

# MODELS, STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF FILM TOURISM: THE CASE OF THE GBU FILM ROUTE\*

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In the catalogue of unforgettable scenes stored in the memory of any self-respecting cinephile, the extraordinary three-way duel between the protagonists of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo, Sergio Leone, 1968) at Sad Hill Cemetery generally occupies a prominent place. Indeed, the famous showdown in this Italian-Spanish-German co-production constitutes one of the most memorable endings in film history. The scene is the culmination of a long sequence (nearly twenty minutes) whose expressive power is underpinned by a combination of three elements: the trio of characters, the soundtrack music, and the locus, i.e., the setting for the action. While the faces of the characters—Tuco, Angel Eyes, and Blondie—are shown only in a slow succession of trademark extreme close-ups, broken up occasionally by inserts of their tensed hands and guns at the ready, the music, in addition to emphasising the slow pacing of the narrative, rhythmically punctuates the protagonists' rising emotional stress from one second to the next. In this way, the images combine perfectly

Ennio Morricone's effective musical theme ("Ecstasy of Gold") to vest the sequence with an unquestionable discursive force. But it would not be as powerful without the third element brought into play: the locus, meaning the extraordinary Sad Hill Cemetery, designed by Carlo Simi, with more than five thousand graves arranged in concentric circles around the huge central circular stone platform. This cinematic architecture, conceived by Sergio Leone as a kind of Roman coliseum, stands as a synecdoche for the film as a whole in the memory of the many spectators, and as a good example of the capacity of cinema to conquer the social imaginary of the viewing public with a powerful image that endures in their memory, even triggering a desire to visit the actual sites where their favourite films were shot, in the hope of reliving them and feeling somehow a part of them.

To a large extent, this capacity of great films to stake a place in the public imaginary has its origins in the profilmic space (Gorostiza: 2014) during the pre-production stage, when the el-

ements of the mise-en-scène are first designed and prepared, including the locations for the story. In the case of *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly*, the process of choosing the locations for the different scenes of the film required Sergio Leone to travel to various regions of Spain in search of the natural settings most suited to his project, which he ultimately found in three provinces: Madrid, Burgos, and Almería. The specific location for the iconic Sad Hill Cemetery (which in the story is somewhere in New Mexico) was discovered by the director in the Mirandilla Valley in the Arlanza region of Burgos province. In that valley, with the unexpected help of 200 Spanish army soldiers stationed in the region, the fictional graveyard was constructed over a stretch of land straddling the boundary between the municipalities of Santo Domingo de Silos and Contreras. With its more than 5,000 fictitious graves, the fake circular cemetery occupied a broad expanse with a diameter of around 300 metres. The episode of the construction of this cinematic architecture endured in the memory of the locals who had witnessed (and in some cases, assisted) the conversion of an empty field into the huge graveyard that would be the backdrop to one of the key sequences if not the most important moment in the film.

Notwithstanding the mixed reviews it received upon its release, *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly* was popular with audiences, although it left its most profound impression on the memory of cinephiles, especially lovers of Spaghetti Westerns, who deemed it worthy of consideration as the culmination of what came to be known as Sergio Leone's "Dollars Trilogy", whose first two instalments, *A Fistful of Dollars* (Per un Pugno di Dollari, 1964) and *A Few Dollars More* (Per Qualche Dollaro in Più, 1965), had also been shot in Spain under the same three-way co-production arrangement, but on location in Almería. The passage of time and the studies written by diverse scholars of both popular culture (Frayling, 2002) and the Western genre and its settings (Gaberscek, 2007;

Hanley, 2016), together with the recognition of acclaimed directors like Quentin Tarantino, have effectively consolidated all three titles, and especially the third, as masterpieces of cinema and inspirations for the resurgence that the genre is experiencing today. All these elements give the trilogy a mythical dimension whose impact seems to keep growing at the same pace as its increasing number of fans. In the specific case of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, its extraordinary final sequence, as a generator of new discourses, is an archetypal example of the multiple effects that can result from the symbiosis between a powerful film story, the clever and creative transformation of a geographical space into a dramatic setting, and a fan-based initiative to restore that locus and exhibit it as a film tourism destination intended to commemorate the movie by offering access to the filming location and a tour of the reconstructed cemetery, so that lovers of the film can enjoy the experience of stepping inside a story so firmly engraved in their memory.

