

The Teaching Contents of Social Sciences Through Cinema

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Abstract: We know that using cinema as a teaching and educational strategy may take up different shapes and have different goals. In the field of Education, the literature regarding the use of cinema as a teaching resource is quite extensive. The topic has been amply discussed in several works and in cultural and scientific events. The aim of this paper is to present some of the strategies that we have applied during the teaching of some contents and concepts of the Social Sciences by using the screening of movies and by discussing about these experiences. The strategies to be presented took place at the Viana do Castelo Polytechnic Institute, in the Bachelor Courses in Primary Education and in Gerontology Social Education and in the Higher Professional Technical Courses in Educational Intervention in Child Care and in Ageing and Social Community Intervention. By using cinema, various contents and concepts were discussed in depth, specially the following: what is Sociology and what is it for; ageing as a social phenomenon; the concepts of culture, multiculturalism, interculturality and the concept of generation. The movie chosen for the pedagogical experiments was *Gran Torino* (Eastwood, 2009).

Key words: education, teaching, social sciences, cinema, culture

1. Introduction

In the last decades, the assumptions about what Education is and how Education should be and about which pedagogical methods are more adequate for the teaching activities have changed not just in Portugal but at an international level as well. However, there is some agreement regarding the pedagogical and learning value of using the audio-visual means in the educational environment.

The activities connected with teaching and education have been applying cinema has a resource since it became widespread while as an artistic expression and since schools began to have the indispensable technical resources for the viewing of movies and for working with movies. The viewing of movies, besides its artistic and entertaining dimensions, presents pedagogical and educational dimensions explored by educators from different fields and professors from different levels of teaching.

Cinema is simultaneously art and entertainment that expresses values, aesthetics and ideologies of a certain period in time. Whatever the genre (adventure, drama, comedy, historical novel, etc.) it attracts audiences of different age groups and social strata. Nevertheless, in the field of Education, it is our belief that cinema should not be seen as a mere form of entertainment nor should it be considered as a mirror of reality.

It is important to remember that cinema is a pedagogical resource: it does not replace a formal lecture but rather adds value to it. We feel that using movies merely for illustration purposes, as a reinforcement or increase

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of the curricular content is not a fruitful way to work with it during lectures. To know the way and the why a certain movie is shown to the students is a crucial pre-requirement in order to ensure that the activity becomes a significant cognitive experience.

There are different stimulating ways of applying cinema to the field of Education. For example, movies can be a pretext for an articulated discussion to take place, with topics previously chosen by the lecturers. Movies can be documents that generate discussion about language and filmmaking. It can be an historic document, studied as an aesthetic and cultural product of a certain period in time, reflecting values and as a portrait of life in society. One can articulate these different ways of working with cinema. However, whichever the chosen application, it will always lead to the analysis and discussion of the viewed contents.

In the context of a classroom, during our educational and teaching practices we have used cinema and the screening of movies as a resource. We start with an analysis of the contents of the movies, from a sociocultural perspective, so as to introduce a type of teaching that signals, identifies and that reflects on the social and anthropological issues that are contained in and surround the movie and cultural productions.

We have applied the screening of movies in order to stimulate the learning of certain key-concepts in the field of Social Sciences and to encourage critical thinking about certain concepts and prejudices. In our activities that deal with the use of cinema, we have tried to stimulate people's thoughts in the scope of Social Sciences. We try to exercise the social perspective and the sociological point of view about certain concepts and problematic situations.

We have been working on concepts such as "culture", "multiculturalism", "interculturality", "ageing" and "generation".

2. Education and Cinema

In today's society, the permanent process of social, cultural, economic and technologic change have contributed towards the establishment of new relationships between the individuals and information, with knowledge and amongst the individuals themselves.

The current continuous circulation of information, driven by the development of technology, breaks the time and space barriers, intertwining facts, events and regions, while the different fields of sciences widen the possibilities for the interpretation and understanding of the various phenomena. This current social reality makes it necessary for the individuals to understand society as something that changes, to become aware of their ability to act and influence the environment and to be prepared for living the influences of that context. By enabling individuals as historic subjects, we broaden the possibilities of commitment of these subjects in the intervention and resolution of society's problems.

