

Cinematic representations of landscape: image creation and tourism in the city of Matera

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Abstract

A classical definition of landscape is “nature perceived through culture”. With regard to the “historicity” of landscape, some authors have pointed to cinema’s ability to record the transformations of a region, while drawing attention to it. Since the end of the Second World War, the Basilicata region has been used as a filming location for over forty feature films. The majority of these films, from Pier Paolo Pasolini’s “The Gospel According to St. Matthew” to Francesco Rosi’s “Christ Stopped at Eboli”, have depicted the misery and backwardness of Basilicata, inspired by the works of authors such as Carlo Levi and Ernesto De Martino. Matera is an interesting case study: while earlier films made in Matera depicted this bleak scenario, in recent years it has been the location of several films, such as Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ”, that have played an important role in constructing an image of Matera as an almost mystic and culturally dynamic city. Matera will be designated the European Capital of Culture in 2019.

Keywords: *film tourism, landscape, cinema, image creation, matera*

Introduction

There is a wide-ranging geographical and philosophical (Assunto 1973; Turri 1998) tendency to place landscape at the intersection between nature and culture: “nature” perceived through “culture”. Turri (1998) argues that landscape cannot be an entity in its own right; rather, it possesses an identity determined by human activity. Landscape is therefore a representation that results from an objective formulation of material reality and from the perceptual and subjective orientation of the eye. Historically, art has played an important role in defining and communicating the idea of landscape (D’Angelo 2010). Visual arts and subsequently photography and cinema have allowed landscape to be reenvisioned and depicted, while contributing to the definition of some of its main characteristics. Films can tell stories that are linked to the identity of the area, intertwining the narrative with its socio-economic background, but they can also be completely detached

from it. Indeed, there are film productions that use a location exclusively as the setting for events which, in their fictional context, take place elsewhere or in entirely imagined places. In such cases a distance is created between the location of the film and the place it represents, so landscape can acquire a “cinematic identity” that becomes part of the local identity. This is evidenced by the growing interest in film tourism (Hudson, Ritchie 2006) – visits to locations where films have been shot – and thus in cinematic landscapes. Curiosity about film locations comes from cinema’s ability to draw attention to these places. Indeed, film tourism can be understood as a phenomenon that demonstrates the film medium’s intrusion into reality (Lukinbeal, Zimmermann 2006). Authors such as Zimmermann and Escher argue that cinema re-presents and re-constructs places and landscapes in a way that it is no longer possible to distinguish between the cinematic world and the real world, between “real” and “reel” (Escher, Zimmermann 2001). One case analysed by the literature on this subject is “The Lord of the Rings” (2001-2002-2003). This fantasy trilogy, filmed in New Zealand, achieved great public success. The films portray an imaginary world, without any connection to the regional identity of the location, which has nevertheless stimulated growing curiosity about the locations where the films were shot. Tzanelli (2004) maintains that films undertake an operation of “staged authenticity”, constructing the authenticity of the location. Although aware that they are dealing with something fictional, film tourists treat film tours as an authentic experience in which New Zealand is actually perceived as “Middle Earth”, the location of the fantasy stories recounted in “The Lord of the Rings”. Thus cinema has a broad impact on the landscape, not only by recording its transformations, but also by producing new meanings and identities.

Chapter 1. The case of Matera

The city of Matera has been a very popular location for film productions, which, despite their very different styles and aesthetics, have revealed the way the city has changed from the Second World War to the present day. It almost certainly owes its cinematic fortune to the unique “negative architecture” (Bertelli 1974) of its historic centre, which is comprised of habitations dug into the rock known as “Sassi” and of a large group of rupestrian churches that resulted from the spread of Eastern Byzantine and Western Benedictine monarchism. Matera is a prime example of the relationship between cinema and landscape, since film production not only documented the transformations of the area, but also played an active role in the process of constructing new forms of landscape connected to the restoration of its historic city centre. An examination of the complex debate and developments surrounding this subject from the 1940s to the present day is clearly beyond the scope of this essay; instead, several important milestones in the discussion regarding the Sassi of Matera will be considered, starting with a quote from Carlo Levi’s memoir *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1945):

“The houses were open on account of the heat, and as I went by I could see into the caves, whose only light came in through the front doors. Some of them had no entrance but a trapdoor and ladder. In these dark holes with walls cut out of the earth I saw a few pieces of miserable furniture, beds, and some ragged clothes hanging up to dry. On the floor lay dogs, sheep, goats, and pigs. Most families have just one cave to live in and there they sleep all together; men, women, children, and animals. This is how twenty thousand people live. Of children I saw an infinite number. They appeared from everywhere, in the dust and heat, amid the flies, stark naked or clothed in rags; I have never in all my life seen such a picture of poverty.” (Levi 2006, p. 85).