## CINEMATIC MYTHOLOGY, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND TOURISM

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In a productive exercise in cinephilia, and as the result of various activities promoted by different groups based in the region of Burgos located between the towns of Salas de los Infantes and Covarrubias, the Asociación Cultural Sad Hill (ACSH) was established in 2014 with the goal of reclaiming the tourist and cultural value of the locations in the region that Sergio Leone had used as settings for the film. To realise this goal, the association set out to restore those settings, especially the fictitious Sad Hill Cemetery. The rest is a story that can be traced in the news archives, as the press gave regular coverage of the ACSH's efforts to reconstruct the fictional graveyard that time had swept away in the fifty years since the making of the film. With a determination characteristic of the keenest archaeologists, the associa-

tion's members cleared the dirt and weeds covering the rocks of the big central circle, and by 2016 they had managed to restore many of the more than 5,000 false graves erected around it. With this partial reconstruction of the cemetery they could celebrate the 50th anniversary of the making of the film, and at the same time reverse the sad fate that looms over all works of cinematic architecture, whose ephemeral nature dooms them to disappearance or, in the best of cases, to being recycled for the sets of subsequent films. Indeed, the fate of Sad Hill Cemetery would end up being quite different, as not only was its reconstruction fully completed two years later, but also, due to the unique circumstances surrounding its restoration, it stands now as a paradigmatic example of the creative power that major films are able to generate once they have found a place in the social imaginary.

It would have been hard to imagine that an anti-war Western made in the 1960s, set at the time of the American Civil War, would maintain its popular appeal over the years to the extent that *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* has, and even harder to believe that it would experience a kind of renaissance that could reawaken interest in the genre among both audiences and filmmakers. Yet this is just what has happened, and the more than 50 years that have passed since its release have not diminished the public memory of the film, but rather have given it a prominent place in the canon of cinephiles' favourites, as in the 21st century its mythical status as a cinematic classic has been fully consolidated. New technologies have proven a formidable instrument for reinforcing the film's continued presence in the memory of its admirers, as has been the case of other films that have made an impact in recent decades, including some that were also shot in Spain. In the specific case of Sad Hill, the use of the Internet and social media allowed the members of the ACSH to promote their project to restore the cemetery and launch a crowdfunding campaign aimed at fans of the

film, with the objective of fully restoring its 5,000 graves. This initiative demonstrated that the film's power to fascinate is as strong as ever in the 21st century, as fans from all over the world not only provided financial support for the cemetery's reconstruction by "sponsoring a grave" in exchange for being able to choose the name of its imaginary occupant, but in some cases even travelled to the valley to contribute personally to the restoration work (Pontevedra: 2018).

These exercises in cinephilia revolving around Sad Hill were also accompanied by the production of a documentary, *Sad Hill Unearthed* (Desenterrando Sad Hill, 2018, Guillermo de Oliveira), filmed in parallel with the restoration of the fictional graveyard. His personal interest in filming locations inspired De Oliveira to document the efforts of so many individuals to restore the site and the material resources brought into play to achieve it (Luna, 2018). Moreover, thanks to the testimonies of several contributors to the film (including the composer Ennio Morricone, and Clint Eastwood, the only living member of the original dramatic *triello* that also included Elli Wallach and Lee Van Cleef), the filmmaker details how this singular work of cinematic architecture that became such an essential element of the original film had been created five decades earlier. At the same time, the reflections offered by other interview subjects (scholars, association members, and even Spanish filmmaker Álex de la Iglesia) to explain their unprecedented and successful restoration plan make the documentary an interesting exercise in metatextuality which in turn triggers a process of resignification both of the cemetery itself and of the idyllic Arlanza Valley where it is located, whose practically untouched natural setting is definitively imbued with the fame of the legendary Western, allowing those who visit it to immerse themselves completely in the hazy territory of myth.