The social, technologic and cultural changes of the past few decades caused a great impact, creating new challenges which education must face and demanding new educational practices. The world of information increasingly affects today's society through pictures and moving pictures. Nowadays, videos and movies with different contents and of various genres are accessible to a wide range of the population.

Regarding this issue, several authors such as Dias de Figueiredo (1996), Monteiro and Pereira (2011) and Cachadinha (2017), indicate that the main functions of the school system should be to give structure and consistency to a world of diversity. Schools should provide context and knowledge for a successful autonomy. Due to the chaotic and fragmented acquisition of information received from different contexts that come from outside the educational environment, schools must try to articulate the life experiences and learning practices of

the student with a body of knowledge that becomes functional and structured for personal training, for life in society and for a professional future.

Education and schools must play a more determinant role in the training of their students, so as to integrate them and prepare them for a more globalized, dynamic and multicultural society (David et al., 2001), where the world of pictures presents itself as a significant means of information and of social and educational influence.

As mentioned by Monteiro and Pereira (2011), it is important that the experiences and the school and educational practices to be more in touch with the day-to-day life, widening young people's scope of apprenticeship, including contexts that are closer to social environments and future working methods. In the current social, cultural, working and educational context, Education must put aside the traditional educational model, very centred in the teacher and on contents. It must adopt another one, more adequate to the existing sociocultural realities, a model centred in the student and on the contexts, without neglecting the contents.

Following what has been said in several publications regarding education and cinema (Bergala, 2002; Duarte, 2002; Cachadinha, Correia & Almeida, 2017; Fantin, 2006; Napolitano, 2003; Rivoltella, 2002), it can be stated that for some years now that cinema and its movies are within the educational space. This happens mainly since schools began to have the technical and technological resources needed to work with audiovisual materials.

We must point out that in the so-called computer age and of internet, referred by Fantin (2003) and Rivoltella (2002), in which we find ourselves, the computers and the internet are means commonly used by children, young adults and adults for the viewing of cinematographic works. We can actually state that with the computer and internet expansion stage comes the possibility of having access to movies and cinema.

We have now access to videos and movies in a public or private environment due to the expansion of computers and of the internet. This situation allows us to think that cinema and its educational potential have in no way been diminished by the expansion phase of computer networks and computers. In truth, there is a greater range of offer at the levels of education, information and entertainment.

By using cinema as a teaching and pedagogical tool, we can focus on social, pedagogical, cultural, artistic, political and historical aspects. We can build a varied and global perspective of cinema as an educational tool that contributes to the full training of the individual, from the perspective of education in citizenship.

Thus, from our point of view and from that of other authors, (Bergala, 2002; Cachadinha, Moura & Almeida 2017; Duarte, 2002; Fantin, 2006; Napolitano, 2003; Rivoltella, 2002), cinema is an educational and training resource full of potential that, if correctly explored, may generate teaching, thoughts and a change in the social, cultural and educational practices.

Pierre Bourdieu (1979) and Rosália Duarte (2002) mention that people's experience with cinema allows for the development of that which might be denominated the "ability to see", in the scope of the "cultural abilities".

The development of the "ability to see" is not confined to the mere action of seeing movies. It also has to do with other capabilities, connected with the social and cultural universe of the individuals. Regarding the other cultural skills and abilities, we can think about the development of the skill and ability of critical thinking about what is seen and heard in the movies.

In the past, it was quite common for some professors and educators to name as "educational" only the movies dealing with subjects that were directly connected to the program and curricular contents. It was fundamental for the movies to have very well defined teaching and training purposes. It was also common to apply the denomination of "educational movie" connecting it to lectures about subjects/contents of certain training programmes that had the purpose of replacing or supporting the position traditionally occupied by the professor.

The two situations mentioned before are, in our opinion and in that of other authors (Cachadinha, Moura & Almeida, 2017), reductionists and bias and limit the application of cinema as a teaching-pedagogical resource.

Once cinema is perceived as a tool or as an educational resource, it is introduced in the classroom in such a way as to maximize the reflected and significant learnings about culture, about certain concepts and about social life itself. From this perspective, the lecturer must play the role of motivator and support the student, acting as a link of connection and of reflexion between what cinema provides/generates from the point of view of the student and the set of knowledge to be constructed/acquired in the pedagogical situation, within the classroom (Cachadinha, Moura & Almeida 2017).

