

## *Original Paper*

# The City of “Matera” Cultural Capital and Cinematographic Destination with the Power of Literature

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### **Abstract**

*Aliano is a small village in the province of Matera (Note 1). The city is characterized by the exceptional nature and the uniqueness of a “lunar landscape”, of a vast expanse of eerie beauty. The area was not always accessible for the same reasons, it became world famous for completely different reasons and specifically through the novel of a writer called Carlo Levi (Note 2). This particular author has left a strong mark on the history of Italian literature, although his work is not very rich. The place and the conditions of his new life as an exile in a poor isolated village of southern Italy, became the reason for the creation of his most important book entitled "Christ stopped at Eboli (Note 3).*

*The book presents the rural south of Italy through its social condition, but not only as the result of an unbearable for the country archaic condition, but also as a place of existence of an important civilization. In this way the author’s narrative, as argued by Palmieri (2020), works as an objective account that is subjectively equated to a literary form.*

*[... Christ did not arrive at this dark land where there is no sin and redemption, where evil is not moral, but an earthly pain that always exists in life. Christ stopped at Eboli.] (Levi, p. 12).*

### **Keywords**

*literary paths, “Christ stopped at Eboli”, Carlo Levi, cinematographic paths, cultural capital, Matera, troglodytes*

## 1. Presentation of Excerpts of the Book

From the very first pages of the book “Christ stopped at Eboli” we understand why this piece of writing sparked the interest of politicians so that they actively dealt with the place. The author presents in a very vivid way what he saw with his own eyes. He describes with his pen the hardships suffered by the villagers of the area, who often said that God had forgotten them, “times today are changing rapidly, whereas the labour of the villagers remains the same as three thousand years before Christ!” (Levi, p. 79).

According to what the reader reads, Christ never reached these places “neither time nor hope illuminates the souls of farmers who do not understand the relationship between cause and result, logic and history” (Levi, p. 12).

For the writer Carlo Levi, “this land had not been touched by anyone, neither as a conqueror or as an enemy, or even as a strange visitor”. It is about a closed society that experiences situations similar to those of Greek tragedies with everyday events that were depicted in people’s faces “because they were the only important events along with the animosities among the notables” (Levi, p. 31).

One of the reasons for the book’s success is that it treats its poor compatriots with a sense of understanding rather than intellectual arrogance. It describes precisely the life of the impoverished peasants who lived with their animals and believed that they were not Christians because Christ never reached them (Note 4) (Levi, p. 11). His descriptions are characterized by realism. His ability to accurately represent what he sees seems exceptional because Levi was able to present the situations he perceived having first processed them mentally and in this way he was able to picture them in an artistic yet not inaccurate depiction.

Images such as “there were piles of rubbish in the street and around the houses, the pigs surrounded by their piglets were searching with their nostrils insatiably and lustfully” (Levi, p. 55) depict in an almost raw way the reality of the people of the village. The life of the villagers was difficult, with a standard of living well below the lowest accepted according to current data. An everyday life inside caves, with living conditions that barely reached the verge of survival. “In the village there was no running water or sanitary facilities of any kind. They did not use to light a fire at night, not even in the houses of the rich, they ate what was left over from the morning, and this did not apply to the poor, who just ate bread accompanied by a carefully cut tomato, with a little oil and garlic or some chilli pepper, almost all year round” (Levi, p. 30).

The inhuman living conditions of the Italian south could be depicted in the following shocking description of the author, “There were billions of children. They emerged from everywhere, in the heat, the flies and the dust completely naked or covered in rags. I had never seen so much poverty in my life, although it is common, it is my job... I had never imagined a sight like yesterday’s, I saw children sitting in filth in front of the entrances of houses, under the hot sun, with eyes half closed, eyelids swollen and red.

The flies were sitting on their swollen eyes and they stayed still, not making a single movement to chase them away with their hands. Yes, the flies were walking on their eyes and they seemed not to feel them... most of them had huge, swollen bellies and yellow faces, sick with malaria... I saw children lying down on the ground, covered with ragged blankets burning with fever. Others crawled with difficulty they had become a bag of bones from dysentery. I saw children with waxen little faces... (Levi, p. 101).

