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The Mini-Hollywood of the Mediterranean": Strategies and Potentialities of Film Industry in Malta

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at evaluating the impact of film industry on local economy and territorial attractiveness of Malta. The Mediterranean archipelago has resulted to be one of the preferred film locations in Europe, thanks to the versatility of its natural and urban landscapes but above all the official support given by institutional players through the creation of bodies such as the Malta Film Commission. Thus, the paper deepens the strategies developed on the institutional level to support the film industry, by underlining both the achievements and the still enduring contradictions. It also aims at evaluating whether Malta's reputation as the "mini-Hollywood of the Mediterranean" has also produced an increase in movie tourists.

Keywords: Malta, Mediterranean Settings, Movie Tourism, Film Industry, Film Commission

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1. Malta, a Mediterranean cinematic setting

As a small-scale archipelago situated midway between Europe and Africa, Malta has always played a strategic role in the controversial geopolitical theatre of the Mediterranean basin, as it is even showed by the succession of past dominations that left long lasting marks on its urban fabric and cultural heritage. Widely known as an attractive tourism destination thanks to its temperate climate and efficient tourist infrastructures, the archipelago has recently imposed itself as one of the preferred locations for film productions, thanks to a well-established movie industry strongly supported by local actors.

Thus, the paper traces the history of Malta as a film location, by underlining the role played by institutional actors in supporting the local movie industry as well as highlighting current challenges due to the potentialities – partly unexpressed – in terms of movie tourism.

As far as the methodology is considered, after a brief analysis of current trends in the Maltese tourism sector, the paper is based on the comparative study of different official (statistical data) and unofficial sources (such as governmental reports, institutional websites and advertising, newspaper articles) in order to evaluate potentialities and critical aspects of the movie industry, particularly in terms of film tourism. Finally, a case study aims at exemplifying the role of cinema in (re)moulding uses and narratives of landscapes.

First of all, Malta as a film location seems to epitomize the deeply-rooted and osmotic relationship between cinema and landscape since the latter is often regarded as a kind of text whose meanings and symbols are given by the cinematic gaze.

In effect, "landscape as text is the dominant metaphor in film geography because it provides a means to explore the intersection between narration and geography. While a useful and appropriate device to engage landscape, the metaphor also works to constrain the discourse surrounding cinematic landscapes" (Lukinbeal, 2005, p. 3).

Notably, the cinematic gaze mirrors the intrinsic *imageability* of places (Lynch, 1960), since the evocative power of cinema fosters unprecedented narratives of landscapes. So, cinema can be regarded as a kind of an aesthetic cartography of space, filtered by the director's personal feeling about a territory. Turri (1998) underlines the "reflective" capacity of cinema, that permits to (re)produce different landscapes and make them "usable" for a wide range of people. The inherent theatricality of landscape is even more sublimated by the cinematic fictional narrative, that uses it as a support for the plot, or even as a kind of another character. Thus, landscape can become an undeniable piece of the narrative patchwork (see also Harper, Rayner, 2010).

From a strictly geographic perspective, cinematic landscapes are actually mere *screenscapes* which do not represent a perfect mimesis of real landscapes, deeply modified by the highly subjective gaze – both of directors/scriptwriters and viewers (Dell'Agnese, 2006; Graziano, 2011; Nicosia, 2012).

A basic element of cinematic space is the *mise-en-scène* or "staging in action", originated in the nineteenth-century theatre, which represents in film studies the constituent element composing a shot as well as creating a specific "screen space."

So, "amongst other prerequisites, including lighting and movement, props and costumes, setting is a crucial aspect of *mise-en-scène*. The setting is sometimes privileged as the leading character in a film, functioning not merely as an incidental background for the main action, but as an expressive component of the narrative itself" (Peckham, 2004, p. 420). Cinema actively contributes to the narratives of a territory, more than simply reflecting it: "the city has been shaped by the cinematic form, just as cinema owes much of its nature to the historical development of the city" (Clarke, 1997, p. 2).

Apart from the implications in terms of (re)configuration and (re)semantization of places, cinema implies substantial consequences in the economic and social structures of the film location, above all in the tourism sector. This is partly due to the increasingly widespread phenomenon of the movie or film-induced tourism (Cirelli et al., 2013).

According to Beeton (2005, p. 9), "it is generally accepted that the term 'movie-induced tourism' relates to on-location tourism that follows the success of a movie made (or set) in a particular region". Placing a destination in a film is the ultimate in tourism product placement (Morgan, Pritchard, 1998; Riley et al., 1998; Kim, Richardson, 2003; Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004). According to Hudson and Brent Richie (2006, p. 387) "product placement is an emerging phenomenon, and has been defined as the planned entries of products into movies or television shows that may influence viewers' product beliefs and/or behaviors favourably", in a more sophisticated, targeted and effective way than traditional advertising methods (Karrh et al., 2003). It can even be regarded as a new form of "cultural landscape", (re)written and moulded by the director's gaze as well as by the spectators/tourists' one (Jewell, McKinnon, 2008).

The most evident impact of film tourism is generally the increase in visitors' numbers that can benefit the local economy of the film location, apart from being an enduring tool adaptable to alleviate problems of seasonality (Beeton, 2001; 2005).

Besides the impact of movie tourism on the visitors' number, shooting a film in a destination implies other consequences in the local economy. The creation of institutions supporting the film industry, such as Film commissions, together with a system of financial incentives, funds and marketing strategies can transform a territory - provided with natural and anthropic resources with a cinematic fascination - in a worldwide competitive location.

This is the case of Malta, that has been recently exploiting its unique cultural heritage, urban settings and natural landscapes as ideal settings for film production thanks to the strong support of institutional players.

As a "veritable micro-state" (Pace, 2006), the Maltese archipelago differs from other European micro-states due to its small-scale and geographical insularity - and peripherality (Eccardt, 2005) - that, together with its colonial past, "have also, to some extent, impacted upon the island's institutional structures, specifically those of church and state" (Cauchi, 2013, p. 49).

Malta's economy, the smallest in the Eurozone (CIA, The World Factbook, 2014), is mainly based on foreign trade, manufacturing and tourism. Financial services industry has grown in recent years, even avoiding contagion from the European financial crisis due to the fact that its debt is mostly held domestically and Maltese banks have low

exposure to the sovereign debt of peripheral European countries (*ibidem*). Furthermore, Malta boasts low unemployment rates if compared with other European countries (6.4%), and generally the economic growth has recovered since the 2009 global recession.

In recent years Malta has been privileging the development of service industry (73.3% of GDP with 76.4% of the total labour force) and tourism, a very key sector of its economy (*ibidem*). The archipelago has built a strong reputation as a tourism destination thanks to its temperate climate as well as the extreme richness of its cultural and historical heritage, apart from the strong support of institutional players, as it is showed by official policies. The National Tourism Policy 2012-2016 is "a proactive, strategic and objective framework which aims at creating a stronger competitive edge, higher-value added, higher-quality and excellence in tourism" (Ministry for Tourism, Culture and the Environment, 2012). Since 2007, tourism policy has aligning Malta in line with neighbouring industries abroad by heralding a number of changes, most notably the facilitation of low cost travel to Malta and the widespread use of internet technology as a means of promoting and booking holidays.

