



## Teaching and learning cinema and visual languages through economics-business studies and law in high school: An experimental interdisciplinary approach

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### Abstract

In Italy, little is being done to promote cinema studies and the ability to analyse films and/or multimedia works among high school students. Although Italian legislation provides guidelines on specific learning objectives, activities and content to be included in high school courses, film and media language is still not encouraged in schools. The pilot introduction of cinema at the C. Tenca High School in Milan had the aim of demonstrating the value of film as an educational and epistemological resource and fostering the development of innovative interdisciplinary teaching strategies. Themes related to cinematographic language, Economics-Business Studies and law were introduced and analysed via the exploration of early films (late 1800s and early 1900s). The students investigated the topics of advertising, building a brand name, online marketing and the role of the media in shaping public opinion. In order to enhance students' skills in analysing interactive communications, we introduced the themes of data journalism and fact-checking.

The results are discussed in terms of a possible role for Cinema in the study of Economics-Business Studies and Law and of how cinema might become an interdisciplinary resource for other school subjects.

**Keywords:** Secondary School Social Science Curriculum, Interdisciplinary Approach, Cinema, Economics-Business Studies and Law, New Media, Promoting Active Learning.

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## 1. Introduction

In Italy, the introduction of cinema into schools is often associated with the so-called “cineforum” format, which consists of showing a film on a theme of broad interest and then debating it in class.

In contrast, the current project involved using cinema in schools to develop and refine an active and interdisciplinary model of teaching.

Specifically, we decided to use cinema as a resource for the subjects of Law and Economics-Business Studies, given the expressivity of its symbolic language and its interdisciplinary value. Our research and experimentation followed the methods of the interdisciplinary approach (Repko, 2008) and the theory of relating film fragments to one another by organizing them around a theme (see Bergala, 2008: *F.M.R. Fragments Mis en Rapport*).

We set out to explore the extent to which cinema may be deployed as an interdisciplinary resource and whether exploiting the overlap, connections and affinities between cinema and other disciplines can promote more effective learning.

Describing the contents of a particular medium is not enough to develop a critical approach. Today’s schools are called on to bring a different perspective to educating students in film and media.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. The pilot study

In this paper, we present the pilot phase of an experimental research project entitled: *Education in cinema, film language, business and law using interdisciplinary activities to develop the competences of digital citizenship*<sup>3</sup>. The partners in this project are the “Riccardo Massa” Department of Human Sciences for Education at the University of Milano Bicocca and a number of classes at the Liceo Statale Carlo Tenca di Milano<sup>2</sup>

The research is based on the idea of offering secondary school students – and at a later stage also trainee teachers – opportunities to reflect on how to make innovative use of cinema in secondary school education to overcome rigid disciplinary boundaries by promoting interdisciplinary forms of learning. An additional goal is to exploit digital technologies in schools (IWB and PC) to facilitate the introduction of cinema into secondary education in Italy.

The planned project activities include cultural exchanges between secondary school and university students. This will help to draw out the educational value of the experience itself and foster personal involvement, as well as helping to orient the secondary school students’ choice of university course.

The project is being implemented over a three-year period. The results reported here are relative to 75% of the programme for Year 1.

During the initial phases of the research, we identified many commonalities between cinema and other disciplines and, in particular, connections with Law and Economics-Business Studies. Furthermore, cinema offers material for reflection on themes of current interest, that is to say, themes that are “socially alive”, while at the same time it can train students in the competences of digital citizenship. The concept of competence is understood here as residing (Le Boterf, 1994) in the mobilization of the resources possessed by an individual (knowledge, abilities, attitudes and more), rather than in the resources themselves: it may thus be defined as knowing how to act (or react) in a given situation, in order to execute a *performance*, with regard to which other subjects will express a judgement.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ministerial Order 7/10/ 2010, n. 211 “Indicazioni nazionali riguardanti gli obiettivi specifici di apprendimento concernenti le attività e gli insegnamenti compresi nei piani degli studi previsti per i percorsi liceali”.

<sup>2</sup> For further background on the research project see <http://www.liceotenca.gov.it/progetti-pubblici/13-14>.

<sup>3</sup> [9], [13] pp. 43-51.

Our emphasis on the symbolic power of images and the interdisciplinary and multimedia nature of cinema helped us to identify the multiple educational values associated with knowing how to watch a film. In particular, we drew heavily on the work of the French film critic and essayist Alain Bergala, for whom cinema at school *sets out to be something else, to be a different experience to a class on a specific topic*.<sup>4</sup>

The consumption of cinema at school may, therefore, be viewed as a path towards knowledge acquisition that is complex and multi-faceted, but at the same time flexible: constantly being “translated” and remediated<sup>5</sup> in terms of forming new connections so that film can become an interdisciplinary teaching resource, allowing other disciplines to be taught along with it. Thus, expanding the boundaries of cinema, by exploring other frontiers across the humanistic, artistic, scientific and business-legal cultural domains, also facilitated learning in the social sciences and audio-visual media. In addition, the work of analysing and comparing old films prompted students to draw other comparisons between academic learning and their direct everyday experience.

