

How an Unexpected Case of Sexual Assault Can Lead to Global Competence

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Abstract

This paper relates an experience shared with a group of American students studying the Bertolucci-Benigni film *Berlinguer ti voglio bene* (1977; *Berlinguer I Love You* in English). It traces the surprising outcomes when students reacted in a brand-new way to old material – old given that the movie was made over forty years ago, and also in the sense that I had used it numerous times in my course on comic Italian performers. Never before had students classified the action as sexual assault, referring to the scene in which Mario Cioni's friend, Bozzone, arrives to spend the night with Cioni's mother, with winnings he had earned in a card game. The students' response prompted us to carry out "the Berlinguer research project," in which they explored five key topics relating to the scene: 1) The Movie Itself, 2) Italian Feminism in the 1970s, 3) Roberto Benigni and Feminism, 4) Sexual Assault and the Law (Italy and US), 5) Sexual Assault and Film.

My students did not produce the literary analysis of the scene I had envisioned, but instead moved in directions consonant with the acquisition of certain global competencies. This was an unexpected but rewarding outcome from a pedagogical perspective. I describe how their work led to gains in global competence, and also advocate that professors also strive to become more globally competent, in terms of appreciating contexts relevant to today's university students. In particular, the issues of sexual violence and mistreatment of women call us all to become more globally aware and proficient.

Keywords: sexual assault, global competence, Benigni, *Berlinguer ti voglio bene*

Author's Note

This essay is dedicated to the ten students who participated in the "Berlinguer film project" for my 2017 spring semester course *Acting Italian: Benigni, Goldoni, Fo*. Their responses and engagement in the course assignment stimulated this reflection and I am grateful to them for pushing me toward new ideas and more humane perspectives. They are quoted throughout the work, but in the interests of privacy their comments will be kept anonymous.

I didn't see it coming. A scene sequence in a film I've shown regularly to students over the past five or six years, part of a popular course on Italian comic performance, provoked an entirely unanticipated response.¹ The movie: Roberto Benigni's 1977 *Berlinguer ti voglio bene* (hereafter *BTVB*), a cinematic elaboration of the pathetic Mario Cioni character familiar to Italian theater audiences from the actor's earlier stand-up performances (Avati, Minervini & Bertolucci, 1977). The sequence: Bozzone, Cioni's best friend, shows up at his house to claim the debt Cioni owes him from a previous card game – a night with Cioni's mother. After a few words with Cioni, Bozzone heads to *la mamma*, who is washing up the dinner dishes with her back to the camera. Upon seeing her swaying backside, Bozzone drops his pants -- when she turns and sees him, she appears frightened and moves away. Hulking over her, he follows as she distances herself, worrying aloud. Bozzone stops for an instant to address Cioni, who vocally objects to the action, but when Bozzone challenges him to instead come through with the money and Cioni cannot, the pursuit continues. A close-up of Bozzone shows him voicing an obscenity "Close your mouth and open your cun*, hippopotamus!" But Mrs. Cioni has already fled up the stairs, where Bozzone follows her. Cioni stands by passively, muttering his disapproval.

A few scenes later we see *la mamma* opening the shutters to the new day, presumably the morning after her encounter with Bozzone. She looks like a different woman compared to the unkempt hag she has been until now. Made-up, hair styled, softened in expression, she is attractive and beaming, looking out on the blue sky and sunny countryside. She opens window after window, singing, smiling, fluffing her hair, playing with the curtains – and commenting on how she hasn't slept this well since she was a little girl, that it is a beautiful day, she has so many things to do, but "Che sarà?" ("What might this day bring?"). A short while later the film shows a Sunday lunch in the Cioni home, where Bozzone now presides at the table and Mrs. Cioni happily waits on him, as if they are husband and wife.

1 The course, ITR 3775 Acting Italian: Benigni, Goldoni, Fo studies the core elements of Italian literary, performative, and cultural traditions in the comic vein. It is taught in English, therefore students see the movie *Berlinguer ti voglio bene* in its English subtitled version, entitled *Berlinguer I Love You*.

