



INTERREG ITALY-CROATIA PROJECT REEL

D 2.1.2 n. 1 study on movie tourism in Italy and Croatia

(Version 1.0 – 31/08/2025)

Italy – Croatia



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Summary

Scholarly articles and most of the pertinent research from the beginning of 2000's point to film tourism presents as a powerful engine for economic and cultural development (Beeton, 2005; Bolan, Boyd & Bell, 2010). Audiovisual sector is culturally one of the most valuable industries as it simultaneously creates economic and cultural surplus, or value. There are many ways by which AV industry can be supported, from direct fiscal incentives and state subsidies, as well as indirect incentives such as cash rebates or tax loans for reinvesting (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2019), yet the potentials for development of collaboration between AV sector and film tourism in Italy and Croatia are not fully realized due to fragmented approaches and a lack of coordinated strategy. This policy paper, grounded in the objectives of the *REEL project*, provides a theoretical investigation at the intersection of film tourism, media and cultural studies as well as cultural politics, and proposes practical steps in order to self-asses positive and negative aspects of film tourism in relation to AV industry as well as to develop a sustainable tourism policy. By analyzing the current landscape, success factors, and key challenges in both countries, the paper proposes that the development of film tourism in relation to AV industry is a result of strategic investment, and not a matter of chance or accidental synergies.

Croatia, through its incentive program, demonstrates an outstanding return on investment, generating approximately €4.77 in local spending for every €1 of rebate provided (HAVC, 2024). Italy, meanwhile, for the purpose of this specific research, can be seen as showing strength in cultural heritage branding (the *Fellini Museum*) and regional infrastructure (*Apulia Film Commission*). However, both nations face challenges such as over-tourism (especially Dubrovnik), and the "displacement problem" where one location stands in for another, as well as the absence of standardized performance indicators.



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In response, beside theoretical investigation, this paper outlines five recommendations as a guiding principle, and not a *sine qua non* of the project: **1) Establish a joint film-tourism observatory** for standardized data collection; **2) Implement "production-to-tourism conversion rules"** within the incentive schemes; **3) Develop and certify authentic film-tourism products** to disperse tourism flows; **4) Foster strategic, integrated marketing** that connects films to their actual locations; and **5) Prioritize sustainability and capacity building, address negative impacts** to ensure long-term benefits. By implementing this methodology, Italy and Croatia can leverage the synergy between their audiovisual and tourism sectors, creating a potential for an innovative and resilient tourism offer targeted at youth and sustainable development.



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1. Introduction: Proposing Film Tourism as a Post-Economic Activity

1.1. The REEL Project Objectives

The REEL project sets explicit goals that form the foundation of this policy paper: diversifying tourism offers, targeting youth audiences, creating sustainable products, testing innovative models (apps, tours), producing short films, training young people, and developing a common methodology for free independent travelers. The emphasis on cross-border cooperation between Italy and Croatia and the application of technology seem to be highly prioritized in order to go pass the disciplinary approaches and to expose the potential of film tourism. This study aims to highlight the abovementioned on the one side, but also to propose new avenues of thinking between film tourism and industry in a critically inspired approach (highlighting mental health policies in AV industry, gender balance and inclusion off-screen, environmentally sustainable filmmaking etc.) While this paper primarily focuses on policy development and applied analysis, it acknowledges the limits of approaching film tourism only through economic or strategic frameworks. A deeper engagement with cultural perspectives – including questions of representation, identity, and the politics of visibility – remains essential for understanding how cinema not only promotes destinations but also produces cultural meanings and hierarchies. The absence of such critical reflection in most existing film tourism discourse points to the need for a stronger theoretical foundation in future research.

1.2. Defining the Importance of Film Tourism

Film tourism, defined as "the visit by tourists to a destination or attraction as a result of the destination or attraction appearing on television or in the cinema" (Evans, 1997), is a growing global phenomenon. Films play a key role in shaping perceptions of a destination even before a tourist arrives (O'Connor and Bolan, 2008). This form of tourism generates an increase in visitor numbers, revenue, and employment, broadens markets, alleviates seasonality, and attracts visitors year after year (Beeton, 2004; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; Riley et al., 1998). Maria Sakellari notes how: "film tourism generates an increase in visitor numbers and subsequent rise in revenues and employment (Riley and Van Doren, 1998; Tooke and Baker, 1996; Hudson



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and Ritchie, 2006), broadens visitors market (Schofield, 1996), alleviates problems of seasonability (Beeton, 2004) and draws visitors year after year (Riley et al., 1998)” (Sakellari, 2014: 194). In a world of media convergence (Bolter, Grusin, 2000), where the planning of the journey begins long before arrival with online bookings, interactive maps, travel blogs, and social media (Mansson, Buchmann, 2020: 2), film provides a uniquely mediatized experience of a space that directly influences location choice. The emotional bond tourists form with a location, driven by plot or characters, gives film tourism an interesting advantage over other forms of tourism, as it both includes affective, cultural and economic aspect. In other words, film exists in our personal imaginary, on-screen as a product, but also as a separate space in the place of filming, forming a tri-partite experience.

Hudson and Ritchie (2006) highlight the research from the UK that shows how eight of out ten respondents take into consideration film in choosing their travel location, and five od out ten chooses the locality based on their favorite film (Skoko, 2014:181). In Croatian context, Skoko's research notes the results of Croatian Tourist Office survey from 2013 regarding the perception of Croatia, in which 38% of all respondents put Dubrovnik as the most recognizable, showing big potentials, but also pitfalls in the development of film tourism, like over-saturation and exploitation.

State of the art usually groups film tourists into three categories:

1. **General Tourists:** The decision to visit was not primarily motivated by a film, but the choice was partly influenced by a film.
2. **Specific Tourists:** The primary motivation for the visit was the film itself.
3. **Serendipitous Tourists:** They visit film locations because they are already in the destination for other reasons.

