The Power of Fiction in Creating a Territory’s Image

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Abstract  The current economic crisis, and its effects on the European sovereign debt, has resulted in a significant reduction in Italian investments in the field of preservation and enhancement of cultural heritage. In fragile contexts, such as Sicily, the contraction of investments has put further into crisis the already weak management and planning system. Despite this scenario of crisis, in South-Eastern Sicily, the province of Ragusa shows a significant resilience to the crisis also due to the “Montalbano effect” and the capability to rethink the traditional heritage policies (Maggiorno and Mantovani 2012). The paper, based on the analysis of the South-Eastern Sicily case study, reflects on these potential and conflictive elements generated by the relationship between cine-tourism and local policies.

1 Media Image in the Creation of the New Urban Dimension

During the transition to postmodernity, the role of media images has been found to be decisive in the narration and consequent definition of the post-metropolis. In particular, according to Shiel (2001) cinema, as stories in images, has been one of the greatest forces in globalisation processes in the twentieth century, making a significant contribution to the construction of the post-metropolis image.

However, the synthesis process that cinematographic image produces compared to complexity of real life can at times distort it; or it can produce types of “space
consumption” (Connell 2012) as it alters the authenticity of places that we are not always aware of or able to control. Soja (2000) seems to be aware of this, highlighting how the relationship between image and reality introduces the concept of “hyper-reality”, that highlights the alterity of a new dimension, both the first and the second.

Therefore, we should ask how the image of certain places transposes reality into a new urban dimension and what type of imaginary relationship it can maintain with reality. Also, what the actual spatial repercussions are of the relationship between image and reality and how much of these places and people are aware of.

To consider these matters further, in reference to South-Eastern Sicily, this Chapter wishes to look at the media image produced by the TV fictional series “Inspector Montalbano”. By moving from the analysis of the effect on tourist flows and of spatial effects caused in the area, the considerations below address a scenario of general economic crisis, in a fragile, marginal territorial context, which tends to find opportunities for expected (tourist) development in the fleeting medium of cinema that is controlled by other parties.

2 Economic Crisis and Cultural Heritage in South-Eastern Sicily

The effects of the 2008 economic crisis caused a clear reduction in state investments in safeguarding and optimising cultural heritage and activities, resulting in a decrease in investment from 0.3% of the GDP in 2009 to 0.17% in 2012.

Although signs of recovery have been noted recently (2015), with an investment in cultural services of 0.36% of the GDP, this value is still one of the lowest in Europe (European average 0.45%) and is about half of France’s investment (0.73%) (ISTAT 2017). This condition has to deal in Italy with the extent and territorial distribution of its cultural heritage, that requires protection, economic development, optimisation and promotion all at the same time.

Also, the notable reduction in state spending on cultural heritage management was accompanied by a partial reduction in local body spending, although the latter had to compensate for the reduction in state investments.

As found in the 2017 BES Report (ISTAT 2017), local councils autonomously contributed about two-thirds of public spending for cultural activities. As can be seen in Table 1, from 2009 to 2014 spending in the cultural activities and environmental heritage protection and optimisation sector decreased by 59.16%.

Also, although Sicily has a large concentration of cultural heritage compared to other Italian regions, as maintained by Casavola and Trigilia (2012), it does not show itself to be effective in optimising such a resource. And it is also in light of the distance between cultural heritage ownership and activation of the optimisation policies, that, in political rhetoric but also in real-life economy, the gap between Northern and Southern Italy increases (Lombardo 2016).

Despite this scenario of crisis, South-Eastern Sicily is an exception, as it maintains its tourists, also thanks to the so-called “Montalbano effect” (Magazzino and Mantovani 2012).
Table 1  Public expenditure in Sicily in the field of protection and enhancement of cultural heritage

| Year | Organisation of culture and related structures (Euros) | Nature protection, environmental assets, parks and reserves (Euros) | Total expenditure in the cultural heritage sector (Euros) |
|------|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| 2009 | 372,630,684                                           | 138,180,789                                                   | 510,811,473                                            |
| 2010 | 250,708,966                                           | 44,307,393                                                   | 295,016,359                                            |
| 2011 | 279,559,964                                           | 85,219,140                                                   | 364,799,104                                            |
| 2012 | 168,238,513                                           | 43,739,873                                                   | 211,830,894                                            |
| 2013 | 190,027,455                                           | 47,592,381                                                   | 237,619,813                                            |
| 2014 | 178,673,509                                           | 29,891,577                                                   | 208,565,086                                            |
| 2015 | 257,969,932                                           | 41,449,355                                                   | 299,419,287                                            |

Ragioneria Generale dello Stato, Bilanci delle Regioni e delle Province Autonome, years 2009–2015

The widespread presence of cultural heritage has formed a historically stratified landscape over the years, which has a great identity value. This has made South-Eastern Sicily an ideal location for several, prestigious cinema productions, including the TV fictional series “Inspector Montalbano”, produced by Palomar for the National Italian Television (Radio Televisione Italiana, RAI).

