

A Didactic Experiment with Cinema - Portuguese Emigration and Sense of Belonging

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ABSTRACT

Since the first decades of the twentieth century, Portugal has affirmed itself as an emigration country. This social, political, economic and demographic phenomenon has consequences, which have always been approached in a general way, neglecting the personal side and identity aspects that the displacement causes at an individual and family level. In long duration emigration, there is usually a paradoxical feeling of non-belonging/belonging to two spaces. On the one hand, already integrated into the new reality, the individual feels that to a certain extent they belong to the new space. However, in their identity memory, the culture and way of life of their nationality, region or place still exist. This dilemma of belonging is relatively abstract to convey to students when we work the demographic phenomenon. The Portuguese filmography has a recent film - The Golden Cage, released by the son of Portuguese emigrants, in France - where this feeling of belonging is represented, under 'the cover' of a comedy. We showed the film to a group of Demography and Sociology students and had them explore this phenomenon. The results were extremely positive.

Keywords: *Emigration, Cinema, Sense of belonging, Didactics, Geography.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the first decades of the twentieth century, Portugal has affirmed itself as an emigration country. This social, political, economic and demographic phenomenon has consequences, which have always been treated in a more general approach, neglecting the personal side and identity aspects that the displacement causes at an individual and family level. In emigration of very long duration, there is usually a paradoxical feeling of non-belonging/belonging to two spaces. On the one hand, already integrated into the new reality, the individual feels that to a certain extent they belong to the new space. However, in their identity memory, the culture and way of life of their nationality, region or place still exist. In relation to the *other*, the emigrant is a foreigner, in their own place, where they have built their lives; regarding their fellow citizens, in the place of origin, the emigrant is no longer a local, either. When this sense of deterritorialization is transmitted to a second generation, the problem can become even more intense, at the individual level. The inheritance of memory passes from one generation to another, but it is vague and meaningless for the ones who have never known or lived effectively in their parents' homeland. They belong to a reality but are constantly confronted with disconnected inherited memories.

This dilemma of (non)belonging is relatively abstract to convey to students, when we work the demographic phenomenon. The Portuguese filmography has a recent film - *The Golden Cage*, released by the son of Portuguese emigrants, in France - where this feeling of belonging is represented, under 'the cover' of a comedy. We showed the film to a group of Demography and Sociology students and had them explore this phenomenon. The results were extremely positive.

2. BRIEF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since the end of the fifteenth century, Portugal began to spread the population through the new world that was discovered. Without large demographic contingents, one of the ways the Portuguese managed to administrate such large areas and variety of territories was to merge with the local population. One of the first laws of Afonso de Albuquerque, 1st Vice King of Portuguese India, was to allow mixed marriages, in order to build an elite with enough formation and quantity to integrate the territory's organization. In one way or another, the Portuguese began to be spread all over the habitable continents. However, the number of these movements of the population was residual, not being able to be called emigration, as we understand it today.

It was at the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century that Portugal began to affirm itself as a country of emigrants. The first cycle happened in the second decade of the XX century, and later, another cycle, this time even more significant, in the 60's. This second wave was more directed to the European continent (there are differences between continental part of the country and the islands - in the latter, destinations Azorean preferred were the United States of North America, and the Madeirans to Venezuela and South Africa). Portuguese emigration has always been marked by the feeling and myth of the return to the homeland, at least in an imaginary representation idealized by the emigrant.

The great theories that explain population movements sometimes forget the details of the personal, the intimate, and the person. Everything is looked at in large blocks of behavior. The life stories to which we have access show how theories of migratory movements are fragmented. They divide phenomena into factors and close themselves into a single logic of reasoning; if it is true that they help to understand the broad lines of explanation of the phenomena, in a Macro approach in the micro viewpoint we can almost visualize a kaleidoscope of factors belonging to different theoretical "metanarratives" on migratory movements. From the repulsive and attractive factors of Ravenstein to the neo-classical theories of social networks, or the intervening obstacles/personal factors, we can find everything in the individual decision-making processes. Leaving is always a personal choice, although

for this position we can find a myriad of factors dispersed in the different theoretical approaches. This assumption is not intended to undermine theoretical constructs, but to frame them in their limitations, depending on the cases, we can verify that one approach or another is present in an individual decision.