Understanding these motivations, what are their shared values and what makes them different is essential for developing targeted film offers.

1.3. The Audiovisual Sector as an Economic and Cultural Driver



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The audiovisual sector is one of the most important cultural fields insofar as it simultaneously creates economic and cultural value. Support for the AV industry is typically provided through four pillars: direct funding, fiscal incentives, investment obligations from industry players, and financial guarantees (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2019). These instruments can be direct (e.g., loans) or indirect (e.g., cash rebates or tax credits), with indirect incentives becoming a key tool for attracting international productions. Poort et.al. (2019) in their study highlight various sources of funding for EU films between 2010 and 2014, showing diversified schemes, but with the highest funding concentrated in a couple of sources, such as governmental funding and tax contributions.

Figure 3.1 Sources of financing of funding bodies

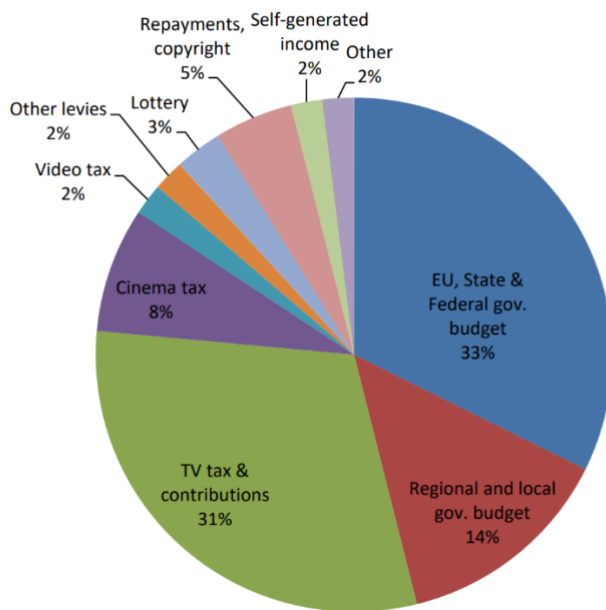


Chart: Sources of funds for the support of AV activities in the EU from 2010 to 2014., Poort et al (2019)

This also serves as a reminder to the specific position of European film between cultural politics and economic policies, EU, state and regional support as well as market activities. Séverine Dupuy-Busson hence contends that state intervention is crucial for the survival of European cinema. This intervention can help promote and sustain cultural diversity (2005).



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Croatia, for instance, passed a new *Audiovisual Act* in 2007 and later established an incentive program to attract foreign productions, recognizing them as a significant source of revenue and a tool for global promotion (HAVC, 2018). As a result in 2017 Croatia had 521 companies included in the production and distribution of films, videos and television programs as noted by the Institute of Public Finance: “Compared to 2011 the number of enterprises increased by 15%. These 521 companies employed a total of 1,493 employees” (Institut za javne financije, 2019: VII) with a revenue of almost 200 million euros, with an average annual growth close to 10%. This paper analyses and proposes policies that not only strengthen the local film industry but also create significant spillover effects, of which film-induced tourism is the most valuable.

2. The Current Landscape of Film Tourism: Italy and Croatia

The film industry is by most contemporary quantitative parameters an economic activity first. Its revenues and production targets entwines the artistic aspiration with capital investments, while being structured in a frame that depends on tight deadlines and budgets. In this picture, film practice is challenged by a highly competitive market that focuses on monetary gain through minimizing costs and accentuating engagement through competitive marketing strategy and communication. Therefore, artistic process can become secondary in the film industry, dependent on cost reduction while obtaining optimal services. Conditions under which the films are made, here specifically referring to pre-production and the production itself, are usually highly competitive, stress inducing, as well as time and money constrained. Framed as projects defined and guided by limited time and financial affordances, film practice can lack the time and funds to articulate and form sensitive interpersonal aspects of film production. More specifically referring to the quality of work for the crew working on a production, researching the local capacities of the shooting film locations that would be beneficial for the production team and for the local community, and for structuring a practical, cost and time effective strategies of, and in, the whole film process. Often, sustainable and well-meaning proposals and ideas that offer answers to the above proposed clusters are disregarded due to the cost saving actions. Preparation time for production at the location (here implying that a production company arrives from another country) is usually insufficient to dedicate more time for research and



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connection between the pool of services that the local and regional community can offer and the fast-paced targets dictated by producers, line managers and crew that lacks this knowledge. Practical, logistically simple, cheap, but beautiful and diverse locations (with the local crew capacity) are the gold that each production seeks to attain.

2.1. Italy: Cinematic Heritage and the Power of Regional Brands

Croatia and Italy are both countries with beautiful and diverse scope of suitable locations and landscape that guarantee the movie its recognizable aesthetics. However, even with its long history of filmmaking in both states, the challenges of structuring, recommending and improving the production process at their locations are still ongoing. The state and regional film and audio-visual structures have invested in providing the travelling or visiting productions with many online information that would assist and usher the interested production houses to consider their location and administrative services. Italy possesses a deep-rooted film culture that represents immense, though fragmented, tourism potential. It is recognized as one of the biggest film industries, as well as a paradigmatic example of the so-called *auteur cinema*.

