

FROM SAN JUAN DE GAZTELUGATXE TO DRAGONSTONE: SCREEN TOURISM AND THE ROLE OF THE BASQUE COUNTRY IN THE NARRATIVE OF THE GAME OF THRONES SERIES

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SETTINGS, EXPERIENCES AND ALLIANCES: (RE)VISITING THE SEVEN KINGDOMS OF WESTEROS

The Seven Kingdoms of Westeros imagined by the writer George R. R. Martin in his novels were brought to life on the small screen in the television series *Game of Thrones* (David Benioff, D. B. Weiss, HBO: 2011-2019), creating a kind of geographical jigsaw puzzle of landscapes as diverse as Northern Ireland, Croatia, Iceland, Malta, and Spain. Cities like Girona, Seville and Córdoba, and locations like the Bardenas Reales in Navarre were transformed to give life to decisive settings like King's Landing, Casterly Rock, Dorne and the Dothraki Sea.

Over the course of its eight seasons, the relentless struggle to determine who would sit in the Iron Throne kept millions of followers around the world on tenterhooks. Indeed, the widely acclaimed American series—winner of more

awards than any other fiction series in history—has broken all audience records, with 20 million viewers for its final episode and an average of 17.5 million per episode in its final season.

Fans had to wait until the seventh season to see the imposing castle of Dragonstone, the birthplace of the show's female protagonist Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke), looming over the winding stairway of San Juan de Gaztelugatxe in the Basque province of Biscay. The image of her meeting there with Jon Snow (Kit Harington) would be seen all over the world on 15 July 2017, turning this setting on Spain's northern shores into a recognisable landmark for followers of the series. Achieving similar recognition were the beaches of Muriola (in the Biscay municipality of Barrika) and Itzurun (in Zumaia, in the province of Gipuzkoa), the other two Basque locations where parts of the series were filmed in 2016. All these locations served as settings for the outdoor scenes of the episodes analysed in this article,

while the indoor scenes were shot in Northern Ireland.

Since then, Gaztelugatxe has welcomed thousands of visitors each year, all coming to see the place where one of the most important alliances in the series was forged. The site has been identified by the European Filming Commission Network as “the Second Best European location of the decade” (“San Juan de Gaztelugatxe...”, 2017). As evidence of this extraordinary success, statistics provided by the Biscay provincial government place tourist numbers to the region last summer at 400,000, making it the second most popular tourist destination in Spain (Pereda, 2019).

In the interests of promoting these locations, in mid-2017 the Basque Tourism Office created the website *Basque Country Is Coming*, featuring film tours around the *Game of Thrones* settings. The international impact of the series has resulted in a level of mass tourism that has sparked protests from local communities, with the creation of platforms like SOS Gaztelugatxe and the collection of signatures for a petition demanding more efficient management of the site (Pereda, 2019).

With the above in mind, the objective of this study is to identify the role that the geographical features of a TV filming location—in this case, the three aforementioned settings in the Basque Country—have played in the narrative discourse of *Game of Thrones*. Along with this objective, we seek to understand how the formal properties of these settings have been used by the producers of the series to shape its discourse. In this way, we may be able to identify the role played by the Basque settings—known as Dragonstone—in the discursive structure of the series, in order to determine whether they transcend the strictly aesthetic to the extent that they could even be understood as another character.

The analysis of their narrative importance in the story will be complemented by a study of the impact—sometimes positive, sometimes negati-

ve—that the appearance of these settings has had on tourism to the Basque Country. At the same time, we will consider how the series effectively replaced the image of the real Gaztelugatxe with the imaginary Dragonstone Castle, a phenomenon reinforced by its viewers and promoted by Basque institutions.

AN AUDIOVISUAL WINDOW OPEN ON OTHER WORLDS

You can travel to the remotest corners of the globe without leaving your seat, without even having to take your eyes off the screen. In this sensory journey lies the magic of cinema, giving it the image of a “provider of virtual voyages for the enjoyment of every audience” (Del Rey, 2007: 9). This “window on other worlds” (Martínez-Salanova, 2002: 77) has turned both the big and small screens into powerful platforms for the promotion of cities, as they constitute “one of the main vehicles for constructing and depicting places that people have no first-hand experience of” (Bernardi, 2016: 28). Each new production arouses significant interest in seeing the settings where the stories take place in real life.

Indeed, having the opportunity to visit these places is the wish of the prototypical tourist described by John Urry: an individual with a strong desire to recognise and relive images that they have anticipated through various media, such as literature, cinema, or television (Urry, 1990: 3). This motivation is reflected in the status of tourism as one of the world’s fastest growing industries in recent years. Data provided by the World Tourism Organization estimate that more than 400 million people travelled to different places in 2019.

Tourism is thus a constantly growing industry that has turned fiction into a highly effective promotional strategy. Evidence of this is the 80 million travellers a year who choose a destination based on films they’ve seen, a figure that has doubled in the last five years (“Fitur Screen”, 2019).

