes a city like Naples, full of passageways and thresholds where most of the city's life takes place. Between the domestic space of the home and the public space of the square, there is the space of the threshold that allows dwelling the condition of not definitiveness.

Indeed, Virilio (1991, p. 99) regarding Benjamin's interest in the materiality of architecture, writes that:

It was connected less to the walls, floors, and opacity of surfaces, than to the primacy of the access protocol of doors and bridges, but it also referred equally to the ports and the other means of transport, that prolonged the nature of the threshold, the practical function of the entryway. This protocol of physical access gave all its meaning to the space of a dwelling and of a City.

As well as for the city also for the school, passageways are crucial elements that give meaning to these spaces. Just like the city described by Benjamin, the material aspects of school, especially the passageways, are crucial to foster the experience of non-definiteness that distinguish school as the space of the «between».

Considering this, we want to address the following question: does the digital space of screen allow this experience of crossing?

Firstly, we can affirm that the screen is an artifact that does not seem to imply any movement, because it provides us information about reality without having to move. We can collect whatever information we want, staying at home. As Virilio (1997, p. 16) writes:

Currently, with the instantaneous broadcasting revolution, we are seeing the beginnings of a 'generalized arrival' whereby everything arrives without having to leave, the nineteenth century's elimination of the journey (that is, of the space interval and of time) combining with the abolition of departure at the end of the twentieth, the journey thereby losing its successive components and being overtaken by arrival alone.

In addition:

Between the subjective and the objective it seems we have no room for the 'trajective', that being of movement from here to there, from one to the other, without which we will never achieve a profound understanding of the various regimes of perception of the world. (p. 24).

The screen lets us experience the so-called «digital reality», full of information always available. Better said, in front of the screen, we cannot make the experience of a blank or an empty: the screen is always already full of information. Indeed, this condition seems to eliminate the possibility of making a real crossing from what we already know to what we do not know yet. Regarding this, Joris Vlieghe (2014), quoting Flusser's thought concerning the proliferation of digital media understood

as a transition from an alphabetic rationality to a digital one, writes that this transformation means that:

Thoughts are no longer the outcome of linear and discursive processes, but immediate results of (complex) computation. Instead of having to construct our thoughts step by step and in a well-defined chronological order, we combine in a very short amount of time dots of information, that according to their various values (1 or 0) directly results in a new information. (p. 526).

The gathering of new knowledge becomes the result of a work of computation: the information is already there fully displayed, so that learning turns into a work of combination of those elements already at disposal. Consequently, learning is no longer a process of moving from a lack (of knowledge) to a fullness, because the screen is already full of material and full of light. Taking up again Benjamin's terms, we can say that the screen is not a «porous» space: the flow of information is continuous so that it makes impossible the transition from «home» to the «square».

The screen creates an «already-open» reality and establishes a space in which the subject is already present, without the need to get in, because, as Massimo Cacciari (1985) writes: «We can only get in where we can open. The already-open immobilizes». ⁸ (p. 69).

Secondly, the computer (or whatever other digital devices) allows gazing at reality not through the screen, but on the screen. The screen is not a threshold of the reality that reflects; it is not a border to go through. The information that the screen provides us, do not let us go beyond itself, so far as to claim that beyond the screen there is nothing.

Indeed, the screen is not like a window from which reality shows through. The window is an instrument that allows us to gaze at what there is beyond it. Regarding this understanding of window as a threshold between the inside and the outside, Dussel (2018, p. 180) writes that:

The window is a locus or surface that has a life of its own because it acts as a threshold or a boundary between the inside and the outside, and allows, as said before, 'a calculation of openings', a regulation of contacts and movements.

Differently, the screen provides us with information about a reality that is contained in it; all the reality that we can face on the screen is only on the screen. Indeed, it does not allow a crossing, because it is not a border of reality, a frame of reality, but it provokes its de-materialization. The screen is a dematerialized place in which reality loses its depth: indeed, what it is possible to watch on the screen is a two-dimensional reality. Things are not present in themselves, but only through their shadows, as Virilio (1995, p. 8) writes:

8. Personal translation.

The projector, designed to optically replace the alter ego (the other me) by enabling the viewer glued to his seat to see as present what is naturally absent and outside the restricted circle of their visual reach, in fact eliminates the stereoscopic couple that previously composed and gave life to the social depth of reality.

In light of this, we can affirm that the screen is a de-materialized space that makes a passage towards something beyond itself difficult. Hence, we can maintain that the materiality of the school is not a secondary aspect that could be easily replaced by a virtual space, without any loss. Its architectural materiality, with its passageways, allows us to consider the school as a space of «between», the space of the threshold that conducts us towards what we do not know yet.

What we have been trying to show is that a complete transition of the school to the digital space of the screen seems to reduce the possibility to understand the school as a space of crossing. The digital space makes it harder to actualize the metaphor of the school as a space of «between» which makes a crossing possible.

Let us now consider a concrete practice to clarify further what the transition of the school's space on the screen implies. One of the most common scholastic activities implemented during the lockdown was certainly the «real time» lesson via Zoom, Skype, Google Meets or other platforms: all the pupils are connected at the same time with the teacher, who gives her/his lesson «as if» they all were in the classroom. This kind of practice seems to create a sort of «differential» time — like the one of the physical schools —: everyone has to connect at the same time, everyone has to interact with the teacher and the others, then the lesson finishes and everyone disconnects. In this sense, some form of Messianic interruption of time seems to be still possible, as in the interruption between times of different qualities, something «other» can happen. This way, different kinds of time are in some sense put in place, allowing the pupils (to a certain extent) to experience the crossing from their private time to the lesson time, even at a physical distance.