One of the greatest problems of emigration is related to the feeling of belonging and the autonomization of an identity of its own. A Portuguese in Portugal, or a French in France, knows that he belongs, regardless of local, regional and specific idiosyncrasies, to a whole which forms his identity and connections; Portuguese in Portugal! However, is it Portuguese the one who is living in France for thirty years or more? Is the country that is present in the social representations of the emigrant still the same as the one at the time of his departure? Back to what homeland: for an origin that no longer exists, or belonging to a social reality in which I am not equal to the other, because of my origin? And the second and third generations, are they from the place of birth or do they belong to the origin of the fatherhood that they have never lived? What am I, where do I belong and what is my identity? These are the questions of the long-term emigrant and the second and third generations. Can someone who has not left the place of birth be an immigrant? "It is a process that may even be involuntary and even violent, where the individual is deprived of territory, not in terms of legal possession, but from a symbolic point of view and from access. "There is therefore a loss of territorial control, in which the individual no longer has access to the symbolic and economic places, resources, housing and other places that are structuring axes of one's identity" (Velez De Castro, 2015). As a form of protection, in the broad sense of integration or interaction, migrants tend to cluster in small communities. This type of behavior can have consequences: "(...) can generate isolation against the natives, as well as practices that lead to marginalization and even the formation of ghettos. From this point of view, geographic dispersion can be beneficial in the sense that the contact with the autochthonous community will be promoted. However, the separation of the origin nucleus interferes with the individual identity, by generating situations of assimilation of identity (Velez De Castro, 2015).

The same author summarizes this dilemma of belonging and identity in a single frame:

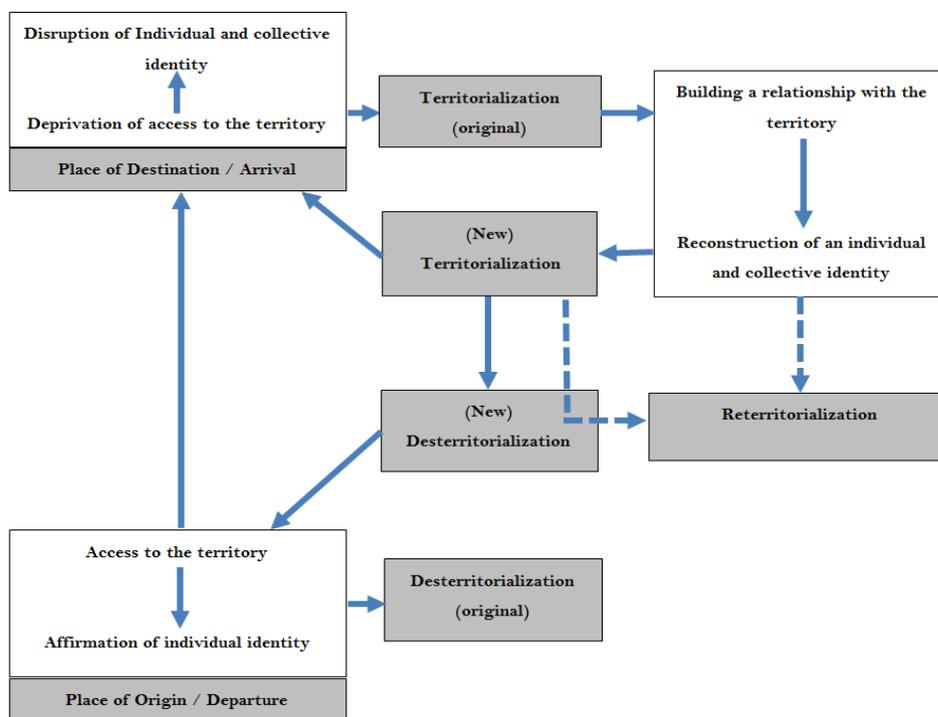


Figure-1. The Reterritorialization from the process of territorialization and desterritorialization

Adapted from: Velez De Castro (2015)

“The fact that individuals, faced in the light of human and social capital, move from their place of origin to a certain destination, causes them to break with their individual / collective identity, for they move from a space they "dominate" to another that is alien, whose symbolic and identity capital they do not fully understand. The deprivation of access to the original territory leads to a deconstruction of one's identity, both as unitary beings and as part of a community (of origin). This means that they get "deterritorialized”- (Velez De Castro, 2015).