Nevertheless, the power of screen tourism—a phenomenon that brings the film and tourism industries together—is not limited exclusively to the increased number of visits to filming locations; it also plays an essential role in the creation of imaginaries associated with those locations. Making a decisive contribution to this process is the work of film commissions, a global network of public agencies established by the governments of different countries or regions to attract and manage film and television production in their respective territories (Rosado & Querol, 2006: 75).

THE POWER OF SCREEN TOURISM—A PHENOMENON THAT BRINGS THE FILM AND TOURISM INDUSTRIES TOGETHER—IS NOT LIMITED EXCLUSIVELY TO THE INCREASED NUMBER OF VISITS TO FILMING LOCATIONS; IT ALSO PLAYS AN ESSENTIAL ROLE IN THE CREATION OF IMAGINARIES ASSOCIATED WITH THOSE LOCATIONS

These film commissions, which have their origins in the US film industry, focus their activity on the promotion of natural and cultural sites in the territory in question as potential filming locations (Nicosia, 2015: 164), while also reinforcing the local audiovisual sector, assisting with the search for locations and developing databases, creating strategic action plans to promote tourism, and carrying out all the necessary administrative procedures for the film shoots, such as permit processing (Martínez, 2003: 45). To pursue these objectives, they make use of a multitude of media tools such as websites, social media, location guides, databases, movie maps, guided tours, and film industry events like festivals or trade shows (García-Retamosa, 2016: 22-24; Vives, 2013: 20-26).

The abundance of academic literature dealing with film tourism, most of it published since the

1990s, has brought attention to the important role this activity plays in the creation of the image of a city, region, or country (Stanishevski, 2007: 260). This perception is influenced to a great extent by the audience's affective response to a specific place, characterised by a desire to relive the excitement experienced while watching a film or series (Kim, 2010). In other words, the events or stories associated with these settings are among the main factors behind the desire to (re-)visit them, in some cases taking precedence over geographical features or the beauty of the landscape (Tooke & Baker, 1996: 89).

Authors like Niki Macionis and Beverley Sparks go further by identifying the reinforcement of self-esteem, fantasising, or a need to escape from reality, status or prestige, nostalgia or a search for identity as personal or “internal motivations” behind film tourism (Macionis & Sparks, 2009: 94-95). It is thus often these intangible elements that boost the popularity of “media pilgrimage” sites, attracting travellers from all over the world.

The success of film tourism to a city or country depends to a great extent on this affective or emotional image, although it is also influenced by other factors, such as the impact or popularity of the series or film, the importance of the setting to the story and its connection with the characters, the time of the product's release, and the different promotional initiatives implemented by the destinations. Prominent among such initiatives are tax incentives, the active search for locations, media monitoring or media outreach, activity on social media and websites, guided tours, and movie maps, among others (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006: 388-389).

Recognising the influence of cinema on tourist activity, in the early 1990s Riley & Van Doren introduced the seminal concept “movie-induced tourism”, which has evolved markedly from Hudson & Ritchie's “film tourism” (2006), “cinematic tourism” (Tzanelli, 2007), and, more

recently, “screen tourism” (Connell & Meyer, 2009). All of these different terms nevertheless point to the same idea of tourist travel to a particular destination as a result of its appearance in a film, television series, or other type of media product.

In this context, according to scholars like Noelia Araújo (2015), the appearance of new distribution channels like Netflix and HBO has brought about a resurgence of series that has challenged the traditional supremacy of cinema. Consequently, there has also been a considerable increase in tourism promotion strategies associated with such content and a growing interest among scholars in studying them. The small screen offers a big advantage in this respect, as the prolongation of series over time facilitates the creation and consolidation of an audience base that is exposed intensively to this indirect or “vicarious interaction” with the settings. In this way, the image(s) associated with them will be reinforced in the spectators’ memories, while also connecting them with the characters (Tooke & Baker, 1996: 88). The repetitive viewing subsequently leads to a growing interest in visiting the locations, which is why Beeton stresses that “the development of a country’s modern identity, image and cultural representations can be traced through popular film and television series” (Beeton, 2016: 41).

In the case that concerns us here, in recent years a notable number of international scholars have analysed the effect of *Game of Thrones* on international tourism (Bowyer, 2017; Waysdorf & Reijnders, 2017; Dimoudis, 2018; González & Araújo, 2018). These studies have focused on various countries, particularly the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland (Hannam, Mostafanezhad & Rickly, 2016; Rogers, 2016; Bolan & Kearney, 2017; Celik, 2019), Croatia (Štruc, 2017; Tkalec, Zilic & Recher, 2017; Pištalo, 2018; Šegota, 2018), and Spain (Ramos & Pedregal, 2015; Seño, 2015; Parra-mon & Medina, 2017; Roldán de la Mora, 2017).

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

To achieve the objectives outlined above, we have designed a methodology that combines a textual analysis of the seven episodes of the series that include Basque Country locations with a content analysis of the media tools employed by Basque institutions to promote the region as one of the main settings for *Game of Thrones*. More specifically, this includes both the website *Basque Country Is Coming*,¹ created by the Basque Tourism Office, and the location guide (in print format) offered by the Bilbao Bizkaia Film Commission to film and television producers.

