

# “C’est ça que c’est bon!”: Identity, heritage and tourism in *Gilded Cage*

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**Abstract** | *The Gilded Cage* (2013), a French film written and directed by Ruben Alves, a Portuguese descendant residing in France, became one of the biggest box office hits of 2013 in France and Portugal. Lighthearted in tone, the film follows a family of Portuguese immigrants in Paris, focusing on the workaholic parents and their second-generation children, while displaying several stereotypes related to Portuguese identity and culture. Although partly based on preconceived ideas of what is understood as Portuguese identity, the film also seeks to show an image of modernity associated with aspects recognized as World Heritage by UNESCO, such as fado and the Douro landscape, both of which have been used at institutional level as a way to promote the country as a tourist destination. It is therefore not surprising that one of the consequences of the success that the film reached among the French public has been the increase in demand for the Douro region among French tourists after its exhibition. In this paper we intend to examine the ways in which the film portrays questions associated with Portuguese identity and culture, as well as the impact those representations have had on tourism.

**Keywords** | Identity, heritage, tourism

## 1. Introduction

*La cage dorée*, the original title of the work that marks the debut of the Luso-descendant Ruben Alves as a director and screenwriter, is a French film, mostly spoken in French and filmed almost entirely in Paris, the setting for most of the plot, but tells a very Portuguese story. We might even say that it is a French film with a Portuguese soul. Centered

on the story of a couple of Portuguese immigrants residing in France for more than 30 years –Maria, a concierge, and José Ribeiro, a construction foreman–the film presents in a lighthearted, humorous tone a portrait of the Portuguese immigration in France. Throughout the film various stereotypes related to the identity and culture of the country of origin are displayed, such as the passion for football, fado, gastronomy and the feeling of longing

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<sup>1</sup>Recently, Eric Weiner, an American “philosophical traveler”, as he likes to call himself, wrote an article for the site BBC Travel entitled “The European country that loves being sad”, in which he identifies and describes the Portuguese feeling of “saudade”, naming it “joyful sadness” (Weiner, 2016).

(the very Portuguese feeling of “saudade”) <sup>1</sup> .

In France, the film premiered on April 24, 2013 and remained in exhibition for 22 weeks (Portugal através do Mundo, 2014). The success that the film achieved in theaters in France was remarkable, having only been surpassed by the American blockbuster *Iron Man 3* (Santos, 2013). In Portugal the film premiered almost four months later, on August 1, a well-calculated marketing strategy on the part of the Portuguese distributor to make the exhibition of the film coincide with the presence in the country of thousands of Portuguese immigrants (Lisboa, 2013), and that transformed *The Gilded Cage* into a blockbuster. It became the most viewed film of 2013, and the 7th most viewed film in Portugal since 2004 (according to data published in November 2016 by ICA-Instituto do Cinema e do Audiovisual, the Portuguese Institute for Film and Media). In addition to France and Portugal, the film was also shown in cinemas in Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Hungary, Brazil, Israel, New Zealand, Spain, USA and Canada (Internet Movie Database, 2013).

The film reached a surprising number of viewers for a medium-sized European production, and it was nominated and won several important awards at European level<sup>2</sup> . Given that Portuguese film production is not very significant internationally, the film by Ruben Alves became one of the rare films with international projection to depict Portuguese identity and culture. Moreover, the success obtained by the film had a tangible impact in the number of French tourists in the region of Douro (the Portuguese setting chosen by the director to appear in the film as the home of the Ribeiro family). In spite of these positive results, some movie critics and journalists were very critical of the film, especially for the way it seems to contribute to reinforcing preconceived ideas about Portuguese immigrants in France <sup>3</sup> . A careful look

at the apparent simplistic representations of the Portuguese immigrants in the film will disclose a much more complex picture than the one perceived at first sight. In this paper we will analyze those representations and their impact on tourism.