3. Teaching of Social Sciences and Cinema

From the Social Sciences point of view, the study of cinema is mainly related to a cultural issue but is not confined to it.

To understand movies as a cultural experience requires recognizing and understanding, in the context of Education, the reciprocal and complex relationship between school and culture. For Forquin (1993), the term culture is inherent to the human being and there is an unquestionable intimate and organic relationship between Education and culture as “one can perfectly say that culture is the substantial contents of education, its source and ultimate justification: education is nothing outside culture and without it.” (Forquin, 1993, p. 14). Since the content is conveyed by Education, this is something that precedes, surpasses and institutes the subjects. It is possible to categorize it as culture, seeing it as a legacy and as a common social good, a heritage of knowledge, skills, values and symbols built throughout the different generations. From this perspective, you get a reciprocal relationship since it is through Education that culture is conveyed and is perpetuated (but, not just that) and it is through education that culture can be transformed.

The complexity of the relationship between Education and culture, in its essence, resides in the process of choosing the contents to be taught at school. This choice motivated by social, economic, political interests leads to a selection that favours certain in detriment of others contents. Besides the selection, there is the adequacy of these contents that go through an educational process in order to be introduced in the school system. This way, by being in a constant process of selection and renewal, a part of the cultural heritage is provided by the school. Intermediate knowledge, built upon processes of adaptation of elaborate knowledge for teaching/learning, appear as new and which are commonly named as school knowledge (Forquin, 1993).

In this context, cinema may be integrated in the of school knowledge, essentially in two ways: as a content or as an instrument and tool. As content, it traditionally appears associated to the subjects related to the field of art. In the various subjects of the curriculum and while perceived as an instrument and tool, it becomes an alternative to the teaching/learning processes. In our practice, we have used cinema as an instrument in the Social Sciences Teaching, especially in the teaching of Sociology.

To reflect on the plurality of perspectives that surround the subject of cinema at school is also to come upon issues of social, political, economic and ideological nature of the relationships between the individuals and society, bearing in mind that these relationships are structured based on intake and production. This set of relationships is in itself a central issue of the Social Sciences. As such, the screening of a movie or a portion of the movie cannot limit itself to leisure or entertainment. In this context, by considering the presence of cinema in the school environment, we list essentially two aspects: as pedagogical instrument and as an object of study.

As a pedagogical tool, cinema can be applied to teaching/learning situations, for example to clarify and exemplify, as a motivational driving force in the introduction of new contents and in the promotion of discussions and reflections. Since most of the times movies are about social issues, its use as a pedagogical tool is quite valuable while teaching Sociology.

By thinking cinema as a way to reproduce realities, the application of a movie as an object of study becomes of interest to Sociology since a movie always goes well beyond its own content.

With the application of cinema in the teaching of Social Sciences does not necessarily imply that we have to choose between one way or the other as both can contribute to the learning process of themes, concepts and theories of Social Sciences, namely those of Sociology.

Nevertheless, cinema is a form of art that recreates reality through a language that is not innocent. Intentionally or not, it reveals ideologies, stereotypes, values and beliefs. For the representation of reality given by the movie not to assert itself as an unquestionable truth, the students must have the skills needed to understand what is being seen. Distance is required to analyse and have critical thinking. In this context, Sociology has an important role to play. For this subject, criticism may be understood not only as an attribute of a method, theory or school of thought but also as a matter of intellectual posture. This intellectual posture expresses itself in the act of questioning, of pointing out inconsistencies and contradictions, of problematizing, in revealing situations and proposing changes (Mariosa, 2007).

In the context of social, cultural and technologic change in which we are living in, school is faced with the challenge of providing quality teaching, that promotes the training of independent subjects, free and aware of their role in the building and/or transformation of society. Within this logic, the critical training provided by Social Sciences, namely, Sociology appears as a principle and school is conceived as a space where students can develop the practice of critical thinking. Nevertheless, as the need for the training of this sense of critic appears, so do the challenges and constraints to its implementation. In view of this scenario, the professionals in Education can use many strategies in order to attain the mentioned objective of training the critical thinking.