Levi's memoir, which recounts the author's exile in Basilicata from 1935 to 1936, testifies to the severe degradation and poverty that characterized the Sassi of Matera under Fascism. In 1937, in order to undertake a rapid redevelopment operation in the historic city centre, an investigation was carried out into the hygiene conditions of the dwellings, which numbered around 3000: 70% of them were considered unfit for habitation (Valente 2010). Many of these were dug into the rock, with limited light, insufficient air and high humidity. The numerous families lived in overcrowded conditions, sharing small spaces with animals. However, the discovery of the dramatic situation in the Sassi district did not lead to an effective solution to the problem. The publication of *Christ Stopped at Eboli* in 1945 brought what De Gasperi and Togliatti have labelled a “national disgrace” to the attention of the newly-established Italian Republic. A real debate arose around the Matera case that involved urban planners and sociologists from Italy and abroad; the scientific interest in the situation was down to the fact that Matera, defined as “the capital of rural culture”, represented an exemplary, insightful case study for analysing the social, ethical and economic situation in Southern Italy (Fonseca, Demetrio, Guadagno 1999). The underlying concept that drove the analytical work during this period was that the Sassi were an insurmountable problem that affected the residents' quality of life and that the resolution of this “national disgrace” could only be accomplished through the evacuation of the Sassi and the construction of new residential villages, far from the historic centre, to which the inhabitants could relocate (Restucci 1991). The decongestion of the Sassi and the creation of people-oriented villages were the first steps towards creating dignified social and cultural, as well as economic, conditions. These developments were followed by the establishment of State Law 619 of 1952, which called for the partial evacuation of the Sassi, the restructuring of those in an acceptable condition and the accommodation of residents in outlying villages. The renovation of the habitations was considered solely from the point of view of quality of life and totally overlooked the cultural value of the site. For a number of reasons that cannot be explored in depth here, ranging from the non-viability of the new housing solutions to the feelings of segregation and the difficulties adjusting experienced by those who were displaced, the new districts were progressively abandoned (Restucci 1991). Meanwhile, the evacuation of the Sassi was not accompanied by the

essential restoration of these habitations, leading to the definitive emptying of the historical centre (Giura Longo 1966). The debate around the Sassi returned to the public arena in the 1970s. State Laws 126 of 1967 and 1043 of 1971 promoted a call for bids for the improvement and preservation of the Sassi as a site of “historic, archaeological, artistic, landscape and ethnographic interest.” The novelty of this legislative approach was that the Sassi were considered not only from a social and hygienic point of view, but also from a historic-artistic perspective (Fonseca, Demetrio, Guadagno 1999). However, the funding provided for by the 1971 Law was withdrawn due to the State’s budget commitments and restoration did not begin until State Law 771 was passed in 1986. Following the 1986 Law, two two-year plans were drawn up that were oriented around the restoration of the Sassi and the promotion of tertiary activities such as services, trade and handicrafts. Thus the ancient district was considered as a place of income generation, cultural activities and tourism (Valente 2010). Consequently, in the 1990s there was a partial repopulation of the historic centre and significant growth in commercial activities and accommodation facilities.

Chapter 2. Matera and the cinema

In the complex framework of reflections, debates and interventions surrounding Matera’s historic centre, cinema has played an important role both in terms of its ability to bear witness to the transformations of the Sassi and for having been an active part of these transformations. From this point of view, it should be stressed that cinema, in relation to landscape, cannot be seen as a mere tool for the recording and transposition of an area’s status quo; at the moment in which cinema “uses” an area as a location, it implicitly impacts and changes it. In the case of the city of Matera, not only is this dual and inseparable filmic action visible, but we can also say that the reputation and image of the Matera landscape, which is linked to its cultural and touristic re-evaluation in recent years, has also left a cinematic mark. To date, Matera has been the location of over 30 films. Two fundamental trends can be recognized in the representation of the Sassi landscape: the first presents the area authentically, in line with the intellectual thought of the first post-war period, while the second uses the landscape to tell stories that are far-removed from the local identity.

