

Review

# Film-Induced Tourism, Destination Branding and *Game of Thrones*: A Review of the Peñíscola de Cine Project

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**Abstract:** This paper addresses an alternative perspective on tourism success, emphasising sustainability over traditional quantitative metrics such as arrival numbers. It explores the impact of fiction films and TV series on individuals' mental representations of destinations featured on screen, as well as the capacity of film discourse to construct a brand aligned with local stakeholders' interests. Qualitative methods have been employed, conducting a literature review on sustainable film tourism and destination branding. Local news and an interview with the head of the Peñíscola Film Office complemented academic insights. The primary goal is to examine the "Peñíscola de Cine" project as a paradigm of success, initiated by the city council of Peñíscola, Spain. This project positions the municipality as a natural film set through productions like *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), illustrating how film can contribute to destination branding and community engagement. The study highlights the positive contribution of film tourism to sustainability by diversifying and de-seasonalising a territory's offerings. It also attracts a more educated and environmentally conscious audience. However, it cautiously discusses the potential risks, as evidenced by misapplications in Goathland, England, and Skellig Michael, Ireland, following their appearances in *Heartbeat* (1992–2010) and *Star Wars* (1977–2019), respectively. The paper concludes by suggesting film-friendly measures for destination management organizations (DMOs), emphasising the pivotal role of film commissions and film offices in crafting effective marketing strategies and capturing the interest of audiovisual production companies.

**Keywords:** film-induced tourism; destination branding; film discourse; sustainable tourism; *Game of Thrones*; Peñíscola



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## 1. Introduction

Historically, tourism progress has been associated with the number of visitors a territory receives annually. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), although it does not include a definition for this concept in its glossary [1], continues to use this criterion as a fundamental indicator in the elaboration of the World Tourism Barometer [2]. In this regard, Volgger and Pechlaner [3] note that over the years, several authors have studied demand behaviour to measure the success of tourism destinations. Other authors, such as Archer and Fletcher [4] or Kozak and Rimmington [5], analyse factors such as the number of arrivals and spending—the so-called "hard" data—while others, such as Fuchs and Weiermair [6], prefer to focus on guest satisfaction—"soft" data. These readings are necessary for the production of micro- and macro-level reports that make it possible to determine the impact of the industry, as well as to anticipate its behaviour.

However, Gössling, Scott and Hall [7] maintain a critical stance toward this perspective and consider it obsolete. To this end, they rely on two essential premises. On the one hand, they recall the fragility of the equation “success = more tourists” after the 2008 global depression [7,8]. On the other, they indicate the need to reconsider the tourism growth model in the face of the paradigm shift triggered by over-tourism, climate change and, more recently, COVID-19. These words coincide with those expressed by Ioannides and Gyimóthy [9], who see the turning point marked by the health crisis as an opportunity to select a new direction and adopt a transition towards greener and more balanced tourism. For their part, Jamal and Camargo [10] argue that we lack an ethical framework that evaluates fair practices towards the natural and cultural assets of the indigenous community and advocate embracing the postulates proposed in initiatives such as the Green Globe 21 program or the Melbourne Principles.

Therefore, it is essential to rethink the balance between local stakeholders—including the residents themselves—and businesses in the sector, tourists, the legal framework and the environment and, above all, to adapt possible solutions to this new post-pandemic horizon. In other words, we must encourage applying a holistic approach that takes a detailed look at the impacts—economic, political, cultural, social and environmental—generated by this industry at all levels. Heitmann [11] subscribes to this strategy and defines it as “integrated sustainable tourism planning with concern for the long-term future of resources at its core”. For Jamal and Tanase [12], tourism planning requires identifying the principles, values and trade-offs related to development, as well as the limits that both the territory and its inhabitants can tolerate. This commitment to sustainability, accompanied by inclusive practices, according to d’Angella and Go [13], conceives three types of capital: social capital—trust and willingness to exchange ideas; intellectual capital—mutual understanding; and political capital—agreements in project implementation.