Also, Haesbaert (2005) works on the concept of deterritorialization. The concept of territoriality and belonging do not arise in isolation and are linked to a specific territory. In each space, influences and aspects of dimensions and multiple factors are crossed; politics, culture, the local economy and others that will weigh in the manner the migrants use the space and are related with the locos. From this spatial relation emerges the personal and collective meaning of the place. If the relation is positive, deterritorialization can be accentuated. Integration into a new reality happens; it departs from the reality of origin, although in the new space they are always an outsider, even if accepted, integrated and therefore not discriminated.

Although these dilemmas of identity and belonging can be seen and explained in relation to a collective, they leave the individual and the particular aside. Each individual lives the dramas of identity and belonging in a particular way. This lost individuality often leads us to regard the subject as a number in the whole. However, the individual experience is always unique and multiplies by the experience of relationship with space and the birth of a third "identity" or new territoriality.

In Portugal, when the demographic phenomenon is studied, the migratory aspects are essential to understanding the collective behavior (great movements, destinies, causes) of the populations. In a pedagogical and didactic relationship, this type of approach erases the person who emigrated, who has doubts and personal reasons for making the choices; despite being collective, identity and belonging are, to a large extent, individual feelings. These aspects are sometimes more effective and allow a better understanding of both the global and the single and individual phenomenon. Life stories are a path, but the use of cinema, with fictional scenarios, allows students to reach the concepts more effectively.

The cinema has the power to tell a story that involves the viewer and makes them take part in the plot and feel what the characters live with their dramas and dilemmas. This fact makes it a powerful pedagogical tool and an appealing easy way to reach the students, passing simultaneously the concepts that we intend to present and introduce in an effective way. If we live a drama or a joy, we understand its reason and internalize the concepts. Cinema allows this, indirectly, through the development of the stories and the characters that live in them. In this way, students reach the understanding of phenomena that were not experienced by them, leading to an interiorization of the concepts.

Nevertheless, we do not advocate the simple passage of films as a pedagogical and didactic instrument. In the process, we have to respect the cinematographic work, the students and the contents we need to introduce. There must be a moment before and after the film for the preparation and presentation of a theoretical basis and framework. The elaboration of a script that guides the students in the visualization, discussion, registers and comparison of the filmic reality with the theoretical aspects is a crucial instrument, as well as the selection of the movies. The previous work of the teacher is the basis for the success of this didactic approach.

In our case, being a Geographer, the geographical view is the most present one. All stories have a physical support where they take place and are framed by human environments that reveal the social, cultural, political and economic characteristics of the era of the film. Thus, cinema is one of the possible didactic approaches that in the context of the various aspects of geography is justified, being effective in any of the various education cycles.

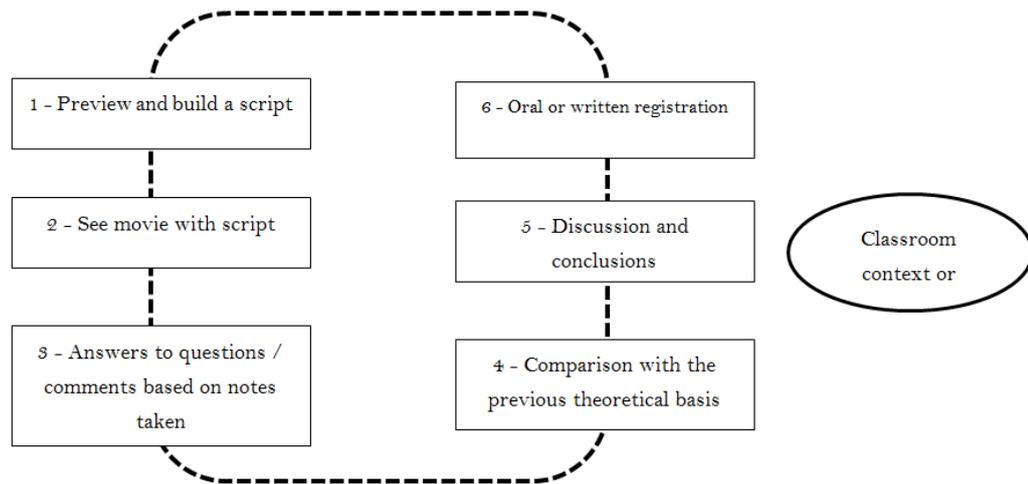


Figure-2. DIDACT PORPOSE Visualization, analysis and discussion in the context of the classroom(all levels of education) Reflective exploration.