The initiatives of the association have unquestionably enshrined the dramatic locus of Sad Hill

as a tourist destination of huge interest to film lovers (especially lovers of the Western genre), who are now able to take the GBU Route (which stands for *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*) to get there. This route was first proposed in 2003 by the Salas Archaeological and Paleontological Collective and the Sierra de la Demanda Tourism Initiative Centre when the cemetery was still buried under weeds, and it connects the four locations in the region where the film was shot: the ruins of the San Pedro de Arlanza Monastery in the municipality of Hortigüela, where the San Antonio Mission was reconstructed; Majada de las Merinas, near the town of Carazo, where the Betterville camp was located; the Arlanza Valley region near Hortigüela, where the Battle of Langstone Bridge scene was filmed; and finally, Sad Hill Cemetery, which, as the project's priority, gave its name to the association. All these locations give the film's imaginary world a material reality, and their establishment as tourist destinations gives them added meaning for the tourists who visit them, who view them as contemporary artistic landmarks. Indeed, with the act and ritual of these visits, film tourism raises the locations—with or without cinematic architecture—to the level of other local cultural landmarks. In the case of the fictitious Sad Hill Cemetery, these include an abundance of sites recognised for their cultural heritage value, many of which are centuries old. Examples include the Romanesque monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos, whose origins date back to the age of the Visigoths, as well as archaeological sites in the region that date much further back.

### **CAPITALISING ON THE TOURISM VALUE OF FILM SETTINGS: MODELS, ACHIEVEMENTS, AND RISKS**

The special circumstances surrounding the Sad Hill case make it a clear example not only of the power of films to find a place in the imaginary and memory of their audiences, but also of the pro-

ductive interaction that can occur when the symbiosis between cinema and tourism is the result of an effective and sustainable project built on the enthusiastic, voluntary action of its promoters. This example clearly brings together a number of factors that favour the model of film tourism it represents. First of all, as it is associated with a film made more than half a century ago, the project to restore the cinematic architecture of Sad Hill is founded on memory—a memory that the witnesses or contributors to the construction of the original cemetery and the subsequent film shoot passed onto their descendants, who many years later would become the promoters of the GBU Route and the founders of the ACSH. Secondly, over the course of that half century separating the film's release in 1968 from the reconstruction of its most emblematic setting, the film has managed to reconcile the popular appeal it has always enjoyed with scholarly interest. At the same time, it has given rise to metatextual reflection in the form of Guillermo de Oliveira's documentary. As a result of all these factors, the film route for which the association and project were created is now a reality and is generating a flow of visitors that is helping to revitalise the region.

On the other hand, everything seems to suggest that one of the keys to the project's success was the fact that its promoters prioritised the idea of film tourism as a cultural experience, interpreting the concept of culture in its strictest sense, i.e., associating it with the idea of the preservation and care of a legacy—in this case, the exceptional natural landscape and cultural landmarks of the Arlanza region. Both the association's original project and the successive parallel activities organised by its members point to an interest in promoting sustainable tourism that can revitalize the region's sociocultural life through strategies quite different from the practices adopted in other film route initiatives whose existence seems to be geared essentially towards financial returns. Without doubt, playing in

the GBU Route's favour is the fact that it is in a sparsely populated area far away from any major urban centre, whose exceptionally isolated condition means the landscape is largely untouched. In other words, the conditions are perfect for sustainable, limited, well-informed film tourism with a clearly defined purpose.