The characteristic of this territory lies in the stratification of heritage and resources of different kinds, that depend highly on each other: sand dunes on the coast, Greek-Roman archaeological sites, agricultural landscapes filled with country houses and Arabic farms, medieval old towns and Baroque cities. All this defines a cultural landscape that provides natural scenic settings for cinema filming. These environments are places that accompany the usual reflections by Inspector Montalbano and that Roskill (1997, 202) defined as “landscapes of presence”, as they are the most suitable setting for the film (Fig. 1).

Moreover, the other part of the cultural heritage that is the backdrop for the TV series is the extraordinary urban landscape that exploits the natural conformation of the ground and the theatrical nature of the urban wings, with their Baroque architecture, making for ideal scenographic settings.

The façades of palaces and churches, accentuated by wide, deep staircases, and their shiny domes, show themselves off to the surrounding landscape as unique scenic settings, that dominate the surrounding small, low buildings (Fig. 2).

More generally, these are part of a network of small- and medium-sized urban areas, an expression of urban planning and Baroque (Noto, Scicli, Rosolini, Modica, Ragusa, Ispica) (Figs. 3–4) and Liberty architecture (Ispica, Canicattini Bagni).

The “fictional towns” of “Montelusa” and “Vigata” in the TV series show Val di Noto as a single entity in the international Baroque panorama, characterised by the contemporary reconstruction of several towns (Caltagirone, Catania, Militello Val Catania, Modica, Noto, Palazzolo Acreide, Ragusa, Scicli) after the terrible earthquake in 1693 when 93,000 people died and 60 towns were seriously damaged.
Fig. 1  The “Fornace Penna” along the coast of Scicli (Photo by Giuseppe Abbate)

Fig. 2  San Giorgio’s Cathedral in Modica (Photo by Giuseppe Abbate)
Fig. 3  The centre of Scicli (Photo by Giuseppe Abbate)

Fig. 4  The centre of Ragusa (Photo by Vincenzo Todaro)
3 Cultural Heritage Development Policies in South-Eastern Sicily

There are two factors that have brought South-Eastern Sicily to optimise its cultural heritage and relaunch its own cultural and tourist image. The first is connected to the recovery of Ragusa Ibla historical old town, that was started by means of RL 61/1981. The actions taken for urban and building upgrading and recovery have brought about the opening of several accommodation facilities (Lo Piccolo et al. 2015).

The second factor, promoted by the Syracuse, Catania and Ragusa Cultural Heritage Departments, which carry out the task of protecting the area’s cultural heritage, is seen in the construction of the joint image of the “late-Baroque cities”. This territorial image, built around recognition of the urban and Baroque architectural culture as a unifying identity value, is based on the cultural enhancement policies started in the period 1990–2000.

One of the outcomes of these policies is the inclusion of “late-Baroque cities of Val di Noto” (including the cities of Noto, Scicli, Ragusa, Militello Val di Catania, Caltagirone, Palazzolo Acreide, Catania, Modica) in the “UNESCO World Heritage List” in 2002. Regional funding was also provided for the establishment of tourist districts aimed at promoting the “Baroque of Val di Noto” also for the high-quality food and wine productions.

What effect to these cultural enhancement policies have on tourism? What are the repercussions on the improvement in the tourist offer?

Actually, in the last twenty years, South-Eastern Sicily has thoroughly transformed its territorial profile. There has been a dual effect: differentiation of the types of available accommodation, from large hotels and tourist holiday villages to the creation of small and medium-sized hotels; and their distribution throughout the area, compared to the concentration on the coastline that was the case in the past. In particular, the type of accommodation that has shown a significant increase in the last ten years are not hotels (farmhouse accommodation and B&Bs).