In the school environment, the social experiments with knowledge are experienced by young people are influenced by the cultural references they possess. In other words, students build meanings and establish relationships, in a dialectic process to which they bring a previous cultural charge (from family, from the first years at school and from the first socializing moment), regarding to culture and to the generation they belong. In terms of meaning, within the school environment this is confronted and redesigned, subject to education practices.

In general, cinema is very much a part of young people's lives, may it be trough movie theatres, or television and videos available on line. It should be introduced in the school environment so that it may go through the process of reformulation of meanings. In principle, in a school environment young people are exposed to more elaborate cultural experiences connected to references and educational school experiences in such a way to allow for a process of training to take place.

We believe, as Angrewsky (2016) did, that cinema was introduced in the schools in the exact same way and with the exact same purpose that it has outside of it. Its inclusion will contribute very little to the training of critical thought of the young. From this point of view, it is necessary to rethink the idea of including cinema and other information and communication technologies in the school context and in the teaching of Sociology, so that it may contribute to the training of young people's critical thought.

In research and sociologic reflection, it is crucial to question the typical concepts of common sense. It is important to deconstruct prejudices rooted in the minds of the collective and it necessary to rethink the usual

social and educational practices. As many authors state (Bachelard, 1972, 2000; Bourdieu, Passeron & Chamboredon, 1973), there must be an epistemological rupture between knowledge that derives from common sense and the scientific or specialized knowledge.

In the work of reflection, questioning and deconstructing, mentioned before, we find that cinema and its movies are a useful tool. It allows us to visualize and revisit real or imaginary social situations, discussing it from the different observation perspectives of the intervening players and/or observing subjects and based on the different theories.

For Angrewsky (2016), it is a mistake to assume that the significance of concepts is a universal fact. The concepts are a result of a cultural socio-historical path and are designed, built, modified socially, adapting itself to all sorts of needs” (Angrewsk, 2016, p. 27).

In view of the contributions of Angrewsky (2016) and of other authors, we can say that all knowledge is social as it is produced in society and for society. In this context, to train the critical thinking of individuals who understand the cinematographic products as “fruits of production and reproduction of today’s society, it takes more than to endow them with the technical knowledge about a certain field, it is necessary that the subjects recognize cinema as a social product filled of intentions (Angrewsky, 2016, p. 28).

One of the characteristics of Sociology that directs us to its critical analysis component has to do with the possibility of continuously renewing its knowledge, when faced with new information. It thus significantly contributes towards the educational process since critical analysis of social reality and of its movies leads to a process of cognitive change of the individual. This process enables to visualize a more active role regarding today’s social structure and towards the cinematographic work itself. As such, the individuals may reassess their own practices and knowledge, the environment, the situation of which they are a part of, always based upon new reflections and new sets of knowledge (Oliveira, 2013).

By connecting the teaching of Sociology with cinema, it becomes obvious the potential that Sociology has to offer to the student by creating the opportunity of questioning the legitimacy and value of certain portrayals produced by cinema.

The process of questioning and of deconstruction in the presence of certain presented and represented social phenomena are key processes in the teaching of Sociology and of the sociologic thought. These may allow to promote the enrichment of the explanations about social life, “by pointing out the historicity of the phenomena and to promote the discussion about how certain changes or historic continuities, portrayed in the movies, are based on decisions and economic and social interests most of the time, from a single individual” (Angrewsky, 2016, p. 31).

In light of what mentioned before, we can state that Sociology finds in cinema and in movies a precious space for reflection and cognitive understanding of fundamental nexuses of sociability and current society and even of the society that the movie intends to portray.

4. Fulfilled Teaching Experiments

In the last decades, and during our teaching experience at the Superior School of Education of Viana do Castelo, in the Bachelor Courses in Training of Elementary School Teachers and of Basic Education, of Art and Cultural Management, in Gerontology and Social Education, and in several Technical and Professional Courses, we used movies as a pedagogical strategy. We used it in the approach of subjects contained in the syllabus, to achieve the objectives of the Curricular Units that we teach within Social Sciences, namely Sociology. We now go

on to presenting some of referred experiments.