All this contributes to maintaining an equitable distribution of power and, therefore, allows the interests of all the agents that make up the sector to be aligned. Furthermore, it makes it possible to establish a connection between tourists’ expectations and the narrative dimension that destination marketing organizations—from now on DMOs—intend to project on the destination in which they operate. The latter are responsible for reflecting on the territory’s identity and synthesising its attributes into an advantageous brand image. With this in mind, DMOs must ask themselves two fundamental questions: what and how? The first question is related to what Imbert [14] describes as social imaginaries, understood as a set of representations that condition our apprehension of reality, i.e., what features, attributes and specific circumstances characterise the region? That is a matter of essence: what do I see? The second issue is mainly linked to aspects coming from marketing and, above all, to the concept of tourist gaze proposed by Urry [15], which raises the distortion between the tourist’s perspective of an object compared to that of the local public. It is a matter of appearance: how do I want to be seen?

For this reason, each destination must honestly read its heritage and symbols before deciding how it wishes to be recognised by the tourism market. Of course, there are cases where this association has been deliberately built thanks to an effective brand image strategy, such as Paris—city of love—or Las Vegas—city of sin, but there are also countries that have been forced to deal with an iconography that harms them for reasons like drug trafficking—Colombia [16]; terrorism—Afghanistan [17]; or the absence of rights for women—Chad [18]. In this sense, several investigations demonstrate the capacity of cinema and fiction series to cement the perception of a territory [19,20], as well as the role they play in the connection between the imaginary and the tourist gaze: a result that tends to align with the interests of the DMOs that originate them [21].

One of the paradigms that has best represented this aspect is the HBO series *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), a production that has not yet received due attention in the areas of film tourism and destination branding. For example, of the 205 results (search carried out on 8 December 2023) that appear in Scopus if the order “Game of Thrones” is written in the “Article title” field, only 21 of them deal with something related to the sectors

mentioned—travel motivations, tourism impact, transformation of the region’s image, etc. Of this number, two do not limit their analysis to any specific location [22,23], 10 focus on the case of Northern Ireland [24–33], five develop the influence that the series has generated in Dubrovnik, Croatia [34–38] and five focus their research on Spanish locations [38–42]. However, none of these studies have investigated the effect that *Game of Thrones* has had on Peñíscola, a Spanish municipality located in the province of Castellón. Therefore, this article aims to provide an unpublished review of how this town has been able to take advantage of its film tradition thanks to the creation of the Peñíscola de Cine project.

In summary, this paper will discuss an alternative vision of progress or concept of tourism success that departs from strictly quantitative criteria, especially the number of arrivals. The approach that will be suggested instead focuses on a primordial element: the creation of a brand image capable of attracting a particular tourist profile through the fair and sustainable use of cultural and landscape resources. In order to achieve this target, a cinematographic tourism model will be used to project the set of representations that symbolise a region and provide it with a narrative dimension that is attractive to the spectator. It will also detail the advantages of this strategy, warn about the possible risks involved in its incorrect application and mention specific case studies that demonstrate it. Some techniques to capture the interest of the audiovisual industry will also be discussed. Finally, a reflection will be established in which the importance of this research in future studies related to issues such as the relationship between cinema and tourism, destination-brand design or the impact of the *Game of Thrones* phenomenon will be determined.

## 2. Methodology

To achieve the objective of this work, we used qualitative methodologies. First, we undertook a documentary analysis illustrating the starting point and the process to reach the final reflections. In this regard, we conducted a literature review of scientific articles on sustainable film tourism and destination branding published in international indexed journals. In addition, a Scopus search was carried out to find post-2020 research related to the impact of *Game of Thrones* on the locations where it was filmed. However, given the topicality of the subject, it was also necessary to look for news published in local newspapers and to interview the head of Peñíscola Film Office. Both sources have provided access to information of a municipal nature, complemented the academic research and offered a practical view of the subject dealt with in this work.

Secondly, the case study [43,44] has been used because of its ability to address a specific topic, deepen a phenomenon and obtain a broad knowledge and because the phenomenon studied is contemporary and accurate, as is sustainable film tourism. In a first approach to the phenomenon, including some elements of benchmarking [45], we expose three different scenarios of non-sustainable film tourism, to finish by detailing a confirmed case of good film tourism management: the *Peñíscola de Cine* project. Since one of the critical elements of the case study is the triangulation of data, we ensure its compliance with the consultation of various sources that present their views on the particular data, reflected in its reliability and validity [46].