## 2. Brief literature review and statement of the problem

Film productions attract a growing number of tourists, fascinated by the iconic images of destinations as portrayed in films (Riley, Baker & Van Doren, 1998). Positive results of film-induced tourism include the enhancement of the destination's image and the increase in the number of tourists/visitors (Beeton, 2006). Tourism organizations such as DMOs have been resorting to films as promotion tools for destination-marketing campaigns (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006). Film tourism research has been following this trend of film-induced tourism very closely, focusing mainly on understanding it from a management perspective, by identifying quantitative aspects such as the impact of film tourism (Connell, 2012). Besides the analysis of mensurable results associated with film tourism, the need has been pointed for looking at film tourism from the perspective of other disciplines (Beeton, 2010). To understand film tourism from a broader, more conceptual perspective, it is fundamental for research to include theory from areas such as cultural geography and film studies (Connell, 2012). The resort to a conceptual approach like that of cultural discourse may contribute, for instance, to the analysis of the ways in which films create and shape tourism imaginaries. Even though this paper looks at the film by Ruben Alves from an applied approach, looking at the impacts it has had on tourism, it will follow a more con-

<sup>2</sup>The film was nominated in the category of Best First Film at the César Awards 2014, and it won the Audience Award at the European Film Awards 2013 (Internet Movie Database, 2013).

<sup>3</sup>See Rosa (2013) and Cardoso (2013).

ceptual approach to look at the cultural representations that result from the portrayal of Portugal and the Portuguese in the film.

### 3. Methodology

There are several methodologies that can be applied for the purpose of film analysis, but for the aim of this paper the most appropriate was that of narrative analysis. The first stage in this process consisted of repeated viewings of the film. A first viewing is done initially in order to get the first generic impressions and then a series of more detailed viewings followed with the objective to observe how the questions of identity, heritage and tourism are presented in the film. During the second stage of the research process, background information about the context of film was collected, including political, economic, and cultural background, as well as technical data about the film. Relevant literature and comments on the film are also collected during this stage. The last phase consisted in the analysis of the film resorting to an analytical discourse and framework.

### 4. Analysis

Although the film portrays in a caricatured way certain aspects that the Portuguese immigrant community in France adopted as a distinctive mark of Portuguese identity (especially the generation that left Portugal between the 60s and 70s, to which Maria and José can be related to), what stands out in the work of Ruben Alves is a well-humored and well-intentioned tribute by the direc-

tor, himself the son of Portuguese immigrants in France, both to Portuguese immigrants and to Portugal. In one of several interviews in which he was confronted with a possible exaggeration regarding the stereotypes that appear in the film associated with the Portuguese immigrants in France, Ruben Alves responded:

That is the truth, treated as comedy, of course. The clichés are true. Did I stress these clichés? Yeah, maybe. But I showed them to the public, especially the French, to go beyond them, to get interested, to go and find out who the Portuguese are. (...) My film, a work of fiction, was not about the Portuguese in general, it was about a family of Portuguese immigrants, hard workers, in the chic quarters of Paris. From this story, I wanted to talk about the importance of the values of family, of life ... That was the most important thing. And, yes, I wanted to pay a tribute to these people (Dias, 2015, own translation) .<sup>4</sup>

In the film itself, the director seems to anticipate these criticisms through a character he interprets - that of Miguel, Paula's ex-boyfriend (Paula is the daughter of Maria and José Ribeiro). Miguel is a comedian and at the end of his show about Portugal and the Portuguese, Paula tells him, in a critical tone, that although the viewers enjoyed it a lot, she found the show to be too caricature-like. Miguel's response, short and incisive, might well be Ruben Alves's response to the critics of the film: "That's what you call humor"(my translation). This short scene introduces in the film an important question about the genre its narrative and characters are built around - that of comedy.

