

## Rural landscape and countryside: promotion opportunity and tourism development. An example from Apulia and Basilicata

### Abstract

*Audiovisual products can be an important mean of communication and territorial promotion. The representation of the localities within the audiovisual products contributes to placing them in the collective imaginary, often loading them with a deep symbolic-emotional significance. It can generate the desire to visit the scene location in the member of the audience, promoting the tourism development of the localities absorbed in the audiovisual project. This share plans to analyse the effects of the audiovisual productions, especially cinematographic ones, on the promotion and the exploitation of the rural areas, and on their transformation into tourist destinations of excellence. It coincides with the recent drift, spreads in the new global economic order; to consider the “soft” territorial elements such as authenticity and local identity, like source of competitive advantage. Although the attention of the audiovisual production towards the country landscape was significant over the years (there are several films of thirties which relate the country landscape in order to spread the Fascist idea of modernization), there isn't a copious literature about the cinematographic use of the rural character and about the effects of this use on the territory, and yet the countryside is the background of many feature films, videos and documentaries. Therefore it can be particularly interesting to analyse some of those audiovisual products, which making the countryside their leit motiv and carrying out precise politics of territorial marketing and systemic strategies of destination management, can contribute or have just made a contribution to promotion and touristic development of the rural areas.*

**Keywords:** Rural landscape, Audiovisual products, Tourism development.

### Introduction

Audiovisual products can be considered an important means of publicizing and promoting territories. The modality with which such products represent places, helps place them in the common imagination, often charging them with strong emotive and symbolic value. It generates in the viewer a desire to visit the places in the shots, thus increasing tourism development of the places involved in the audiovisual project.

As pointed out by Butler (1990), using visual media to promote a tourist destination has always been a very common practice that evolved with technological progress. For example, the paintings and the drawings spread during the Grand Tour period, between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, have not only been an important documentary source but, as photographs and postcards, they also contributed to mould and spread the imagines of numerous places. The coming of cinema as well as television have strengthened the promotion of the territory further by the media, thanks to the enormous power

of involvement of cinema's language and to the possibility of reaching a vast and heterogeneous audience.

Out of the main tourist routes, rural areas could significantly take advantage of the camera and transform, as has happened in other cases, into “par excellence” tourist destinations thanks to specific territorial marketing and to a strategic and planned tourist offering. In this context, the geographer can play a precious role: through his analytical and interpretative skills, he can effectively identify those territorial elements which, promoted through a film, could make a place more attractive from the tourist point of view. Besides, it is important to stress the centrality held by the landscape, a very important geographic concept, within cinematic productions. It goes further than the simple space or natural set design and, as per Arecco in 2009, “it often becomes the privileged interlocutor and the mirror of the characters, a living and irreplaceable presence in the narrative articulation”.

Although the attention of the cinematic eye towards rural life has been significant through-



out the years (for example, there were many films made in the 1930s, which told the story of rural landscapes to transmit their 'Italian-ness' and passed on a message of modernization, as required by fascist propaganda), there is not much literature about cinematic usage of rural settings and its effects on the area, though the countryside and rural spaces are the backgrounds of numerous feature films, TV dramas, video clips and documentaries.

It can turn out to be particularly interesting from the geographical point of view to look into the ways that cinema tells about the landscape and defines the places, paying particular attention to the countryside and the rural landscape. These have always represented a meaningful reality in literature and visual arts in Italy. In order to do so, emphasis will be put on how the representation of the rural territories has changed in the world of cinema, by giving a brief outline of the main films that told the story of the peasant world in the last century. Furthermore, analyzing some recent cinematic cases, it will be shown how films can or have become real tools of territorial promotion.