According to Malta Tourism Authority (2014) the total tourist expenditure in 2013 was equal to 1, 440, 379 euros, with a tourist expenditure per capita of 910 Euros. In the same year the number of people permanently employed in the sector was equal to 5,339, plus 3,462 of part time employers, without taking into account the workers of the satellite activities, notably food and beverage services activities (in 2013, 4,544 full time workers and 6,947 part time workers).

In spite of the global recession, the number of inbound tourists has been increasing for the last three years, as shown by the tab. 1, with an increase from 2012 and 2013 of 9.6%. Even tourist guestnights have increased (+ 8.7%), with an average length of stay of 8.1, as well as the tourist total expenditure (+ 8.6%).

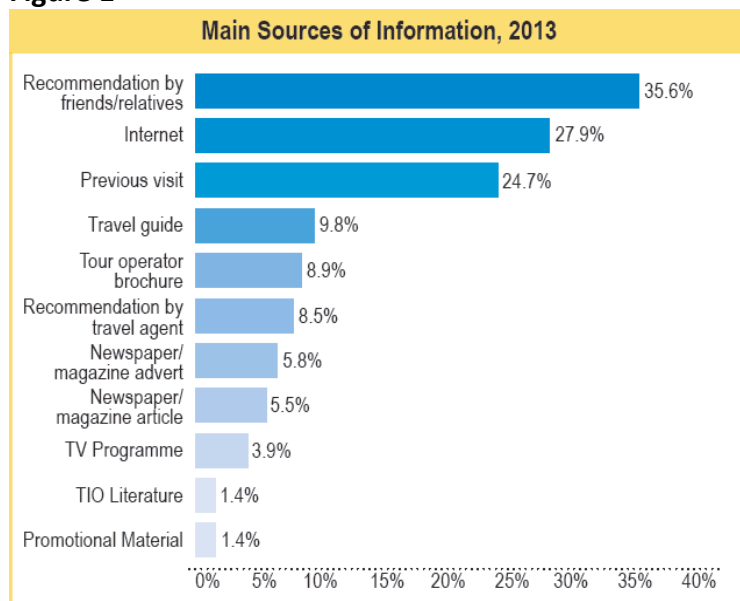
Table 1: Main Indicators of Inbound Tourism to Malta

	2011	2012	2013	Change 2013/12 %
Inbound Tourists	1.415.019	1.443.414	1.582.153	9.6
Tourist Guesrtnights	11.241.472	11.859.521	112890.268	8.7
Average length of stay	7.9	8.2	8.1	-1.2
Tourist Expenditure (€'000s)	1.221.321	1.326.474	1.440.379	8.6

source: Malta Tourism Authority, 2014

Apart from the well-established tourist flows coming from Europe (+ 5.4%), the market share of international tourist arrivals that has increased the most is the Asian and Pacific one, with a growth of 6.2% in 2013, while a meaningful increase has been recorded with regard even to African flows (+ 5.4%).

Figure 1

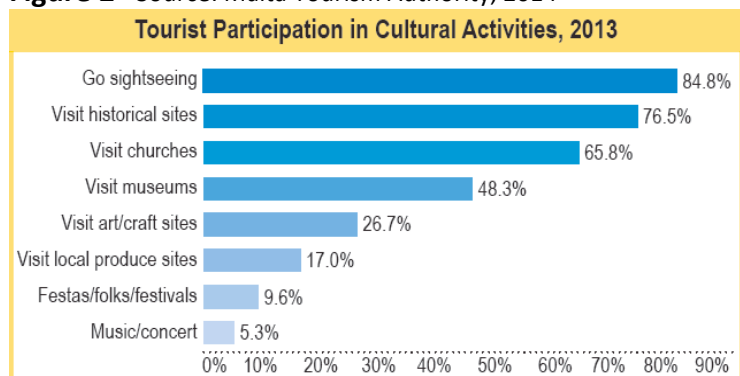


Source: Malta Tourism Authority, 2014

In spite of the growing role played by the Internet in building the brand of Malta and consequently orienting the tourist's choices (27.9%), the most relevant source of information about the archipelago is the word of mouth or the recommendations by friends/relatives (35.6%), apart from the experience of a previous visit (24.7%, fig. n. 1). Furthermore, the main purpose of visit is holiday, with an increase of 9.8% in 2013, followed by business (+2.5%).

With regard to the incoming tourists' profile, the first is age group is 45-64, followed by the 25-44, even though the age group which has grown the most is that of over 65. The agreeable climate is the first motivation for choosing Malta (57.0%), apart from the historic and cultural heritage (39,2%) and the relatively affordable costs (32,1%). Activities such as sightseeing, visiting historical and artistic sites or generally related to cultural heritage record high levels of participation among the inbound tourists, thus challenging the well-established label of *sea-sun-sex* country that has dominated in past decades (Fig. n. 2).

Figure 2 Source: Malta Tourism Authority, 2014



All in all, the current picture of Maltese tourism sector reveals a good endurance in terms of economic performances, employment levels, percentage and growingly differentiated tourists' typology, above all if considered the general recession of the Eurozone. This is partly due to the local actors' strategic approach aiming at supporting deseasonality and differentiation of the tourist products, increasingly targeted to the practices of "experiential" or "emotional" tourism. According to Ringer (2013, p. 1), tourism's exponential rate of growth worldwide since the 1990's mirrors "the increasing desire among people to engage in meaningful, interactive experiences with the local people in other communities and cultures" (see also Urry, 1990).

Thus, it is not by accident that in recent years Maltese local players have been making several efforts to strongly support movie tourism, regarded as a key sub-sector to enhance local development as well as establishing the country's tourism brand.

2. The "Mediterranean Hollywood": a multifaceted landscape

"Malta has built a reputation as the mini-Hollywood of the Mediterranean". These famous words written by the journalist Daniel Rosenthal in 2002 in *The Times of London* mirrored the already well-established reputation gained by the archipelago in the film industry.

It was in the early twenties that Malta started hosting foreign productions thanks to fine craftsmen, skilled set builders and model makers.

In the late sixties the small and newly independent island was regarded as a low cost alternative to more established production sites such as Italy, Spain and France (Guest, 1968), with the advantage of an extreme landscape versatility which could double for every of the above-mentioned country.

However, for at least forty years, international production remained quite sporadic since any adequate infrastructure and service network was established to attract foreign productions. It was in the early 2000s that the archipelago eventually became a competitor in the film production system on a global scale.