With regard to tourist flows, some sector studies (Mantovani 2010; Magazzino and Mantovani 2012), that cross-check different databases (tourist density and tourist specialisation), clearly show how the arrivals and presences in the province of Ragusa—compared to the whole of Sicily—in the period 2000–2008, show growth of about 5.00% and 5.80%, compared to the same indicators (4.50% and 5.20%) in the previous decade (1990–1999). Also, in the subsequent period (between 2009 and 2010 and between 2012 and 2013), compared with the wider panorama of the international crisis that also affected the tourist sector, South-Eastern Sicily generally seemed to maintain positive figures.

When speaking of nationality, the presence of Italians is much more widespread than that of foreigners, which up to 2009 stood at about one third of the former; however, this difference started to decrease starting from 2010: in 2013, there were 72,354 foreign individuals present, compared to 128,555 Italians.

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1Data and considerations of this section do not take into account the effects connected to the Covid-19 crisis.
Some of the most prominent foreign nationalities in 2013 were French (22,667), German (8,523), American (5169), British (4950), and Swiss (4738).

Moreover, compared to the above scenario, although it is not possible to link the reasons for the holding of tourist flows solely to “Inspector Montalbano”, it is agreed that this TV series has played a decisive role in the international promotion of South-Eastern Sicily’s image.

There have been countless presences in recent years, in fact, around the so-called “Montalbano locations”. The transfer of Scicli town hall, the location used as the “Vigata” police station in the series, is the consequence of the high numbers of tourists interested in visiting “Inspector Montalbano’s office” (Fig. 5).

The inspector’s house, located on the beach at Punta Secca (Santa Croce Camerina), has become the “La casa di Montalbano” B&B (Figs. 6–7). The RAI TV crew has to make a group booking to find availability for the rooms to record the new episodes of the TV series.

With regard to this phenomenon, and some clear distortions that this brings with it, it must however be pointed out that for the Ragusa area tourism is a recently-formed opportunity, that needs more structured strategies and greater consolidation (Azzolina et al. 2012).

The same experience of several tourist districts, that are created in this territory through cooperative spirit, has been a mere aggregation of municipalities that cannot express a “joint vision of South-East territory” (Azzolina et al. 2012, 161). The current tourist offer, rather than responding to the new system logic, continues to propose out-of-date, traditional models aimed at developing hotels and catering, neglecting facilities and services.

This model appears to be inadequate for the current time, as it does not respond to the demand for a differentiated tourist offer that is integrated with infrastructures and services (including technological ones) to help make use of cultural heritage, a realm in which it is possible to effectively compete in international tourist markets.

4 The “Montalbano Effect”

The TV fictional series “Inspector Montalbano”, adapted from the novels by Andrea Camilleri, initially created an increase in tourist flows in South-Eastern Sicily in the period 1999–2007 and a limitation of recession trends in the period 2007–2013 compared to the regional and national context.

As stated by Mantovani (2010), based on an analysis of tourist development indicators, the “Montalbano effect” has permitted South-Eastern Sicily and Ragusa in particular to limit the drop in tourist numbers in the period of international financial crisis. However, the “Montalbano effect” has not only driven tourist development; it has also been an opportunity to rethink local cultural heritage enhancement policies, via the promotion of cinema-tourism.

High profile tourist destinations increasingly sponsor their own territory with marketing operations that use film sets and scenes shot in those places as leverage.
Fig. 5  The police station at the Town Hall of Scicli (Photo by Giuseppe Abbate)
Fig. 6 Inspector Montalbano’s house (Photo by Vincenzo Todaro)

Fig. 7 Inspector Montalbano’s house and the coastal urbanisation of Punta Secca, Santa Croce Camerina (Ragusa) (https://www.google.it/maps/)
However, as pointed out by Joanne Connell (2012), cinema tourism probably has a historical precedent in literary tourism (Pocock 1992; Squire 1994; Busby and Hambly 2000; Robinson and Andersen 2002; Hoppen et al. 2014), although there are significant differences: the images produced via reading require the reader’s imagination to be created (Butler 1990; Verdaasdonk 1991); consequently, they tend to produce different, higher tourist expectations on a given destination, as they are not pre-established as cinema images are (Pocock 1992). On the relationship between literary and cinema tourism, the Di Betta study (2015) applied to the case of “Inspector Montalbano” compares the different places that refer to each of the two categories: Agrigento for literary tourism and Ragusa for cinema tourism.

The study results show how literary stories are no less effective than television in terms of effects on tourist flows; to the contrary, the two areas seem to be complementary to system policies that acknowledge the added value of integrated tourism.