### **The country and the peasant culture in twentieth century italian cinema**

In the first half of the twentieth century, the peasant world was in the centre of cinematic representations and strongly conditioned by the ideology and the propaganda of the fascist regime. It was aimed at spreading an idyllic image of life in the country, enriched by the most common stereotypes of the rural world. An example is Alessandro Blasetti's "Sole", released in 1929, the first big fascist film centred on land reclamation in Agro Pontino. It was an example of the sort of advertisement of the fascist politics for the recovery of the swampy and malarial areas. Even at that time, when there were no "talkies", Mussolini understood the importance of the image and its capacity to fascinate and condition man. He considered cinema as a powerful medium and defined it as "the most powerful arm of the State".

This sort of mythical image of the countryside, shown in the cinema of the 20s or 30s, is also present in "Terra di nessuno" (1939) by Mario Baffico. This is set in the Tuscan Maremma area and it shows peasants and landowners happily cooperating. It completely ignores the abuses done on labourers and the hard life in the fields.

The realist cinema of the postwar years, on the other hand, moves away once and for all from the

sweetened representation of the rural landscape, typical of the regime's cinema which showed an unnatural and unreal image of Italy. According to De Martino (1952), it mainly dwells on the urban space, by telling the stories of the popular classes who lived in the suburbs of the city or the peasant lower bourgeoisie. The trend to tell the Italian reality in a quite documentary style finds its utmost expression in the neorealist films, characterized by the abandonment of the studios in favour of location shots. In films shot on location, there are local non-professional actors everyday life stories are narrated. Film directors like Visconti, De Santis and Lattuada, take interest again in the country life and the main social problems of that age. An important example is "Riso Amaro" (1949) by De Santis, which tells the story of the hard life of the workers in the paddy fields of the great plains of Vercelli. It gives the rural landscape and life a foreground role in the film.

In this film, the rural landscape and agricultural life are undisputed protagonists of the narration in line with the trend spread in the cinema of those years, when the area was given a prominent role. Some examples are "Il grido" (1957) and "L'avventura" (1960) by Michelangelo Antonioni. He turns upside down the traditional relation picture-background, giving great importance to the film space in his films to the detriment of main actors who sometimes end-up getting lost among images of the places.

With the industrialization linked economic boom of the 1960s, the look of the camera turns to urban centres and the peasant world ends-up playing a secondary role in cinema. The only meaningful film works linked to the rural environment, as epic tales of the peasant world are "Novecento" (1976) by Bernardo Bertolucci set in the Emilian lowlands, which recounts the passage from rural society to the modern one, and "L'albero degli Zoccoli" (1978) by Ermanno Olmi. This film shows the life of Bergamo's countryside by making it as real as possible with the use of dialect and a faithful reconstruction of the rural environment of that time. Rural life gets a main role again in some films by the Taviani brothers, like "Padre Padrone" (1977) and "Kaos" (1984), which show Sardinian and Sicilian culture and the rural world. Another film by Taviani, "La notte di San Lorenzo" (1982), tells the story of a group of peasants evicted from their places and puts the Tuscan countryside at the centre of the film.

From the 1980s, films set in the rural environment start disappearing from Italian cinematography and the country, which only appears hastily in



some comedies or in road movies, leaves the protagonist's place to the urban space, which better lends itself to telling stories of contemporary man.

From this short panorama on films with a rural setting, the centrality of relationships between the land and men is evident. The rural landscapes considered are not limited to the physical elements of the land. Rather, it is something more complex that involves geographical and topographic aspects typical of the territory in which the narrative is set. It also shows the social relations and practices (habits, rites, activities) outlining the identity of the human protagonists in the stories told. It is basically a landscape where rurality gets a strongly emotional and often nostalgic treatise. Moreover, rural life and nature, with its wheat fields, the centuries-old olive trees and paddy fields, sometimes gets a positive meaning. This resurrects the image of a healthy and harmonious life, rich in values and traditions, sometimes symbolic of isolation and desolation.