The GBU Route thus represents an alternative to the models for many current film tourism initiatives that suffer from objective weaknesses like overcrowding and the consequent degradation of the tourist destinations where this occurs. In such situations, institutional policy needs to respond (and in fact, this is what some authorities are doing) with the measures necessary to preserve these natural and urban spaces without undermining the development of their potential as tourist destinations. For their part, academics have been analysing the nature of film tourism from different perspectives for years, as well as its positive and negative consequences. Notable among these are Riley, Baker & Van Doren (1998), Urry (2002), Jenkins (2003), Beaton (2005), Gamir & Manuel (2007), and De Diego (2014), to cite just a few authors who have explored the issue. In recent years, scholarly interest in film tourism has increased, reflecting a recognition of the socio-economic significance of the interaction between the film and tourism industries, whose increasingly intense symbiosis is clearly in consonance with contemporary habits of reality perception, governed as they are by the virtuality of the gaze.

To contribute further to the existing literature, the studies included in the Notebook section of this issue explore the film tourism through case studies focusing on different Spanish films of recent decades, whose diversity makes it clear that Spain's natural and urban spaces are taking on an increasingly prominent role in contemporary film production. This trend, boosted by the diverse interests that feed the interaction between cinema and tourism and facilitated by new filming technologies, clearly represents a stimulus for the de-

velopment of both industries in Spain, although it also poses some problems. In the best-case scenario, the prominence accorded by contemporary filmmakers to certain natural and urban spaces can turn such spaces into major expressive elements and even defining features of a particular director's film style. On the other hand, the presentation of a geographical space in a film with no narrative justification runs the risk of turning it into little more than a kind of thinly veiled travel documentary or advertorial.

Among the articles included here, Alfonso Cuadrado's "The Origins of the Sinister Locus in Jaume Balagueró's *Barcelona*" highlights the crucial role played by the imaginary in film-induced tourism, while at the same time studying the work of this particular director to reveal the maturity and modernity of Spanish horror, which has found a way of appropriating international trends without losing its specifically Spanish identifying signs. A very different perspective is offered in María Carmen Puche's study, "Cinematic Depictions of the Guadalquivir Marshes", which explores the successive representations of this natural space in Spanish cinema over the years, and how they have failed to reflect the full complexity of the region. Juan Pablo Osman explores a different type of problem in his article "*The Best Summer of My Life*, or the False Tourist Destination", which analyses the confusion that can be caused by simulated settings if they hinder tourists from closing the interpretative circle described by Jenkins (2003) because they are unable to identify the settings that had captured their imagination in the film.

The other articles in the Notebook section deal with the role played by Spain's regional governments in the promotion of tourism to their respective territories. Framing her analysis in this context, Rosanna Mestre's article "Secular Re-symbolisation of the Santiago Pilgrimage Route in Spanish Cinema: the Cases of *The Way* and *Road to Santiago*" analyses the depiction in re-

cent Spanish films of tourism on the Camino de Santiago and the recent secular redefinition of the ancient pilgrimage route in northern Spain that had until recently been one of the canonical examples of international religious tourism. On the other hand, Rubén Romero and Ana Menjón's article "A Very Beautiful Barcelona': Almodóvar, a Tourist in *All About My Mother*" offers a detailed analysis of the diverse circumstances that turned Barcelona into a prominent and popular destination (one of those circumstances being the Almodóvar film) and the high price the city is paying for it, as the gentrification resulting from the tourist invasion is rendering it unaffordable to its original residents. Meanwhile, Leire Eguskiza and Ignacio Gastaca's study, titled "From San Juan de Gaztelugatxe to Dragonstone: Film Tourism and the Involvement of the Basque Country in the Television Narration of *Game of Thrones*" examines how Basque institutions got involved in the production of *Game of Thrones* and the two-edged sword that the saga's huge success has meant for the hermitage of San Juan de Gaztelugatxe and its natural environment, due to the two spaces having served as locations for one of the series' episodes. Finally, with the aim of broadening the perspectives on the question of interactions between the tourism and film industries, Sebastián Sánchez's article "Research on Film as an Inducer of Tourism: A Methodological Review" analyses various quantitative bias methods that have been used in recent years to explore the topic of film-induced tourism.