However, Joanne Connell (2012) believes that in the ambiguous relationship between reality and cinema image, it is possible to distinguish at least two different approaches: the construction of the film image takes place with the clear intention of maintaining the authenticity of reality as much as possible; or through specific manipulation of reality with cinema’s main tools, with editing being the main one.

In the latter case, there is a more controversial and sometimes contradictory change in the perception of real space by film-making; a kind of a real consumption of space which occurs by removing or adding other elements and that produces an incredible paradox: the boundary between reality and film image becomes indistinguishable (Schofield 1996); the film image takes over from reality, staying in the memory of those who have witnessed it; in visiting places, the observer records an important difference between image and reality, to the extent that the latter is not recognised as such; this is the cause of frustration in the tourist experience (Connell and Meyer 2009).

The film image generates a spatial appropriation of the place and consequently the reality loses respect, as it is no longer recognisable. Two examples show the spatial effects that this phenomenon creates.

The first concerns the case of “Inspector Montalbano”: in the 1990s, the town of Porto Empedocle (birthplace of A. Camilleri) asks for and obtains permission from the writer that the town can add “Vigata” to its own name, to honour (with a clear return on tourist image) both him and his stories (Fig. 8). In this case, the film image appropriates the real space.

To the contrary, the second concerns the phenomenon of loss of recognisability of places compared to the predominance of the film image over reality: this is the case reported by Connell (2012), of an American producer who, while looking for a film location in Scotland in the 1950s, returned to the United States after not finding anywhere that looked like Scotland.
5 Cinema Tourism and Cultural Heritage Enhancement Policies in Sicily

The successful television series, produced by Palomar for the RAI, and also thanks to its broadcasting on RAI International in 18 different countries\(^2\) has been a driving force for international tourism in a peripheral area of Sicily, namely the South-East. Ragusa, Scicli, Santa Croce Camerina—some of the locations used to film the series—have become destinations for tourists who want to see the places around which the fictional series is centred.

The success of the series and the consequential benefits for the area were recognised in 2007. In fact, through RL 16/2007, the Sicilian Regional Administration established a “Regional fund for cinema and audio-visual works” for the production of films to be made in Sicily, called the “Film Commission Regione Siciliana” to manage said funds.

\(^2\)The TV series has been broadcast in Argentina, Australia, Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom and USA.
In reference to the above, two new elements emerge, although highly problematic compared to traditional heritage enhancement policies.

An initial aspect concerns recognition of the media image when promoting cultural heritage. It is no coincidence that the law states that some scenes must be filmed in pre-decided places in order to promote and spread the image of Sicily more effectively.

However, this recognition is not without its ambiguous side. In fact, the race to offer locations gave rise to a high rate of competition between municipal councils, to the detriment of an overall enhancement policy for the area’s cultural system.

Following the economic recession, and the simultaneous reduction in municipal finances, the latter realised the need to set up partnerships to promote their own cultural heritage through film productions. Therefore, on 11 February 2015, towns in the province of Ragusa signed a “Protocol of Understanding for the coordination and planning 2015–2017 of activities to support the production of Inspector Montalbano”, also setting out intervention modes and joint actions.

While the use of media image has brought about this change in standard in the public subject’s action model, with regard to cultural heritage enhancement, on the other hand, there is an ambiguity in the power of the image to convey an ideal reality that does not correspond to the actual reality.

The unspoilt coastal area, with its sand dunes, as seen in the TV series, does not, in fact, reflect the real situation on the coastlines of South-Eastern Sicily. Illegal buildings, the man-made load linked to holiday homes and hotels, and the presence of production infrastructures and structures have all transformed the coastal areas in the province of Ragusa into a highly-affected, fragile habitat.

According to a study carried out about the state of urbanisation in Sicily, in support of the regional urban plan, 80.5% of the urbanised coastline in the Ragusa area within 150 metres from the shore is illegal; and 88.6% of the buildings located in the area 150–500 metres from the shoreline are illegal (Trombino 2005). This data shows the conflictual nature of the Sicilian situation, where cultural heritage protection and enhancement policies and urban-planning policies seem to be moving in completely separate directions.

The second aspect concerns the possibility of creating public-private partnerships for the promotion of cultural heritage, with a clear reduction in public investment in this sector.

In return for the employment of local human resources (actors, interns, master tradesmen, etc.) and a pre-set percentage of filming of Sicilian territory and its heritage (20% of the total of outdoor filming of the edited film and at least 30% of the total footage of the edited film), RL 16/2007 provides a non-repayable contribution to film productions.5

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3 The town councils which signed the protocol are: Ragusa, Acate, Chiaromonte Gulfi, Comiso, Giarratana, Ispica, Modica, Monterosso Almo, Pozzallo, Santa Croce Camerina, Scicli and Vittoria.