### **Cinema as a factor of promotion of the rural world**

Twentieth century films, which today sort-of represent a collection of "historical documents", contributed, probably subconsciously, to defining and spreading images of the territories and landscapes described. Numerous studies show that cinema contributes to the production of a place's image by exploiting the landscape potential. It can represent a fundamental element in the process of a place's tourist development. In fact, it can act as a motivator and a factor of critical selection in the decision process that makes an individual choose a tourist destination (Beeton 2005; Butler 1990; Gartner 1993; Kim and Richardson 2002).

What is said above is particularly true in the new global economic setting spurred by the ongoing economic crisis, through which rural areas should have important development opportunities through audiovisual products. They would make for their own landscape and territories elements which stand them out, such as local identities, authenticity and traditions, which can represent important attractive factors. The audiovisual production sector seems to have grasped this potential, considering the newly-born attention that the cinematic eye has turned towards rural realities over the last few years, making the country the main focus of numerous feature films, documentaries, TV films and musical videos. Moreover, this sector is becoming increasingly a pre-selected and privileged interlocutor of the territories, thanks to the

intervention of the film commissions, institutions born to attract cinematic productions through activities of territorial promotion, by giving them technical and organizational support, services and in some cases, financial support for the realization of a film. Among these, even rural areas are acquiring the awareness of the enormous potential within their own landscapes and are starting-up a series of marketing drives, in a systematic and integrated manner intended to promote their territories and transform them into tourist destinations.

This is well demonstrated by what happened to the growing and wine producing and processing part of the Californian landscape, which became protagonist of the Oscar winning film "Sideways", by the American director Alexander Payne. Released in America in 2004, it is considered one of the most interesting of cinetourist successes in the world. The film is an out-and-out film of travelling, which gained huge success among audiences and critics; it tells the story of two forty-year-olds, Jack and Miles, who travel in the county of Santa Barbara in California in the run-up to a wedding. They travel along the "route of wine", characterized by rows of vines and bunches of grapes, cellars rich with wooden casks and companies producing black Pinot wine. The film is an example of how the synergy between rural landscapes, local institutions and cinematic productions can generate a unique occasion for development and enhancement of an area. All the actors involved in the film project, in fact, have been able to seize, from the beginning, the potential of film to promote tourist development in the rural area where the film is set.

The promotion of the territory has not only taken place through the images, but through the contents of the screenplay as well. These have tried to respect the local identity as much as possible and mostly use the actual places of the story, engaging many residents in order to make the images as accurate as possible. Even the film's release, the Film Commission and the Conference and Visitors Bureau of Santa Barbara (the former is interested in attracting TV and cinematic productions to the territory and the latter deals with tourism and congresses) undertook a series of actions intended to promote the film and to generate curiosity among viewers, the media and sector operators. There were, for example, articles in the national and international print which reached a potential audience of over 25 million people, meetings with the local Chambers of Commerce and the projection of the film preview at the fair of "World Travel Market", dedicated to tourist industry.

Within days of the film's release, when early



box office figures foretold the huge success that the film would have had at international level, there was a creation of the “Sideways map”. This geographic map plotted the eighteen places mentioned in the film, distributed on paper and online, downloadable from the website [www.santa-barbara.com](http://www.santa-barbara.com). Enjoyed immediate success.

Moreover, a tourist route of the protagonists’ tracks was suggested, involving the food-and-wine operators present in the production. A website dedicated to the film was created, where a stay at the film’s locations and local wines mentioned by the protagonists could be bought.

Although economic investment in the activities of film promotion have been minimal, a little more than \$23,000 dollars, the international success of “Sideways”, generated a significant economic spin-off for the rural areas involved in the shots. In the 12-18 months following the release of the film, there was a 15% increase in the total tourism related earnings in the County of Santa Barbara that is about \$202 million dollars per year (Rocco, 2006) and the creation of over 50 different tourist packages.

Actually, the majority of initiatives put to use before and after the release of the film, aimed at promoting the Californian wine region’s tourism potential, turned-out to be particularly effective. They addressed a specific audience: over 30-years-of age, with medium to high level of cultural literacy and connoisseurs of wine. Studies have shown that, depending on the narrative structure and the setting of the film, it is possible to make a selection of the viewers that will affect the process of the formation of a tourist destination.