### 3. The interdisciplinary approach

Recent research on interdisciplinary teaching has shown that students are attracted by and engage more readily with interdisciplinary approaches, which help them to acquire new knowledge and reinforce existing knowledge. Interdisciplinary learning, as claimed by Alan Repko, enhances cognitive abilities in general.<sup>6</sup>

In formulating our key pedagogical objectives, we asked ourselves what we wished to “reactivate” and consolidate within the cognitive development processes of individual students. One of the first questions we put to ourselves was: how can we foster creative connections, allowing students to acquire novel perspectives and new cognitive strategies as they integrate new knowledge and acquire new abilities? Moreover, once we have identified the connections and affinities among the various disciplines, how can we relate them to one another in such a way as to enhance students' comprehension?

The study programme was designed on the basis of these key questions. Nonetheless, an interdisciplinary educational project whose key component is film must include other important educational objectives. Two aspects are particularly crucial: 1) that the students actively participate in the project by being *emotionally involved* and learning the importance of conserving and recognizing the historical and cultural value of our international film heritage; 2) *knowing how to recognize emotions*, so as to judge their appropriateness when consuming the language of cinema and of images in general.

The disciplines involved in the preliminary phase were Cinema, Art, Law, Economics-Business Studies and Digital Literacy. Early cinematographic works and their protagonists “showed” us the interdisciplinary path that we could follow, progressively revealing multiple creative relations among the disciplinary areas in question.

### 4. Results

The interdisciplinary approach became even more fruitful thanks to our decision to teach the language of film through the earliest films in the history of cinema. Choosing to share the historic heritage of international cinema from the late 1800s and early 1900s with our young participants threw up surprising connections with other disciplines. The intersecting of different disciplines helped students to attain a deeper understanding of certain concepts and in particular the root causes and complexity of themes that featured strongly in the early history of film (e.g., the first examples of cinema advertising).

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<sup>4</sup> [3].

<sup>5</sup> On the concept of remediation see Bolter and Grusin, 2002: the concept has been adopted here as a theoretical frame of reference, not to describe the *Remediation* of earlier media by digital media. It refers to remediation in terms of new interdisciplinary ways of highlighting shared contents and mutually reinforcing the teaching of the subjects involved in the project.

<sup>6</sup> [11].

## 5. Methodology

A preliminary conversation was held with the students to brief them about the research topic and aims, which helped us to better orient our study. The students were administered a short questionnaire comprising open-ended questions about their competences in the domain of cinema acquired during previous learning processes at (Maldonado, 2005) both *formal school* and *parallel school*<sup>7</sup>.

While some interesting data were collected, we feel that further information is required in order to build up a detailed picture of the pupils' prior competences in relation to film.

The method used to analyse the language of film was that of the constant and reiterated "reading" of the text or fragment, as is standard practice in film analysis. This approach had the aim of helping students to develop an analytical and critical perspective and at the same time to maintain a healthy distance from their object of study.

All analysis and comparison of film material was conducted following semi-structured<sup>8</sup> procedures.

The film material used was sourced using digital technologies and internet databases.

## 6. An interdisciplinary approach to *Cinema, Law and Economics-Business Studies*

The initial sessions were unidisciplinary: the students lacked basic knowledge of cinema and film language.<sup>9</sup> Providing a series of classes focused on film allowed them to immediately begin using film language and served as a basis for beginning to identify interdisciplinary topics shared with law and business.

The first classes were devoted to the history of the birth of film, the development of theories of visual perception and devices for studying moving images in the pre-cinema era. Next, some of the earliest works in film history were described and analysed: these were mainly short black and white films with a simple narrative structure. The first task assigned to the students was to watch each film several times in order to memorize its narrative structure; they were then asked to write objective descriptions of it or draw schemas on the frames; next they were asked to observe specific details (e.g., position of the camera, light, shade, camera movement, types of screen shot, use of subtitles, space of the frame, etc.); finally, the pupils were asked to compare the most significant works, an exercise that yielded rich critical analysis.

The objective of these first exercises was to help the students gradually learn to make their own film language: even the earliest productions of the pioneers of cinema contain almost all the elements of film language. Spontaneously and without being fully conscious of what they were doing, the pioneers of cinema left us a legacy of works with much to inspire; we just need to know how to "read" them. As suggested by Sergej Eizenstein (Grasso, 1995), "The eye must be trained in analysis in order to capture the details. A rare capacity for synthesis is required to identify, among the data from the analytical vision, that decisive and characteristic detail which has the power to recreate the image of the whole in a fragment."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Parallel school* is understood here as "...the complex and multi-faceted set of realities of every kind that, outside of the walls of formal school, play a key role in educational processes in the broad sense. I refer, specifically, to that galaxy of educational places in which, in one way or another, processes take place of acculturation of social actors and of interiorization of values, beliefs, opinions, preferences and habits", [10] pp. 182-183.