<sup>4</sup>"Aquilo é a verdade, tratada numa forma de comédia, claro. Os clichés são verdadeiros. Sublinhei esses clichés? Sim, se calhar. Mas mostrei-os para o público, sobretudo o francês, ir além de isso, para se interessar, para ir descobrir quem são os portugueses. (...) O meu filme, de ficção, não era sobre os portugueses em geral, era sobre uma família de emigrantes portugueses, trabalhadores, nos bairros chiques de Paris. A partir dessa história, queria falar na importância dos valores da família, da vida... Isso é que era o mais importante. E, sim, queria homenagear essas pessoas" (Dias, 2015).

As Elsa Lechner argues about the use of caricature in the film: "Comedy offers a look from inside the clichés and tries to surpass them by the self-reflexive and caricatured exercise that it imposes" (Lechner, 2013, p.2, my translation)<sup>5</sup>. In this sense, the film by Ruben Alves can contribute to a reflection on the stereotypes associated with Portuguese immigration. Moreover, the humorous exercise of caricature that crosses the film can be interpreted in the direction of a more critical awareness regarding the identity and citizenship of the Portuguese immigrants, who are presented in the film as selfless, submissive and almost invisible in their labor relationship with their French employers.

It is worth noting that the film also presents a certain degree of disinterest of the French towards the Portuguese culture resorting to caricature (the most evident examples of this unfamiliarity are the slips that Madame Caillaux makes when she goes to have dinner at the Ribeiro's - she greets the hosts in Spanish, thinking she is speaking Portuguese, changes the name of Salazar by that of General Alcazar, a cartoon character, and refers to the revolution of the carnations as the revolution of the tulips). This inattention regarding the Portuguese may hide a criticism towards the French employers for not being interested in the Portuguese community, only wanting to take advantage of their qualities as dedicated and subservient workers. As seen in the film, although the qualities of Maria and José Ribeiro as workers are recognized by their employers, they are only properly valued until the possibility arises for them to leave their jobs to return to Portugal. On the other hand, this caricature-like portrait may also imply a criticism of the Portuguese immigrants themselves, who with their discreet and submissive way of being around the French, both in the labor context and in the social context (keeping some exuberance as Portuguese when they are with other

Portuguese - at home, at the meeting places of the Portuguese community, when on holiday in Portugal) almost become invisible, thus contributing to the perpetuation of stereotypes and social submission.

In the scene portraying the dinner that Maria Ribeiro prepares for the Caillaux it is possible to observe this need for approval by resorting simultaneously to the omission of aspects of the Portuguese culture and the mimicry of a supposed French middle class (see the changes to the decoration of the house, in the form of speech adopted by the Portuguese couple, as well as in the way they dress to welcome the Caillaux). Also the option of serving a dish influenced by "nouvelle cuisine" instead of a Portuguese dish may be associated with a certain degree of identity stigmatization on the part of the Portuguese immigrants themselves and not being apparently motivated by external factors, since in this case the French guests know and value the Portuguese gastronomy and are even disappointed with the French dish.

From the generalized lack of knowledge about Portugal among the French portrayed in the film, gastronomy and Port wine are the two exceptions – both are aspects that everyone seems to know and appreciate. Among the French characters, Charles Caillaux, Paula Ribeiro's boyfriend, stands out as an exception, as he wants to know more about Portugal, and even starts taking Portuguese classes. This interest in Portugal arises from his relationship with a Luso-descendant, but may also be related to the fact that Charles' generation is more open and culturally educated.

In terms of plot, the film focuses on the conflicts provoked by the cultural dialectic experienced by the Portuguese immigrants, and interestingly the film itself (as a filmic object) mirrors that dialectic. The entire film, from the cast, which has Portuguese and French actors, to the narrative and languages used, also including the soundtrack, is

<sup>5</sup>"A comédia oferece um olhar por dentro dos clichés e tenta ultrapassá-los pelo exercício auto-reflexivo e caricatural que impõe" (Lechner, 2013, p.2).

based on and reproduces the permanent state of division between Portuguese and French cultures in which Portuguese immigrants live in France. While in most countries where the film was screened and distributed the option was to keep the original title, translating it literally to the country's native languages, in Germany it was modified to *Portugal, Mon Amour*, a title that evidences the two cultures depicted in the film.