Granted, the premise is bizarre. Even for American students used to the term “MILF”, and accustomed to laughing at comic renditions of young men desiring and even coupling with friends’ mothers (in movies such as *American Pie* [1999], and *MILF* [2010]), the idea that one’s buddy would propose such a romp as betting currency stretches credulity and strains most people’s comfort-zones (Rimawi & Wheeler, 2010; Weitz & Weitz, 1999). But the card-playing Mario doesn’t seem to fully understand the bargain as it is happening, consistent with his role as the out-of-sync dupe among his band of male friends. To prepare for the film the class reads and views a few of the Mario Cioni theater monologues, focusing on Cioni as emblem of a lost generation, and the character’s essential grounding in Tuscan politics, cultural legacy, and a particular brand of Tuscan peasant humor (Benigni & Ambrogi, 1992; Bertolucci, 2012; 2014; Celli, 2001, pp. 23-31). Before students see the film, I provide what I can to fill in socio-historic context and help decipher Bertolucci’s and Benigni’s wacky narrative and stylistic choices (Brodo & Brugnolo, 2014; Celli, 2001, pp. 23-31; Celli & Cottino-Jones, 2007; Palmiro, 2009). *BTVB* is a challenging movie, nonetheless. Today’s college students, so attuned to the “random,” usually see both the stage Cioni and *BTVB* as “super-random,” and Cioni and his life as alternately absurd, depraved, and/or inscrutable. But the movie had never elicited this reaction, pinpointed precisely on this scene.

Students voiced their shock at what they named blatant sexual assault. More chimed in, professing a mixture of dismay, confusion, and anger. Bozzone’s predatory behavior toward Mrs. Cioni, her clear victimization, and the equally upsetting message that women might be liberated through rough, aggressive man-handling was enormously problematic for them. Even more disturbing: the scene “where Bozzone rapes Cioni’s mother” (a student’s words) seemed to communicate that men have the right to assault women and that women ultimately desire it -- indeed, they are, after the fact, glad to be abused. As far as I could recall, the scene had never gotten this kind of notice. My students were engaged in a way I’d not seen before; now it was my turn to pounce.

I gave students the option to address their concerns in a group re-

search project, which would serve as an alternative to the original choices offered for the required final assignment. We would explore this scene, and the culture surrounding it, from different perspectives. I explained that we would have to work together to determine the structure and parameters of the project, creating as we went. It would definitely involve some extra time outside of class, since there would now be two distinct groups: those students pursuing the traditional project topics, and those in the “Berlinguer” group. Ten of eighteen students chose to do so, eight women and two men. They divided into pairs, each concentrating on one of five topics that had emerged most noticeably in our discussion: 1) The Movie Itself, 2) Italian Feminism in the 1970s, 3) Roberto Benigni and Feminism, 4) Sexual Assault and the Law (Italy and US), 5) Sexual Assault and Film. Over the course of the seven weeks remaining in the term (the film didn’t appear on the syllabus until nearly midway through the semester), they assembled bibliographies, took notes, and wrote up their findings, posting them on a single blog created for the project. They worked individually and with their partner. We met periodically to share and exchange research, and at the end gathered to determine the content and format for their final presentation to the class.

Expectations

Before discussing the actual outcomes of that presentation, it will be useful to touch on expectations, namely mine. I had grand visions of light-bulb moments as students examined this sliver of the film’s larger whole. Surely the team researching “The Movie Itself” would alight on the rich backlog of literary antecedents: they would see Bozzone’s sadistic treatment of Mrs. Cioni in this scene, together with her overall portrayal as a shrieking, critical, oppressive woman/mother, as belonging to a larger canon of misogynist representations. They might see her ancestors in some of the notorious wives, mothers, and daughters in works such as Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (1349-51), Rabelais’ *Pantagruel* (1532) and *Gargantua* (1534), or Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew* (1590 ca.).

The outcome I took most for granted was that students would read

the scene in light of conventional comedic strategies. Given that before the film we had spent weeks on comic mainstays in medieval and early modern Italian literature (parodic sonnets and other mocking or subversive comic-realist poetry, archetypal buffoons, lewd language use, *commedia dell'arte* masks and plots, etc.), I assumed the students were primed to discern classic tropes and caricatures. They'd easily identify in Bozzone the insatiable satyr, household tyrant or primitive brute. His bestial behavior could be decoded as an indictment of men's general nature, and possibly as striking a blow to Tuscan pretensions of artistic, intellectual, and cultural refinement, and/or economic, political, and social progress. Cioni's mother, *la mamma*, plays a truly unique role: for most of the film she is ruthlessly harsh with her son. In the scene she turns erratic, moving from crazed, raving matron to defenseless, terrorized prey to enraptured and obsequious domestic slave. Her very volubility should have belied her victimhood. A woman so pathologically domineering was not likely to be cowed by anyone, male or female. Finally, the character of Mario Cioni evoked the lost, fatherless child, the disempowered outsider, the village idiot – the inevitable fall guy. My students would recognize the irony, the tongue-in-cheek aspect of the scenes' content. I could not expect them to know the history and connotations associated with the actors Carlo Monni (Bozzone) and Alida Valli (*la mamma*), which might also have inflected their understanding of the sequence, but they would surely appreciate the host of essential cultural-literary *topoi* animating it.