<sup>8</sup> By semi-structured we mean activities that have been planned and take place in predefined school spaces, but are freely managed or not rigidly predefined.

<sup>9</sup> It was not necessary to offer unidisciplinary classes in Law or Economics-Business Studies: the students were already in their second year of studies in these subjects.

<sup>10</sup> [7], p. 8.

## 7. Results

The students reported finding the unidisciplinary classes highly meaningful and exciting, both because of learning to read moving images and because of discovering the cultural value of film heritage: the more inexperienced pupils had been unaware of the existence of this patrimony and of its historic and artistic worth. The students' emotional involvement and hence their motivation was also boosted by the fact that they spontaneously identified with the film directors, audiences and characters of these early short films.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, emotional involvement played a key role in this first phase of the project, although naturally it could be more or less intense for individual students. In this regard, we asked the students to write a description of the emotions they experienced while viewing these late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century films. They described multiple kinds of emotional experience but in general were enthusiastic, reporting that it had been a pleasure for them to admire the first films produced in the history of cinema and to have had the opportunity to observe repeatedly and in detail scenes of everyday life and filmic entertainment from over a hundred years ago. Of especial significance is the gratitude expressed by students for the particular benefit of having learned a method providing them with a new perspective that they could also apply in their everyday lives.

From these initial explorations of early cinema, we next went on to explore the complex interdisciplinary connections between film on the one hand and Economics-Business Studies and Law on the other.

## 8. An interdisciplinary approach to Cinema, Law and *Economics-Business Studies*

The students became more aware of and involved in the pursuit of the project's interdisciplinary goals, when they were invited to revisit concepts that they had previously learned in relation to the first industrial revolution (Jaramillo, 2005), now linking them with the history of technology and technical advancements in cinematographic devices.<sup>12</sup>

In relation to the First Industrial Revolution, the students were shown a clip from Charlie Chaplin's 1936 film, *Modern Times*, and then asked: "What details from this clip clearly indicate that this scene is set in a factory at the time of the First Industrial Revolution?" The clip was shown several times, until eventually a student noticed a large wheel in the background of the frame. On the basis of this observation it was pointed out to the students that the movement of this great wheel, through a drive shaft and a system of belts to the right of the frame, transmitted the movement generated by the plant's single steam engine to all the other machines across the factory floor. This prompted reflection on the implications of such a system for production, in terms of overall efficiency. To reinforce this learning, we also showed the students the scene in which the factory manager orders a worker to speed up the production process by increasing the speed of rotation of the enormous wheel. The conclusion inevitably drawn from this was that, under these new conditions, "the maximum overall speed of production" would be the maximum speed that could be maintained by "the slowest worker on the production line".

## 9. An interdisciplinary approach to cinema, Law and ECONOMICS-?? Business Studies

First, the students watched the first cinema advertisements ever produced in the history of cinematography: *Laveuses* by the Lumière brothers from 1896 and *Admiral Cigarette* by T. A. Edison from 1897.<sup>13</sup> Next, in order to draw out the connections between film and *legal* themes, we presented some more recently produced cinema advertisements, which had been modified by order of the courts. Finally, we presented a film made by Greenpeace as part of their campaign against the partnership between Lego and Shell.<sup>14</sup> The students themselves asked to view the film several times

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<sup>11</sup> See student reports.

<sup>12</sup> [8].

<sup>13</sup> These films may be viewed at the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztV6zDmoiCs>

<sup>14</sup> This film may be viewed at the link: <http://politiken.dk/oekonomi/virksomheder/ECE2418605/lego-boejer-sig-for-greenpeace-og-dropper-shell-som-partner/>. See [1]; see also: <http://video.repubblica.it/economia-e-finanza/greenpeace-la-campagna-contro-la-partnership-lego-shell/179661/178435?ref=HREC1-28>.

so that they could analyse it in depth and share their personal reactions, both rational and emotional.