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Cinema as a Persuasive Builder of Imaginaries

The Real Academia Española, in its fourth meaning, defines the term imaginary as a “symbolic image from which a mental representation is developed” [47]. Hall [48] had to value this idea when he included cinema in the category of “hallmark events” since it contributed to forming images of a destination. This vision, therefore, demonstrates that the recreation that films and fiction series make of a location has considerable influence on the conception of it, mainly if it has not been visited before, and ratifies the power that the audiovisual industry exercises in a tourist’s decision-making. In order to delve deeper into this issue, one must first understand the elements that incite travel. In this sense, several authors have established a traditional confrontation between the so-called “push” and

“pull” factors. Initially, Dann [49] hypothesised that push motivations constitute a dominant factor over pull ones, an opinion that coincides with that of Weaver and Oppermann [50].

However, as studies on film tourism have gained weight [51], it has become evident that the destination represented in film and television does not only act as an element of entertainment—pull—but can also be the reason why tourists undertake their trip, even creating feelings of fantasy, romanticism, nostalgia, novelty and prestige—push [52]. Thus, according to this criterion, the tourist is not the only one who chooses the place they visit since the destination itself also selects the visitor profile it is interested in attracting. Hudson, Wang and Gil [53] estimate that “after family, friends, and the Internet, TV shows and movies are the next key factors in the decision to travel to a particular country”. This statement raises a necessary question: why does film possess a higher conviction rate than other discourses? The answer lies in the medium’s use of persuasion. Filmic language can cloak a suggestive message that goes more unnoticed than the one featured in advertising communication, which is much more explicit [54].

Thus, while watching a film, series, soap opera, reality show or fictional documentary, the viewer does not interpret the diegesis as an explicitly commercial message. However, the desire or need to visit that destination is subtly induced through the vicarious experience generated. Beeton [19] relies on this emotional connection to assert that cinema functions as a promotional tool rather than a conventional advertising announcement. Croy et al. [55], in addition to endorsing this standpoint, state that this region recognition is carried out with minimal cost implications for the tourism industry. Therefore, harnessing the potential of this tool and projecting a favourable image of a territory is not strictly an economic issue but rather a matter of planning on the part of local stakeholders. Consequently, it is up to these actors to assess their interests, define a strategy and act accordingly to benefit their community. These guidelines are related to destination branding, a concept we will focus on below.

### *3.2. The Role of DMOs in Destination Branding*

When an audiovisual production company undertakes a shooting, it does not consider the impact—commercial, political, environmental, cultural and social—that it may subsequently have on the destination [56]. Instead, it prioritises the quality of its product and the cost of production, so that upon completing its services, it does not take care of promoting the destination or revitalising its heritage. This task concerns all the organizations that manage the region’s image. The DMOs as well as the film offices and commissions are in charge of obtaining a material return beyond the artistic purpose of this type of activity [57], thus acquiring the responsibility of shaping a corporate image model. To do so, they have to establish a stereotyped relationship, presumably propitious, between a territory and the qualities that constitute it. This process is known as destination branding, which Cai [58] describes as “the selection of a consistent mix of elements to identify and distinguish it through the construction of a positive image”. Palmer and Tivers [59] add that this combination of elements must be captured in videos and images to link experiences and emotions with the destination to which they belong.

Developing a consolidated and recognisable brand helps future tourists to have specific expectations and to know what they can find or experience in the place they are traveling to. The latter is linked to what we previously pointed out as vicarious experience, which transmits a degree of empathy and familiarity before the trip. Kim and Richardson [60] state that the viewer who experiences this event vicariously by viewing a place on screen is on a similar level to the tourist who travels to the original destination: “it is not unreasonable to consider vicarious experiences with a destination depicted in a film as another type of destination experience”. Hence, film not only reinforces the idea of branding but also contributes to the formation of a tourist gaze that distorts the perception and behaviour of visitors—how do I want them to see me? This phenomenon occurs when the spectator appropriates the emotions and faculties of the fictional characters portrayed in the film, embracing the narrative dimension—the diegetic universe. In short, exposure to these

elements, whether real or fictional, creates a perspective in the viewer/tourist that allows them to acquire more significant levels of familiarity and complexity with the image [61].