As for students working on the other topics, they would see connections between the socio-historical context and aspects of the scene that fall into a broader category of the comic, with its focus on disruption, instability, and the underside of the normal or socially acceptable. For example, students working on 1970s Feminism would relate the sexual revolution and women's movement of the time to the movie's frequent instances of absurd interaction between men and women. They might explore the cultural history behind the term *motherf***er*, or consider the mother-son-Bozzone triad from an Oedipal perspective. There was also the central theme of homosociality, in terms of Cioni and his group of guy-friends (his *brigata*).

Wouldn't my students pick up on how Bozzone's role now as family patriarch destabilizes his friendship with Cioni, and results in a new (a)normal, that of paternal oppression and fraternal abandonment?

My students would ultimately see through the post-supper drama and be able to laugh at its subtext: the exaggeration, the intensity, the in-your-face contrasts – in short, the *grotesque* essence of the scene, in a class where I had taken pains to teach that grotesque in the field of comic literature does not mean gross, disgusting, or vile, but rather the unnatural, *and meaningful, allusive mashup* of elements (italics mine). Alas – almost none of these scintillating insights made their way into my students' posts.

Outcomes: Reality Strikes

I did not push hard to coax the above readings from my students. If anything, it seemed more important to allow them time to discover what was there and follow their own impulses. A small proportion of the group seemed aware of a potential play of meanings:

It was difficult to piece out the intended comedic nature of this scene. One scenario is that it's simply a distasteful and outdated comedic bit, but ... it is worthwhile to ponder the possibility of it existing as a satirical commentary on sexual assault, violence against women, and the foolishness of those resisting the progressive nature of the women's movement during this time period.

The rape scene and the final scene in which Cioni's mother falls in love with Bozzuto [sic] could show [that] these archaic laws and politics [do not] match [any longer] with a society that is becoming more progressive.

Other students made connections that tantalized, insofar as they hinted at the critical evaluation I envisioned. They paid close attention to detail and aptly cited historical contingency, as these comments from the team studying Italian feminism suggest: "...feminists [at the time of

the film] especially contested the use of sexual violence by men in order to discipline women, and the scene points explicitly to that practice;" "...the hostility toward women in the community center/Bingo scene might indicate a problematic social scenario, e.g. difficulties Italian feminism faced in gaining ground, taking root." But the reflections stopped there, and did not explore more deeply.

Or – they did go further, but in less productive directions. For example, interpretations often veered toward the ultra-literal: "...with this scene Roberto Benigni is overtly defying the feminist demands and advocating male control over the woman's body;" "The film...belittles feminism and depicts it as ineffectual...[it] can be considered an attack on the values of Italian feminists." Some of these attitudes may have stemmed from what students perceived as Benigni's flippant response when asked in an interview at the time of the film's release if he was feminist:

Q: On that subject, what do you think of feminists? Of feminists in general?

A: I wish I was one.

Q: What?

A: A feminist...but I can't be. I'm a young guy. How can I be feminist? Right? Besides, I've always had bad experiences with feminists. In Carpi, where they had invited me, they assaulted me. Before starting my monologue I had greeted them ironically. "Good evening ugly pigs." Many of them didn't get the irony and they went crazy. I had to run, actually escape, to Modena. I don't mean by that that I'm anti-feminist. On the contrary! I'm against anti-feminism. Women, in my view, are a little like men. They have to be re-introduced.

Q: So you are not against feminism. Then why is your character Cioni such a male chauvinist?

A: No. I'm not against feminism. Why should I be? If I were a woman I would be a feminist. For me women are a little like pigs. As an old Tuscan saying goes, "Don't throw anything away." It's true. (Brusati, 1977, p. 15; translation mine)

My students' comprehension of news articles in the Italian popular press had its own hurdles. Although I translated journalistic excerpts for them, there were limits on how much I could produce, and thus on how much material they could access. As for interpretation, after reading the above interview one student stated:

Throughout this short interview, the way in which Benigni presents his views seem contradictory to his character's actions in the film. If he truly believes men and women are similar and should have similar rights, one would think he would have issues with how the women are treated and presented in this film.

It was clear they were not yet sufficiently versed in Italian comic irony (not to mention Benigni's unique brand of rebelliousness) to bridge the opinions of his authorial self in the interview with Cioni's character portrayal in the film.

When I did not find any Italian sources that remarked on the particular scene, and students looking for commentary in English also came up dry, they made some rather reductive conclusions. They found the silence incomprehensible, even appalling, given the act of criminal violence. Many reasoned that zero discussion meant sexual assault was normal at the time. For them the scene simply mirrored an archaic status quo, not to mention barbaric Italian laws. It comprised a "straightforward representation of the misogynistic norms of the time." "Portraying the victim of rape as an overjoyed woman not only demoralizes victims' post-traumatic instability, but further promotes the idea that men know best." Mrs. Cioni's dramatic mood shift after sleeping with Bozzone is "not only jarring, but disgusting."