The three city case studies reflected in the project are Venice, Rimini and Bari. All three locations differ in their level of cultural filmic recognizability, location and regional landscape capacity, production interest and scalability. Because of these different levels of operational and desirable profiles, it is key for the Italian agencies to promote diversity among them to ensure a balanced “use” of their locational capacities. To ensure this aim, an overview of all the capacities and opportunities, the platform *Italy for Movies*: <https://www.italyformovies.com/chi-siamo>, offers the space to engage with the noted potential. Initiated in 2017, the platform aims to “act as an institutional tool, coordinating information and communication with both the State and the Regions within a remit for the international promotion of the *Made in Italy* brand”. The platform gathers information about the current shooting sites, outlines projects and offers an overview of landscapes, fundings and an archive that connects the sites to the list of previous and current projects. Aside from this platform that offers a well detailed archive of film opportunities, each of the noted cities is



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connected to a regional fund agency that promotes their production capacities. In Bari, the Apulia Film Commission offers information on hubs, landmarks and incentives to the interested production parties. Individually, each city offers to promote film and tourism through their locally organised film festivals. In Bari, it is the Bari Puglia International Film Festival organized in the Bitritto castle, promoting the beauty of the region with its filmic accomplishments. In Rimini, this year's 18th Amarcort Film Festival edition, once again celebrated Federico Fellini through an international short film festival where new approaches to the director's oeuvre were presented to the audience. In addition, “La Settima Arte – Cinema and Industry” is another film festival that cojoins Rimini and Romagna, and which aims to promote the local institutions that participate in the cultural production. Unlike the two festivals which are perhaps not overly known outside of the regional scope, Venice International Film Festival, organised by La Biennale di Venezia, counted 82nd birthday in 2025. The international film spectacle, brings yearly international celebrities and showcases new released films at the end of each summer. All of the three cities and their festival differ in many levels of outreach and impact; however, it is important to overview the statistics behind them to understand the benefits, and warn about the potential issues.

Key examples pertinent to the project can be used to illustrate the strengths:

- **Venice:** The Venice Biennale, with nearly 700,000 tickets sold in 2024, functions as a powerful international magnet and media engine, setting a benchmark for cultural events (La Biennale di Venezia, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/news/biennale-arte-2024-closes-700000-tickets-sold,2024>).
- **Rimini:** The Fellini Museum recorded a 16.5% increase in visitors in 2023, proving that "auteur-branding" and quality museum infrastructure can drive year-round cultural tourism (comune.rimini.it, 2023, <https://www.comune.rimini.it/novita/notizie/il-bilancio-2023-e-i-numeri-della-rete-museale-riminense>).
- **Bari/Apulia:** The Apulia Film Commission, with its Cineport hubs and film fund, has positioned the region as a center for attracting and hosting productions, creating a foundation for converting that activity into tourism offers (apuliafilmcommission.it).



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For the case of Italy, Giulia Lavarone's work is important as it emphasizes that film-induced tourism encompasses tourist flows linked to films, TV series, and other media products, directed towards filming locations, settings, or other related cinematic elements like theme parks or celebrity homes, but also categorizes how audiences "read" landscapes in films, leading to different tourist experiences (Lavarone, 2018).

1. **Documentarissante (Documentary reading):** A focus on the landscape as a historical document, appreciating real-world details.
2. **Fictivissante (Fictionalizing reading):** Immersion in the narrative and characters, prioritizing the emotional connection to the story.
3. **Esthétissante (Aestheticizing reading):** An appreciation of how the film constructs the space, finding pleasure in the contrast between the real and the filmic.

These concepts are evident in Italian case studies pertinent for this research:

- **Florence/Firenze (*Hannibal* series):** While the series was not filmed in Florence, its diegetic narrative established a strong thematic link with the location (Lavarone, 2018: 380). The resulting tourism can be read as "fictivissante," driven by fans' desire to relive the emotions and narrative, often through culinary experiences. This shows how film tourism can emerge spontaneously from fan culture, independent of official marketing (Williams, 2019) and without actual location shooting. This aligns with the understanding of "participatory culture" where fans are both consumers and producers of media content, influencing the understanding and representation of tourist spaces. The latter is crucial for the development of incentives for visiting a specific space. Similarly, in the film *La sedia della felicità* (2013) Palazzo Bo' is playfully reconfigured to simulate a Venetian courthouse. Lavarone argues that such "reconfigurations" do not "denature" the place but invite new interpretations, revealing latent traits. This is an example where an "esthétissante" reading can be cultivated, appreciating the artistic construction of the filmic space even when it



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differs from reality. We will use both examples to highlight the complex and layered relations between authenticity and imaginary, as well as a location between the constructed and “natural” space.

- **Matera (*The Passion of the Christ*):** Following Mel Gibson's film, international arrivals in Matera increased by 143.8% in 2004, a paradigmatic example of the massive economic impact of a successful film (Lavarone, 2018: 16)
- **Padova (Displacement examples):** The use of Paduan locations to "play" others (e.g., Venice or Prague) invites an "esthétisante" reading, where the tourist can appreciate the artistic construction of the filmic space even when it differs from reality.

Italy's main challenge lies in fragmentation; events, film commissions, and tour operators often act independently. Without standard indicators and coordinated campaigns, measurable economic gains are not apparent.

2.2. Croatia: A Rising Star for Film Productions

Croatia has a long tradition of hosting foreign productions, but for decades its locations served as backdrops for other countries. In the 1960's, Orson Welles filmed an adaptation of Kafka's novel *The Trial* in Zagreb. In the same decade, Istrian peninsula served as a location for the war comedy *Kelly's Heroes* (starring Clint Eastwood), and Neretva, with neighboring regions served as a set for famous Yugoslav war blockbuster *The Battle of Neretva*. The film was shown in almost every country in the world and broke numerous viewership records in the year it was released.

Croatian Audiovisual Centre highlights the various indirect economic effects of foreign productions: additional spending during their stay on film locations, employment of local residents and increased sales, as well as government revenues, marketing impact of high-budget projects (such as *Game of Thrones*), but also disadvantages such as pollution due to overpopulation or the damage to the natural environment (Bagarić, Jelić & Meštrović, 2018).