In the Social Studies Curricular Units of the Bachelor Course in Elementary Education, of Sociology and Anthropology of Culture of the Bachelor Course in Art and Culture Management, of Sociology of Ageing of the Bachelor Course in Gerontology and Social Education, of Societies and Interculturality of the Technical and Professional Course in Educational Intervention in Child Care and of Sociology and Multiculturality of the Technical and Professional Course in Ageing and Social Community Intervention we used the movie *Gran Torino* (Eastwood, 2009).

The above-mentioned movie was chosen because it is about problems that are fundamental in the syllabus of the Curricular Units that we teach. For this reason, it also gives the possibility to reflect and discuss about the concepts that we intend to expand.

Previously and before the screening of the mentioned movie, the lecturer gave an introductory session regarding the theme: "The perspective of Sociology regarding culture, the relationships between cultures and ageing". The point of this session was to clarify what distinguishes the sociologic perspective from the psychologic perspective as well as the biologic perspective in the analysis of the phenomena and situations.

After the introductory session, in the following lesson, we divided the class in to small groups, composed of three students. Each of these groups were given a set of topics/questions connected to the movie that they were going to see. We asked the student to read the questions before seeing the movie, which they did.

To be more precise, we applied the following topics/questions for the viewing by the students of the movie *Gran Torino* (Eastwood, 2009). The questions were as follows:

- Which type of culture or cultures does the movie present?
- How does the film present the relationship between the different cultures?
- Are there other ways for cultures to connect beyond those presented in the movie?
- How is it portrayed the ageing process in the movie?
- What is the relationship between the ageing process and the family contexts?
- What relationship is there between ageing and social relations?
- Is there any relation between ageing and culture (s)?
- What is the connection between ageing and education?
- How does the film portray the intergenerational relationships?
- Is there a relation between the age and/or cultural group and the exercise of citizenship?

After viewing the movie and in the following class, the students got together to discuss and each group produced a text. Next, the texts were presented to the class, thus leading to a sort of debate between the groups, moderated by the lecturer. This moderation allowed to reformulate and to go deeper in terms of concept whenever found necessary.

Now we present a few samples of texts produced by the students regarding the film *Gran Torino* (Eastwood, 2009) which we consider as a prime example of the type of consideration that the film instils:

The film portrays the North American society's culture (...) in which there are many minority groups that struggle to be integrated in the dominant culture (...) some of them are marginal. Ageing is presented as a part of life filled with difficulties, many one them created by the individual's own (...). The neighbours in the film are of great help to Walt although at the beginning they did not get along. The disagreement was due to the differences of education and culture. When people grow old they tend to be perceived as diminished or senile (...), not all elderly people are like that (...). The younger ones ridicule some elderly people and it even seems

that they no longer matter (...). In the film, we see that the elderly deal with the process of ageing differently depending on the culture they originate from. (Text produced by ESG's 1st year bachelor students).

Next, we present a sample of another text written by students from another course:

The film starts with a funeral and set in the USA. Funerals there are not quite like ours in Portugal. The way funerals are conducted is connected to the culture of each people (...). After Walt becomes a widower, he has to deal with his neighbours belonging to an ethnic minority (...). He does not like his neighbours because he had been in the Korean War and because his neighbours do not have the same costumes as the Americans. Walt does not get along with his children and grandchildren (...), they are from different generations, with different tastes and preferences. Walt's family does not care about him any longer (...) they think that he is no longer capable of taking care of himself and they want to place him in a home for the elderly. Walt does not accept the projects his family has for his future. Walt ends up liking his neighbours and they even become friends despite the differences in culture and upbringing. Tao and Walt begin to help each other even though they belong to different generations and come from different cultures. (...) The minorities, since they are different from the majority, are perceived as being inferior and sometimes lose their rights. In society, there are numerous prejudices (...). The film evolves from a multicultural situation (in which there is only coexistence between different cultures) to an intercultural situation (in which there is already a mixture and exchange between cultures). (Text produced by 1st year bachelor students in Elementary Education).