Even more disappointing than the knee-jerk credulity of some students was the way they quickly identified and clinched on worn stereotypes. Their statements that Benigni was misogynist and supportive of violence against women paralleled similar findings on Italy in general. The team researching sexual assault legislation landed on sources that

reinforced ideas about overall Italian backwardness, especially with respect to sex and gender relations. Their study of the evolution of Italy's rape laws brought honor killings into the mix and led to their discovery of reparative marriage. Its repeal only in 1981 constituted proof positive that Italy trails far behind the rest of the world, or at least the United States. Tracing Italian legal history on sex violence helped explain "why Mario Cioni's mother did not report her rape," and one student cast Mrs. Cioni's domestic union with Bozzone at the end of the film as a *de facto* reparatory marriage. In short, the scene and its aftermath stood as clear evidence of Italy's "misogynist cultural views" and "older sexist traditions," as it "normalized sexual assault and continued to promote the patriarchy."

That the students were largely unable to read the scene's hyperbole as comic code, and instead responded so viscerally to its physical and psychological aggression made me wonder about an American academic culture predicated on trigger warnings and safe spaces. My students' university experience overlaps with the rise of these phenomena. Detractors of the "new campus politics of sexual paranoia" might see in my students' initial reaction to the *BTVB* scene that same "fragile collegiate psyche" that the new measures seek to so "vindictively protect" (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Are they right? Are my students overly sensitive and, in the words of some long-time comedians irritated by the new campus climate, "Can't they take a joke?" (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015).

And yet, there is something to be learned from not automatically discounting their response. It may be that my students' assessments of Italian sex and gender norms, especially those of the film's period, are not so off-base. Filmmaker Alina Marazzi's award-winning 2007 documentary *Vogliamo anche le rose* (*We Want Roses Too*) expresses many of the same sentiments in its investigation of the women's movement in the 1960s-70s (Pedote, Virga & Marazzi, 2007). Its conclusions regarding real progress in gender parity are at best ambivalent – the film ends with a chronological list of Italian laws that point up the inequity, sluggishness, and bigoted character of national legislation and social norms where women are concerned. And Marazzi's is only one voice in a chorus of social and cultural

critics disparaging the state-of-affairs in Italy over gender, then but especially now: Lorella Zanardo, Laura Boldrini, Giulia Blasi, Caterina Soffici, and others.

Thus, while the students' thoughts may have been somewhat overstated, they were also somewhat in line with contemporary perceptions. When they noted that the card game and its outcome presents women as currency exchanged among men-at-play, or that Mrs. Cioni has traded sex for financial stability, obtained through her new husband's (Bozzone's) income, they are touching on discrete issues that in the age of Berlusconi (and beyond) still plague Italian citizens. One student noted that Bozzone's violence and greed may emblemize the character of Italian consumerism and industrialization at the time. Interestingly, this interpretation aligns with the analysis of *BTVB* by Brodo and Brugnolo, who highlight the destabilizing and debilitating effects of the new sexual consumerism arising in Italy in the 1970s. The speed, intensity and pervasiveness of a "globalizing consumer ideology" are ultimately devastating for postmodern men and women, at all social levels (pp. 477-85).

Global Competence – Theirs

The students' work seemed to engage them in a conversation with global implications, pivoting on sex and gender dynamics, justice and morality, and their intersections with a world market economy. The Berlinguer film project began to look like an occasion for increased global competence. Two elements common to the numerous definitions of global competence swirling in public, corporate and educational spheres appear in the National Education Association (NEA)'s version as "International Awareness" and "Appreciation of Cultural Diversity" ("Global Competence," 2010). These labels imply, respectively, a learning process, i.e., the acquisition of knowledge about global realities, and an attitudinal openness, i.e., acknowledgement of and curiosity about differing ways of being in the world. The Association of International Educators (NAFSA), in collaboration with the Asia Society and the Center for Global Education (CGE), phrases it this way: globally competent students are able to "Investigate the World" and

“Recognize Perspectives” (“What is Global Competence?,” 2018). My own institution includes very similar aims in the learning outcomes it assesses in students studying abroad (“University of Virginia,” 2010, p. 1). Despite my disillusionment with the missing literary textual interpretation, the Berlinguer film project contributed significantly to these other goals.