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The importance of nurturing and expanding the efforts of film production offer in Croatia is important not only for the local, regional and state development in terms of profiling Croatia on the film production scene, but also in the scope of artistic productivity and proven record of collaborations with Croatia and other European partners, and as well with those worldwide. Therefore, the Croatian Audiovisual Centre's efforts to prepare and enforce the production companies that film in Croatia to register through a Filming Registration Form. These [*Regulations on maintaining official record of filming*](#), *prescribe the procedure, manner and deadlines for submitting a Filming Registration for filming an audiovisual work in the Republic of Croatia*. However, this is not only to do with the administration. Simple acts of registering guarantee to having an archive of those made labours and provides a base for regulation, statistical overview and a database of current and future potential partnerships. It is particularly important to request these administrative extra efforts that could sound to the production process as another bureaucratic labour. Nonetheless, as explained, insistence on administration can assist in ensuring a clear and structured overview of projects from which one can build on further. In terms of sustainable efforts, another time and cost saving act is to engage local film experts and crew into the preparatory and filmmaking process. Their engagement can ensure simpler collaboration making, smoother obtaining of permits and other licences, as well as gaining insights into the local framework and community performances. Establishing the connections between the guest production crew and local ones, or even insisting on them, does not only work for the project in place or the local economic gain, but actually signifies the core base for a healthy creative collaborative process.

Collaboration is not only significant on the foreign and local production, but also in terms of the regional connectivity. One of the main support branches for filming in specific locations is also part of the network of local film commissions who are familiar with more detailed locations, experienced crew members, regulatory and administrative aspects for their municipalities. In this respect, there are several successful commissions that have showcased their importance in regional film making projects. They are: Istria Film Commission, Kvarner Film Commission, The Split-Dalmatia Film Commission, The Varaždin Film Commission, Zadar Film Commission and Zagreb Film Office. The connectivity between the regional Commissions should overarch and intertwine not only their entities but also local film production houses



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and tourist agencies. Ideally, a streamlined chain of command would perform to ease the process of decision-making, crew and expert engagement and establish templates and processes that ensure a stable and sustainable production.

The main feature of the *Filming in Croatia* platform, a program of the Croatian Audiovisual Centre, is to immediately accentuate the diversity, practicality, and beauty of filming on Croatian locations to the visitor, i.e. the interested party. The offer is detectable immediately in its opening statement: A country that can accommodate even the most demanding visual requirements. There is no challenge that cannot be addressed and solved when one decides to film in Croatia. Visual requirement here directly addresses locations as the categories that will provide a film with that grandiose and specific location requirements. A notion that will for sure, as it already is, be challenged by the rise of AI usage to produce film settings or explore locations online thus lowering the costs for location scouting by producers and the film crew. Nevertheless, the ability to competitively offer Croatian locations was recognized by being in the finals of the European filming awards (EUFCN) two times.

Filming in Croatia also strongly recommends working with Croatian cast and crew, and the directory of contacts offers their services. In the database, each contact remarks which services are they offering, i.e., PP – Post production, PS-Full production service and production genre, i.e. A – Animated films, etc. To ensure the sustainability of human capacity through investment and development there is an incentive for productions who benefit more than EUR 500.000,00 in incentives, must in return employ at least one Croatian trainee in each of the main production departments. Productions benefiting from more than EUR 1.000.000,00 in incentives, must employ at least three co/head of departments and 50 % of the crew must be Croatian tax residents. Having said this, it is also very important to enforce the diversity element when choosing and selecting the film crew at the local and regional scope. The size of the country and the acquaintances pool can be an issue when contacting crew members. Evaluation of proven successful workers should be an asset and this need should be addressed so that diverse crews can gain more experience but also to disable potential nepotism opportunities. In addition to the scoring system, there is an indication of the Croatian Cultural Test used for scoring service production and co-production, that in the end does not affect the result, but addresses categories: use of Croatian production capacities, such as



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studios or locations. No preference is given to projects scoring higher on the Cultural Test. Applications are evaluated by the Incentive Committee, comprising five members appointed by the Minister of Culture and Media, which meet at least once every three months.

The “decentralized” approach to the crew is also applicable to locations. To be more specific, the focus of the platform is to offer a variety of interesting locations aside from the main “superstar” locations used for production of *Game of Thrones* (Dubrovnik) and *Mama Mia!* (Island of Vis) for which Croatia became more globally recognised. Even though the category of “Coastal Cities & Towns” introduces perhaps less known cities such as Split, Rijeka and Zadar, there is a reminder of Dubrovnik, *the most famous tourist destination, and also the filming location of the Game of Thrones series and the film Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. This should be welcomed as it is a format of building publicity of the region based on a successful example of production should enhance interest in other cities as well. Promotion of other cities and towns which are more inland (Zagreb, Varaždin, Osijek, Vukovar) also suggests expanding the interest scopes and themes, but also diversifying the pressure of production in Croatia. However, there is a two-folded issue here. The lack of capacities in the less filmic developed cities and regions, but also promotion and gain in potential development of the resources. However, in this respect there is the main concern of the issue of sustainability. One example how sustainability can become an issue is the example of Motovun film festival which after decades of being organised on the small hill in Istria, moved to another regional location, Gorski Kotar. The reasons for this were many and diverse, but also connected with the sustainability clause. Motovun is a small city limited in resources and space. The organisers have done their best in assuring accommodation, logistics and program, but over time the production remained limited while the needs expanded. The same example can be applied to a shooting location when drained of its resources or not attainable due to request or appetites. It is important to create awareness of what is possible and manageable and to ensure a longevity of locations so that they can accommodate more future film plans. In line with this, the focus goes back to the *Filming in Croatia* where a conundrum is detectable in the category “Nature”. Statement, *Croatia presents one of the ecologically best-preserved parts of Europe with 10% of its territory having a protected status (8 National Parks and 11 Nature Parks). Its sea is the purest in Europe according to the European Commission;* triggers a concern of maintenance and usage.