Now we present the sample of another text produced by a group of students from another course:

The main character of the movie is a North American old man, played by Eastwood, who had been in the Korean War and who did not like Chinese or Asian people. He became a widower and all his family came to the funeral. We can immediately see in the funeral scene that Walt does not get on well with his children nor with his grandchildren (...) There seems to be a conflict between generations. When Walt becomes a widower, he has only his dog Daisy to keep him company. Despite disliking Asians, it is not long before Walt ends up liking his Asian neighbours as he finds out that they also have qualities (...). A boy from the neighbourhood, Tao, tries to steal his car, a Gran Torino, but then they end up becoming friends. We think that in the movie an evolution occurs in the multicultural situation where there is a coexistence of cultures to another intercultural situation, in which we can observe the interaction between the different cultures. The theft of the car had to do with an initiation ritual imposed by the gang of which Tao was a member. To Walt, Tao and his sister begin to help each other despite the difference of culture and ethnicity (...). When he dies, Walt leaves the Gran Torino in his will to Tao. Although Tao is from a minority, different from the Americans, we become aware of how well minorities can integrate other societies (...). (Text produced by 1st year students of the Technical and Professional Course in Educational Intervention in Child Care).

Following the discussion as a result of the screening of the film and by the texts presented to the corresponding group, we established as a starting point the ideas and concepts contained in the texts of the students (that were connected to the subjects of the syllabus of the Curricular Units) and we introduced a greater degree of rigour in the concepts being approached, by dialoguing and by supplying bibliography supporting the referred to concepts.

In a later stage, after the viewing and discussion of the movie, it was already possible to organize sessions/classes that were more theoretical, without the students involved envisioning it as something "tedious". In the sessions of a more theoretical nature, sometimes, we returned to certain scenes of the movie in order to analyse the different possible perspectives, in the light of different theoretical references and different models of analysis,

5. Conclusion

After several years experimenting with movies as a pedagogical resource, the training contribution of this resource should be noted. The learning of general and precise contents of the syllabus of the Curricular Units of Social Sciences lectured by us was achieved without great difficulty, although there were substantial differences in the previous background of the students in the field of Social Sciences.

Globally, by using cinema as a resource, by the analysis and discussion about the movie shown to them, the students from different classes made a significant effort in the sense to overcome the typical common knowledge concepts and of the current knowledge. They understood that for each situation presented there are several points of view and different analysis perspectives connected to the different theoretical models.

The educational and teaching work developed by the viewing of movies, namely *Grand Torino* (Eastwood 2009), has made it possible to understand that the students' motivation towards more theoretical and abstract subjects increased significantly after the viewing of the movie in association with the syllabus. Subjects initially perceived as potentially dull (boring) and of no interest, because they were introduced in a context and traditional teaching/pedagogic scenario where the lecturer gave merely a discourse, became the object of a greater interest, resulting in heated discussions amongst the students of the different courses after the viewing of the movies.

Thus being said, we can conclude that the projection and viewing of cinema movies, if conducted in a guided and pondered way, generates learning of great significance and allows to deepen the learning and pedagogical objectives more effectively than by applying the traditional and of mere display strategies.

As to our thoughts about leads for new ways of exploring the didactic and pedagogical potential of movies, we can say that, as we mentioned in previous works (Cachadinha, Moura & Almeida 2017) that it is of essence to have previous preparation for a well-defined performance in a classroom. The proposed objectives in the curriculum and in the syllabus must be taken into consideration. It is also necessary to motivate students to seek a better understanding of the purpose of including this tool in the classroom, as well as of the tasks to be completed after viewing the movies.

In today's society, the different means of communication have such a strong impact in people's lives and that of organizations. As such, the training of future professors, gerontology professionals and other socio-educational and cultural intervention technicians must promote awareness and focus indicators to develop their sense of critique and reflexive analysis and not to limit themselves by the mere appreciation of common sense or by the pleasure/enjoyment that movies can provide.

We should remember, as already mentioned, that we live in a society that is in an accelerated cultural, scientific, technologic and educational change. This accelerated change is greatly influenced by the audio-visual sphere. It demands from all citizens a greater degree of awareness about these phenomena and its evolution so that the strategies and attitudes may be adequate to the changes, allowing for an active citizenship.

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