We began this research with an extensive review of the literature that helped us to identify the key academic texts related both to the question of film tourism and to the work of film commissions in the process of attracting, managing, and promoting local film shoots. In this respect, our starting point was the previous work carried out both by members of the Bilbao Bizkaia Film Commission and by commissions in the historic regions of Gipuzkoa and Araba (San Sebastián-Gipuzkoa Film Commission and Vitoria-Gasteiz Film Office), with whom we have conducted various interviews since 2017.

The objective of the textual analysis has been to examine the presence of Dragonstone in the main plot of *Game of Thrones* and its role in the series’ discourse. The analysis consists of identifying the relationships between the physical features of the local landscape and the themes and narrative strategies developed in the series. To this end, we have made use of two narratological tools: semiotics, which has served to identify the role played by this location as a narrative actant within the enunciation (Greimas & Courtés, 1982: 320-322); and film analysis, to shed light on the meaning that the cinematic forms are intended to convey in relation to the themes and structures of the series in general (Zunzunegui, 2013: 10), and particularly in the seven episodes of the seventh season in which Dragonstone appears.

DRAGONSTONE, THE HOPE OF THE NORTH AND THE SOUTH

The location chosen for the forging of the alliance between the King in the North and the Dragon Queen in the fight against the threat of the Night King simply had to be the place to which both can trace their roots. In its formal features, Dragonstone has much more to say than it might seem to at first glance. In this sense, this location—understanding Daenerys Targaryen and Jon Snow as two parts of a single actant subject—functions as an aid, as it serves to bridge the gap between two characters who both ultimately seek the Iron Throne. Daenerys has pursued the Throne since her children (the dragons) were born, but it cannot be hers because Jon is the rightful heir.

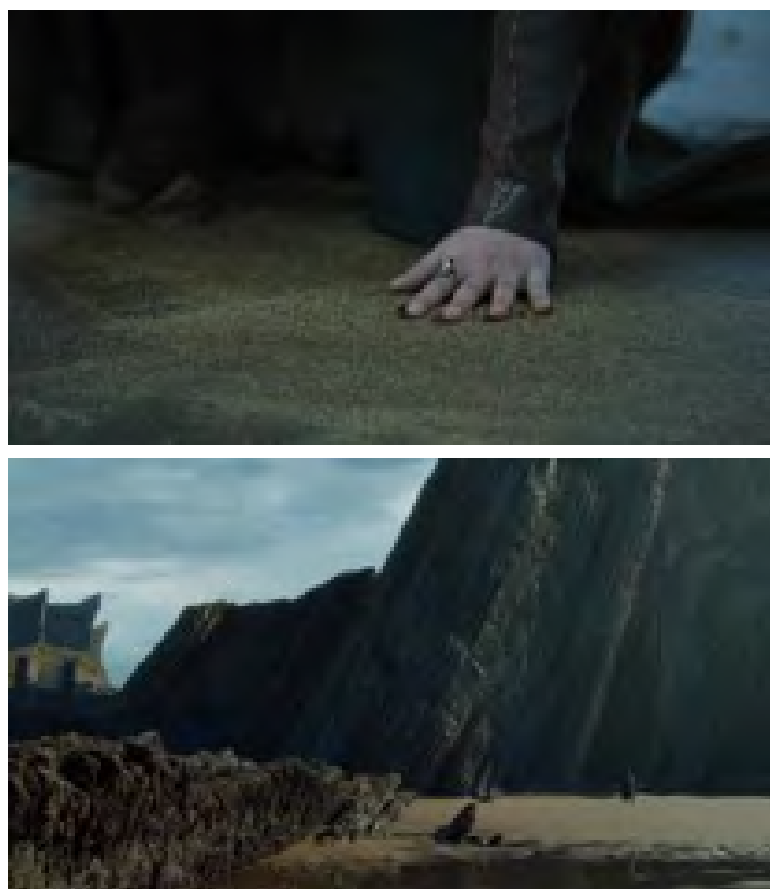
To begin with, the episode that opens the seventh season bears the name of the location itself. Dragonstone, the ancestral home of the Targaryens and the birthplace of the female protagonist, is a castle built upon the highest point of an island of the same name. The Targaryen dynasty lost its castle during Robert's rebellion. However, Dragonstone is not explicitly shown until the end of this first episode, thereby making its appearance the climax of its narrative structure. This idea is emphasised by the low-angle shot that presents it, as this gives greater importance to the landscape framed in the image. It is striking that the presence of the island must be inferred from Daenerys' reaction on returning to her home after spending her whole life in exile. Her silence and stillness underscore the solemnity of the moment. As Emilia Clarke herself points out, Dragonstone is "the beginning of [Daenerys] and the end of [her] family" ("Game Revealed", 2017). She and her home engage in a dialogue and seem to be recognising one another, like two loved ones who have spent too long apart. Dragonstone is clearly the second main protagonist in this sequence. Daenerys runs her hand over the sand, leaving her fingerprints there (figure 1); the landscape responds by em-

bracing her in the giant crevices of its cliffs, in a series of romantic shots that seem to engulf the Queen, dwarfing her and underscoring the power and grandeur of this majestic setting (figure 2).