Overall, the articles contained in this issue's Notebook section raise numerous questions both about what the interaction between the tourism and film industries means for the art of filmmaking and about the models which, to promote that interaction, attempt to pursue industrial and institutional interests to their mutual benefit. This raises the question of the extent to which cinema runs the risk of being taken over by these interests if films end up filled with beautifully photo-

graphed but narratively irrelevant locations that create illusory geographies increasingly detached from reality, as Gamir and Manuel have suggested (2007), thereby promoting the *cinematic world-view* that characterises post-modern society. In this sense, it is important to remember that the main purpose of cinema is not to promote tourism, even if this may occur as an inevitable effect of the expressive power of its images. Instead, every filmmaker should be guided primarily by a desire to tell powerful and thought-provoking stories that can connect to the lives and engage the intelligence of contemporary viewers, who are immersed in an ambiguous and constantly changing reality in which the barrage of audiovisual productions available to them may sometimes prevent them from seeing the world around them and questioning the relationship they have with it. ■

## NOTES

- \* This paper has been written in the context of the R+D project "Spaces of Spanish Fiction Cinema as a Factor in Tourist Promotion for Regional Geographical and Cultural Heritage" (Ref. HAR2016-77734-P), funded by the Spanish government's Ministry of Science and Innovation (MICIIN) for the period 2017-2020.
- 1 The use of extreme close-ups of the characters is one of the stylistic features of Sergio Leone's films, which is why in some glossaries this type of shot is referred to as an *Italian shot*.
- 2 Apparently, Leone wanted to double the number of graves to 10,000, but the idea was dropped due to the time and money that would have been required.
- 3 The film would be shot almost entirely in Spain, with the exception of the odd sequence filmed in the Cinecittà studios in Rome.
- 4 This same region was where the Spanish-US co-production *The Castilian*, about the Count of Castile, Fernán González, had been filmed in 1962. The film's director, Javier Setó, and its production manager, Antonio Pérez Giner, suggested the location to Sergio

- Leone, in view of its topographic similarity to New Mexico and Arizona.
- 5 In addition to the daily payment received by the soldiers and their superiors for the work done, the agreement with the producers included a donation of 75,000 Spanish pesetas to the orphans of veterans.
  - 6 The term was coined by Sergio Leone himself as a lexico-semantic correlative to *duello*, the Italian word for a showdown between two characters.
  - 7 Álex de la Iglesia offered a wry reflection on film tourism in his film *800 Bullets* (800 balas, 2002), shot in the Tabernas Desert in the Almeria region (Rey-Reguillo, 2015).
  - 8 An example of this economic revitalisation is the production of new films in the region, such as the Spanish-Finnish co-production *Once Upon a Time in Sad Hill* (Rax Rinnekangas, 2019).

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## MODELS, STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF FILM TOURISM: THE CASE OF THE GBU FILM ROUTE

### Abstract

Based on the story of the circumstances surrounding the restoration of the cinematic architecture of Sad Hill Cemetery, conceived as the main initiative in a sustainable film tourism project, this article considers the potential pros and cons of different film tourism models for filmmaking itself, and for the preservation of natural and urban spaces.

### Keywords

Spanish fiction film; social imaginary; film tourism; geographical space; locations.

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## MODELOS, BONDADES Y DEBILIDADES DEL TURISMO CINEMATOGRAFICO. EL CASO DE LA RUTA DE CINE BFM

### Resumen

A partir del relato de las circunstancias que rodearon la recuperación de la arquitectura del Cementerio de Sad Hill, ideada como reclamo principal de un proyecto de turismo cinematográfico sostenible, el texto sopesa las aciertos y riesgos que los distintos modelos de turismo cinematográfico puestos en juego podrían acarrear para la propia creación artística y la conservación de los espacios naturales y urbanos.

### Palabras clave

Cine español de ficción; imaginario; turismo cinematográfico; espacio geográfico; localizaciones.

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