Chapter 3. The dark land without hope or redemption

The film productions in Matera in the ’50s and ’60s are affected by the widespread reflection which, from Levi to De Martino, focused attention on the problems of Basilicata. In particular, cinema seemed to emphasize the dramatic conditions of life in the Sassi, showing that “dark land without sin and redemption”, as Levi refers to it in his memoir.

The first fictional film entirely shot in the Sassi was “La Lupa” (She Wolf, 1953), directed by Alberto Lattuada, a film adaptation of Giovanni Verga’s novel of the same name. The film tells the story of a woman whose irrepressible sexuality provokes scandal in a small town. Lattuada makes the interesting decision to use the Sassi of Matera not as a backdrop to represent a Sicilian town (the original setting of Verga’s story), but rather as the actual location in which the events portrayed take place (Cosulich 1985, p. 58). Thus, the landscape brings its dramatic force to the film, which is integrated with Verga’s work. For example, there is a section in the first part of the film dedicated to Matera’s Festa della Bruna, during which the story unfolds. The inclusion of typical Matera customs and traditions serves to interweave the plot with its new regional context. After the war, a number of documentaries were also produced. In 1949, Carlo Lizzani made his directorial debut with a documentary entitled “Nel Mezzogiorno qualcosa è cambiato” (Something has changed in the South, 1949). Created at a time that marked the start of new work by the assembly for the rebirth of the South, which saw groups of farmers, workers and students come together in several southern cities including Matera, Lizzani’s documentary exposes the backward conditions of the South, while offering great hope for the future. In contrast to Levi’s work, which aimed to offer a social, political and anthropological commentary on Basilicata, Lizzani highlighted the spirit of renewal and change that was spreading through the southern towns (Bernagozzi 2002). Thus, although the camera lingers on the interiors of the caves in the Sassi, showing men and animals sharing the same space, the film ends with farmers happily returning to their homes after the assembly. Other directors also took interest in life in Matera and Basilicata: partly in the wake of anthropological expeditions organized by Ernesto De Martino, they depicted the rituals and superstitions that were prevalent in the region. A number of documentaries were filmed in Basilicata, which evidently aimed to portray its cultural and social conditions. Particularly notable is the short film by a young Antonioni entitled “Superstizione” (Superstition) and several films, including “Magia Lucana” (Lucanian Magic) and “La Madonna di Pierno”, directed by Luigi di Gianni, one of the most important anthropological documentary makers. A fictional film, partly shot in Matera, that explores Basilicata’s heritage and this period of upheaval is “Il Demonio” (The Demon, 1964) by Brunello Rondi. The film aims to offer an authentic portrait of Basilicata, especially in reference to that “magical world” that surrounded life in the region in the ’50s and ’60s. Part drama and part documentary, the film depicts the rituals against the evil eye, the exorcisms and superstitions which, according to the anthropologist De Martino (1973) had the important function of providing people with a support in the face of the adverse conditions in which they lived. It is precisely this subject that forms the dramatic framework of “Il Demonio”: the protagonist, Purificata, is unable to overcome the heartbreak of a past love affair and falls into “enchantment”. Enchantment, or possession, represents the point at which Purificata is unable to accept the end of love; the path to liberation from this evil, which in fact leads to

a tragic end, consists of a succession of rituals, magical practices, exorcisms and funeral lamentations that the director inserts into the narrative with almost documentary intent. Several evocative sequences filmed in the Sassi involve a kind of magical conflict: *Purificata* seeks to undermine the marriage between her beloved and another woman with magic potions, while the couple protect their union from negative forces with special rituals. A magic “landscape” that shows the clear disparity between the backwardness of the Basilicata region and the progress and economic boom that were being experienced in other areas of Italy. This approach to representation, which began to fade out in the '70s, had one last and perhaps most important example in Francesco Rosi's film adaptation of Levi's memoir. Rosi's “*Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Christ Stopped at Eboli, 1979) is certainly one of the artistic works that best represents the region's identity and portrays a part of Basilicata's history with distinct realism. Adapted from Carlo Levi's book of the same name, which is halfway between a novel and an essay, it portrays the period of confinement that Levi experienced during the Fascist era. During his two years spent in exile, Levi, a progressive doctor from Turin, came into contact with the rural and ancient Lucanian civilization, which was far-removed from his own culture and which he observed with meticulous attention. The novel, like the film, focuses in particular on the town of Aliano, where the writer lived, but there are also descriptions of Matera which, as mentioned previously, highlight the difficult living conditions in the Sassi, initiating the debate around the destiny of that part of the city.