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Yes, there is a desire to offer a diverse palette of landscape for promoting Croatia as a film destination, however, without strict regulation and investments into those same locations (i.e., natural parks) its resource of beauty and diversity could be jeopardized.

Displaying practical ways in which Croatia is able to answer requirements of diverse set of filmic needs, in hand with the incentive of offering 25 percent cash rebate and an extra five percent for filming in regions that are underdeveloped, aims to attract production houses to its grounds. The practicality aspect that is also an important part of having a geographically small(er) state but with a diversity of geographical and climate scope is also accentuated; *Croatia is also one of the rare countries that boast an amazing mixture of different climates: continental, Mediterranean and semi-highland, and highland, all that in the radius of less than 200 kilometers. In practical terms, this means that the film crew could be based in a sunny Italianate Adriatic historical town, while being just an hour's drive away from a totally different landscape: either the arid Wild West plains of the Croatian coastal hinterland or Alpine-looking snow-covered mountain peaks.*

As mentioned, the measurable turning point was the film production incentive program introduced in 2012, which (currently) offers a 25% cash rebate on qualifying local spend (with an additional 5% for filming in underdeveloped regions). On the side of economic impact, the program has been remarkably successful.

The Economic Leverage of Croatia's Film Incentive Program (2012-2024) clearly illustrates the powerful return on investment from Croatia's cash rebate scheme. In the 12 years incentives were €59.2M, that generated local spend of €282.9M. Return on Investment: For every €1 of rebate paid, €4.77 in direct local expenditure was generated (Hrvatski audiovizualni centar, 2024).

Pertinent case studies for understanding Croatian film industry and tourism in international sense are as follows:

Winnetou film series (1960s): 11 films based on German author Karl May's novels were co-produced in Croatia, with Croatian locations like Paklenica National Park, Plitvice Lakes, and Krka national parks



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"starring" as the American Wild West. Filmed in Croatian national parks, this series created enormous popularity in German-speaking regions leading to organized tourist tours to filming destinations. Although initially neglected, its enduring popularity led to the later development of tourism products, demonstrating long-term organic potential. For example, in 2009, a Winnetou Museum opened in Starigrad (Paklenica). Excursion programs like "Following the Trails of Winnetou" were initiated, offering visits to filming locations, horseback riding, and campfire meals. An "Indian reserve in Europe" called "Winnetou Land" was also opened in Rakovica. The enduring popularity led to three new sequels filmed in Croatia in 2015, and "Winnetouland" was included in the national tourism development strategy for 2014–2020, showcasing a strong organic link between the film and its locations, even without initial promotion

Game of Thrones: Dubrovnik, as King's Landing, became a global phenomenon. Research estimated the series generated a cumulative economic impact of €180.7 million between 2013 and 2018 (Vukašina et. al. 2021: 101). The series is often used to illustrate valuable spillover effects of the incentive program. Research by Tkalec, Zilic, and Recher (2015) found that from 2012 to 2015, the series attracted an average of 60,000 additional tourists to the Dubrovnik-Neretva County annually. These tourists generated 1.44 million overnight stays and €125.9 million in tourism spending over that period. The report projects the total benefit from 2012-2019 to be at least two to three times higher, estimating a minimum total impact of 260-350 million euros. However, this success also brought immense pressure, making Dubrovnik a prime example of film-induced over-tourism.

Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again (2018): Filmed on the island of Vis, which "played" a Greek island, this case raises the crucial question of who benefits from tourism when viewers are unaware of the true location. Croatia has a long tradition of hosting foreign film productions (since 1923), but for decades, locations were often used to portray other countries, making international and local audiences largely unaware. This underscores the need for effective public relations to link the destination with the production.

Croatia's filming locations have received international acclaim, including the EUFCN Best European Film Location Award, confirming the program's success in creating global destination visibility at a fraction of



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the cost of traditional marketing campaigns. *Filming in Croatia* program is obviously highly successful, with cumulative economic impact between 2012-2024 resulting in 139 international and domestic projects realized.

On top of that, Istrian Film Commission established in 2015 reports it has implemented a number of initiatives relevant to the study. They reflect Istria's strategic and forward-looking vision for developing its audiovisual sector by combining sustainability, cultural heritage, and regional promotion. The Istrian Film Commission has taken a leading role through a comprehensive set of activities that position the region as an authentic, green, and internationally recognized film destination. It launched Croatia's first regional Green Filming initiative, produced a Guide to Sustainable Filming in Istria, and created a directory of local professionals. The guide, featuring a QR code, provides clear, practical steps for applying green protocols in production—focusing on achievable sustainability goals rather than formal certification. The “Istra snima zeleno” (Istria Shoots Green) program embeds environmental responsibility in local filmmaking and aligns with the Cultural Development Plan 2024–2029, emphasizing landscape preservation, reduced environmental impact, and responsible destination branding. A forthcoming Letter of Intent by the President of the Region will further formalize Istria's leadership in green audiovisual policy. Also, the Istrian Film Fund, founded by the Region of Istria and the Film Commission, has become a key financial instrument for regional production. Once limited to short films, it now includes feature projects and saw a 200% budget increase in 2025, reaching €75,000 (€50,000 from the Region and €25,000 from the Croatian Audiovisual Centre). This partnership strengthens local production capacity and reinforces Istria's identity as a sustainable film region. The Commission also preserves and promotes cinematic heritage by serving as a publisher a catalogue of more than 180 films shot in Istria and the publication “Film Time Machine” (published by the Public Institution Pula Film Festival), offering a historical overview of the region on screen. It further produced the multilingual film map “Istria on the Screen” and the handbook “Film in Istria”, guiding filmmakers and visitors through locations and production resources. It is through the “Istria on Screen – Film on Location” project that the audience is able to experience films at their original shooting locations, enriched with film posters exhibitions and live concerts of film music, merging tourism and cultural memory. Reported weakness proves to be a persistent challenge that involves copyright and



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intellectual property constraints. Legal restrictions on the use of film titles, imagery, or characters in promotional and digital projects (AR/VR) limit the ability of destinations to fully capitalize on cinematic exposure. Securing permissions from rights holders can be costly and time-consuming, discouraging local initiatives and slowing the development of innovative film-tourism products despite their cultural and marketing potential.