The historical landscape of the Maltese islands, moulded by different past dominations, has proven to be a perfect backdrop above all for productions set in ancient eras, namely featuring the classical Greek and Roman empires or even the ancient Egypt.

The capital of Malta is the very core of the archipelago's locations. Currently the island's major commercial and financial centre, Valletta still retains a timeless atmosphere, fuelled by the grid of narrow streets boasting fine works of art, churches and palaces.

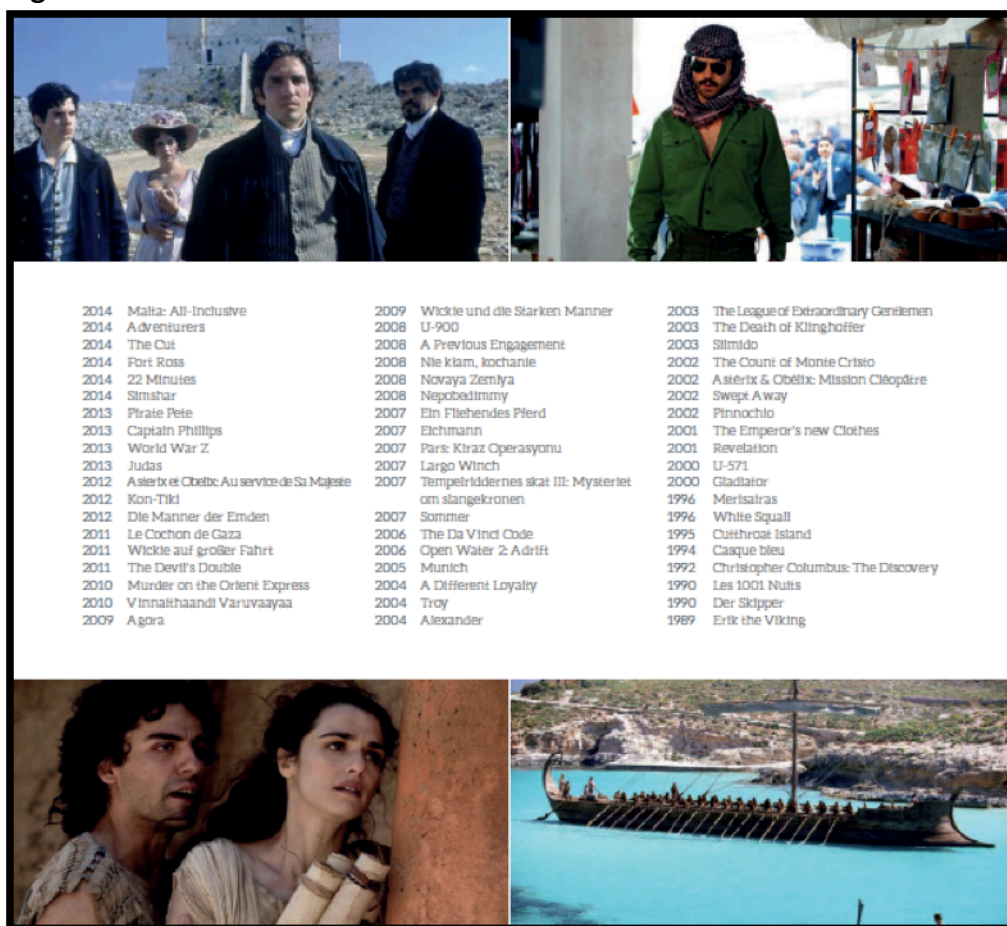
The flexibility of the city Valletta is widely known so that, apart from scenes set in Malta (*The Devil's Double*), its urban setting has doubled for Israel (*World War Z*), Turkey (*Midnight Express*), Peru (*Kon-Tiki*), Rome and Athens (*Munich*).

The islands is also suitable to represent scenes set in 18th and 19th centuries thanks to the High Baroque architecture developed under the rule of the Knights of St John, as happened in the BBC productions *Daniel Deronda* (2002) and *Byron* (2003), or in Kevin Reynolds's *The Count of Monte Cristo* (2002).

Furthermore, the eclectic 19th and 20th architectural style, combining baroques elements with North Africa and Middle East ones, has resulted in a building style made of stone, square, flat-roofed houses that had made the Maltese urban settings highly peculiar.

In 2005, Steven Spielberg chose Malta for shooting its *Munich*, thus exemplifying how the islands are so versatile to be used also as settings for contemporary stories, and not just those set in the more distant past. In Steven Spielberg's film the Maltese islands doubled for contemporary Israel, the West Bank, Beirut, Athens, Cyprus, Spain and Italy within the same production. This also happened with the Canadian production of *A Different Loyalty*, starring Sharon Stone, where different locations around the islands were used to double for 1960's Beirut in its hey-day.

Figure 3: Films shot in Malta from 1989 to 2014



Source: Malta Film Commission, 2014, www.mfc.com.mt

Film production often choose the Malta's majestic Grand Harbour that, notwithstanding the busy port activity, has served as a backdrop for many different productions for the past 60 years. It has doubled for Peru (*Kon-Tiki*), Turkey (*Murder on the Orient Express*) and Marseille (*The Count of Monte Cristo*), apart from having been

chosen by Oliver Stone who had come to Malta in 2003 specifically to film the Grand Harbour for visual effects plate shots for the film *Alexander*.

Figure 4: Films shot in Malta from 1926 to 1989



Source: Malta Film Commission, 2014, www.mfc.com.mt

Among the most known locations, Fort Ricasoli, a 17th century fort by the sea near Rinella Bay, was re-used as the ancient Rome Coliseum in Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000), when even the Emperor's palace and a training school were constructed by following the style of the already existing limestone structures. Thanks to the worldwide success of *Gladiator* and the boom of the classical empires setting genre, Malta was once again re-used as the ancient Rome in TV series about Julius Caesar and Helen of Troy. Malta stand for the ancient Asia Minor city even in the Warner Bros' high-budget production, *Troy*, shot in 2003.