Historical and Social Studies Proficiency is one of six pillars in the Center for Global Education’s understanding of global competence (“History and Social Studies,” 2018). My students excelled here, digging into sources to report on various aspects of Italian history and social development. Those treating the 1970s women’s movement noted the multiple and evolving concerns of Italian feminists, including labor and workplace equality, agency over one’s body, and domestic and sexual violence. They discussed the women’s movement in the context of the Communist party, citing *Operaismo*, *Lotta Femminista*, *Wages for Housework*, and other landmark campaigns of the time. They articulated in nuanced ways the politics of the personal, as expressed by significant Italian feminist theorists and activists, and pointed out the special attention Italian feminists paid to sexual difference rather than equality. Students not only juxtaposed the progress of the Italian feminist movement with its American counterpart, but they also situated it among international feminist movements and transnational feminisms. Based on the history of Italian feminism in the 70s-80s, and in relation to other scenes in *BTVB* focusing more squarely on women’s bid for power, one student proposed multiple ways to read the scene. Benigni’s depiction might reflect specific tensions in the movement, such as the disconnect between generations, or its parabolic trajectory, or its woeful impotence, especially next to other national feminist achievements.

The students investigating Italian legal policy on sexual and family violence dug deep as well. They covered jurisprudential details regarding Italy’s historical definition of rape, and controversies over non-mandated prosecution. Along with their study of *il delitto d’onore* (honor crimes), reparatory marriage, and a historical tendency toward victim-blaming in rape cases, they introduced the Italian legal requirement of the *querela*, and discussed legislation biased in favor of criminal perpetrators. They considered

how cultural notions of gender, shame, and honor historically inflect a nation's society, especially as born out in criminal and legal systems.

The students who took up sex assault portrayals in film evaluated scenes of sexual harassment and violence in Italian, French and U.S. movies, in the 1970s and currently. They traced changes in the quantity and quality of on-screen sexual violence over time. Their study led them to deliberate on the broader issue of consent and its representation. They conducted an in-depth exam of the various notions and depictions of consent, relating these in turn to conceptions of ideal masculinity. They further considered the tensions between "responsible" cinematic representations of consent and incentives for commercial success in a global film industry. They wrestled with determinations of films' nature and purpose – are they merely reflective of their times or do they have agency as well, producing social mores? Should movies communicate an evaluative judgement on the content they present? They concluded that films featuring sexual assault should always show its negative consequences, to clearly convey its injury and injustice.

It's important also to mention the global competence gains inhering in our process. At the end of the term, after the teams had worked independently for a time, we came together to share findings and determine how best to present the project to the rest of the class. Students realized their conclusions diverged in some significant ways – those few who thought the scene could possibly be satirical conflicted with the majority who instead thought it was an indisputable nod to male chauvinism and a barefaced putdown of women and/or feminist interests. I proposed presenting team by team, letting the various conclusions stand alone, but the students wanted to find a way to reconcile their views, or at least relate them in a more connective whole. They admitted that after reading the others' conclusions, they were affected by them and learned from them. Students became amenable to the idea that the scene may not have a clear-cut interpretation, and admitted both uncertainty and acceptance of possible multiple meanings. "Tolerance of Ambiguity" is another marker for global competence (Herman, Stevens, Bird, Mendenhall & Oddou, 2010; "Tolerance of Ambiguity," n.d.; "Univer-

sity of Virginia," 2010). My students' willingness to contemplate ways to accommodate their divergent thoughts attests to the efficacy of the Berlinguer film project as an exercise in acquisition of world skills.

Global Competence - Ours

Easy as it is to lament our students' ignorance of the literary, cultural and comedic tropes propping up the Bozzone-Mamma scenes, we too cannot ignore context. Our students belong to their milieu as surely as we do ours. As academic professionals, many of us are distant from our students by at least a generation; thus we also are challenged "to acknowledge other points of view about pressing world issues," to become aware of and appreciate cross-cultural differences, and be willing "to accept those differences, ...[as] opportunities to engage in *productive and respectful cross-cultural relations*" ("Global Competence," 2010, p. 1; italics mine). The enterprise of teaching should surely encompass at least some fundamental knowledge of the world one's students inhabit.

My students' world, and, I would venture to say, that of the majority of college and university students in the United States today, includes a focus on social issues entirely ignored in an earlier era. Zeroing in on sexual violence, most schools now offer some kind of educational component to their pupils, and some institutions make it mandatory. These efforts derive from recent developments in national legislation that seek to better address incidents of campus sexual harassment and violence. Originating in Title IX of the Educational Amendments (1972), the Clery Act (1990), and the Violence Against Women Act (1994), the new measures obligate schools to "respond to and remedy hostile educational environments" rising especially from sexual misconduct ("Title IX," n.d.; "Title IX and Sex Discrimination," 2015; "Twenty Years," 2016; Lynch, 2018). They include installation of a Title IX coordinator on all campuses, regular reporting of campus crime statistics, and more rigorous modes of effecting school compliance with federal laws ("Q&A," 2017; "New Requirements," 2014). Given the activism and awareness campaigns of recent years, in combination with the current contentious climate in the political sphere over

policies on campus sexual violence (Obama-era mandates vs. Trump-era rollbacks), few students are likely to not be aware of and sensitive to these issues (Nilsen & Sitrin, 2017; Saul & Taylor, 2017).