Despite its success in attracting foreign productions, Croatian films face challenges in the domestic market. In 2024, domestic films saw a 49% drop in admissions, with a market share of just 4.13% (HAVC, 2024). This points to a strategic gap between a successful service industry and the development of local content.

2.3. Comparative Analysis: Strengths and Weaknesses

	Italy	Croatia
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong cultural brand (Fellini, Venice, <i>auteur</i> to 4.77x ROI cinema) Developed regional infrastructure (Apulia) Deep academic tradition in film studies Diverse locations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highly effective incentive program (up to 4.77x ROI) Proven ability to attract big productions (<i>GoT, Star Wars</i>) Stunning and recognizable natural landscape Lower production costs
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fragmented approach (institutions) Lack of standardized impact measurement Risk of relying on past glory without innovation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High concentration of tourism in a few locations (Dubrovnik) Displacement problem (locations playing other countries) Weak domestic market share for local films



3. Key Success Factors in Film Tourism

Neil O’Boyle’s research of the afterlife of John Ford’s *The Quiet Man* (1952) shows the potential of the long impact of a film for a small village in which it was shot. A small village Cong in Western Ireland built on the success of the film by opening a pub, a hotel, as well as the museum catering to the memorabilia from the film (O’Boyle, 2017). On the other hand, even though Ireland serves as a backdrop for the Star Wars franchise, O’Neil claims that those films, regardless of economic impact, “have arguably deepened Ireland’s association with the mythic, the otherworldly, and the supernatural and strengthened its reputation as a place of spiritual recuperation and regeneration” (2017: 1368). Displacement theory is here again valuable to consider, as the stakeholders should discuss possible negative impact of propagating stereotypes and otherness, creating or projecting exotic images, or misrepresenting altogether.

Recent research suggests New Zealand as an example of successful branding and marketing as a destination, seen especially in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* trilogies. During the peak of tourist interest between 2000 and 2004 (the period during which the LOTR films were released), New Zealand’s visitor numbers increased an average of 7% (Ferrer-Roca, 2020). Of this increase, 1% – which translates to approximately NZ\$33 million in terms of the total tourist spend – affirmed that the LOTR trilogy was their main or only reason for visiting the country. But, as Natàlia Ferrer-Roca asserts: “Nevertheless, only big feature film productions that get into the international circuit are able to attract prolonged and international tourist flows by changing the collective perception of a destination and, therefore, are able to have a significant and long-term impact” (2020: 112). Similar can be seen in Brereton (2020) for the case study of Ireland as a tourist destination.



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Beside the measurable economic impact, as well as tourist surge, for Italian, and especially Croatian case, there is no complete analysis of cultural impact of film tourism, especially in the domains of displacement, or misrepresentation of location.

Successful film tourism initiatives are rarely accidental. While the serendipitous popularity of a screen production (*Game of Thrones*, *The Lord of the Rings*) can generate short-term or even long-term spikes in visitation, sustainable outcomes typically depend on strategic planning, infrastructure, and stakeholder coordination.

3.1. Strategic Production Incentives

Both Italy and Croatia demonstrate the centrality of audiovisual infrastructure and incentive frameworks. As mentioned, Croatia's *Filming in Croatia* scheme offers a 25% cash rebate (30% in underdeveloped regions), attracting over 130 projects since 2012 and generating a 4.77:1 return in local spending. In Italy, regional commissions such as Apulia's operate integrated location hubs (Cineports), production funds, and marketing units, creating a direct bridge between filming and tourism product development. As the Croatian model shows, well-administered cash rebate programs are not a cost but a strategic investment with a direct, measurable return to the public budget. They are a key tool for attracting foreign productions that create the foundation for tourism. Key takeaway seems to be that incentives work most effectively when coupled with tourism conversion strategies — e.g., agreements requiring productions to engage locally through public screenings, guided tours, or even community workshops.

3.2. The Power of Scenery and Visual Identity – short takeaways

Research by Peter Bolan shows that scenery is the dominant motivational driver (43%) for film-induced travel. Films like *The Lord of the Rings* in New Zealand or series like *Game of Thrones* in Croatia use epic landscapes to create a powerful emotional connection.



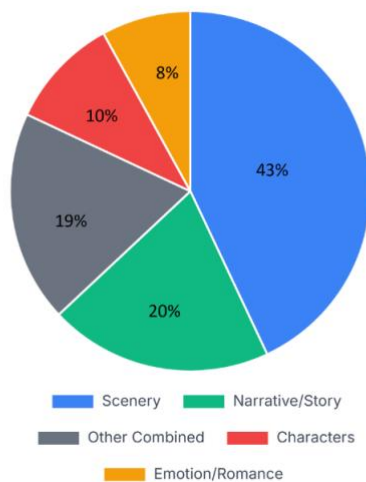
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This chart shows the primary factors from film that influence the decision to visit a destination.

What Makes People Visit a Film Location?

Primary factors influencing the decision to visit a destination seen in a film.



Source: Adapted from Bolan, P. in "Displacement Theory – Probing New Ground in Film-Induced Tourism".