Figure 5: A view of Valletta



Source: T. Graziano, 2014

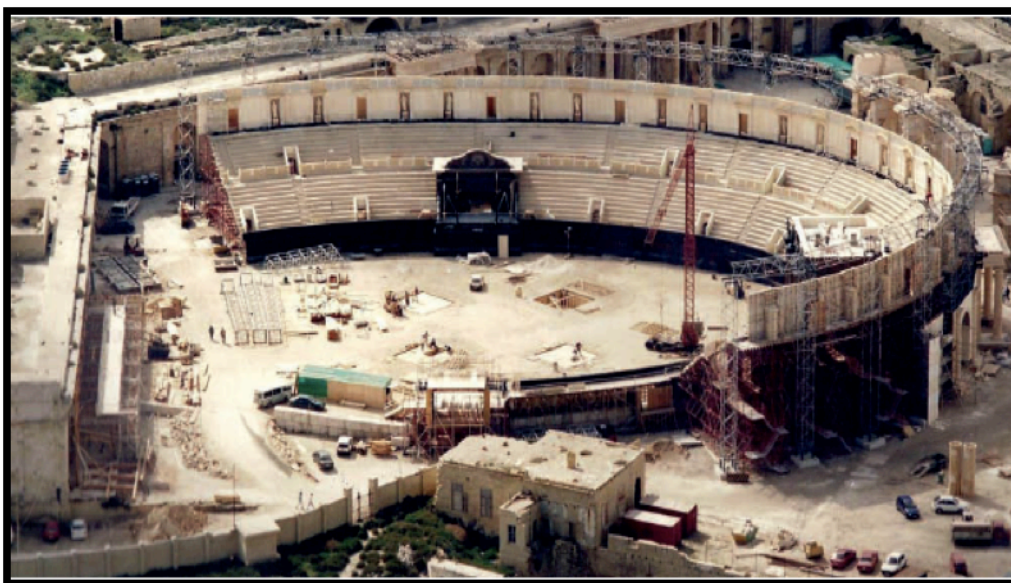
Thanks to *Troy*, the archipelago strengthened its reputation as the ideal set for the epic genre, so that the entire fort was the backdrop of Alejandro Amenábar's *Agora* (2009), standing for Alexandria in 300 AD. The production built a huge set, of which the amphitheatre still remains and is available to productions requiring such a backdrop, while the exterior entrance of the city was recreated over terraced fields in Marsaxlokk.

What is more, in 2010 HBO used it to shoot scenes from their worldwide famous epic fantasy series, *A Game of Thrones*.

Even the sister island of Gozo – the legendary Calipso's island of Homer's *Odyssey* - boasts some of the most famous landmarks which have been eternalized on screen.

From the world famous Azure Window in Dwejra, a 100-metre high natural arch over the sea hollowed out of the Gozo coastline by thousands of years of wind and waves, to the medieval hilltop fortified town of Cittadella, Gozo offers many spectacular views for film makers: *The Game of Thrones*, *Sinbad*, *Byron* and the American television series *The Odyssey* are but a few of the many productions which have been partly filmed in Gozo.

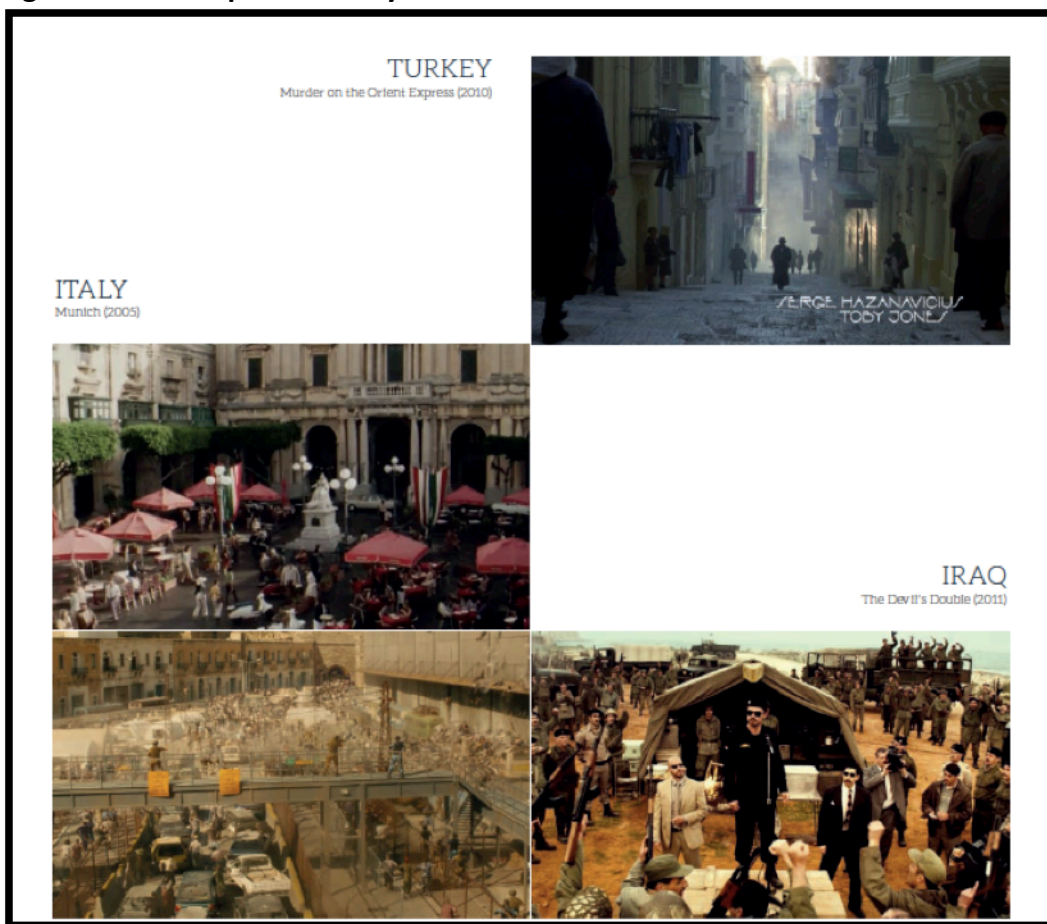
Figure 6: The Fort Ricasoli set



Source: Malta Film Commission 2014, www.mfc.com.mt

Finally, the relationship between Malta and cinema is exemplified by the Kinemastik International Short Film Festival (Cauchi, 2013). Kinemastik is an NGO responsible for a year-round cultural programme based on screenings, talks, exhibitions and concerts about cinema, that culminates with the festival, held in August at various venues around Malta. The highlight of the festival is the Westside Selett weekend, open-air screenings held on the Valletta and Floriana bastions overlooking the Grand Harbour. The main aim of the festival is to link young filmmakers in Malta to the world of cinema and provide them with a platform for their work, through local screenings as well as through worldwide distribution of locally produced work. It is for this reason that the festival has hosted a number of international filmmakers and professionals to provide master classes and workshops for the local industry.

Figure 7: Landscape versatility: Malta can stand for...



Source: Malta Film Commission 2014, www.mfc.com.mt

3. Strategies and tools: from *Malta Film Facilities* to the *Malta Film Commission*

On a general level, in recent years Malta institutional actors have been trying to develop cultural and creative sectors, specifically the audiovisuals, a wide sector encompassing broadcasting, new media, creative online content, film and cinema. Audiovisuals are seen as a significant cultural industry that plays an important cultural and economic role in Malta. This is specifically supported by the Malta's National Cultural Policy (NCP) that acts as a framework for the cultural sector since 2011, through a set of actions and policies finalised to promote art and culture as tools of socio-economic development. The fact that film and cinema are considered in cultural terms and not only in economic ones is the sign of the new approach of institutions towards the film industry, since local actors had previously regarded cinema as a tool to generate inward investment thanks to film servicing. Even though its economic value is not lessened, nowadays cinema is recognised as a cultural product.