However, behind these beautiful images is concealed the phenomenon of displacement, a dialectic between reality and fiction that occurs when

a movie is shot in one place but in reality is representing somewhere else entirely. While films may act as a catalyst or motivating factor on people to visit a particular place, they may rarely offer an authentic view of that place compared to the reality of what the tourist will find there (Bolan, Boy & Bell, 2011: 115).

Figure 1 (above). Still frame from Season 7, Episode 1. Dragonstone. The beach, the sand, and the fingerprints.
Figure 2 (below). Still frame from Season 7, Episode 1. Dragonstone. The flysch and the cliffs



In this case, Dragonstone is the product of two completely different settings fused together with the aid of CGI and art direction. On the one hand, sets created in Northern Ireland were used for the inside of the castle, a “cave-like space” (“Game Revealed”, 2017) according to series production designer Deborah Riley, recalling the fact that the dragons sleep hidden inside caves, as traditional folklore tells us. In addition, the designers added props shaped like the *flysch* rock formations so characteristic of Gaztelugatxe (which are discussed in more detail below), like the walls of the royal hall and even the throne itself. On the other hand, everything filmed in the Basque Country was used for the scenes outside Dragonstone, i.e., the shots of the castle and the area around it (figure 3). It is here that the cognitive dissonance or conflict between reality and fiction described above comes into play. While *Game of Thrones* shows us the cliffs and beaches of the Basque coast and the stairway of San Juan de Gaztelugatxe in its original form, the castle that occupies the place of the hermitage in no way resembles the physical reality of the spot. Moreover, the editing effects suggest that the nearby beaches of Muriola and Itzurun are both in the same place. This complete-

ly contradicts the reality, as these three spots are all in different locations.

In any case, the effect seems to meet the expectations of the series creators in their quest to find locations in keeping with the world imagined by the reader or viewer. It is worth noting that although the castle, perched on top of the island, is the main focus of attention, the natural environment that surrounds it also has considerable thematic and aesthetic importance. This is the case because the story actually exploits the natural characteristics of the location to generate mechanisms of signification. Giving them a meaning that transcends the merely visual, the creators effectively linked the Draconian motifs of the series in with the natural morphological peculiarities of the Basque coast.

In his descriptions of the place in the novels, George R. R. Martin explains that this castle was made up of several constructions in the shape of a dragon. The Sea Dragon Tower is where the maesters’ chambers are located; the Stone Drum has four windows facing each cardinal point; the Great Hall is in the shape of a reclining dragon and its entrance is the dragon’s mouth; and finally, the kitchens are shaped like a curled-up dra-

Figure 3. Still frame from Season 7, Episode 1. Dragonstone. Dragonstone Castle



gon whose nostrils serve as chimneys, expelling smoke and steam (Martin, 2003).

In narrative terms, Dragonstone plays a crucial role in the fight against the Night King, because apart from Valyrian steel and fire, dragonglass is the only element that can destroy the White Walkers. The castle was built on the side of the volcano Dragonmont, in Blackwater Bay, which explains the abundance in the region of this igneous rock, inspired by obsidian (in fact, Jon Snow's best friend, Sam Tarly, even calls it by that name). According to one theory, this rock comes from dragons' fire. However, another theory more widely accepted in this fantasy world is that dragonglass comes from the bowels of the earth, from the combination of magma and different gases, just like obsidian in the real world.

In the ancient Valyrian tongue, dragonglass means "frozen fire", which serves as a pretty metaphor both for the real aspect of this rock, formed from the heat that lies beneath the earth, "the inner fire trapped in the rock", and for the fictional aspect, as the ability of this material to kill the Walkers is a reflection of the struggle that gives the saga its title: fire against ice (Lobato-Fernández, 2017).

This metaphor can be extrapolated to Dragonstone itself, as despite having been abandoned and taken over by another family, where fire once blazed, embers are still smouldering with enough force to revive the force of the Targaryens and weld two characters together in the fight against the northern Night King.

At the same time, dragonglass is a primitive weapon, both in *Game of Thrones*—where it is used in weaponry by the wildlings who live beyond the Wall—and in the real world. Because of its brittle properties it has been used since prehistoric times to make arrowheads and spearheads, like the weapons that Jon Snow finds buried beyond the Wall thanks to his warg, Ghost. The production of weapons with this raw material is vital for the victory against the Night King's Army. In this

way, the story pushes Jon to sail to the place of his Targaryen ancestors.