Chapter 4. The biblical landscape

In the mid-'60s, Pasolini's “*Il Vangelo secondo Matteo*” (The Gospel According to St. Matthew, 1964) marked a new trend of setting biblical events in the Sassi of Matera; the film, which places the narrative of Jesus' life into this highly underdeveloped Southern region, can be considered as the synthesis of the two “landscape” trends described earlier. Pasolini did not choose Matera because of its similarity to Jerusalem, but because it was representative of the socio-economic environment of Southern Italy. The film, which was made in 1964 in Lazio, Puglia and Basilicata, set its most important scenes in the Matera locations, scenes which were destined to go down in the history of cinema: the Sassi became the Jerusalem of Christian preaching and of the Way of the Cross, while the Murgia Materana park was the setting of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Thus, alongside the genuine intention to emphasize the revolutionary power of the Christian message and to reconnect it to a general sense of the sacred, there is also a desire to expose and draw attention to the unacceptable living conditions experienced by the inhabitants of this part of the South. In the film, close-ups of Christ spreading his divine message alternate with long shots that reveal the backwardness of Basilicata and the South in general. The camera turns away from Christ to capture the landscapes, hardships and gaunt faces of the farmers, with

the same attention to detail that Pasolini demonstrated in his previous films about the suburbs of Rome. The two narrative levels, which we can call “divine” and “social”, remain separated in the film without any possibility of reconciliation, demonstrating Pasolini’s view that the Christian message is still unheeded in modern times. Therefore, Matera not only transfers its physical structure to the film, but also its social makeup, becoming a metaphor for the whole Southern question (Ferrero 2005). The director attempts to convey an authentic image of the area by telling a story that does not belong to it. After Pasolini’s film and especially since the ’70s, the centre of Matera has become a location for works that are far-removed from the cultural heritage of the landscape. Unlike *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, which maintains the relationship between narration and landscape, the other films use Matera simply as a backdrop, reclaiming the vague mysticism that characterizes the monastic tradition of the Sassi. The prime example of this is the Hollywood version of “*The Passion of the Christ*” (2004) produced by Mel Gibson. Indeed, the exterior scenes in the film were almost entirely shot in the Sassi. The film, which portrays the passion of Christ from the invocation in the garden of Gethsemane to the resurrection, gave major international media exposure to the Sassi of Matera, in which the bloody Way of the Cross scene takes place. Just as in “*Il Vangelo secondo Matteo*”, the film ends in the Murgia Materana park, the location used to represent Golgotha for the crucifixion scene. Obviously in this film, the social aspect, which is present in Pasolini’s *Gospel* for example, is not depicted. Matera was chosen because of its similarity to Jerusalem, which was essential for making the passion of Christ more authentic and believable; the narrow streets and the stairways of the Sassi set the stage for this story and as Christ continually collapses on the dusty steps, the blood of his disfigured body stains the white stone of the Sassi. The narrative culminates with the scene that depicts the arrival on Mount Golgotha, in which Christ, bent by the weight of the cross, staggers up onto the rock of the Murgia Materana. The camera, turning from the Murgia towards Matera, exposes the landscape, revealing a part of the Sassi positioned just above the cross. It is the point at which the film metaphorically expresses the key of Christian thought: through suffering, Christ takes responsibility for all humanity in order to redeem it. The Matera landscape is shown to emphasize this moment, confirming its important role within the narrative. “*King David*” (1985), an impressive production about King David of Israel directed by Bruce Beresford and starring Richard Gere, took a similar approach, as did “*The Nativity Story*” (2006) in particular, although it favoured the Murgia Materana, whose rocky, arid background effectively contextualizes Joseph and Mary’s struggles surrounding the birth of a son who would play such an important role in human history. All these films offer a portrayal that is far-removed from the actual reality of the Sassi, while promoting a new image of the Matera countryside, replete with the mysticism and architectural peculiarities that have brought the Sassi major cultural and touristic renown.