Within the Parliamentary Secretariat for Tourism, the *Environment, Culture and Audio-Visual Unit* was established in order to identify some key issues related to the film industry, among which promoting indigenous film production is the most relevant.

Moreover, a *Creative Economy Working Group* was established in 2009 within the Office of Prime Minister to provide a cohesive policy and strategic legislative framework to support the development of the Creative and Cultural Industries. In the *Draft National Strategy*, published in 2012, the need for professionalization in CCIs was underlined.

With a specific regard to film industry strategies, during the early fifties the *Rank Organisation* came to Malta to shoot on location a war-time film titled *The Malta Story*, for which the inlet of Dwejra in Gozo was regarded by producers as the fittest location. However, it was not before 1953 that the crew of another film production made its appearance on the island, bringing a script, *Single Handed*, which was tailed for the local scene.

It was *Treasure in Malta*, an adventure film, that marshalled what may be called the dawn of the film industry in Malta.

The huge potentialities of a local film industry became soon at the core of local actors debates and interests. Thus, in 1964 the *Malta Film Facilities* service company was created by the British special-effects expert Jim Hole, assisted by Paul Avellino, in order to provide logistic support to the international film industry. Later on renamed as *Mediterranean Film Studios*, situated at Rinella on the eastern coast, the company created a huge surface tank facing the sea to shoot in a controlled environment as well as creating the illusion that the on-screen characters were miles out to sea.

After the creation of the first tank in 1964, for the shooting of the film *Raise the Titanic*, another tank was built in 1979, a deep-water giant hole which is the only construction of its kind in the world, followed in 1996 by another indoor insert tank.

In particular, the surface marine tank facing the sea was specifically designed so that the water, sky and horizon appear seamless, eliminating the need of a false backdrop in addition to providing a controlled environment of a water studio without sacrificing the realism of filming in a natural setting.

Figura 8: Mediterranean Film Studios: the surface water tanks



Source: Malta Film Commission, 2014, www.mfc.com.mt

Nowadays, in addition to the three main water tanks, the 90,000 square feet studio complex – which also boasts a vast range of SFX machinery that can create storms effects - have serviced over 200 productions, from features, TV productions and series to documentaries, commercials, music videos and photo shoots.

Apart from the growing worldwide reputation of the MFS, the real turning point of film servicing was the year 1998, because two big-budget production visited the island, Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* and Jonathan Mostow's *U-571*, both issued in 2000. The first was entirely shot in Malta for 11 weeks bringing an inward investment of 28 million dollars. Due to its worldwide impact, *Gladiator* gave the government a strong motivation to really exploit Malta's potential as big-budget film location.

Thus, in 2000, the *Malta Film Commission* (MFC) was established to formally support film productions in shooting in the archipelago. Moreover, a film commissioner was appointed by the Ministry of Economic Services in order to induce economic benefits from inward investments as well as supporting local film industry. In 2000 alone, 5 film, 2 television series and 5 commercial productions visited officially Malta as a potential location.

On the contrary, even though before the creation of the MFC no official records can be found about the number of productions executed in the island, some rough approximations reveal 11 feature films, 4 television series and 11 commercials between 1991 and 1999 (Cauchi, 2013).

At the beginning, MFC was surely less developed than other film commissions. Later on, the extreme variety of natural and urban landscape, the deeply-rooted artisanal craftsmanship, the temperate climate, in addition to the above-mentioned worldwide famous sea-facing water tanks, represented a competitive asset for film productions.

What is more, the tremendous versatility of its historic and natural sites was regarded as an advantage to optimise costs and duration of shooting.

Obviously, the main factor inducing a big-budget production to migrate to foreign shores is the economic advantage (Cauchi, 2013). So, MFC became a government body established by chapter 478 (Act No. 7 of 2005) of the Laws of Malta consisting of an advisory body with the role of advising the Minister responsible for the film sector on policies pertaining to the promotion, development and support of the audiovisual and film servicing industry.

The Malta film Commission Act was even implemented in order to assure financial incentives to foreign productions, by differentiating the island in a increasing network of film locations on the global scale. According to Miller (2005, p.15), "a fiscal incentive communicates that a territory is 'open for business', that is film friendly. In some respects this may seem counter-intuitive, as the presence of a fiscal incentive indicates that a territory is not competing solely on the basis of low costs. So the incentives become a symbol of a territory's film maturity". Thus, foreign producers were offered up to 20 per cent of eligible expenditure of the Malta budget of a qualifying production, as a cash grant once filming was completed.

In 2007, Malta established itself as one of the most appealing European locations since filming in the island assured foreign productions from 20 to 22 per cent of eligible expenditure of the Malta budget of a qualifying production, and 32 per cent for low-budget productions. So, MFC envisaged to attract also smaller and more independent productions to assure a constant flow of shooting in the island. The impact of such financial incentives and tax schemes is quite evident since in 2007 a film shooting was in preparation or in production almost daily (Cauchi, 2013).

As far as the local film industry is concerned, local human resources working for high-budget international productions have the chance to gather expertise to be fully developed for local productions. However, skill gaps of film practitioners in Malta have often been underlined, so that the urgent need for more training has been highlighted, above all for below-the-line workers employed in film servicing and for all areas related to the local film industry.

4. The impact of the film industry on the Maltese economy and the strategies of MFC

As reported by Galea Debono (2005b), according to the film production manager and line producer Malcolm Scerri Ferrante "everyone needs to constantly remind oneself that Malta has a film servicing industry. The term 'film industry' is misleading because it means Malta has an ongoing economic and cultural activity of making its own movies. It does not. It simply services foreign film producers, who are producing foreign films for foreign markets with foreign financing. Of course, we hear about co-productions with Malta, but these are none other than on-paper descriptions, whereby films take advantage of financial schemes abroad by pretending to co-produce with Malta. In essence, there is no real financing coming out of Malta and the Maltese do not have any creative input in the respective movies. These types of 'alternative' co-productions

exist everywhere and are good business for countries where the films are shot but it does not mean that Malta has its own film industry" .

According to the film production manager, in the late nineties the main reasons why producers came to shoot in Malta were language, climate, locations, tanks and economy. Already in the early 2000s, the number of locations were not increasing and the water tanks were no longer unique since in UK and Spain several similar tanks were in construction: "this is why it is so important for Malta to be aggressive with other incentives, such as financial, to compete with other countries that offer the same and much more" (*ibidem*).

It was for these reasons that in the early 2000's the Maltese government developed plans to change Malta from being a mere location for the filming of movies to having a real movie industry (Galea Debono, 2005a).