Graph 2: What Motivates Film Tourists to Travel?

3.3. Institutional Collaboration and Integrated Infrastructure

Successful destinations demonstrate close collaboration between tourism boards and film commissions. The Apulia Film Commission is an example of integrated infrastructure that actively works to convert production activity into tourism offers.

3.4. Destination Branding and Targeted Marketing



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Simply being a film location is not enough. New Zealand's "Home of Middle-earth" campaign is a paradigmatic example of integrating a film franchise into a national tourism brand. As shown, research asserts that 1% of visitors during the film's release period cited the trilogy as their sole reason for visiting, translating into tens of millions of dollars in tourism spending.

3.5. Authenticity, Cultural Heritage, and Fan Engagement

Successful initiatives often rely on authenticity and heritage. The Fellini Museum in Rimini and The Quiet Man Museum in Ireland are examples of how the legacy of a single film or director can be turned into a sustainable, year-round attraction (growing 16.5% in 2023). The case of *Hannibal* in Florence highlights the power of fan-driven tourism, where visitors create their own routes in search of an "imaginative restoration" of the filmic experience (Williams, 2019).

3.6 Digital Engagement and Mediatization

Tourists increasingly engage with destinations through user-generated content (UGC) and digital media long before arrival. Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and fan blogs extend the life of a film tourism product and allow participatory co-creation of narratives. Florence's *Hannibal* fandom — largely unmanaged by official tourism bodies — illustrates the organic potential of "imaginative restoration," where fans reconstruct mediated experiences in real-world settings. Paul Smith.

Policy implication: Destination managers should monitor and engage with UGC, using it both as a marketing asset and as a feedback mechanism to gauge visitor sentiment.

4. Challenges and Risks in Developing Film Tourism

While the opportunities are considerable, Italy and Croatia face shared structural and operational challenges that can undermine the long-term sustainability of film tourism.



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4.1. Over-tourism and Sustainability

The GOT–Dubrovnik case is a textbook example: a 38% surge in arrivals between 2012–2015 brought economic benefits but also overcrowding, resident dissatisfaction, and strain on heritage assets. Dubrovnik’s 2019 GSTC assessment flagged traffic congestion, overcrowding of attractions, and degradation of historic sites as critical issues. (GSTC, 2023). Although the City of Dubrovnik has since implemented a sustainability plan, this case serves as a critical warning.

4.2. The Displacement Problem and the Loss of Tourism Value

Even though filming locations are one of the most valuable tourist destinations, there is a measurable difference between cities “playing themselves” that are deeply rooted in collective imagination and memory of worldwide viewership (Las Vegas, New York, Paris, Venice). When the location does not represent itself, much greater effort is needed to market the filming location, as well as to create a meaningful tourist campaign. Even a successful campaign can have its downside which are not economic in nature. As Skoko and Miličević assert, While *GoT* significantly increased tourist arrivals, its popularity “overshadowed the rich history and cultural heritage of this cultural monument” (Skoko and Miličević, 2020: 206). Their analysis showed *GoT* was overwhelmingly mentioned in tourist-generated content, with positive sentiment, but also mention “mass tourism” and “crowded” as references to Dubrovnik.

On the other hand, as suggested, “displacement” refers to when one location is used to represent another in a film (Bolan, Boyd & Bell, 2010). When filming locations portray other places, the tourism benefit often accrues to the fictional destination rather than the real one. Without proactive PR, Vis’s portrayal as a Greek island in *Mamma Mia 2* failed to establish a strong link to Croatia. Similar risks apply in Italy’s displacement cases, where Padova often doubles for Venice or Prague in cinema. In both countries, benefits tend to cluster in a few high-profile locations (Dubrovnik, Matera, Venice), leaving other regions under-leveraged. This spatial concentration exacerbates seasonality pressures and neglects the potential of inland or less-developed areas.



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4.3. Fragmentation and Lack of Coordination

As previously mentioned, a lack of collaboration between film and tourism bodies is a common problem. Without a joint strategy and standardized indicators, synergistic effects are missed, and benefits remain limited.

4.4. Cultural Commodification and Stereotyping

Themed tourism built around reductive or romanticized representations can distort local identities. In Ireland, *The Quiet Man* and *Star Wars* reinforced peripheral, pre-modern stereotypes; in the Mediterranean, nostalgic “as it once was” imagery risks creating visitor expectations that clash with contemporary realities. There is a danger that popular films will overshadow a destination's rich history and contemporary culture, reducing it to a simplified, commodified image.

4.5. Managing Tourist Expectations

There is a risk of disappointment when a real location does not match its on-screen depiction, which is often enhanced by cinematography or digital effects. Managing these expectations through authentic yet appealing presentation is crucial for visitor satisfaction.

4.6 Limited Monitoring and Data

Both Italy and Croatia lack standardized, national-level measurement systems for film tourism’s economic and especially social impacts. Current studies (e.g., *GoT* economic impact estimates) provide partial insights but are not comparable across regions or productions.



5. A Joint Methodology: Recommendations for Italy and Croatia

To fully realize film tourism’s potential in Italy and Croatia — and avoid its pitfalls — a **joint, evidence-based methodology** is essential. This section outlines concrete actions, building on the REEL project’s objectives of diversification, sustainability, and cross-border cooperation.

5.1. Foundational Principle: Embracing the Mediatization of Tourism

It builds on the idea that cinematic tourism “denotes embracing the conceptual shift from exploring the ‘effects’ of media, ‘conceived of as separate from society and culture’ (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 105), on tourism, to questioning the intrinsic changes led by mediatization to the tourist experience itself” (Lavarone, 2018, 35), or in other words, understanding cinema as a means of formulating new experiences, representations, as well as impacting local surroundings in various quantitative as well as qualitative ways.