He was so disappointed that when he found himself in the courtyard of the cemetery he considered it to be “the most claustrophobic, cool and secluded place in the whole village and he even described it as the least sad” (Levi, p. 79). Carlo Levi described the inhuman accumulation of men, women, children, animals as depriving him of any dignity and called it “vergogna d’ Italia”, that is, “shame of Italy”. On the hundredth page of the book he begins a description that is particularly interesting because he compares the path he takes with the descent into Dante’s Hell (Note 5). I was beginning to descend a path for mules like one circle of hell inside another, downwards. As I was walking by I was looking on the inside of the caves that are ventilated and illuminated only by the door. Some did not even have that. They entered the ones above, through hatches and stairs. Inside these black holes with the earthen walls I saw the beds, the poor furniture, the misery itself. Dogs, goats, sheep and pigs were lying on the floor. Every family has only one of those caves for accommodation; they all sleep together, men, women, children and animals. That's how twenty thousand people live.

The feeling or rather the realization of the inability to offer something to these people gave birth to the desire to describe his impressions. We learn from him that without his will he felt that he was taking on all the evils of the fate of the peasants. He felt almost responsible, as if he were in a city hit by the plague at the same time as the skinny women showed their respect towards his face by greeting him politely and sadly while holding their newborns. However, this precise need of his to accurately describe what his eyes saw, was his very offer to those people since the book aroused great interest and made an impression as it brought to light the inhuman conditions of southern Italy.

## **2. Social Impact**

Levi’s book “Christ stopped at Eboli” was the cause of the great reversal in the later life of the villagers. It has been translated into many languages from China to France, from the United States to the Soviet Union, from Iceland to Greece, England, from Japan to Latin America. Immediately after its release it was a great success not so much owing to its great sales but because of the fact that it raised public awareness of the time towards the serious socio-economic issues of the region. In fact, on the back cover of the Greek edition of the book we read the words of Italo Calvino (Note 6) who said “the characteristic of Carlo Levi is that he witnessed the existence of another time within ours, he was an ambassador of another world that exists within the world we live in”. Another very important benefit was that he put the people of the state and especially the politicians before their legal liabilities.

In particular, the Italian Prime Minister of the time, Alcide De Gasperi (Note 7), was the man who, influenced by Levi's descriptions, visited Matera to find out for himself how the situation was. The living conditions of the people who lived as troglodytes in the caves almost forced him to act upon it. His viewpoint that Catholics should address social problems and resolve issues as quickly as possible was what urged him to pass a series of laws according to which almost 15,000 residents of Sassi di Matera were relocated to new districts of the state, built with a special regulatory plan in order to decongest the area.

The evacuation of the inhabitants lasted several years (1953-1968) whereupon the ownership of the cave residences passed to the state, which since then according to Klimkute (2019) has been inactive once more in terms of their utilization.

Today, Matera and especially Sassi are not just an impressive landscape of the Italian South. Literary parks dedicated to the book and the heroes of Levi, with a variety of cultural activities, adorn the area and help the visitor get to know the present and experience the past. In 1986 the Italian government granted the use of the Sassi di Matera, that is, the cave dwellings, to individuals for ninety-nine years, even subsidizing their restoration by 40% to 60%. In this way Italy not only acquired a reborn town but since 1993 the Rocks of Matera (Sassi di Matera) have entered the list of UNESCO's World Heritage Sites, as an excellent example of troglodyte settlement in the wider Mediterranean area, perfectly adapted to the soil and ecosystem. Besides, they have a great historical value since traces that represent important stages of the human development have been discovered there. The impressive scenery regained life, cultural value and about 5,000 permanent residents, while with the forever growing trend of returning to traditional colours and shapes, in the year 2005, the accommodation in the Neolithic caves of Matera is considered a "fashionable" move. It should be also taken into consideration, that according to Galasso (2019), these were the components that strengthened the position of Matera in order to be designated as a cultural capital by Unesco in 2019. The area today has been completely modernized with the development of technology. One of the most interesting projects concerns the elevation of the local culture through the promotion of film activity. Kanaraki (2018) informs us that as far as the restoration of the caves is concerned, Matera requested and received 130 million euros from both the state budget and European funds.