However, still in 2011, Scerri-Ferrante (2011b) underlined some difficulties in shooting in Malta, notably the scarce availability of local crews and service companies so that it could be more convenient to rent equipment from German, Italy or UK: "the servicing industry needs to mature much further (...) and some Government policies within departments need to be re-configured with the film industry in mind and some locals need to take the film industry less for granted when negotiating their location fees or salaries. Despite its 35-year history of film servicing, the Government has only just started to understand the true potential of this industry".

In spite of the huge number of film productions in June 2011, "the past is no guarantee of the future but this cannot be any truer where Malta's film servicing industry is concerned unless the island makes big strides to keep up with the smart competition" (Scerri-Ferrante, 2011a).

Even though some actions were carried out by local actors, such as training courses, Scerri-Ferrante (*ibidem*) highlighted that they were specifically targeted to support the creation of an "indigenous" industry, whilst the servicing industry catering for foreign productions was still lacking in first-class expertise. "Producers choosing to film in Malta do not seek scriptwriters, creative producers, documentary film-makers or other creative levels of an executive level. They need location managers, production coordinators, unit managers, art directors, camera and grip technicians, to mention only a very few, all of whom must have proper training specific to the film industry".

Goundry (2012) underlined that "the main drawback is that as a small island it does not have a large crew base. Bigger productions often have to import up to half their crew, especially in the not-uncommon event that there are multiple shoots going on across the country".

Even Cauchi (2013, p. 45) underlined that "unlike Hollywood, however, Malta does not have a vast pool of talent experienced in the field of film production, there are no adequate sound stages for large-scale productions, and there has been no official or recognized tradition of producing or promoting domestic films locally or internationally".

This is the reason why in 2012 the Malta Film Commission was awarded EU funds to develop its film crew base through training course targeted to below-the-line

production employees such as location scouts, special effects and lighting experts, wardrobe managers.

Furthermore, in an interview released in July 2014, the newly appointed Film Commissioner Engelbert Grech underlined that "without doubt the films that are being shot in Malta this year are extremely important, not only for our film industry but for the country's economy in general. Thanks to our new financial incentives and our marketing strategy, Malta is now back on the international map" (Allen, 2014).

Actually, Malta has even more established its reputation as filming destination thanks to the high competitive financial incentives (cash rebates increased from 20% up to 25% on eligible expenditure in Malta, plus an additional 2% if Malta is culturally featured in the story). In addition to this, Malta's workforce is competitive because of the labour costs which remain below the Western European average, apart the widespread knowledge of English and other foreign languages.

What is more, in recent years the huge potentiality of film industry, both on the economic and cultural level, has been fully understood by institutional actors. As Grech underlined, "every production filmed in Malta can be considered as a foreign direct investment. On a good year, the film industry can inject around €40 million in the economy" (Allen, 2014).

According to the research carried out by the Creative Economy Working Group (2012), the film industry injects millions directly in the Maltese economy, not only in the film industry alone, but also in the related activities such as accommodation, restoration, transport, communication and general business services. What is more, the economic impact of such an investment has a triple multiplier effect, since the investment generates more millions in gross value added (*ibidem*).

As a result, the further development of Maltese film industry is one of the main commitments of the Maltese Government for the achievement of an overall strategy for the Cultural and Creative Industries within the National Reform Programme 2014.

According to this strategy, the development of film industry requires a coordinated approach bringing together the local cultural institutions such as the University of Malta, private training providers, and above all a holistic governance framework for the audiovisual sector (currently fragmented between the Malta Film Commission, the Culture and Audiovisual Unit, the Public Broadcasting Services and the Broadcasting Authority).

In particular, apart from the highly competitive cash rebate aiming at attracting international productions, one of the MFC main objectives is to better support indigenous industry, through the Malta Film Fund that provides funds for the development and production of local films (above all in scriptwriting, directing, producing), in addition to training courses to enhance local human resources.

In order to make Malta even more competitive, according to Grech it is necessary to "continue investing in our infrastructure. The building of soundstages and the continuous investment in the water tanks will give a holistic package to producers which would certainly make Malta a strong player in the film industry" (Allen, 2014).

However, despite some critical aspects, Malta continues in attracting international high-budget productions.

After the worldwide appeal of Malta thanks to another episode of *The Game of Thrones*, in 2014 another high-budget international production visited the Maltese islands and finally chose them as locations for a film starring Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt (Camilleri, 2014).

5. Between film industry and movie-induced tourism. A case study: The Popeye Village

In spite of still enduring gaps, the film industry is fully developed in Malta, whilst the related phenomenon of movie tourism is probably less widespread in the country. Paradoxically, the first reason is linked to the archipelago's extreme landscape versatility so that it can easily double for different countries. This element has made Malta famous among producers, but maybe it does not induce the immediate recognisability among spectators and potential movie tourists.

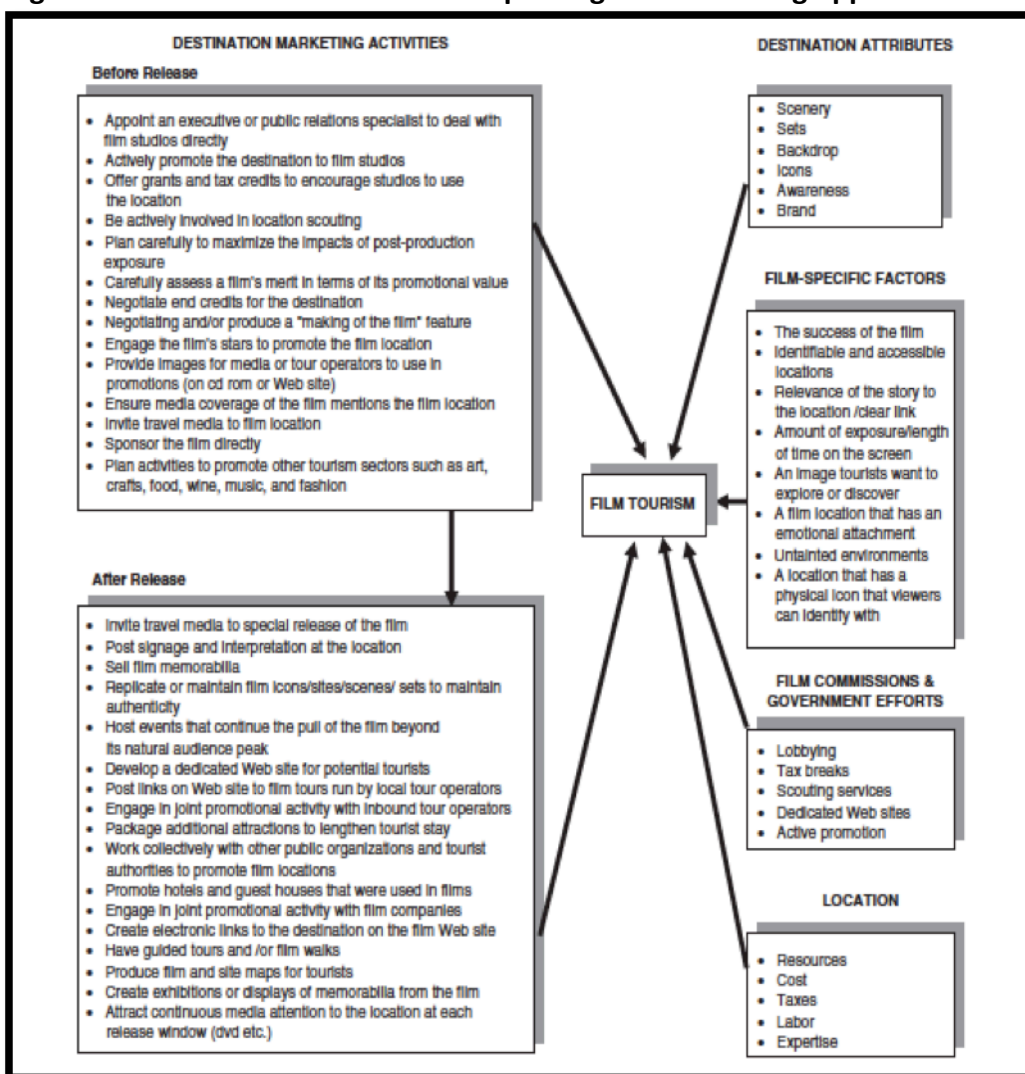
So, following the scheme proposed by Hudson and Brent Ritchie (fig. n. 10), in many cases the Maltese locations can count on some film-specific factors such as the success of films and the tourists' desire to discover deeply emotional places, but often the locations are not easily recognisable as Maltese neither they have icons that viewers can identify.