This flowchart visualizes the interconnected steps of the proposed methodology.



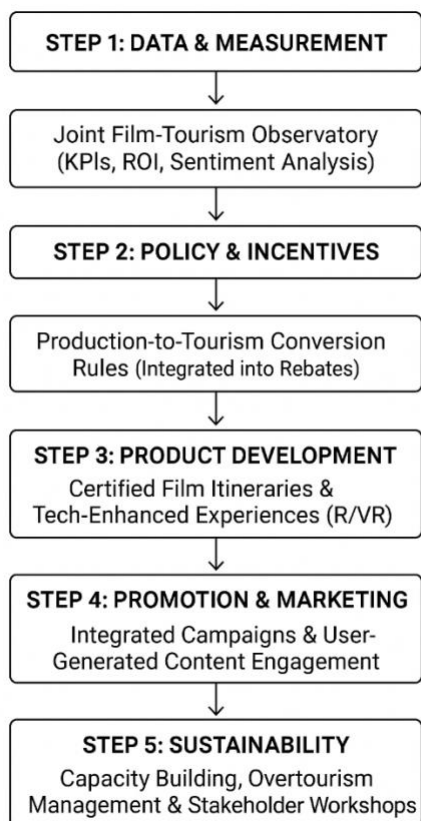


Figure 1: A Proposed Flowchart for a Joint Film Tourism Strategy

5.2. Recommendation 1: Establish a Joint Film-Tourism Observatory

Action: Create a shared digital platform and dashboard with standardized Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for both countries. This includes film-related visitor numbers, average spend, online sentiment, media mentions, and campaign reach.

Rationale: Consistent, standardized measurement enables evidence-based policymaking, calculation of ROI, and facilitates cross-border learning, overcoming the current problem of fragmented data.

5.3. Recommendation 2: Implement "Production-to-Tourism Conversion Rules"



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Action: Make a portion of film incentive approvals conditional on a "tourism engagement plan." This could include an obligation to hold a public screening, a guided location tour, a quota for local suppliers, or data-sharing commitments. Regional incentive *top-ups* could be prioritized for projects with strong conversion plans.

Rationale: This measure systematically bridges the gap between hosting a production and reaping tourism benefits. It is especially important in cases of "displacement".

5.4. Recommendation 3: Develop and Certify *Authentic* Film-Tourism Products

Action: Strengthen the central coordination of film tourism projects (e.g., through respective agencies). For films with enduring popularity (like *Winnetou*), explore the development of dedicated theme parks or long-term themed attractions ("Winnetouland") to capitalize on established fan bases (e.g., "Fellini Routes" in Rimini). Ensure multilingual content, signage, and integration with online booking platforms. Encourage the use of technology (AR/VR apps) to enrich the on-site experience.

Rationale: This diversifies the tourism offer away from overcrowded hotspots, creates sustainable, high-quality products that manage visitor flows, and promotes regional development.

5.5. Recommendation 4: Foster Strategic and Integrated Marketing

Action: Implement proactive PR campaigns that explicitly link popular films to their actual filming locations. Actively monitor, analyze, and engage with User-Generated Content (UGC) on social media to understand and shape destination perceptions. Facilitate opportunities for tourists and locals to co-create visual narratives and experiences that enhance destination image. Promote platforms where "experiential authenticity" can be shared, drawing on both official and user-generated content. This aligns with critical theories that emphasize agency and lived experience over passive consumption

Rationale: Recognize that simply being a filming location is insufficient if the location portrays other places. The goal is to neutralize the negative effects of "displacement" and ensure the destination's brand is strengthened, not overshadowed. Engaging with UGC allows for direct communication with audiences and



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addresses issues like perceived crowding. Fully acknowledge and leverage the power of mediatization and media convergence in tourism. Understand that tourists are active co-creators of content and meaning.

5.6. Recommendation 5: Prioritize Sustainability and Capacity Building, Address Negative Impacts

Action: Use Dubrovnik's journey from problem to solution as a model for managing high-demand destinations. Organize workshops for hoteliers, tour operators, and local guides on creating and marketing film experiences. Encourage interdisciplinary research to continuously refine strategies. To mitigate "Overshadowing", develop policies to ensure that popular film productions do not completely overshadow the existing rich history and cultural heritage of a destination (e.g., Dubrovnik's UNESCO status versus *Game of Thrones*). Strategies could include integrated marketing that clearly communicates both film connections and historical/cultural significance. Implement measures to manage potential "mass tourism" and crowding issues that arise from film-induced popularity. This includes exploring sustainable and ecologically friendly tourism approaches.

Rationale: The aim is to mitigate the risks of overtourism, ensure economic benefits remain in local communities, and guarantee the long-term environmental and social sustainability of film tourism.

6. Conclusion

Film tourism offers Italy and Croatia an extraordinary opportunity for innovation, diversification, and strengthening their tourism sectors. As this paper demonstrates, success is not guaranteed by the mere act of filming. It stems from a strategic vision, smart policies, close collaboration, and a deep understanding of how media shapes the modern tourist experience.

The transition from a passive host of film productions to an active creator of tourism value requires a paradigm shift. Instead of fragmented and reactive approaches, a proactive, integrated, and data-driven strategy is needed. The proposed joint methodology—focused on measurement, targeted conversion, authentic product development, smart marketing, and sustainability—offers a concrete roadmap for achieving this vision.



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The joint methodology proposed here — anchored in shared data systems, integrated incentive policies, certified products, and cross-border branding — provides a replicable model for sustainable film tourism. By implementing these recommendations in the spirit of the REEL project, Italy and Croatia can jointly leverage their unique cinematic and cultural heritage to create a resilient, sustainable, and globally competitive tourism offer for the 21st century.

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