An example of this can be found in the phenomenon awakened by the movie *Paris, Je t'aime* (2006), or *The Hangover* saga (2009–2013). The former recreates Paris as the city of love, while the latter does the same with Las Vegas and unbridled fun. Of course, residents' perceptions of these places do not coincide with the perceptions of those who travel intentionally to reproduce the story experienced by the film's protagonists. These brands—Paris/love and Las Vegas/sin—have been successful because both turn the image of the destination into something tangible and straightforward. In other words, an abstract service is transformed into a product that the consumer can apprehend through their senses. Other projects that have managed to reduce their brand to an easily distinguishable concept thanks to the influence of the seventh art are Hollywood/Movie Mecca and New Zealand/The Home of Middle-earth. Although initially reifying a region's attributes into a stereotype may be translated as silencing its fewer commercial values, this strategy produces a reverse result. Palmer [62] argues that through this procedure, a large number of indigenous elements can be brought together under "the umbrella of a single brand with a common identity and marketing objectives".

### 3.3. The Risks of Misapplying Brand Image

As previously discussed, reifying the most recognised particularities of a territory under a tangible product helps to give voice to other, less commercial, cultural properties that may not possess sufficient interest to attract the attention of tourists on their own. However, branding also entails some risks that are worth noting. This section will describe three scenarios where the influence of films and fiction series has generated a negative result for the region where the filming took place. The first occurs when the movie provokes or creates a pernicious representation of destiny. Treating issues related to crime, corruption, poverty or drugs can cause the viewer to have an adverse reaction, especially if they associate them with the social reality of a country. This effect can be seen in the staging of violence in the Brazilian favelas in the film *Cidade de Deus* (2002) or the depiction of Colombian drug trafficking in *Loving Pablo* (2017) and the Netflix series *Narcos* (2015–2017). However, if the viewer associates the treatment of these topics with a mere narrative element that seeks to enrich the plot, this harmful effect of the image does not occur, as demonstrated by the dizzying increase in tourism in Albuquerque after the premiere of *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013) [63].

The second scenario occurs when a film unintentionally and unexpectedly creates a positive image of a destination that is unprepared to cope with the influx of people it begins to receive. This phenomenon tends to occur in rural environments whose economic engine differs from the service sector. In general, it is rare for the impact generated by this type of situation to last for years because the locality needs to design a sophisticated exploitation plan to make this activity profitable and a promotion plan to continue attracting film productions to its land. Two examples of this can be found in the municipalities of Goathland—England—the setting for the fictional town of Aidensfield in the ITV1 series *Heartbeat* (1992–2010) [64] and Tobermory on the Isle of Mull—Scotland—where the children's series *Balamory* (2002–2005), broadcast by the BBC, was shot [65]. In Goathland, Tooke and Baker [66] found that between 1991 and 1993, there was an increase in the number of long-distance bus arrivals of 278% and rail arrivals of 171%, compared to 8% for the number of cars. These authors also denounce the collapse suffered by the population and the damage it caused—the sinking of roads due to the weight of the coaches, destruction of green areas, etc.—and the access restriction measures that the city council had to impose. For their part, the stakeholders of Tobermory alleged that during the pre-production phase of *Balamory*, the production company hardly contacted them, consequently leading to a lack of planning. The absence of foresight was compounded by a poor tourism infrastructure that prevented the companies from capitalising on the increase in visitors [65].

Finally, the third scenario in which the action of films and series can have a negative effect occurs when a community intentionally creates a brand image related to it but underestimates the magnitude of its repercussions. In these cases, tourist saturation causes a detrimental impact on the landscape and environmental resources of the area, as well as affecting the traditional identity of the locality, which could turn it into an artefact of popular culture. In this sense, the island of Skellig Michael—Ireland—stands out after the *Star Wars* saga (1977–2019) transformed it into Luke Skywalker’s exile during Episodes VII and VIII—*The Force Awakens* (2015) and *The Last Jedi* (2017), respectively. At first, the Office of Public Works was hesitant about the feasibility of marketing a World Heritage Site as a set, although it finally approved the filming permit. Today, together with the site director, they admit that it was an inappropriate decision and recognise that a larger audience is interested in Hollywood representation than in the history of this place [67]. Another case that also responds to this scenario is found in Maya Bay—Thailand—the setting of *The Beach* (2000), starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Tilda Swinton [68].