### **3. Cinema-Literature Routes in Matera and Basilicata**

Matera today has contributed to the film tourism of the country it belongs to. Italy is the fifth country in terms of visitors in the world and it is not surprising the aspect of film tourism as it has in its assets a variety of cultural, gastronomic, nature-loving and religious interests.

According to Di Cesare; La Salandra (2015) film tourism is booming in recent years as this heavy industry uses more and more media (3D, audiovisual, etc.) to attract viewers, which results in an increase on the number of tourists interested in the 7th art. A positive development for the economic

sector, but with conditions of improvement as it is not one of the forms of tourism that have been fully developed.

Matera has been inhabited since the Paleolithic era and later with the advent of Christianity, the caves began to be inhabited by Benedictines and Greek Orthodox monks who were hosted in the various churches of the rocks that are preserved and are an attraction for visitors even today.

Nowadays Sassi and the whole area of Basilicata, whose older name is Lucania, is one of those areas that have been developed mainly through film tourism. The film tourist has the opportunity to admire both the place where the shooting took place and the way in which the features of the place, the customs and traditions as well as the natural beauties of the city and the wider area are projected.

Matera is a city with carved caves and a biblical atmosphere that enchants and entices the tourist on a journey through time. Anyone who crosses its alleys feels from the very first minute history gushing through the caves, the stones, the stairs. Today the area is a unique destination, a rough diamond, for the traveller seeking special places, out of the ordinary because it is in itself a cinematographic setting. At night the landscape seems unreal because the countless cave-dwellings create a unique spectacle. Any pilgrim who does not just happen to be in this area, but chooses to visit it in search of a new and different experience, has the opportunity to immerse himself in places where silence, colours, smells and tastes take him away from the frenzy and stress of modern life and offer unique senses.

According to the official website of the region, there are five interesting routes based on movies, in order for the traveller to discover the area through them and thus increase its financial income from domestic or international tourism.

- 1) The first route is dedicated to Matera, the so-called “Cinematographic Jerusalem of biblical films”.
- 2) The second is located on the path discovered by Rocco Papaleo in the film “Basilicata coast to coast” (2010).
- 3) The third starts from the coast of the Ionian Sea and reaches Craco, a beautiful abandoned village, near Matera.
- 4) The fourth route is about Bernalda (an area near Matera), the town of Francis Ford Coppola, who impressed with his photography in the film “Io Non Ho Paura” (2003) by Gabriele Salvatores and finally.
- 5) The fifth is related to Dolomiti, Lucane, who were portrayed in the film “Un Paese quasi Perfetto” (2016).

In order to facilitate the visitors to reach their destination, apps (mobile phone applications) have been created, which are oriented to film tourism and promote with various actions, locations where movies as well as festivals were filmed. The app, as Papadimitrakis (2020) reports, works as a tool for the visitor as it gives all the information he needs for the “cinematographic routes”. Up to now, more than 60 films have been made, either dramatic or historical or biblical and by very important directors as well such as: Taviani, Gibson, Jenkins, etc.

#### 4. Films in Matera

The residents of Matera made good use of the benefits of the film image and took advantage of the opportunities and managed to promote their land through the films. Even while still shooting there are many tourists who want to enjoy the magic of the cinema and peek behind the cameras. Then the promotional moves for the advertisement of the film serve as a tourist attraction. Mastrangella (2020) argues that a typical example are the efforts made by the local community of Matera and especially by the tourist agents in the time of the coronavirus crisis for advertising spots of the place connected with the photo of James Bond. According to Tarnaras (2014), the film tourism in the Matera region can be considered sustainable because the infrastructure of filming and the theme activities that meet the expectations of the film tourist are maintained and also, as Foschino (2018) mentions, even film memories engraved on the rocks remain.

Sassi di Matera today is a settlement of caves carved into rocks that evolves with complex structures and according to Negro et al. (2016) is preserved as a cultural heritage with improved energy efficiency in the historic buildings functioning as hotel units.