Meanwhile, Daenerys needs Snow's military might to defeat the armies of the Lannisters, commanded by Cersei, who holds the Iron Throne at that moment. Without the armies of the North, Daenerys is not able to vanquish her enemies, as she doesn't wish to annihilate the civilian population of King's Landing (home to the Iron Throne). Initially, a simple *quid pro quo* brings these two characters into contact with each other: the need to fight the common enemy of Westeros with dragonglass in exchange for a pragmatic alliance to dethrone Cersei.

All these details of George R. R. Martin's imaginary world take shape on the screen thanks to the choice of the Cantabrian coast as a setting. Moreover, the unique topographic features of the region around Zumaia and Barrika, together with the architectural peculiarities of San Juan de Gaztelugatxe, are complemented by the development of the significance of the Targaryens' past, on the one hand, and the plotline that brings Daenerys and Jon Snow together, on the other.

The *flysch* that defines this landscape serves to express two basic qualities of the Targaryens. The first is the ancient roots of the dynasty. These rock formations are notable for laying bare the age of the rock layers. Like the rings of bark of a tree, the *flysch* denotes the age of the region it dominates, making it an ideal location for the home of the most ancient family in the West. The Targaryens' ancestors were Valyrians, the first people to inhabit the continent and to subjugate the dragons. Secondly, the ridges of the *flysch*, running in horizontal lines, recall the crests that run along the backs of those winged beasts and remind us that even if Daenerys were not present, the place is still ruled by dragons (figure 4).

Indeed, the parallel between the formation process of the *flysch* and the plotline of the series itself is striking, as the plate-like outcrops of the rocky layers that characterise the Cantabrian



Figure 4. Still frame from Season 7, Episode 3. *The Queen's justice*. The flysch

landscape are the product of the collision of the Iberian tectonic plates of the African continent with the European plates (Orue-Etxebarria, Bacea *et al.*, 2012: 15). This geological fact reflects the plotline of *Game of Thrones* itself, as it echoes the thematic and narrative clash between Daenerys and Jon: the collision of the Queen of the South with the King in the North, forced together in the fight against the threat looming beyond the Wall.

Their meeting at Dragonstone serves to shed light on their similarities, which acquire greater significance than their differences. Beyond the physical or aesthetic attributes of each character, both lost their family at birth, along with their home and their true nature. Both are fighting for the same cause: to take the throne of their territories in order to bring peace—and to lead their respective armies. Both have risen from humble positions, as Daenerys was the third in line to the Iron Throne after her brothers, while Jon, as a bastard son, never even had a hope of becoming King in the North. Both have conquered the land whe-

re they grew up, and thus both are rulers: Dany by liberating all the city-states of the South; Jon by bringing all the families of the North together with the wildling tribes that live beyond the Wall.

For all these reasons, it could hardly be coincidental that the images constructed to express this loving union fit together in the same way that the two characters do, like the throne in the castle (figure 5) and the cave (or dragonglass mine) on the beach (figure 6). The goal in each case: the mineral for Jon and the power of Dragonstone for Dany. The triangular shape of the Targaryen throne fits like a jigsaw piece into the entrance to the dragonglass cave. In the depths of the cave, in the intimacy it offers, both characters come clean. Daenerys believes the implausible stories of the Walkers and agrees to help Jon. This dialogue transcends merely military matters, as it constitutes a circle of trust between the Wolf and the Dragon, sealed with the fire of the torch that illuminates the mine. It would seem that each one is the piece that the other was missing.



Figure 5 (left). Still frame from Season 7, Episode 3. *The Queen's justice*. Throne of Dragonstone
Figure 6 (right). Still frame from Season 7, Episode 4. *Spoils of war*. Entrance to the cave at Dragonstone

Coincidentally (and contrary to the case of Dragonstone Castle and the hermitage of San Juan de Gaztelugatxe), a striking connection between fiction and reality is established through the dragonglass mine and the beach at Muriola, which is known locally as the “*la playa de la cantera*” (“the quarry beach”). In fact, the beach is artificial, “because its sand comes (...) from a silica sand quarry located nearby” (“Ayuntamiento de Barrika”, n. d.). A parallel could be identified here with the mine shown in *Game of Thrones*, comprised of vestiges of dragonglass resulting from the same effect of sedimentation.

Similarly, the stairway on San Juan de Gaztelugatxe, an intermediate point between reality and fiction in this setting in the municipality of Bermeo, seems to allude to the erratic and extremely sharp ascent of the two characters who meet upon it. Like the rock on which Dragonstone itself is built, both have stood up to the pounding sea

THE TRIANGULAR SHAPE OF THE TARGARYEN THRONE FITS LIKE A JIGSAW PIECE INTO THE ENTRANCE TO THE DRAGONGLASS CAVE

and the blows that life has dealt them. They even seem to have been made stronger from them. However, it is no coincidence that instead of climbing the stairway, Jon is shown coming down the steps to reach Daenerys (figure 7). Symbolically, this descent hints at the quest of both characters for their origins, and their blood connection, a link whose origins they discover thanks to the intimacy offered by the setting in which they meet.