4 RL 78/1976 states a restriction on all constructions within 150 metres of the shoreline.

5 Funding contributions are issued based on the number of weeks of filming in Sicily. They range from three annual contributions, from an overall maximum of 250,000 Euros if filming goes beyond seven weeks, to a minimum of 10,000 Euros for filming of less than one week.
For the promotion of cultural heritage, this is a form of joint-funding for territorial marketing, entirely the responsibility of the public entity. This public-private partnership is repeated again in the 2015 “Protocol of Understanding” which, in return for the municipal council’s undertaking, sees the company Palomar involved in transforming public assets provided by the councils into permanent exhibition spaces that will be managed as a partnership.

It is clear that in times of economic crisis, film productions are an effective means for the enhancement of cultural heritage, as can be seen in the “Montalbano effect” being the driving force for Ragusa heritage enhancement by the public entities involved.

However, although this change in standard can provide a substantial change to the enhancement of the territory during a permanent economic crisis period, it also raises several doubts of an ethical nature regarding the use of public assets for private purposes, even within partnerships. The Sicilian Regional Administration does not seem to have noticed this, however, as when faced with the possibility of transferring the location for future filming of the TV series to Apulia, it approved a bill for “Interventions in favour of audio-visual serial productions of a continuous and cyclical nature”, known as “Montalbano” DdL (“Montalbano” Draft Law), that provides for 50,000 Euros funding for each episode of at least 45 minutes, for film productions and TV series with a history of at least three years of programming and production, and a total allocation of spending of 2,000,000 Euros.

6 Conclusions

Several authors have studied the effects of film and TV productions on tourism. These analyses have mainly focused on the influence of the locations’ image on the choices of sets and repercussions on tourist flows (Schofield 1996; Hudson and Ritchie 2006a, b; Soliman, 2011).

However, the effects of film productions on the planning and enhancement policies for the locations’ cultural heritage has not really been considered by the literature on this subject. The case study of South-Eastern Sicily shows how cinema tourism has had considerable effects on the territory, on cultural heritage and on the parties involved in managing them.

By moving the point of view from the users of the locations to the cultural heritage that acts as a setting for the television and film productions, the matters of planning and managing cultural heritage, as the contribution proves, are an especially important field of investigation.

The results obtained show how the so-called “Montalbano effect” has had at least two positive impacts in a period of crisis for public funding:

• The maintaining of the tourist industry linked to the use of the Hyblaean area cultural heritage, even during a recession;
A change in standard in cultural heritage management and enhancement models, creating both greater cooperation between the public entities involved and between the public entities and the private players, in order to optimise available resources.

With regard to the first point, the province of Ragusa has shown considerable resilience to the crisis that also affects the tourist sector, over time maintaining the number of foreign presences and recording a constant and significant increase in accommodation available other than classic hotels (farmhouse accommodation and B&Bs). There appears to be only a weak, or even non-existent system strategy, however, to direct tourist flows and demand towards a more sustainable, responsible and innovative type of tourism. The current offer is based on a short, fragmented, weak and uncompetitive chain compared to the innovative content and services linked to the offer of cultural assets.

The second point, regarding the economic synergy between public and private funding, as Soliman (2011) suggests in relation to the increase in the types of film tourism, could introduce forms of free taxation and special incentives for film productions rather than resorting to emergency laws to favour productions, as used in the Ragusa area.

What is described above represents the initial trials of innovation in the cultural heritage sector, which, as stated by Connell and Meyer (2009), in order to be effective must not cause any cultural or environmental damage to the heritage, but rather have a greater enhancement effect on them. The data found shows the parties’ attention to types of historical and architectural heritage protection, on the one hand, and on the other a lack of attention for the territories and landscape that are not included in the “Protocol of Understanding” signed by the town councils in the Hyblaean area. At the same time, urban planning policies do not often interact with territorial and environmental asset protection and enhancement policies.

In light of the considerations made, rather than referring to a condition of “hyperreality” (Baudrillard 1983; Soja 2000), owing to the spatial repercussions that it has on the area, the relationship between image and reality created by the TV series “Inspector Montalbano” on South-Eastern Sicily is more a case of evoking a post-reality, where the parts of reality tend to become more tenuous than the imaginary ones which, to the contrary, seems to be increasingly real.

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