At my university, many steps are taken to educate and equip students on the subject (R. Kiliany, personal communication, March 19, 2018). Incoming students receive information about sexual violence and its prevention in their summer orientation period, in sessions with both student orientation leaders and the Dean of Students. They are also required to complete an hour-long online module put out by the university's Title IX office. The penalty for not completing the module by the end of the first month of the term (Sept.) includes restrictions on access to essential university Internet sites; it may account for the nearly 100% completion rate. The web program is designed to be a baseline resource for students, and treats topics including consent, bystander intervention, survivor support and sexual violence prevention. During Fall orientation, new students are also expected to participate in the Green Dot Overview Talk, a one-and-a-half-hour session led by employees of the eponymous national non-profit organization ("Green Dot," n.d.). Dormitory meetings introduce the topics yet again, folding sexual violence prevention into a larger discussion of community safety and unity. All of these initiatives aimed at first-year and transfer students are reinforced by additional programs, often peer-led and offered in residence halls and in sorority and fraternity houses. The sessions, workshops, trainings, official lectures and informal talks run through the academic year and are open to all students.² What's more, this range of efforts is likely replicated at most colleges and universities, given that nearly all follow the American College Health Association's 2016 Guidelines geared to the issue of preventing sexual violence on college campuses ("Addressing Sexual and Relationship Violence," 2016).³

2 And this does not include the programs instituted by affiliated university offices (such as the UVA Women's Center), as well as those initiatives and agencies active in the surrounding community (SARA, SHE, the Hoos Got Your Back campaign).

3 I thank Rachel Kiliany, MPH, CHES, Program Coordinator for Prevention, Office of Health Promotion in Student Health, at the University of Virginia, for all the information in the above paragraph.

All the students in my ITTR 3775 class would have been exposed to the gamut of the above experiences. Moreover, UVA Prevention Coordinator Rachel Kiliany reminded me that the third-year students in my Berlinguer group (half) might have been especially sensitive to incidents of sexual violence, given that they lived through a particular tragedy in their first months at the university. In mid-September 2014, second-year student Hannah Graham disappeared. Little more than a month later her remains were found on an abandoned property not far from the campus; she had been sexually violated and murdered. Unfortunately, this case was only the last in a series of very public crises turning on male-on-female violence at UVA.⁴ However, the rising tide of American institutions with their own similar high-publicity episodes dilutes my school's celebrity. Statistics spell out a fairly ominous landscape outside the educational environment as well ("The Scope," 2018; Vagianos, 2017). The range of the provisions and remedial programs can be taken as instructive about the scale of the problem.

And still we haven't touched on the personal experiences our students may count as part of their individual private formations and which inevitably shape their outlooks. This takes us back to trigger warnings: it must be obvious by now that it never occurred to me to issue any sort of alert for the movie scene. I wasn't for or against, I simply hadn't given it much thought. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say that if and when I reflected on things like safe spaces, micro-aggressions, trigger warnings and the like, I sided with those who had some distaste for the outsized sensitivity of today's students. One of the reasons against the new regime is the worry that giving cautions before challenging texts allows students to opt out of reading, or watching. Eventually, it's feared, whole lists of

4 Morgan Harrington, a Virginia Tech college student, was abducted from a concert held at UVA in October 2009, and her remains were found in a nearby farm field three months later – her murderer was not discovered until the Hannah Graham investigation, when the same man was found guilty for both killings; less than a year later, in May 2010, Yeardeley Love, a UVA student-athlete was murdered in her apartment by her on-again off-again boyfriend and fellow UVA student-athlete; in November 2014 *Rolling Stone* magazine published "A Rape on Campus," a long article detailing an alleged sexual assault perpetrated by a group of fraternity brothers on a UVA female student during a frat house party. The story could not be substantiated and was entirely retracted by the magazine in April 2015, though not without months-long community-wide distress.

works will be off-limits to teachers. Critics of trigger warnings claim that they block freedom (Stone, 2016; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). But other voices in the fray speak about the freedom that's gained when all participants in the conversation feel acknowledged, respected and supported (Holm 2017). When assigning a work to her class Kate Manne considers the students "with relevant sensitivities," and views her trigger warning as helping to create a community environment "that supports people to engage rationally, fully, and calmly" (2016; 2015). Rather than shelter students from the inevitable rough and tumble of "real life," safe spaces and trigger warnings offer those who have already experienced plenty of real life an environment of security, dignity, and welcome. Cameron Okeke states: "They allow people to feel okay about speaking," especially those without privileged identities and who therefore have not traditionally enjoyed institutional backing (2016b, 2016a). For many, trigger warnings don't stifle but encourage involvement, as they challenge the academy on precisely those topics it has not been open to (Okeke, 2016b). They shine a light on the power dynamics that have allowed only one story to prevail. They draw attention to the fact that master narrative(s) coexist with other, alternate narratives.