Adapted from: [Velez De Castro \(2015\)](#)

“Adams (2005) (...) se refere à forma como os indivíduos percebem e se relacionam com determinados lugares, entendendo que há três tipos de elementos que explicam esta relação: a natureza, o significado e as relações sociais. Ora a Geografia e o Cinema, como campos de investigação, assumem uma dimensão interdisciplinar, em parte fruto da dinâmica das espacialidades ficcionadas, pois retratam a geografia cultural e social do cotidiano” ([Velez De Castro and Campar De Almeida, 2016](#)).

The advantage of cinema as a didactic tool is its ability to tell stories. We all like stories, regardless of our age, but the suitability of the narrative to the age of the pupils is one of the most important factors to be taken into account by the teacher. For this reason, we use ([Kieran, 1992](#)) guidelines and perspective, in his works: "Stages of Historical Understanding". We applied this didactic experience to a Demography group of Polytechnic Higher Education, in Portalegre, Portugal. According to Egan, these students are in transition from the Philosophical Stage to the Ironic one, which is between 18 and 22.

During the philosophical stage, the explanation of the world is based on metanarratives; the complexity of the world is seen according to schemes of thought that result from an ever greater accumulation of knowledge. Sophisticated mental schemes serve as a road map to explain reality. They frame phenomena in grand theories and group people and their behaviors into clusters, depersonalizing individuality - in some way the collective overlaps the single/unique, unrepeatable subject.

In the ironic stage, young people and adults conclude that beyond the general schemes and explanatory models there is a reality of being, as an individual, unique in the complexity of behaviors and acts - "The world remains as it is, regardless of what we can think. All our ideas, hypotheses, plans, schemes and models are products of the mind and do not affect the world in its infinite particularity. The ironic mind is fundamentally interested in the particularity of the world. It shows self-interest only because it is considered one of the peculiarities that compose the world and wants to understand how the mental processes, through which the world is ordered and made significant, interfere with what actually exists in it and true"([Kieran, 1992](#)).

It was based on all these assumptions that we presented a film by a French director, son of Portuguese emigrants in Paris, where, in a comedy formula, he addresses the problems and dramas of a family of emigrants in relation to feelings of belonging, deterritorialization, and identity – "The Golden Cage".

3. EXPERIMENT

The experiment put in practice came from the necessity to introduce, within the general theme of Portuguese demography, the aspects essentially related to the sense of belonging and identity, felt by the many thousands of national emigrants.

We have been teaching a curriculum unit, in Demography, for several years, and when this theme is introduced, I usually use life stories told by some students who have migrants in their extended families. It is always a certainty that there is someone with contact with emigrants; the school is located in an interior region of Portugal, where there has always been a lack of high standards of living conditions. Even today, there is a lack of infrastructures, and investments which can fix the population. Portalegre still suffers from the leak of human capital, not to the countries of more developed Europe, but to the cities of the coast, whose demographic dimension allows people to access a number of essential equipment for a satisfactory quality of life. Health, education, social assistance, culture, and leisure are, somehow, rare in small towns. With access to quality goods, the coastal centers are attractive to the young population who is looking for a job, leaving a population contingent in the small towns that does not allow the sustainability of superior equipment. Also, this aspect is discussed and debated from the point of view of geography, but it is not in this context that we want to develop a critical approach to the issue.

It is possible to describe and debate the problems about the sense of belonging of the emigrants in a more traditional way, such as texts with life histories, Powerpoint presentations or using other didactic resources. This year, in addition to the resources already mentioned, we introduced cinema.

The film "The Golden Cage" is focused on all the problems related to the feeling of belonging and identity lived by two generations of Portuguese emigrants in France. It is a comedy by Ruben Alves, with a lot of rhythms, very well directed and that reflects a Portuguese reality, closely linked to the migratory phenomenon.

This didactical experiment has not left behind the theoretical presentation and debate of this problem as a way of preparing students for the problem. The 18 students of Demography and Sociology of Aging had a theoretical preparation for the phenomenon in question; this time we prepared a viewer's guidance of the film so that the students would watch the film in a more oriented way. The script had two fundamental parts: the first was focused on the technical part - the elaboration of a synopsis, the appreciation and description of the characters, their dramas and psychological density. The second part was more focused on the relationship between the theoretical part and the experiences of the various characters, regarding feelings of belonging to space, identity or multiple identities, territorialization and deterritorialization. The analysis - suggested by the viewers' guidance of the various attitudes of the characters, when they face one of these issues/subjects in the story - was thought according to the Ironic stage characteristics by Egan, and led the students to internalize and assimilate the complexity of these concepts more effectively.