Also, we must not forget that, even in this case, the film ended up affecting the perception of the image of the wine area of Santa Barbara. It is now synonymous with a healthy lifestyle, marked by the slow rhythm of nature and high quality food, but also by the whole of California, which has appeared far from the stereotyped image of long and busy beaches and violent cities, shown through numerous films.

The choice of extolling and promoting the rural landscape and the typical European model of peasant life through cinema, versus the urban one, was already shown in the film “Under the Tuscan Sun”, directed by Audrey Wells in 2003. The film, set mainly in the city of Cortona, in the province of Arezzo, tells the story of an American writer who, having arrived in Italy after parting from her husband, is fascinated by the beauty of the Tuscan countryside and decides to completely change her life and buy an old farmhouse. The

feature film, even if dripped with numerous clichés about Italy, has represented an effective tool of promotion of the rural landscape of Tuscany and Italy in general, especially in the United States, thanks to the contribution of the numerous articles appeared in the foreign print media, which extolled the postcard image of the Tuscan countryside and that showed how the vision of the film encouraged to book a trip to Italy immediately.

In the Italian film industry of the mid 1990s, areas were shown in the film exclusively for script purposes, having little impact on tourism. They were produced in a spontaneous and uncontrolled way. On the other hand, frequent are the cases where rural areas play a proactive role in the creation of TV and cinema works. They became part of the film project. In fact, films within rural environment have proliferated since then. An example is the film “Come le formiche - wine and kisses”, by the young Neapolitan director Ilaria Borrelli, released in June 2007. The film, almost entirely shot in the frame of the Todini Relais, situated in an estate of over 1,300 hectares at 6 km away from Todi, tells the story of two sisters who, in order to rescue the heavily indebted family-run business, decide to produce the Rubro again, a wine made with an ancient vine. This film is interesting for this analysis because it was born from the spur of local authorities and some economic entrepreneurs who wanted a cinematic work which could show the beauty of the rural landscape of Umbria, with its villages on knolls, terraced olive groves, tidy rows of vines, which could promote the Rubro local wine and a castle of 1300.

The will and the engagement of the Region of Umbria to promote and enhance its own rural territory through audiovisuals, is further shown by a documentary called “Brufa – La campagna scolpita” (“Brufa – the carved countryside”), which shows the integration between characters of the Umbrian countryside and contemporary art. This meeting started in 1987, the year when the show of “Sculptori a Brufa” (“Sculptors in Brufa”) was conceived. Director Giovanni Pulcioni’s camera documents the “aesthetic” transformation of the landscape of Brufa, hamlet of the Council of Torgiano, a world famous old fortified medieval village and a wine centre following the installation of famous contemporary sculptors and through interviews of the village’s inhabitants, tells how they accepted those sculptures.

In order to attract a larger number of visitors, apart from the documentary, a route to follow on foot or by bicycle has been created. It is called “La



Strada del Vino e dell'Arte" ("The Road of Wine and Art"), which, among sinuous hills covered in vines or olive groves, it leads to the discovery of one of the most original landscapes and the artistic experiences in the world and it celebrates wine as an element of continuity with the traditional culture.

### **An example from Apulia and Basilicata**

Apulia, for its scenic beauty and the heterogeneity of its landscape and for its artistic and architectural excellence, can easily be the ideal natural setting for cinematography. In recent years, the Apulia Film Commission, founded in 2007, took numerous initiatives to attract film productions in the Apulian territory. This has reinforced Apulia's role of undisputed leader in the cinema sector.