We next carried out a *case study* focused on analysing the strategy implemented by *Procter & Gamble* in launching their *Pringles* snack crisps. We began by introducing the various functions making up company structure: *Procter & Gamble* began their product development process by carrying out market research to identify the “defects” of “traditional potato chips”. The Production and Marketing departments worked together to define the innovative characteristics both of the product itself, with its distinctive shape and taste<sup>15</sup>, and of the packaging in which it was to be launched<sup>16</sup>: *Pringles* are sold in a can that prevents the product from getting crushed and is also reusable, “young and fun”. This perception is fostered by the overall marketing strategy, whose objective was to make *Pringles* a cult product. In the first three months of the product launch, starting in February 1999, a “deprivation marketing” strategy was implemented, meaning that the product was only retailed through a small number of exclusive outlets and was unavailable through traditional outlets for similar offerings. In the next phase of the launch, beginning in April, an “events marketing” strategy was implemented, with the sale of *Pringles* continuing to be conducted on a restricted and selective scale in the context of major sporting fixtures and concerts. Over the following six-month period from May to November 1999, *Pringles* received intensive media coverage and were distributed through both traditional outlets and unconventional outlets for this type of product<sup>17</sup>. The new product was hugely successful and not only eroded the market shares of existing potato chip producers (Barbieri, 2000), but even won over consumers from other types of snack product.<sup>18</sup> Having presented the students with this background, we asked them to analyse, using the competences acquired during the cinema project, the four original commercials used by *Procter & Gamble* in 1999 and early 2000 to launch their new *Pringles* potato chips. The group work yielded numerous interesting observations. Students were then given the following individual assignment:

#### **10. Assignment: Advertising and marketing**

For the following class, students were required to write a summary of the work carried out in class, as though they were describing it for the benefit of a classmate who had been absent.

The summary was to include the following:

1. The purpose of the activity
2. The key points emphasized and the learning outcomes achieved
3. They were then required to explicitly describe which aspects of the work carried out bore a connection with the experimental interdisciplinary cinema project (and in what way they saw them as being connected)
4. Finally, students were invited to end their summary with something to surprise the teachers.

The following are extracts from the students’ texts<sup>19</sup>

*[...], first the teacher showed us a diagram representing the different functions making up a company. At the top of the structure is the strategic coordination function, followed by all the others, but we particularly concentrated on the sales and marketing function. This function is in charge of selling the products by means of strategies that lead an increasing number of people to buy them. These strategies generally concern all aspects of the product, from how it is structured, its packaging, etc., to the various types of advertising, TV, radio, etc.*

*[...]*

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<sup>15</sup> All chips are the same shape, they are only salted on one side, they are not greasy to handle, etc.

<sup>16</sup> A. Cusi, M. Boffa, *Pringles: un brand globale nel mercato italiano*, Lupetti editore, Milano 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Events, stadiums, gymnasiums, parks, airports, railway and underground stations, beaches, factory outlets, cinemas, discos, catering firms, hotels.

<sup>18</sup> [2], p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> The highlighting in bold has been added by the authors to point to key evidence of enhanced awareness acquired by the students as an outcome of the interdisciplinary project.

*Then, he showed us four different TV commercials, the first ever used to advertise this product.*

*After watching them as ordinary spectators, he helped us to observe them from a cinematographic perspective. And this helped us to understand more deeply the link between business and the cinema and how this link is exploited by companies in order to sell particular products. Together with the teacher, we identified features that were effective in leading the product to be perceived as offering value and therefore bought. Some of the leading factors that we discovered included: an initial state of boredom, brought to an end by the arrival of kids carrying Pringles, cans of chips used to produce a very appealing and attractive musical rhythm, the recurrent sound of munching on the crisps, the highlighting of the quantity of chips in the can, the presence in the commercial of kids of all ethnic groups, etc. Next we reflected on more technical points, such as the use of certain colours to attract attention, the use of shots from particular angles, the use of slow motion and speed, various lighting effects, music, rhythm... in this way we carried out an analysis of all the commercials, first viewing each as a whole, then breaking it down into its constituent parts. This, in my view, is very interesting, above all because it helps you to grasp more fully the fact that our daily lives can be influenced, at times without us even realizing what is going on. Furthermore, it is interesting to see that there can be a relationship between aspects of business and psychology. Having studied psychology, I realized that the choice of certain types of music, colours, settings, etc. chosen for the commercials were connected with psychological principles and processes.<sup>20</sup> Curious fact: the inventor of Pringles requested that, after his death, his ashes be kept in one of his famous chip cans!*

## 11. Results

The reflections shared by the students during this first phase of our research project suggested that, in general, they had learnt how to analyse the medium of film and to appreciate the multiple perspectives inherent in an advertising message. The ability to critically view a film had been acquired by the majority of the students participating in the project. Furthermore, all the students displayed enhanced awareness of how to interconnect ideas and knowledge from different domains.

A second questionnaire was administered to the students at the end of the first year of project work, in order to obtain their feedback regarding the learning acquired in this initial phase of the research. Many constructive responses were received, in which the students described both the positive and the critical aspects of this pilot experiment in interdisciplinary teaching.

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<sup>20</sup> This subject is part of the high school social science curriculum.