Chapter 5. Film tourism in Matera

As has been discussed, if on the one hand cinema tends progressively to distance itself from the local identity and to tell stories unrelated to Matera, on the other hand the arrival of large productions offers a very important showcase for the city. Mel Gibson's "The Passion" is often cited as an example of film tourism and it has had a major impact on the city from an economic/touristic point of view. With its international cast and worldwide distribution, the film successfully promoted Matera, particularly on the international tourist market. Although the film uses Matera to tell a story set in Jerusalem, following the tragic events of Christ's passion, the spectator can admire views of the Sassi immortalized by the camera. The major increase in tourism recorded in the years after the release of the film can partly be attributed to the effect of the media and promotion surrounding Mel Gibson's film. De Falco (2006) observes that in 2006 there was a 40% increase of tourist arrivals and a 30% increase of overnight stays compared to 2003 (the film came out in 2004) with an 83% surge in arrivals and 53% rise in overnight stays among foreign tourists. These changes inevitably created awareness among the citizens and the local authorities about the touristic potential of the city and the promotion of the region through cinema. In 2013, the Lucana Film Commission was established, an organization that aims to attract film producers to the region, offering services and financing for the creation of films. Consequently, after several years of stagnation, producers returned to make films in Matera: in 2015, for example, the blockbuster remake of *Ben Hur* was filmed there.

Summary

Film landscapes are always alive, blending human affairs and the land, and loaded with the values and symbolism of cinematic poetry. Therefore, cinema simultaneously acts as a witness to the transformations of the area and as a producer of new meanings, related to its ability to define new relationships between man and the environment. The case of the Sassi di Matera demonstrates this dialectic relationship between cinema and landscape; a long and complex process that transformed the historic centre of Matera from a "national disgrace" to a tourist destination and culturally active location. The films made in Basilicata bear witness to this evolution with the use of different styles and poetics. Analysis of cinematic production in the Matera locations reveals two dominant trends in the representation of landscape. The first, which is linked to a period between the '50s and '70s, is influenced by intellectual discussions regarding the dramatic living conditions in the Sassi and shows the degradation of the landscape in which the inhabitants live. From "Nel mezzogiorno qualcosa è cambiato" to "Il Demonio" and "Christ Stopped at Eboli", cinema depicted the landscape of the Sassi by focusing on its anthropological and cultural characteristics. The second trend, which developed at the end of the '70s, moves away from

the real problems of Matera in order to tell stories that take place in other locations. A number of biblical films form part of this trend, using the Sassi as a location to set stories relating to the life of Christ in particular. The first, in chronological order, was “The Gospel According to St. Matthew” by Pasolini, which can be considered as a transitional film between the two trends. Although it tells a story from the Gospel, which is set in the Holy Land, the Matera landscape in the background is not staged in any way: the director’s idea was for the Christian message to manifest itself in a current setting. The film connects the sacred aura which shrouds the Sassi (thanks to the monastic tradition) to the real problems of the South and the life of Christ, and can therefore be considered as a bridge between a realistic representation of the Matera landscape and the subsequent phase that redefined its representation in cultural and religious terms. Attention to socio-economic problems was therefore progressively side-lined, in part because the Sassi began to be the subject of interventions oriented around their restoration and enhancement. Cinema distanced itself from a reality that was no longer dramatic in the way that it had been in the past to become, paradoxically, a bearer of change. The large international production of “The Passion” depicted a highly mystical and spiritual landscape and spread that image throughout the world. The Sassi district is no longer a “national disgrace”: it has slowly been repopulated and, in part thanks to its UNESCO designation, opened to the tourist market. Portraying a distant landscape, the film had a concrete effect on the area, introducing the city of Matera to the international market and promoting it as a place of culture. This evolution of the representations of the Matera landscape and the renown of the city, which were both made possible in part by cinematic productions, is linked to its designation as the European Capital of Culture in 2019.

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