WHEN DRAGONSTONE SPREAD ITS WINGS: IMPACT OF THE FILMING OF GAME OF THRONES IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY

As has been made clear in the analysis outlined above, the three Basque settings for *Game of Thrones*, and especially the stairway at San Juan de Gaztelugatxe, have become irrevocably associated with plotlines of vital importance to the protagonists of the series. This gives the settings added value and facilitates the creation of the aforementioned affective link that characterises them as potential pilgrimage sites for fans from every corner of the planet. The obvious dissonance between the real-life locations and what appears on the small screen does not seem to have constituted an obstacle to their rapidly growing popularity. The

release of the seventh season in the summer of 2017 gave rise to an unprecedented phenomenon in the small fishing municipality of Bermeo in the province of Biscay, which was caught off guard by the huge waves of visitors sweeping into the region in search of the rugged isle of Dragonstone.

Foreseeing the interest that the Basque landscapes might arouse, the Basque Tourism Office launched the website *Basque Country Is Coming* (figure 8) in the spring of that same year, allowing fans to retrace the steps of the characters during the film shoots in the region. This online platform is offered in five languages (Spanish, Basque, English, French, and German) and allows visitors to access all three locations—San Juan de Gaztelugatxe, Muriola beach and Itzurun beach—via a medieval-style “movie map” in the top part of the home page. By placing the cursor any of the three locations, users are redirected to the Basque Tourism website, where they can access general information about the place, instructions for tourists, and other information of interest such as photographs and maps.

Other features offered on the website include a section for each setting with a photo gallery, accessible by scrolling down the home page. Finally, a horizontal banner at the bottom of the page provides supplementary information on the filming

locations with other points of interest visited by the *Game of Thrones* cast during their stay in the Basque Country: museums, restaurants, hotels, etc. The aim is to promote local film tours, an emerging field of activity that has also been seized upon by the provincial government of Biscay, which has included them for the first time as key features of their 2019-2025 Tourism Action Plan (“Bilbao Bizkaia Be Basque”, 2019).

Biscay’s local institutions, in this case through the Bilbao Bizkaia Film Commission, have also developed media resources that refer directly to the filming of the series, such as its current locations guide, also published in 2017. This booklet is aimed at a specialist audience: film and television producers. Its objective is to provide a visually attractive promotion of the varied range of locations in Biscay where producers could potentially film their productions. Immediately noticeable is the image of San Juan de Gaztelugatxe featured on its fold-out cover (figure 9), highlighting its recognition as a finalist for Best European Filming Location of the Decade, awarded at the end of that same year by the European Filming Commission Network (“San Juan de Gaztelugatxe...”, 2017).

The guide thus clearly expresses the Biscay film commission’s determination to turn Gaztelugatxe into one of the main attractions of the region, ba-

Figure 7. Still frame from Season 7, Episode 3. *The Queen’s justice*. Stairway to the castle





Figure 8. Basque Country Is Coming website. Source: Euskadi Basque Country

sed on its association with *Game of Thrones*. In this respect, it is worth highlighting the commission's activity throughout the pre-production and filming process, acting as a key liaison between HBO and the different actors in the Basque Country: local and regional institutions, professionals in the audiovisual sector who worked on the different stages of the process, local business and residents chosen to contribute, etc. Equally notable is the Bilbao Bizkaia Film Commission's prior involvement in the active search for the coastal locations needed for the scenes that would depict such a decisive part of the story. At the same time, it acted as a single point of contact for processing all the necessary permits (traffic interruptions, contact with coastal authorities, etc.) and contributed to the management of infrastructures (travel, accommodation) for the cast and crew in the Basque Country, supporting them throughout their stay.

The Basque Country's commitment to attracting international film and television projects like the adaptation of the George R. R. Martin novels

was also reflected in the attractive tax incentives (30%) it was offering at the time the series was filmed, which were the best offered in Spain except for Navarre and the Canary Islands, and well above Spain's nationally approved discount of 20%. This advantageous fiscal context was a decisive factor behind the producer's choice of this region as a filming location. The marked reduction in film and television projects resulting from the coronavirus pandemic, however, has completely changed the national approach to the industry. Last May, the central government passed a new law that expanded the advantageous conditions offered in the Basque Country to the rest of Spain, establishing a 30% tax incentive nationwide (Eli-drissi, 2020).

Returning to the case that concerns us here, the positive economic and social conditions coordinated by Basque institutions to attract the *Game of Thrones* franchise has unquestionably had an unprecedented economic, social, cultural, and media impact that has continued to grow expo-

nentially even since the series ended. Even in the summer when season 7 was released, around 280,000 people climbed the stairway at Gaztelugatxe. This figure has increased in the last two years, doubling in 2019, with more than half a million visitors during the summer months (the busiest period) and 730,000 for the whole year ("La Diputación limita...", 2020). In fact, the report by the regional government identifies it now as the second most popular destination in the Basque Country, with tourist numbers surpassed only by the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao.