A total of 15 films were shot in the city of Matera alone from 1950 until today. The authenticity of the landscape that has managed to remain unchanged over time is an ideal setting for Italian and foreign films in a place that has been named “the film town”.

The most commercial ones are listed below.

1) The book “Christ stopped at Eboli” was made into a film directed by Francesco Rossi (1979), starring Jean-Marie Volonte and Irene Pappas. The film received very good reviews that justified the efforts of the contributors. Betella (2000) informs that Carlo Levi’s autobiographical novel, which describes his exile and how he cultivated his interest towards the people of Aliano, was shot in Basilicata, Craco, Aliano, Matera and Guardia Perticara. The film was a great moment in the history of both Italian and European cinema because in a special way it manages to alternate situations and emotions and most importantly proves the wonderful harmony between literature and cinema.

Among the dithyrambic reviews we read the one of the film reviewer Danika (2016) where he states that “Rossi follows the path of Carlo Levi in solid homogeneity. The shocking experience is recorded in Levi's own modesty, silence itself. A unique course of self-knowledge. Supporter the huge, dark, slightly blurred photograph of the great Pascualino de Sandis (1927-1996). An excellent photo-shading recital. Like an exhibition of photography today. Equivalent supporter the polymorphic ‘tool’ called Gian Maria Volonte (1933-1994). In his eyes, in his body, even in his coat, his breath is imprinted. Along with Marcello Mastroianni and Vittorio Gassman, the astounding trio of post-war Italian Cinema”.

The film met worldwide success because it introduced and projected pioneering themes and as reported by Betella (2020) “it contributed to the overthrow of human morality but also introduced elements of psychoanalysis”.

2) “The Passion of the Christ” of 2004, directed by Mel Gibson, starring Tim Cavizel and Monica Bellucci. The film turned a profit of \$613 million. Despite its success and public acceptance, it has received controversial reviews. It was described as the second most violent and brutal film of all time, after Kubrick’s “A Clockwork Orange”. “The Passion of the Christ” remains to this day the only film with the best revenue in the history of the American cinema, which is unsuitable for minors. It was nominated for an Oscar for photography, original music and makeup. After the production of the film, Matera became an increasingly popular tourist destination and the local businesses enjoy the publicity caused by the film.

3) Pasolini filmed the classic “The Gospel according to Matthew”, 40 years earlier in Matera. He said: “I put my work and my life into this film. I had a story to tell that I did not believe in. I had to sink into the soul of one who does...”. According to Ahtsioglu (2020) the film, shot in 1964, is perhaps the “top transfer of Christ’s life to the big screen”. The manner is characterized simple, austere, essential, without literary outbursts, which manages to narrate the events with the utmost precision. They talk about “scenes of immediate regeneration that correspond to the point of view of the faithful Matthew” and all this results in the film having a distinct and prominent position to stand out, because through its symbolism, it achieves and transmits the messages in time which are regardless of religions, nations and fanaticisms. The film, according to the daily and periodical press, greatly helped Matera and the Basilicata area in general to become a popular destination.

4) “King David” by Beresford in 1985 starring Richard Gere. The film continues to arouse interest even today and receive positive reviews. It refers to the fascinating and famous story of young David, who became the mighty, wise king of Israel.

5) “The Star Maker” by Tornatore, 1995. Although the film is set in Sicily, the opening scenes depicting the first city where the protagonist arrives were shot in Matera and impressed the friends of the cinema worldwide since the film was nominated for an Academy Award for Foreign Language Film.

6) “No Time To Die” is the twenty-fifth upcoming James Bond spy film. In the trailer of the film, the main shot takes place in Matera, in Basilicata, in the primitive landscape of Sassi di Matera, in the caves that are protected by UNESCO. Scenes also take place in Gravina and in the historic centre of Puglia (Mastrangella, 2020). The upload of the new film served as a constant advertisement for Matera and the wider region since the daily and periodical press internationally, did not miss the chance to promote the cities that would be filmed and become a pole for advertising and attracting tourism. The Greek press was quite interested in the presentation of the film and the region and in fact there were reports that the new film of “Agent 007” is estimated to boost the economy of the town, with forecasts talking about an amount close to 12 million euros. In fact, the mayor of the city, Raffaello de Rugeri, is said to have stated in the press that “This is an incredible opportunity”.