The impulse behind trigger warnings points to the bleaker realities of humanity, but also to an interest in rectifying those ills. Such an impetus can be felt in exciting new scholarship that re-investigates long-studied works or examines those long-unstudied, to illuminate contexts crucial to meaningful new understandings of the past. As I specialize in eighteenth-century literature, works that come to mind include Mary Trouille's analysis of wife abuse in France (2009), Larry Wolff's exploration of child abuse in Italy (2012), and Simon Dickie's exposition of the cruel comic underbelly of English society (2011). These studies join a tidal wave of new research on slavery, disability, racism, servant abuse, sexual and domestic violence in British and American history and letters.

An example more germane to *BTVB* involves the 1972 film *Last Tango in Paris*, which I encouraged students to research, given its chronology and storyline containing sexual assault. Students themselves discov-

ered the fairly recent public outcry over how well Maria Schneider, who played the young woman involved with the protagonist Marlon Brando, had been informed ahead of time by directors about the rape scene they planned to shoot (Izadi, 2016; Moore, 2016). Issues of consent, gendered violence, abusive masculinity and industry sexism have come to the fore, and great interest was piqued in my students when they learned the directors of the two films were brothers: Bernardo (*Last Tango*), and Giuseppe Bertolucci (*BTVB*). The movies are quite different in genre, but headlines that read “Why We Should No Longer Consider *Last Tango in Paris* ‘a Classic,’” (Torres & Golding, 2016) lend legitimacy to a re-examination of Benigni’s film.

Thus, my students’ general response to the *Berlinguer* scene makes me pause and re-evaluate. The fact is, whether due to private, individual trauma a student or someone s/he loves may have suffered, or mere exposure to the collective cultural apparatus built up in relation to those experiences, our students consume and produce worlds that are often quite foreign to those of us of an older generation, or a more remote geographic location. Pop-quiz! Define the following: VAWA, “blurred lines,” “bystander effect,” *The Hunting Ground*, safeporting, “rapey.”⁵ The world of sexual and gender-based violence along with new, updated responses to it has generated a vernacular that American students are versed in more often than not. They implement this vocabulary and these concepts in their interpretive work with the materials we professors bring to the classroom. For example, several students connected the behavior of the passive Mario to

5 VAWA is the commonly-used acronym for the Violence Against Women Act, US federal legislation first enacted in 1994; “blurred lines” refers to an eponymous 2013 pop song by Robin Thicke which suggests women are deliberately disingenuous when it comes to communicating desire for sexual activity; the “bystander effect” or “bystander apathy” is a social psychological phenomenon whereby individuals are less likely to offer help to a victim when other people are present; *The Hunting Ground* is a 2015 documentary film focusing on the pressing problem of sexual assault on US college campuses; “safeporting” is a method of being sexually intimate with another, in which the active partner tells the other exactly what s/he is going to do before doing it, as a way of establishing a safe and mutually-paced connection; “rapey” is an adjective meaning “suggestive of or characterized by rape,” but its multifarious usages and meanings are problematic for many. See <https://newrepublic.com/article/115070/we-need-replace-rapey>.

contemporary theory on the bystander effect. The students drawn to issues of consent referenced definitions of it from the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network Organization (RAINN), unveiling new facets of the film scene's content. Others identified the coarse, animalesque Bozzone and the submissive, ineffectual Mario as ways in which the scene itself assaults different kinds of failed masculinity. Again, while the group didn't approach the sequence from a strict comic literature or cinema perspective, they analyzed it from within a framework of pressing contemporary debates on practices and ideologies that are extremely relevant to them.

It's not only college students who evince new sensibilities regarding old(er) artefacts, either. An American friend tells of taking her two young sons to an American neighborhood pizzeria that runs old black and white Italian films silently on the back wall to add to the "authentic Neapolitan" atmosphere. Her boys were puzzled and distressed at images of a husband roughly shoving his wife in a domestic scene. Clearly, these boys know little of the artistic heights of Italian 1950s cinema, but they do have a feel for mutual respect and fair treatment, and showed curiosity and concern for what looked to them like mistreatment of a fellow being. That's global competence one can get behind.