As the constant tourist traffic became an increasingly common feature of this part of Biscay, in 2018 the regional government approved measures to regulate the flow of visitors in an effort to preserve the protected biotope of the area. These measures focused mainly on issuing free tickets to visit Gaztelugatxe at specific times, along with improving infrastructures, such as renovating the walkways and increasing public transport (bus) services to prevent heavy traffic of private vehicles in the vicinity (Errazti, 2018a). Similarly, with the aim of offering a better response to the

growing number of visitors during the months of July and August, a tourist information point has been set up to support the work of the Tourism Office in Bermeo, the municipality where the islet is located (Euskadi Basque Country, n. d.).

On-site signage of the itineraries to tour this unique setting has been complemented with directions, maps, and multimedia resources available on the Basque tourism agency website. In addition, the local councils of the neighbouring towns and various private businesses have introduced tours of the region. One example is the Bermeo municipal council, which is planning the implementation of guided bus tours this year (Fradua, 2020), in view of the success of the excursions scheduled during the Easter holidays and the summer in previous years (Ensunza, 2019).

Another of the economically beneficial initiatives introduced since the release of the series is the small souvenir shop set up in the hermitage at the top of the Gaztelugatxe stairway. However, this is by no means a large-scale enterprise, obviously due to the location of the hermitage itself,

Figure 9. Cover to the locations guide published by the Bilbao Bizkaia Film Commission. Source: Bilbao Bizkaia Film Commission



accessible only via the narrow pathway that runs from the mainland over an isthmus, making the establishment of gift shops rather difficult. However, it also effectively conforms to the conservation model for the protected biotope established by the Basque authorities. In fact, the 1-euro donation requested from tourists who wish to take photos inside the hermitage goes towards conservation initiatives (Errazti, 2018b), thereby involving visitors in the protection of the site.

THE REVITALISATION OF THIS PROTECTED SPACE AS A CONSEQUENCE OF THE SO-CALLED “GAME OF THRONES EFFECT” CONTRASTS WITH THE MASS TOURISM THAT HAS RECENTLY PROMPTED COMPLAINTS FROM LOCAL GROUPS

At the same time, the revitalisation of this protected space as a consequence of the so-called “*Game of Thrones* effect” contrasts with the mass tourism that has recently prompted complaints from local movements like SOS Gaztelugatxe, which has decried the more than 6,000 visits per day and called on the institutions responsible for an open debate on management of the site (“SOS Gaztelugatxe”, 2019). The exploitation of the islet with the construction of a large parking lot for private vehicles has also sparked a confrontation between residents of the municipalities of Bermeo and Bakio, who have mobilised against the plan by taking legal action and collecting signatures (Pereda, 2019). The local councils have also expressed concern over the situation and have submitted a proposal to the regional government for changes to the project, suggesting the creation of two reception centres that would control tourist flows more efficiently (“Bakio propone”, 2019).

The movement is especially critical of the current “crowds and selfies” tourism model and war-

ns of the risk of “an irreparable environmental cost resulting in the gradual loss of [the location’s] scenic qualities and a significant deterioration of its natural beauty” (Pereda, 2019). One sign of this risk is the mass theft by tourists of the characteristic stones that cover the stairway, an issue raised at the end of last year by the San Juan de Gaztelugatxe Volunteers Commission, responsible for maintenance and repair work at the site (“El problema de San Juan”, 2019).

In this respect, some authorities on film tourism, such as Sue Beeton, point to the need to develop a management plan for sites like the one analysed here that aims to strike a balance with the local community and works to ensure the long-term benefits that this type of tourism can offer (Beeton, 2016: 42). Up to now, this is something that has not been given much attention in institutional agendas. According to Beeton, although economic development is important, it needs to be considered together with all the other elements that influence film tourism to an area. Intangible benefits, for example, can be harder to measure, yet they are of decisive importance to the impact and influence of this type of tourism (Beeton, 2016: 56).

As Beeton puts it, an immediate increase in tourist numbers should not be the only objective of strategies implemented by local authorities, as emphasis should be placed on the effects that film productions will have on local residents over time, particularly in relation to “changing attitudes and social representations”, understanding the latter as the “micro-community relationships” developed by local residents with tourism (Beeton, 2016: 57). A beneficial and respectful relationship between the two can generate a “greater level of pride in the town and a sense of belonging” (Beeton, 2016: 59) among community members that will inevitably help boost and maintain the popularity of such film productions from a sustainable perspective.

CONCLUSIONS

The choice of the stairway at San Juan de Gaztelugatxe and the Muriola and Itzurun beaches as settings to turn the experiences imagined by George R. R. Martin into television images has had an extraordinary economic, social, and cultural impact on the Basque Country. On the one hand, the film tourism phenomenon has certainly had its positive effects, which include improvements to local infrastructure and a substantial increase in tourist numbers, especially in the case of San Juan de Gaztelugatxe, which has turned into a pilgrimage site for *Game of Thrones* fans.