In particular, the rural landscape of south-central Apulia, with its red land, the centuries-old olive groves, the dry-stone walls which mark the plots of land, the old farms and the "trulli" (typical rural houses of Alberobello, a village in Apulia), is immediately recognizable in many successful films and ended up identifying, even if erroneously, the whole Apulian rural landscape, by attracting a growing number of tourists, especially foreigners. It is in this wonderful rural environment that, for example, some of the most famous scenes of the Italian record box office successful film "Che bella giornata" (2011) by the Apulian comic actor Checco Zalone were shot. He has further contributed to reinforce the role of the "trulli", ancient stone constructions mainly concentrated in the area of Valle d'Itria, as icons of the Apulian landscape.

Alberobello's historic centre, in the province of Bari and registered as a Unesco World Heritage site in 1996, has been the background of some scenes of the famous soap opera "The Bold and the Beautiful". Last year, some episodes were set there, between the coast and the Apulian countryside, particularly in a manor farm situated in the territory of Fasano, in the province of Brindisi. This represented a very important promotion of the area and appreciation of the tourist image of Apulia in the world, considering the fact that the soap opera is broadcast in over a hundred countries and is watched by over 300 million viewers.

Among the endless wheat expanses which characterize the "Tavoliere" area in the northern part of the region, in the province of Foggia, some of the famous film scenes of "Io non ho paura" (2003) by Gabriele Salvatores were shot. It is set

between Apulia and Basilicata, between the valley of the Ofanto river and the Vulture range, characterized by wheat expanses and ancient manors, testimony of the rural culture. Borgo Segezia, one of the most well-preserved rural villages in Italy, founded in the fascist era to transform the local labourers into State peasants, has hosted the shooting of "Mio fratello è figlio unico" (2007) by Daniele Lucchetti.

These films focused on the rich and varied Apulian rural landscape, along with its people's traditions helped promote the region as a tourist destination. The Apulia Film Commission, created in 2008, a cinema tourist guide called "Effetto Puglia ("Apulia Effect"). A cinetourist guide for a region worth it to travel around", where ten tourist itineraries are presented. They cover the whole Apulian territory from the north to the south, along the tracks of the famous films shot in these places and that was also presented at the Cannes film Festival meeting with outstanding success.

At the sixty-fifth International Cinema Festival of Berlin, which took place in 2015, in the section called "Panorama Special", the preview of the feature film by the Apulian director Edoardo Winspeare named "In grazia di Dio", was presented to much critical acclaim. The film, entirely shot in the Salento area, in the area of Giuliano di Lecce and Tricase, tells the story of four brave women, who face a moment of economic crisis which affected their family who moved to the country to work the land and live on bartering of their products. The narration is immersed in an authentic rural setting, made up of red land, ancient olivegroves, manors with dry-stone walls, as Salvatrice, the eldest of the women, says, they were built stone by stone. It is pronounced by the sounds and the time of nature, without the need to use music or artificial lights. Country life is represented in all its own difficulty: the four protagonists are willing to injure themselves and sweat, to use the plough or the spade to look for the fruits of the land. They are willing to ruin their femininity, to stink of horse manure, as long as they live as the title of the film suggests "by the grace of God".

Even the region of Basilicata has decided to take its chances with cinema, in order to promote its internal rural areas. This has been, in fact, one of the objectives of the successful film "Basilicata coast to coast" (2010) by the actor-director Rocco Papaleo, who tells the trip of four friends in Lucania, along 233 km leaving from Maratea (on the Tyrrhenian slope) to reach Scanzano on foot (on the Ionian slope of the region).

Certainly, it seems and is oversimplified con-



sidering “Basilicata coast to coast” as exclusively a tool of territorial and tourist promotion of Basilicata. However, it is true that the film puts the region not only at the centre of the screenplay, but the stories of the protagonists and the narrative plots have the function of giving visibility to the Lucania landscape.

The choice of using the region’s name in the title of the film creates an inseparable link between the narrative and the area, which is not limited to being a background and setting, but it carries precise values. The choice of giving precise geographical names at the beginning of the film has been very important. Supplying precise geographical indications and toponymy related to this region, which was not always known, by focusing its position on a geographical map of Italy, underlined what Papaleo said “... Basilicata exists ...”.