Only in recent years some efforts have been made in order to better develop movie tourism through some destination marketing strategies – both before and after release. They include media coverage of film mentioning the location as well as the creation of specific web-pages about movie tourism, with the possibility to download maps and podcasts about film locations itineraries (i.e. fig. 11).

Even though movie tourism is not so widespread as the development of the Malta film industry could let suppose, the archipelago can be regarded as a kind of pioneer of the use of cinema for tourist reasons.

A meaningful example of the impact exerted by the film industry, both at the environmental and the economic level, is provided by the Popeye Village, set in Anchor Bay in the north-western corner of the island, two miles from the village of Mellieħa. Clearly reminiscent of a typical small fishing village, actually the clapboard houses and the quays only date from 1979. In that year, the hitherto undeveloped and almost unknown inlet of the bay was chosen by a film production company (*Lions Gate Films*) to build a set for a musical film directed by Robert Altman and starring Robin Williams, commissioned by Paramount and Walt Disney Productions, based on the cartoon character Popeye.

Figure 9: Film tourism: a model for exploiting film marketing opportunities



Source: Hudson, Ritchie, 2006

During seven months, 165 international crew workers build the village-set, made of nineteen wooden buildings protected from the high seas by a 250 foot breakwater set around Anchor Bay, to represent the fictional village of Sweethaven. Several factors contributed to induce production and director to choose the Mediterranean archipelago. First of all, the weather condition, even because Robin Williams, starring as Popeye, was only available to shoot the film in January. Secondly, the production discovered a wide productive labour force of professionals (builders, artisans and craftsmen) boasting a deeply-rooted experience in film production. What is more, local institutional actors played a fundamental role by building access roads to the bay. So, at the governmental level, there was the will to allow impressive structural changes in Anchor Bay, by definitively altering its natural landscape.

Figure 10: Malta movie locations

Malta Movie Locations

Malta is a renowned destination for film-makers. In this second series of podcasts we will point out some of the best movie locations in the archipelago, so you can create your own itineraries across the Maltese islands, following the footprints of your favourite movie stars and directors.

You can print out the [PDF map](#) to find all the movie locations described in the podcasts.

 1: Intro: the mini-Hollywood of the Mediterranean Brief introduction to the second series of the VisitMalta podcasts. Why Malta is great for filming – and for holiday too! Duration: 4min 44sec audio only (mp3 - 4.5MB) audio with images (m4a - 7.2MB)	 2: Valletta: movie locations in the fortified city The narrow streets and walls of Valletta used in A Different Loyalty, Munich, The Count of Monte Cristo and Midnight Express. Duration: 8min 5sec audio only (mp3 - 7.7MB) audio with images (m4a - 11.4MB)	 3: Vittoriosa Marina: from Madonna to Geena Davis Tales from the Three Cities: Swept Away, Cutthroat Island, the Count of Monte Cristo, U-571, Munich. Duration: 6min 46sec audio only (mp3 - 6.5MB) audio with images (m4a - 9.8MB)	 4: Inside Malta: Mdina, Rabat, Naxxar Follow the Count of Monte Cristo in the "silent city" of Mdina, the secret agents of Munich in Rabat and the pirates of Cutthroat Island in Naxxar. Duration: 7min 41sec audio only (mp3 - 7.3MB) audio with images (m4a - 11MB)	 5: Beaches and coasts, from Munich to Troy Urban waterfronts, wonderful beaches, wild cliffs: why Steven Spielberg, Brad Pitt and Sharon Stone all came here. Duration: 8min 52sec audio only (mp3 - 10.6MB) audio with images (m4a - 12MB)
 6: Special for kids: Popeye's village How the set of the movie Popeye became a wonderful theme park for children and their parents. Duration: 3min 32sec	 7: Fort Ricasoli: the secret set Troy, the Roman Colosseum, Alexandria: how ancient cities are built inside the fort of the Knights of Malta. Duration: 6min 54sec	 8: Mediterranean Film Studios: the special effects shop Malta's unique marine filming feature, where synthetic storms and naval battles are created. Duration: 6min 37sec	 9: Comino treasures Find a treasure on the tiny island of Comino: the incredible water of Blue Lagoon, the dramatic St Mary's tower, the caves. Duration: 7min 5sec	 10: Romantic Gozo Discover with the characters of Coronation Street, the distinctive charme of Victoria, Ramla Bay and Dwejra on the island of Gozo. Duration: 4min 24sec

Source: <http://www.visitmalta.com/en/podcast-movie-locations>

After the seven months necessary for the construction, the extensive earthworks and the breakwater aiming at protecting the site from high seas during shooting turned the final product in a huge investment considering that it was linked just to a single film project (Gold and Gold, 2013).

In 1980, after the end of shooting, the ownership of Sweethaven village passed to the former *Malta Film Facility* service company which decided to convert it in a tourist attraction rather than demolishing the buildings – all but two of which were actually just shells - and returning the area to its original state.

The *Malta Film Facilities* managed the site for 6 years, but any significant investment for further development was made. The company just transformed the former film-crew canteen in a coffee shop for beer and sandwiches and women dressed like Olive Oyl conducted tours around the film set.

Figure 11: The set of the film



Source: The Popeye Village, www.popeyemalta.com

In 1987, when *Malta Film Facilities* turned into the *Mediterranean Film Studios*, a newly formed entity named *Anchor Bay Leisures Ltd.* started managing the park.