These benefits are the result of the narrative significance of Dragonstone in the HBO series, depicted as the home of the female protagonist and the meeting point for the two main plots underpinning the series. It is thus a place of communion, another character who has brought Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen together for both strategic and emotional reasons. The Basque coast represents these key sequences in the story. However, this location was not selected solely for the good fortune of its aesthetic quality, but also due to the formal use that the producers of *Game of Thrones* have been able to make of the Basque landscape. The stairway at San Juan de Gaztelugatxe, the sloping cliff faces of Muriola and the *flysch* of Zumaia serve to translate what Martin described in his books into the language of the screen.

Despite the positive aspects mentioned above, the staggering success of the series is also something of a double-edged sword, since the overexposure of (Beeton, 2016) of Gaztelugatxe resulting from the huge influx of visitors to the region each year has sparked numerous social movements to combat mass tourism and promote more respectful and efficient management by local authorities.

Throughout the creative process, both in the preproduction stage and during filming itself, the work of the Bilbao Bizkaia Film Commission as a

liaison between the producers and the different political and social stakeholders that took part in the process has been decisive. The film commission is currently promoting the region as a *Game of Thrones* setting, following the approach adopted by the Biscay provincial council and the Basque government, which have created various media resources—a website, movie maps, etc.—for the same purpose.

All of this has contributed to the creation of a powerful image of San Juan de Gaztelugatxe as Dragonstone Castle that has reached far beyond our borders and entered the world's collective imaginary (Del Rey, 2007; Stanishevski, 2007). In this respect, it is important to stress that although the reconstruction in *Game of Thrones* is not entirely in keeping with the real location, giving rise to a kind of displacement (Bolan, Boy & Bell, 2011) or cognitive dissonance between the two places, the narrative importance of the Basque setting and its crucial relationship with the two protagonists of the series has transformed it into a site of great interest to fans. The case study described here thus stands as further evidence of the well-known power of film and television as creators of images of cities and countries, and as inducers of tourism to the locations they show. ■

NOTES

- 1 The website *Basque Country Is Coming* is accessible at: https://turismo.euskadi.eus/contenidos/informacion/turismo_got_landing/es_def/got.html

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FROM SAN JUAN DE GAZTELUGATXE TO DRAGONSTONE: SCREEN TOURISM AND THE ROLE OF THE BASQUE COUNTRY IN THE NARRATIVE OF THE GAME OF THRONES SERIES

Abstract

This article offers an analysis of the impact of the TV series *Game of Thrones* on the Basque locations featured in its seventh season: San Juan de Gaztelugatxe, Muriola and Itzurun. All three sites have enjoyed a boost in popularity thanks to the international success of the series, along with improvements to their infrastructures and the creation of media resources to attract visitors and promote the locations as settings for film and television productions. An analysis is also offered of Dragonstone's importance to the plot of the series, a decisive factor behind the massive influx of screen tourists that has sparked complaints by various local organisations. Treating the series as an audiovisual text, the study draws from semiotics and film analysis to identify the role that the features of the landscape play in the structures and themes developed in the series. The Bilbao Bizkaia Film Commission has been essential throughout the process as a liaison between the producers (HBO) and local institutions and stakeholders. In short, the *Game of Thrones* phenomenon in the Basque Country has firmly established an image of Gaztelugatxe as Dragonstone that has made a deep impression on the collective imaginary.

Key words

Screen tourism; *Game of Thrones*; film analysis; Euskadi; Dragonstone; Film Commission.

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DE SAN JUAN DE GAZTELUGATXE A ROCADRAGÓN: EL TURISMO CINEMATográfico Y LA IMPLICACIÓN DE EUSKADI EN LA NARRACIÓN TELEVISIVA DE JUEGO DE TRONOS

Resumen

El presente artículo estudia el impacto de la serie de televisión *Juego de tronos* en los parajes de Euskadi presentes en su séptima temporada: San Juan de Gaztelugatxe, Muriola e Itzurun. Tres emplazamientos de la costa vasca que han incrementado su popularidad gracias al éxito de la ficción, en consonancia con una mejora de sus infraestructuras y con los recursos comunicativos creados para atraer visitantes y promocionar dichos lugares como escenarios audiovisuales. Igualmente, se ha analizado el peso de Rocadragón dentro de la trama narrativa, un factor decisivo que explica la masiva afluencia turística contra la que han surgido movilizaciones sociales. Tratando a la serie como texto audiovisual, la semiótica y el análisis cinematográfico se han empleado para identificar el papel de las formas del paisaje dentro de las estructuras y temas que desarrolla la ficción. La Bilbao Bizkaia Film Commission ha desempeñado una labor fundamental durante todo el proyecto, vinculando a la productora (HBO) con los agentes institucionales y sociales implicados. Con todo, el fenómeno de *Juego de tronos* en Euskadi ha creado una arraigada imagen de Gaztelugatxe como Rocadragón que ha calado hondo en el imaginario colectivo.

Palabras clave

Screen tourism; *Juego de tronos*; análisis cinematográfico; Euskadi; Rocadragón; film commission.

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