

The Joy of Teaching Cinema at ETH

Rebecca West

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The traditional divide between the hard sciences and the arts and letters (or, more broadly, the human sciences) is belied by the cinema, both as a practice and as an object of critical inquiry. The early cinema was allied with new technologies such as photography, and with ancient realms of artistic creation such as the theater and literature, especially poetry. Cinema has never been entirely situated in one field or the other; it has been and continues to be made up of a marriage of technological and material instruments and advancements with very old modes of narration and representation. To teach a course at the ETH on the films that focus on modern Rome, many of which are adapted from literary, theatrical, or historical texts, seemed to me at first to be a daunting challenge, given the scientific research and technological professional orientations of the majority of students at this eminent technical university. I soon found, however, that they were enthusiastic about discovering cinema as not only an entertaining but also an intellectually rigorous field of study that is not as far from the more scientific and technical fields pursued at the ETH as they may have thought.

Rebecca West

Rebecca West is William R. Kenan, Jr. Distinguished Service Professor Emerita of Italian Literature, and the Department of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago.

Educated as an Italianist at Yale University, she has focused her research and pedagogy on twentieth-century Italian literature, with a concentration on poetry and prose fiction, and more recently, on cinema. She has maintained as well her longstanding interest in Dante, on whose *Divina commedia* she has published several articles. The modern authors and issues on which she works are diverse, but are united by her longstanding interest in that which escapes from the so-called “center” of cultural production and canonization: to wit, women’s writing; experimental writers; mass medial works. Her book on the poet Eugenio Montale explored the concept of the liminal in his poetry, while her book on prose writer and documentary filmmaker Gianni Celati studied the manner in which his work is allied with oral storytelling and the validation of past modes of verbal and visual communication.

As a scholar of contemporary Italian literature and culture, she also focuses on cinema, which is one of the most prominent artistic forms of modern Italian culture. She maintains an interest as well in Italian American cinema, which has both deep ties and wide divergences from the Italian film canon. In the field of cinema studies, her research and teaching have concentrated on intersections of literature and film, the role of the screenwriter in the elaboration and production of cinema, feminist and queer film theory, Italian and French classical and contemporary film theory, comparative screen representations of masculinity, and stardom. She has published articles on the Italian American directors Martin Scorsese and Abel Ferrara, and their collaborations with actor Harvey Keitel, on the Italian screenwriter Tonino Guerra, on contemporary Italian writer and filmmaker Gianni Celati’s video production, on screen versions of Collodi’s *Pinocchio*, on semiotics of the clothing of Cary Grant, and has edited a volume of articles by graduate students in Italian literature, on the intersections of film and literature entitled *Pagina, pellicola, pratica: Studi sul cinema italiano* (2000).

As an academic field of studies, research into and teaching of the history and interpretation of cinema have grown greatly in the last decade. Most institutions of higher learning now have departments or programs in cinema studies, and the legitimization of their rightful role in universities is complete. At my own institution, The University of Chicago, I was involved in the creation of the Department of Cinema and Media Studies, which grants both undergraduate and post-graduate degrees, including the Ph.D. Our Department is now considered one of the top programs in North America, with eminent scholars in many diverse specializations such as early cinema, French cinema, Chinese cinema, African-American cinema, cinema and the sister arts, sound in cinema, adaptation from literature to cinema, Slavic cinema, and many others. The production of films is taught, and students have the opportunity to make their own short films which are shown to campus audiences on a regular basis. A flourishing field that attracts students from many different areas of the University, cinema studies will continue to enrich our students' general culture as well as to give them excellent interpretative tools and historical knowledge that are applicable to problematics well beyond the confines of cinema.

The development of interpretative techniques, of the capacity to judge and to express one's judgments in clear, eloquent prose, and of historical knowledge concerning the birth and development of modernity across the globe is what makes cinema studies important and relevant even to students of technical areas of expertise such as are taught at the ETH. Moreover, a course on cinema taught in Italian and focused on Italian films brings an essential component of Swiss cultural and linguistic reality to students who might otherwise follow courses taught only in German or English. Many students who registered for my course told me that they were delighted to be able to hear lectures in their native language and to do research into Italian topics. This aspect of the De Sanctis Chair seems to me to be one of its most admirable contributions to the academic environment at the ETH. Italian is one of the official languages of Switzerland, and it must continue to have a presence in all institutions of higher learning there.



Rebecca West, William R. Kenan, Jr. Distinguished Service Professor Emerita of Italian Literature at the University of Chicago and Cattedra De Sanctis Visiting Professor during the autumn semester 2015.

Here in the United States, as is true also in Europe and around the globe, the humanistic fields of study are being marginalized in favor of technological and scientific fields, with the result that many students do not learn about the disciplinary riches of history, philosophy, literature, and other traditional areas. Certainly, scientific and technological knowledge is essential to our world, but I would argue that the *scienze umane* are equally essential to the formation of skills and attitudes pertaining to good citizenship, to judgement, to competent modes of expression, and to a full appreciation of what makes us human. The De Sanctis Chair has provided students at the ETH with an admirable opportunity to turn their attention to literary, historical, and philosophical topics that they otherwise might not have been able to study. I am grateful to have been invited to be part of such a great undertaking, and to be included among such fine scholars of humanistic specializations. To honor the distinguished late and very much lamented scholar Remo Ceserani, the first De Sanctis Professor, with this collection of essays makes me even more proud to be a member of such an august group. I personally have benefitted enormously from Professor Ceserani's scholarly work, and I even had the great pleasure of meeting him in Chicago several years ago when I understood why he was so lauded for his humane generosity of mind and spirit.

My brief stay in Zurich in the autumn of 2015 allowed me to experience only a small portion of the incredible institution, the ETH, which hosted me with such warmth. Professor Francesca Broggi was my assistant in my course, and I have never known someone so willing to be of such constant practical support, as well as of such generous intellectual sharing. Rosa Pittorino was another great source of practical support, and she went beyond the usual tasks to make my stay comfortable and pleasant. I thank them both, and I thank the ETH for inviting me to have this unforgettable experience, which enriched my life and which I hope enriched the lives of my excellent students. May the De Sanctis Chair continue for many years to come.

Il corso di letteratura e cultura italiana nel semestre autunnale 2015

Rebecca West: Roma moderna nel cinema e nella letteratura

In questo corso si discutono e si analizzano film e scritti letterari di autori italiani moderni che riflettono le realtà, i miti, e i sogni che riguardano la "città eterna," ossia Roma. Non è presa in considerazione l'era classica romana; invece si punta su opere, sia scritte sia cinematografiche, che sono ambientate nel tardo Ottocento fino al tardo Novecento.

Lo scopo principale del corso è di esplorare le diverse rappresentazioni della Roma moderna, le quali esprimono elementi storici, politici, soggettivi, e/o fantastici che hanno interagito per produrre il palimpsesto che è la città moderna di Roma. Si guardano e si esplorano film diretti da grandi maestri italiani come Fellini, Rossellini, Pasolini, e Bertolucci, e qualche film non italiano sarà incluso. Si leggono testi letterari di D'Annunzio, Moravia, Pasolini, e Malerba assieme a film specifici.