After viewing the movie, a debate was held and the students were requested to write a critical essay on the problems lived by the emigrants. The result was extremely encouraging and positive.

4. RESULTS

The results of the experiment cannot be extrapolated because we have tried this didactic approach only once and to a universe of 18 students, which means that there is not sufficient data support for a generalization. It is an experience and a case study, whose final objective was to verify the effectiveness of this strategy in higher education, based on the use of cinema to tackle complex concepts of Demography and Geography.

Notwithstanding the limitations, the results of the critical essays, done by the students, showed not only the understanding of the concepts and their own perspective but also revealed critical thinking about the reality in

question. We could also verify the assertiveness of the strategy by comparing the results with the levels reached by students in previous years when cinema had not been used as a didactic tool.

Another aspect that is interesting to highlight is related to the heterogeneity of the group and their adherence to the methodology used. The age group diversity consisted of two students between 40 and 50 years of age (workers and with relevant life experience), and the remaining students were between 20 and 22 years old. The geographical origin was also diverse: a student from Lithuania, a Brazilian, a Portuguese of Spanish origin and the remaining were Portuguese.

The main issue we wish to underline is the use of cinema as a more effective strategy to approach concepts in the context of a classroom. Over the course of several years we have introduced this instrument in various levels of teaching, but always with some limitations. In preschool and 1st cycle, movies have to be cut, to select the aspects that we want to introduce, otherwise the children get lost in the story and do not focus their attention on what we want to present. In the 2nd and 3rd cycles of education and in Secondary school, the duration of the classes do not allow the complete viewing of the film, which again leads to cuts or discontinuity in the process. In higher education, we had already used films or documentaries as a support to the introduction of thematic debates. However, in a structured way and with the objective of comparing didactic effectiveness approaches, with previous work and with the elaboration of a specific script for the film and concepts, was a new and fresh approach. This experiment, here described, allowed us to make an evaluation of results that permitted to sustain that this type of pedagogical-didactic strategy should be used in a more systematic way, taking the results into account.

This scholar year, we extended this type of experience again, besides Demography, to other curricular units and in a more systematic and not in an irregular way. The results continue to be very positive and can reveal that the students end up with a more complete and internalized perspective of the problems addressed. Another factor that cinema introduces is an easier and more effective adhesion of the students to the subjects and to the classes. The playfulness of this approach is also a factor that attracts students to the proposed themes, in addition to the cinematographic aspects which are also emphasized, thus broadening the scope of student training.

We do not, however, advocate a lecture based only on the screening of films that lead to debates or critical essays, but we clearly point out that this type of approach must exist and be effective, leading and also contributing to the ultimate goal of school - the success of students.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The main conclusion that can be drawn from this experience is the assertiveness of the use of cinema as an instrument capable of reaching students easily and attractively.

Some concepts that are relatively easy to theorize and present to students are sometimes less internalized because of their complexity and volatility. Thus, students are less able to understand phenomena more fully, leaving only a general idea of the great theories, moving away from the individual implications and problems that occur in the daily lives of many thousands of citizens throughout the world.

In a time emigration is a topical subject of nowadays, the information that students must possess cannot, and should not, from our point of view, be held up only by general and metanarrative theories, which leave out the difficulties and dramas of the populations and the individuals. The use of cinema as a didactic strategy allows students to identify themselves with the characters, to live their dramas indirectly and to understand the individual specificity present behind the great theories. In this way, their understanding of the concepts is easier and more effective, making the internalization and manipulation of those ideas simpler and their learning is more effective and permanent because the process is more striking.

The feeling of belonging to space, to its culture and identity is something that is related to the personal field of life; it can be easy to understand, but it is not something that can be felt and embraced in its entire complexity. The film, as a tool, emerges and is effective because through its narrative ability, even if indirectly, the students can apprehend aspects that would otherwise not be possible to achieve, unless they had really lived them.

Thus, if the choice of narrative is appropriate to the age group and the problem to be introduced also passes through a personal component and is hardly transmissible, cinema as a didactic instrument proves to be efficient in achieving the desired pedagogical objectives.

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