Conclusions

The Berlinguer film project provided a lesson in global competence that calls all of us to be learners. If my students had been studying in Italy as they viewed this film, what would have transpired had they brought their concerns to their Italian instructor? Or their Italian home-stay family? Italian roommates and/or peers? How would a European context impact the reaction aroused by the film scene? Do we consider sexual violence a pressing world issue? How does one reconcile manifold and conflicting cultural understandings of private vs. public, personal rights, propriety, consent, seduction, sexual preference and other social relations phenomena?

Consider the immediate response to the Harvey Weinstein sex scandal from major European voices: Catherine Deneuve and nearly a hundred other French women immediately issued a letter criticizing the an-

ti-sexual harassment faction, including the French rendition of the #metoo movement, #Balancetonporc (#Exposeyourpig), for its excessive “puritanical” sweep and threats to sexual freedom (Deneuve, 2017; Poirier, 2018). The accusation campaigns are controversial in Germany as well, where detractors speak of “#metoo propagandists” and lament the “execution by media” of those falsely accused (Hild, 2018; Luyken, 2018). In Italy, one of the dominant accusers of Weinstein, Italian actor Asia Argento, faced a strident backlash from men and women alike (“Caso Weinstein,” 2017). Meanwhile, the Italian version of the #metoo movement (#quellavoltache, or “that time that”) has run into much more friction than its American counterpart (Codacci-Pisanelli, 2018; Horowitz, 2017; Poggioli, 2018; Siri, 2017; Tammaro, 2017; Trinchella, 2017).

Had we had more time, I would have had my students delve more fully into Italian perceptions of *violenza sessuale* (sexual assault), to invite a better sense of the differences and similarities among global communities and ideologies. I would have countered the temptation to see Italy as a retrograde inferior by making sure students examined areas in which Italian public policy bests or equals its American equivalent (Phelan, 2018). These areas include maternity leave (“Maternity Leaves,” 2015), number of women in government positions (“Women in U.S. Congress,” 2017), the gender pay gap by women (“The Simple Truth,” 2018), and percent of higher education degrees earned (Wilson, 2017; “Women Earn More,” 2013).⁶ I would have invited them to learn more about variegated responses to #metoo in the United States, not to mention the imperfect facets of the women’s movement overall in their homeland (Stan, 2018).

As for reading the scene in a comic context, I would definitely have had them read Danielle Bobker’s article “Toward a Humor-Positive Feminism: Lessons from the Sex Wars” (2017). Bobker makes an incisive case for approaching comedy from a “humor-positive” stance, parallel to that

⁶ Maternity leave: Italy, 5 months paid leave, US, 12 weeks; Women in national government posts: Italy, women occupy 30% of Parliament, US women hold ca. 20% seats in Congress; Pay disparity: Italy, working women make nearly 95% of what men earn, US ca. 80%; Degree earners: Italian women get almost 59% of undergraduate degrees, US 58%.

of sex-positive proponents, who advocate that consumers have a “prerogative in shaping their reception of any sexual representation, regardless of its intended public.” In the same way, people – including my students, and the feminists among them – can shape their own response to humor and decide what it means. They can look for nuances in power relations, and consider that “Amusement [comedy, humor] does not necessarily degrade its objects but may imaginatively reframe or transform them, circulating power between tellers, laughers, and their objects in any number of ways.” Bobker exhorts feminists to remember language’s polysemic quality and humor’s theatricality, layers, and artifice. Part of the fun is determining what is “true,” what is “play,” and where/how/when those lines and layers intersect. The superiority theory of comedy, which operates on a one-up one-down relationship, is not the only way in which humor works. Bobker recommends that we “stay open to the possibility that surprise or relief rather than aggression may be the primary affect or intention ...[and doing so will] better equip us to see the various, potentially contradictory, facets of any comic provocation.” Had we used this article as a guide to the *BTVB* scene (and the film as a whole), my students might have parsed its social and gender dynamics in quite different ways.

And then again, perhaps not. Their sentiments were strong while we were working on the Berlinguer project last spring, and the Harvey Weinstein affair was still months from exploding onto the world stage. *BTVB* is now over forty years old, and the gender-based power imbalance it spotlighted still holds sway among many. There is much to be noticed, and much to act on, in all parts of the world. Steve Bannon, avowed nationalist and reputed misogynist, only a short time ago spoke in Rome saying “I’ve come to Europe to learn from your global movement. I am thinking of spending a lot of time on your continent this spring and summer, and afterward I’ll be in Asia” (Guerrera, 2018; translation mine). The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women states, “violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women” and “violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a sub-

ordinate position compared with men” (“United Nations Declaration,” 1993). I judge it a success that my students sought and uncovered the information they reported on; they evidenced real project-based learning. They showed a sincere desire to investigate, and stretched their own thinking as well as mine, about the cultural work a film performs, and its global repercussions. At the same time, the need for higher levels of global competence seems more urgent than ever.

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