From the cinema tourist point of view, the intention was to promote the image of Basilicata, extolling its authentic life, the importance of the human relationships and the old values. Films were not set in the most famous places of the region, like Matera, already protagonist of successful films such as “The Passion”, by Mel Gibson, but in the internal rural areas, in the councils of Craco, Lauria and Aliano, which have a low tourist visibility both at local and international level.

Even in this case, the synergy between cinematic production and local institutions has been fundamental. The Gal institutions (Groups of Local Actions) have a common objective: to promote an image. Basilicata can be characterized by its alternative lifestyle. Tourists should be able to appreciate its slow pace of life and the nuances of its rural setting. Moreover, we must point out that the representation of Basilicata in the film is perfectly in line with the strategy of the Company of Lucania tourist promotion, interested in promoting high quality rural tourism linked to its landscape, food and wine.

The impact that the film has had in terms of visibility and of exhibition of Basilicata has been very important, because the film has been among the first twenty films with box office success in 2010 and at an international level, it participated to numerous Festivals, gaining important accolades, such as the “Silver Ribbon” and the “Donatello’s David”. The promotion of the film has continued even after the release and the highly successful agreement reached with Alitalia to show the film during some of its flights as part of a season of “Made in Italy” films. Meetings were organized with journalists from the main travel and tourism magazines aimed at advertising the internal Luca-

nian areas. Moreover, the protagonists’ itinerary for the film spurred several ad-hoc tourist itineraries. These cater for those who wish to live the emotion aroused while watching the film.

“Basilicata coast to coast” certainly addresses niche and responsible tourism. It is for those aware of the beauty and uncontaminated landscapes, the authenticity of the places and environmental sustainability. This is expanding continually and can represent the reference target for Lucanian tourism, as it opens new markets. It is difficult to measure the impact of a cinematic film on tourism. According to a survey commissioned by the Eni Enrico Mattei Foundation on the opportunities of the movie-induced tourism in Basilicata, 50% of the questioned tourist related businesses registered increased activity after the release of the film. These mainly included hotels, restaurants and farm holiday sites, which represent around ninety percent of those who said they have had economic advantages from Papaleo’s film.

## Conclusions

From the brief analysis carried-out on some of the most significant audiovisual products with a rural setting, there appears a dual use of the rural landscape in a film project. On the one hand, it can have an accessory role, representing the background in which stories take place and making a sort of an illustrative frame. From another point of view, it can become the absolute narrative protagonist, with a dramaturgic value. From images of the films studied, it emerges that in the majority of the cases, the rural landscape is not only a physical land element or a geographical or toponymical aspects typical of the given narrative setting, but includes the inseparable relationship between the land and the man, those relationships and those typical social practices of rural life that identify the human protagonists of the stories. Recently, films have contributed to imbibe a positive image of the rural landscape and the country, very distant from the vision spread between the 1960s and the end of the 1980s, the time of the economic boom that has considered rural life as a symbol of isolation and desolation. The rural landscape, with its cultivated fields, the century-old olive groves and the rows of vines, the paddy fields, the old manors and the slow rhythms of nature, remind the image of a healthy and harmonious life, rich in values, traditions and authenticity.

The same rural areas are acknowledging the enormous potential of their landscapes and, in



some cases, have taken marketing actions to promote their area and turn it into 'par excellence' tourist destination, having a proactive role in the creation of TV and cinematographic works.

Transformation of a successful film into a promotional tool is not an automatic or spontaneous phenomenon, but it requires the cooperation of multiple stakeholders. Institutions, tour operators, film producers and regional experts, among others, need to work together in a systematic way with common objectives. This is particularly so for rural areas, which are often little known to the greater audience but have enormous tourist potential. Movie-induced tourism and film setting could represent a development occasion for the areas involved. Handled correctly, this could result not just in occasional tourism, but as something lasting, organized and sustainable for the territory.

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