

# Emigration, Sense of Belonging—A Didactic Experiment through Cinema <sup>†</sup>

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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 in 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 exists. This dilemma of (non)belonging is relatively abstract to convey to students, when we work the demographic phenomenon. We used a recent film—The Golden Cage, released by the son of Portuguese emigrants—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 considered in a more general approach, neglecting the personal side and identity aspects that the displacement causes at an individual level. In emigration of long duration, there is usually a paradoxical feeling of belonging. In relation to the *other*, the emigrant is a foreigner, in their own place, where they have built their lives; 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 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 belonging is relatively abstract to convey to students. However, there is a recent film—The Golden Cage, released by the son of Portuguese emigrants—where the feeling of belonging is exemplified, under ‘the cover’ of a comedy. We showed the film to a group of Demography students and had them explore this phenomenon. The results were extremely positive.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Since the end of the fifteenth century, Portugal began to spread population through the new world that was discovered. However, the number of these movements of population was residual, not being able to be called emigration, as we understand it today.

It the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century 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 more significant, in the 60's. This second wave was directed to the European continent (there are differences between continental part of the country and the islands—Azorean preferred the United States of North America, and the Madeirans, Venezuela and South Africa). Portuguese emigration has always been marked by the myth of the return to the homeland, at least in an imaginary image idealized by the emigrant.

Theories that explain population movements sometimes forget the details of the personal, the intimate. Everything is looked at in large blocks of behavior. The life stories to which we have access to, 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 the micro viewpoint we can visualize a kaleidoscope of factors belonging to different “methanarratives” on migratory movements. From Ravenstein to the neo-classical theories, we can find fragments of all theories in the individual decision-making processes.

One of the problems of emigration is the feeling of belonging and the creation of an identity. A Portuguese in Portugal, or a French in France, knows that he belongs to a whole which forms his identity. However, is a Portuguese person living in France for thirty years or more a ‘real’ Portuguese? Is the country that is present in the social representations of the emigrant still the same as the one at the time of their departure? Back to which homeland? To an origin that no longer exists!? And the second and third generations? Are they from their place of birth or do they belong to their parents’ homeland, where they have never lived in? “What am I? Where do I belong to and what is my identity?” These are the questions of the long-term emigrant and the second and third generations. “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”. [3:87]

Haesbaert [2] 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*. Each individual lives the dramas of identity and belonging in a particular way; the individual experience is unique and by the relationship with space, a third “identity” emerges.

In Portugal, when the demographic phenomenon is studied, the migratory aspects are essential to understand the collective behavior. In a pedagogical and didactic stand, this type of approach erases the person who emigrated, who has doubts and reasons for making the choices; identity and belonging are, largely, individual feelings. The singular aspects are more effective and allow a better understanding of both the global and individual phenomenon. Life stories used in the cinema, with fictional scenarios, allow students to reach the concepts more successfully.

Cinema has the power to tell a story that involves the viewer and makes them take part in the plot, feel what the characters live, their dramas and dilemmas. This makes it a powerful pedagogical tool and an appealing way to reach students, introducing the concepts in an effective way.

Nevertheless, we do not advocate the simple visualization of films as a 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.

We all like stories, regardless of our age, but the suitability of the narrative to the age of the pupils/students is one of the most important factors to be taken into account. For this reason, we use guidelines and perspective, based on Kieran Egan's [1] work: "Stages of Historical Understanding". We applied this didactic experience to a Demography group of Superior Education, in Portalegre, Portugal. According to Egan, these students are in the 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 a greater accumulation of knowledge. Sophisticated mental schemes serve as road maps to explain reality. They frame phenomena in grand theories and group people and their behaviors into clusters, depersonalizing individuality.

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. It was based on all these assumptions that we presented a film where, in a comedy style, 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**

It is possible to describe and debate the problems about the sense of belonging of the emigrants in a traditional way, such as texts with life histories, PowerPoints 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 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, which reflects a Portuguese reality, linked to the migratory phenomenon.

This didactical experiment has not left behind the theoretical presentation and debate on the problem as a way of preparing students for the problem. The 18 students of Demography had a theoretical preparation for the phenomenon; this time we prepared a viewer's guidance of the film, so that the students would watch the film in an oriented way. The script had two fundamental parts: the first one was focused on the technical part—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, identity, multiple identity, territorialization and deterritorialization. After 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 and Discussion**

The results of the experiment cannot be extrapolated because we only tried this didactic approach with 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.

The main issue we wish to underline is the use of cinema as a more effective strategy to approach concepts in the classroom. 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, otherwise the children get lost in the story and do not focus their attention. 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, was a new approach. The experiment here described, allowed us to make an evaluation of results that permitted to sustain that this type of didactic strategy should be used in a more systematic way.

We present some numbers to support the experiment: the average marks of the students in previous years were 13 (0–20 scale) and the Gauss diagram and the dispersion began in 11 up to 15. This year the average was 15 and the dispersion was set between 13 and 18. The improvement in the marks was about two points on the scale. Furthermore, besides the marks, what was really striking was the way the students were caught by the strategy and the enthusiastic way they participated in the debates about the changes and the concepts.

We clearly believe that this type of approach must exist, since it is effective, leading and 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, the information that students must possess cannot, and should not, from our point of view, be held only by general and metanarrative theories, which leave out the difficulties and dramas of the populations and the individual's. The use of cinema as a didactic strategy allows students to identify themselves with the characters, to live their dramas and to understand the individual specificity behind the great theories. In this way, their understanding of the concepts is easier, more effective and permanent because the process is more striking. 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 be hard to achieve, unless they had really lived them.

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