Nevertheless, the situation of the same practice is radically different regarding the experience of space. In this regard, this practice seems to confirm exactly Virilio's view: the screen on which the class «meets» is a uniform, one-dimensional and all-open space, where no experience of crossing is possible. The teacher, the pupils and the teaching materials are displayed, fully accessible in one single place which, furthermore, does not require any movement to be accessed. Indeed, the screen does not help to differentiate the significance of different spaces: it is transportable, accessible almost everywhere and to everyone. The screen can, additionally, be «opened» and «closed» by the pupil when he wants: it does not resist the individuals will like physical spaces do. For instance, a pupil can open different web pages when connected during a lesson, or can simply shut down his computer; oppositely, he cannot just go away from his class during a usual lesson because the space materially resists. In addition, we want to stress again that the physical

experience of going out of one's house to enter the school building is not just an accident: it is part of the educational experience to move from a safe, secure and intimate place to a different one, which is public, in a certain sense frightening and that needs to be discovered step by step. This kind of experience of spatial crossing — and consequently of educational moving — is impossible when the school is made into a screen, accessible without even opening the door of one's room. The space, finally, loses most of its educational potentiality when the school is exclusively online: every place becomes, in some sense, equal, as the same room can be a living room or a school indifferently. Differentiating the spaces is an act of great educational value and is not just a material necessity (because of the presence of different instruments in different spaces): the experience of going to school is already a part of the schooling process.

This analysis of the «real time» online lesson, on the other hand, does not intend to affirm that this kind of practice is not useful at all in education, or that it is just dangerous for the educational process. Firstly, during an emergency like the COVID-19 one, «distance learning» is certainly the only way possible to continue some kind of schooling: its contraindications are in this case the lesser evil (interrupting abruptly every contact with the school during an emergency would have resulted in much worse consequences than those coming from «distance teaching»). In addition, we think it is possible to imagine ways to safeguard the experience of «crossing», even extending its possibility into the realm of digital technologies: if we could imagine practices that consider the screen as an educational tool and not as the exclusive space of schooling, then it is possible to foresee even some experience of «crossing the screen».

4. SCHOOLING AS CROSSING THE DISTANCE

We started our argument from acknowledging the current situation of schools around Europe: forced to close by the COVID emergency, they have transferred all the scholastic activities on online platforms. We have then suggested that in this unprecedented moment it is necessary to raise critical attention, because digital technologies are not just neutral instruments, but they have an impact on the very identity of the school. Furthermore, digital technologies are implemented in this emergency moment with little critical attention to what consequences they may have on schooling in the long period.

We have then shown that two important aspects of schooling are radically transformed when school is transferred online, namely time and space. The scholastic time, characterized by qualitative differences and interruptions (marked by the ringing bell, for instance) is substituted with the ever-flowing time of the internet, where no Messianic time — in Agamben's words, a gap in the flow of chronological time that makes time possible — is possible. On the other hand, the school's

spaces, marked by thresholds and passageways, are changed into a unique online space, all-open and dematerialized, where the experience of moving towards something unknown is forbidden — because everything is already fully displaced and at disposal of the observer.

This discussion resulted in noting that one of the most peculiar experiences of schooling, that of the «crossing», particularly visible in «porous» spaces, is made very difficult to perform when the school is totally transferred online. Online spaces seem to be hardly hospitable to the scholastic experience of moving from a place to another, of closing a door to concentrate on a subject, of separating qualitatively different times: the internet, with its ever-flowing time and all-open space, seems to obey to a logic different from the one that makes a scholastic experience possible. Summing up, online schooling seems to make the experience of a difference to cross very difficult.

Indeed, as recently argued by Gert Biesta (2013) the experience of teaching needs a form of alterity or distance to be authentic, in order not to reduce teaching to simple assimilation of data. The teacher can really teach something — can bring something really *other* or unexpected in the pupil's experience — only if the distance between her and the students is preserved; the distance, in a certain sense, is the condition of possibility of teaching, and so of the schooling experience:

When we think, just at the level of 'everyday phenomenology,' of experiences where we were taught something—where we would say, always in hindsight, that 'this person has really taught me something'—we more often than not refer to experiences where someone showed us something or made us realize something that really entered our being from the outside. Such teachings often provide insights about ourselves and our ways of doing and being—insights that we were not aware of or rather did not want to be aware of. (p. 53).

The author displays a critique of the educational rhetoric of «learning» which, in his view, reduces the alterity of the teacher in front of her pupils. If the teacher's role is reduced to a facilitator of learning, then the possibility for him/her to make something *other* visible in the pupil's experience is annihilated: the teacher becomes nothing more than an «assistant» to the children's learning activities. On the contrary, Biesta aims at safeguarding the role of the teacher as a «voice of the other» calling from outside of the pupil's experience, and so pushing for a move outside of oneself towards something radically new. Pushing the argument further, we could affirm that the author is trying to underline the importance of different roles that make a crossing of such difference possible.

This kind of distance, as we have shown, is hardly experienced in exclusively online spaces. Quite the opposite, online teaching is mostly about reducing and hiding the differences. If space is already completely open and time is just a present without history the possibility of something *other* to show itself is profoundly

compromised; in other words, in such a situation it is hard to experience authentic schooling. All the material tools preserving distances have in this framework the role of safeguarding the possibility of an experience of alterity and, consequently, of crossing the distances. We could say that while the online points to erasing distances, authentic teaching aims at preserving them and at making them thresholds to cross.

Nevertheless, we are not stating that digital technologies, in themselves, exclude the possibility of a scholastic experience. The point we want to stress is that, especially in times of emergency, the specificity of the scholastic experience — namely, the experience of a distance calling for a «crossing» — needs to be safeguarded: extraordinary measures, taken rapidly because of the emergency, risk becoming everyday practices regardless of the quality of schooling.

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