The shooting in the narrow, quiet alleys that connect the stone churches and the caves was suddenly filled with motorcycles and movie drones and chases of the grey Aston Martin DB5, a trademark of James Bond with breathtaking scenes. Meanwhile Basilicata officials, said they have nothing but gratitude to the people of the film. “Everybody here in Matera is proud that part of the shooting of the new James Bond film took place here”. The historic architecture and the bureaucracy of Italy were not an obstacle in the shooting, a fact that makes us very happy, the mayor of the city stressed in the end. In fact, according to Kanaraki; Tsigopoulos (2017) Eon Productions has allocated a budget of 12 million euros to be spent in Matera and the other towns participating in the shooting.

## 5. Conclusion

The area that was, according to the Prime Minister of Italy of the time, Gasperi, the “Shame of Italy” today excites the visitor because it manages to travel him back centuries ago. Matera is now causing national pride as the European Capital of Culture 2019. If actually, until 1700 the area was the symbol of how perfectly man and the environment complement one another, for about two centuries the town was abandoned to degradation and misery. The power of literature brought it back to life. Today, those who visit Matera can still perceive the soul of these caves, of the people who were poor in goods but rich in values. Values such as solidarity and altruism that have been forgotten in times of globalization. The support and willingness to help came to these people from where they did not expect it, from a book. An exile made the difference by realistically describing the image he perceived with his senses. Matera and the wider Basilicata area owe a great deal to Carlo Levi and the film industry who managed to take the area’s shares off in the tourism Stock Market.

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## Notes

Note 1. On the Unesco website, we read that Matera is located in the southern part of Basilicata and is considered the most exceptional and intact example of a troglodyte settlement in the Mediterranean area (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/670>).

Note 2. Carlo Levi (1902-1975) was an Italian physician, painter and writer of Jewish descent displaced in Aliano, Lucania (now Basilicata), in one of the poorest regions of southern Italy. In 1943-44 he wrote his most important work, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Christ stopped at Eboli).

Note 3. Eboli is an Italian town located in the province of Tuscany about 20 km southwest of Florence. An area very far from the place described by Levi. It is purposefully used to emphasize the contrast between the Italian north and south.

Note 4. The exact words of the author are: “Noi non siamo Cristiani. Non siamo uomini, non siamo considerati come uomini, ma bestie. Bestie da soma, e ancora meno che le bestie, i fruschi, i fruscicchi, che vivono la loro libera vita diabolica e angelica, perche “noi dobbiamo invece subire il mondo dei christiani, che sono di la dall' orizzonte, e soportarne il peso e il confronto” Carlo Levi (p. 3, ediz Struzzi) translated by M. Manola: “We are not Christians. We are not humans; we are not considered humans, but beasts. Beasts of burden and even less than beasts, savage spirits living a free life diabolical or angelic, because we are the ones who must endure the world of the Christians who lie beyond the horizon, and bear the weight and the comparison”.

Note 5. Dante (Dante Alighieri 1265-1321) along with Petrarch and Boccaccio are considered to have laid the foundations of the Italian literature. His most famous work was the Divine Comedy (Divina Commedia), which to this day is considered one of the most important works of world literature. According to Dante’s description in the Divine Comedy, Hell has an inverted shape whose sharp edge lies in the centre of the Earth. It consists of a total of nine circles, which narrow successively as one moves downwards. Each cycle corresponds to specific sins.

Note 6. Italo Calvino (Italo Calvino, 1923-1985) Italian novelist, essayist and journalist. He is considered one of the most important Italian litterateurs of the 20th century

Note 7. Alcide De Gasperi (Alcide Amedeo Francesco De Gasperi, 1881-1954) was a politician and prime minister of eight successive Italian governments from 1945 to 1953.