Due to the cultural bipolarity caused by the phenomenon of immigration, other conflicts arise in the film, which have to do with the distinct relations that the two generations of the Ribeiro family have with Portugal. The older Ribeiro can be seen as a model of success among the first generation of Portuguese immigrants of the process of reterritorialization and adaptation to the host country (Velez, 2015, p.356). In the case of Maria and José, the development of relations of belonging with the place of immigration becomes so profound that when the possibility of returning to Portugal finally arrives, the option lies in multiteritoriality (division between the territory of France and the territory of Portugal), but following an option inverse to the one that was more common to observe among the Portuguese immigrants of this generation (Velez, 2015, p.356). So while the parents decide to stay in France with the youngest son, the eldest daughter comes to Portugal with the French boyfriend to take care of the inherited family farm in the Douro region. This inversion results from a series of social and economic changes that allowed, for example, that Paula Ribeiro had access to higher education, unlike the parents, thus becoming able to manage the exports of wine produced in the family farm. While the brother seems completely adapted to the French culture, not even considering the possibility of returning to Portugal, Paula has complex relationship with her Portuguese identity. Representing the generation of Luso-descendants already born or raised in France (to which the director of the film also belongs to), Paula no longer feels attached to the identity ele-

ments of her parents' generation. She does not feel comfortable with the perpetuation of the stereotypes associated with the parents' generation, not because she no longer feels Portuguese, but because she no longer identifies with most of them. This complexity in terms of identification emerges in the film more visibly when her French boyfriend takes Paula to a fado restaurant in Paris. Although there are a number of traditional elements in that setting - the environment, the food, the fado that is played and sung, there are also some more contemporary elements, such as the diversity of the audience, which is mostly young, as well as the interpreter herself. This mixture of traditional and contemporary elements visible in the fado restaurant seems to mirror the way Paula identifies herself with Portugal (and Paula's perception of this circumstance may explain in part the fact that she is so moved by listening to fado): having other cultural references does not prevent her from feeling as strongly attached to her Portuguese identity as the parents. By including this music genre in the film associating it with the two generations of immigrants, the director points to a renewal of fado, which reached new publics. The recognition of fado as Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2011 added multiculturalism and contemporaneity to this music genre. Apart from gastronomy and landscapes, fado is also frequently used in tourism promotion campaigns. A recent announcement of a concert to be held in Canada by Mariza, one of the fado singers of the new generation, evidences the international recognition of fado, while stressing the connection between tradition and contemporaneity found in this music genre:

With her vibrant, soulful voice, and graceful, commanding presence, Mariza is the undisputed queen of the Portuguese art form, fado. Steeped in the yearning sounds of the tavernas of Lisbon, Mariza's music expands beyond borders to create a modern

and contemporary sound, all the while keeping her roots grounded in her native country (Chan Centre, 2016).

Profound socioeconomic changes in Portugal have made the two generations of immigrants portrayed in the film relate differently to the country, but have also made it a more competitive and attractive territory abroad, both in terms of business (mainly through the increase in exports of endogenous products such as Port wine), or as a tourist destination. As far as the Douro region is concerned, one of the consequences of the 2001 recognition as a World Heritage Site in the category of Cultural Landscape by UNESCO was the increase in demand from domestic and foreign tourists, accompanied by an increase in the supply of differentiating and quality tourism products. Today, following wine production, tourism is one of the region's main sources of income (Sousa, 2013). At the end of the film, we see the Ribeiro returning to Portugal, to their farm in the Douro region for the summer holidays. In their farmhouse they welcome Portuguese and French guests, in an atmosphere of relaxation and fraternization around a large table, accompanied by good wine and dancing at the end. When everyone comes together as if to take a family portrait and say in unison, "C'est ça que c'est bon!" ("That's what's good!"; my translation), they are clearly inviting viewers to visit Portugal, where they can find fantastic landscapes, food and people. Regarding the direct influence of the film on the number of tourists in the Douro region in the year 2013, António Martinho, the president in charge of "Turismo do Douro" (the former tourist region concerned with the tourist promotion of the Douro region) pointed out to an increase of French tourists in the territory which, in his opinion, may be associated with the

film (Porto Canal, 2013). Although the film has integrated the tourist destination Douro and some Portuguese products successfully in the plot, promoting them among its viewers, according to Carvalho and Sousa (2016), there could have been a more effective use by the national tourism organizations to promote Portugal as a tourist destination:

The Portuguese society, its customs, culture, language, history, gastronomy and the tourist destination Portugal are portrayed in some detail, however, the film achieved the integration of destination in the plot, something that should have been perceived by national tourism promotion organizations to promote Portugal, especially the Douro region, through the use of branded entertainment (p. 23, my translation).<sup>6</sup>

In spite of the fairly positive results in terms of the number of visitors to the region, the impact could have been much greater if official entities in charge of tourism promotion had been involved. As Morgan and Pritchard argue, placing a destination in a film is the ultimate in film product placement because film images persist for decades, provide publicity and create identities (1998, p.72). Although the film did not receive direct support from Portuguese public organizations linked to the promotion of Portugal as a tourist destination, there were two private companies from the Douro region, Douro Azul and Graham's, which sponsored the film directly, helping to promote the tourist destination Douro, in exchange for the promotion of its products in the film (product placement). The DVD of the film includes a promotional film of the company Douro Azul in English, while Graham's, which appears in the film through the Port wine that the characters drink and is also the owner of Quinta dos Malvedos, the setting of the scenes shot in the Douro region, their partici-

<sup>6</sup>"A sociedade portuguesa, os seus costumes, a cultura, a língua, a história, a gastronomia e o destino turístico Portugal são retratados com algum detalhe, no entanto, o filme conseguiu a integração do destino no enredo, algo que deveria ter sido percebido pelas organizações nacionais de promoção turística para promover Portugal, especialmente a região do Douro, pelo recurso ao branded entertainment" (p.23).

<sup>7</sup>See <https://blog.grahams-port.com/2013/08/01/french-film-partially-filmed-at-malvedos-premiered-today-in-portugal/> and <https://blog.grahams-port.com/2012/07/27/malvedos-hosts-filming-for-la-cage-doree/>.

pation in the film was publicized in the company's website <sup>7</sup>.

Several symbols of Portuguese popular culture are presented in the film through close-ups, contributing to their identification and promotion. The main highlight in the film goes the products associated with gastronomy and drinks: custard tarts, cod pastries, salted codfish with cream, lupini beans, beer, Port wine and coffee. Many of these products are associated with specific brands in a product placement strategy. In addition to the soundtrack and the use of the Portuguese language in some of the characters' lines, there are symbols such as the rooster of Barcelos, an image of Our Lady of Fatima, a painting of the fado singer Amália Rodrigues and the national flag, all of which contribute to the identification of the spaces located in France as relating to the Portuguese culture. These cultural artifacts are also important aspects in the promotion of a tourist destination, for they contribute to the creation of a certain tourist imaginary that does not have to do exclusively with location and landscapes:

The actual travel to film locations is less concerned with the prosaic materiality of objective geography; it is, in fact, driven by a desire to be bodily present in certain spaces, which have been constructed and imbued with fiction (Cordeiro, 2011, p.251).

## 5. Conclusion

*The Gilded Cage* has become one of the rare films with international projection to present on the big screen what for many Portuguese (especially for those living abroad) Portuguese identity and culture mean. Besides the narrative and the characters themselves, several symbols of Portuguese popular culture are presented in the film, contributing to the creation of a tourist imaginary

related to Portugal and the Portuguese. In terms of the promotion of Portugal as a tourist destination, although there was no direct involvement by official entities associated with tourism promotion, the film presents the scenario of the Ribeiro family farmhouse in the Douro region through magnificent panoramic scenes that could be included in a promotional film and which may have been behind the increase in the number of French tourists in the region in the year 2013.

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