The new private company exploited the potential of the Popeye village in terms of family tourist attractiveness, notably for off-season months, at the point that it was transformed in a very family theme park based on children's entertainment characters. So, already in the early eighties, when movie-induced tourism was not yet a well established tourist practice, Maltese local actors had already understood the potential tourist value of visiting the sites of a film's production. The new owners decided to convert all the shells into functioning craft workshops and tourist amenities. The company also invested in children's joy-ride equipment and an undercover games area, apart from developing a much bigger catering area and creating the Santa's Toy Town, where all year round the elves make toys for the children to be distributed at Christmas time. In 2008, the company decided to transform a sandy beach behind the breakwater in a sunbelt area provided with a sundeck for visitors.

"So, in the first years, the company promoted the development of the Popeye village as a theme park, almost without any connection with the film was shot there" (Euroscreen, 2013).

As Gold and Gold underlined (2013, p. 210) "hence as Popeye faded into cinematic history, the landscapes of Sweethaven became shaped by new attractions related to the packaging of Maltese tourism", such as for instance, displays of local handicrafts and adventure playgrounds, many of them only partially related to the original film main theme.

Thus, "the transformation of Anchor Bay provides insight into the complex relationship between landscape and film and, beyond that, to wider relationships between landscape and popular culture" (*ib.*, p. 211).

With regard to the relationship between landscape and film, the (faux) harbour explicitly built in line with the production needs of a Hollywood film production underlines the role played by the setting as an element of the *mise-en-scène* "or the business of 'staging an action' for the sake of the cameras" (Gold and Gold, 2013, p. 211; see also Gibbs, 2002). The Director and Producers looked for convincing frames for the film's action that would meet the audience's expectations: "as frames, the landscapes function rhetorically in the construction of the film serving, amongst other things, to provide information about characters' identities, convey persuasive ideas about the film's emerging narrative and supply images that might enrich the audience's experience" (Gold and Gold, 2013, p. 211; see also Groenendyk, 2000).

Moreover, from a geographical perspective, the reproduction of a fishers-like village for filming exigencies modified completely the landscapes of the bay. It altered definitively not only its environmental and natural elements but above all the representations and narratives through which it was perceived by Maltese people and tourists. The fictional village overwhelmed – in terms of brand reputation – the image of the little bay.¹ Sweethaven swallowed up Anchor Bay, as the once-uncontaminated corner facing the sea did not actually exist before a process of film "colonisation", that implied a renaming and re-use of spaces as well as the subsequent *touristification* of hitherto unknown places.

Particularly at the beginning, the Popeye Village was not a case of a pure movie-tourism phenomenon, since a greater number of visitors was not persuaded to visit the theme park after the film. It was rather an example of the potentialities of film industry in the field of tourism. What is more, movie tourism can usually be regarded as an elitist tourist practice, very far from the mass tourism's patterns, whilst the Popeye Village is the very emblem of mass commoditization through the staged authenticity and the marchandisation of a place.

However, nowadays the 20,000 square meters Popeye Village is half way between an open air "museum" and a family entertainment complex inspired by the fascination of cinema, one of the main tourist attractions of the island.

As advertised in the village website (www.popeyemalta.com), the emphasis is put upon the paradigm of emotional experience, even more accentuated by the long-established fascination exerted by cinema: "the whole family can be part of a unique filming experience with the animation crew and giving you the opportunity to see yourself on the big screen".

So, with the recent discovery of the potentialities of movie tourism, "the promotional approach is deeply changed, more and more oriented towards the enhancement of the cinematic fascination" (Euroscreen, 2013), as it is exemplified by the different activities explicitly referred to the film (see note n. 2). Thus, "the village is no longer marketed as a theme or family park, even because of the growing concurrence of other modern and appealing children's park recently born in the island, but rather as a film location re-used and re-opened for visitors" (*ibidem*).²

Figure 12: The brochure of the theme park



Source: The Popeye Village, www.popeyemalta.com

With regard to the direct impact of the set reconversion, *Anchor Bay Leisures Ltd* employs five full-time maintenance staff and five full-time animators, in addition to boasting a souvenir shop stocked with themed items, a small selection of which is manufactured in Malta.

Even the overall effect on Malta tourism figures has been positive, with an yearly average number of visitors equal to 100,000 (Euroscreen, 2013).

Thus, the theme park is a meaningful example of the longevity of screen tourism, apart from demonstrating that the authenticity of the locations is not always the most important aspect.

Furthermore, "privatisation and the engagement of a business oriented organisation helped to renew the different ideas along the history of the film set. The creative business approach helped to turn a weakness (lack of money to turn 'Popeye Village' into an amazing theme park) into a strong concept, to market 'Popeye Village' simply as the film set of Popeye" (*ibidem*).

Final considerations

According to the research carried out by Euroscreen (2013), 3.5% of the tourists who visited Malta in 2012 reported that one of the factors which influenced their decision was seeing Malta featured on TV. It is a slight percentage if compared to other trip motivations, but is worthy to be taken into account for a further development of movie tourism, whose huge potentials have been recently understood by local players.

To conclude, the little Mediterranean archipelago has hitherto proved to be a competitive film production destination on a global scale, thanks to a shrewd destination marketing strategy which has been enhancing a historical and cultural landscape naturally fit to be used as a cinematic setting.

The achievements of the film industry (as shown by the increasing number of foreign productions shooting in the archipelago) are mainly based on the worldwide famous water tanks, the financial incentives and assistance provided by the Malta Film Commission, in addition to the landscape's extreme versatility allowing directors to 'use' Malta as many different Mediterranean countries.

Nonetheless, the growing worldwide competition has recently induced Malta Film Commission to embark on a more aggressive international marketing campaign with the objective of making the country more visible. This is pursued through a coordinated advertising strategy covering the major film industry trade magazines and their online outlets (Times of Malta, 2010; 2014).

What is more, the country's versatility is also the most controversial element of Malta's attractiveness as film setting, so that local actors have been recently trying to further develop movie tourism. It is for this reason that the Malta film policy assures higher funding and additional assistance for those productions portraying Malta as Malta, by representing a pro-active strategic policy finalised to create long-term and higher destination awareness amongst potential movie tourists of Malta.

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¹ By tapping Anchor Bay in different web research engines, the bay seems to exist and be recognisable just with reference to the Popeye Village.

² The main activities and amenities of the park are the following: Popeye Comic Museum, where guests can read digitized Popeye Comics, watch the full movie and also view several old memorabilia; Cinema (15 minutes history of Film Set); Boat trip (15 minutes around anchor Bay); Silver Smith Demonstration; Live Animation Shows and activities for children; The "Take 2 Filming" activity, during which visitors can realize their own film, from plotting the scenes to the actual filming (Euroscreen, 2013).