However, perhaps the most famous event occurred in Dubrovnik—Croatia—after *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019). Depken, Globan and Kožić [69] calculated that the episodes of this series led to an increase of 5000 additional overnight stays per month and about 59,000 in a calendar year, just from tourists wishing to visit the setting of King’s Landing, capital of the Seven Kingdoms in George R. R. Martin’s universe. Šegota [37] argues that the city has become a melting pot of three narratives, where its Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque history; its political challenges, war and the reasons for its fortification; and, finally, the fictional chronicles of the dynastic struggle for the iron throne converge. This amalgamation of discourses is not necessarily harmful to the heritage of the destination or disadvantageous to its interests—on the contrary, it may even be positive—but it does pose a problem regarding how to approach its narration. Indeed, this author differentiates the presence of tour guides committed to the historical cause from those who prioritise the fantasy version, who, in her opinion, “increasingly succumb to postmodern tourists’ preferences for instant authentic experiences and a superficial understanding of heritage”. She also fears that Dubrovnik will be unable to recapture the original interest of its heritage and return it to a stage before the irruption of *Game of Thrones*, which would be achieved by diminishing the relevance of the cinematic narrative in favour of the war and historical one.

### 3.4. Peñíscola and *Game of Thrones*: A Sustainable Film Brand

Peñíscola is a municipality located in Castellón—a province in Spain—with a population of 8210 as of 2022 [70]. Historically, this town has enjoyed a long tradition of cinema. At the beginning of the 20th century, it hosted some shootings, such as *Ana Kadova* (1913) or *La alegría del batallón* (1924). However, titles have increased considerably since the second half of the century. From 1950 to the present day, more than 20 productions have been made, not to mention short films, documentaries, video clips and commercials. These 20 can be classified into four categories. (1) Spanish films, in which 12 stand out: *La vida es maravillosa* (1956), *Calabuch* (1956), *Todos eran culpables* (1962), *¡Jo, papá!* (1975), *El hijo del cura* (1982), *El cura ya tiene hijo* (1984), *Tramontana* (1991), *El día nunca, por la tarde* (1994), *Tierra* (1995), *París-Tombuctú* (1999), *Mataharis* (2007) and *Fin* (2012); (2) international films, where we find 4: *El Cid* (1961), *Il conquistatore di Maracaibo* (1961), *Escape from El Diablo* (1983) and *Sinterklaas* (2009); (3) Spanish series, which are: *El barco* (2011–2013), *El chiringuito de Pepe* (2014–2016) and *El Ministerio del Tiempo* (2015–2020); and (4) international series: *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019).

Precisely, the arrival of the latter and the premiere of *El chiringuito de Pepe*, shot almost entirely on easily recognisable locations, marked a turning point in the town’s tourism strategy. In 2017, the Peñíscola Film Office considered the idea of building a brand image that would present the municipality as a film-friendly destination and began work on the Peñíscola Ciudad de Cine project. The initiative, which had the support of the Castellón Municipal Tourism Board, led to the signing of an agreement in June 2018 between the city council and Turisme Comunitat Valenciana (Turisme Comunitat Valenciana, known

as Agència Valenciana del Turisme until June 2018, “makes up the public entity of the Generalitat to which corresponds the promotion and execution of the tourism policy of the Comunitat Valenciana” [71]) to promote the prosperity of the Peñíscola Tourism Film Product Promotion Plan [72]. With this intention, it obtained in 2019 a first grant of 100,000 euros to develop “specialised media actions aimed at the final tourist”, as well as to enhance the representation of the municipality as a cinematographic scenario [73]. This annual funding was renewed for 2021 [74] and 2022, the year in which Peñíscola announced the launch of the project “Peñíscola: El plató natural más grande del mundo”—the world’s largest natural film set [75].

One of the main activities that has driven this proposal has been the enhancement of the film route inaugurated by the Peñíscola Film Office in 2016 after the addition of the *Game of Thrones* locations. The itinerary, which consists of 14 points (the North beach—Playa Norte, the South beach—Playa Sur, the port, the Ronda promenade—Paseo de Ronda, the Santa María square, La Porteta, the Felipe II ramp—La Rampa Felipe II, the Artillery Park, El Portal Fosc, El Bufador, the Sea Museum, the lighthouse, the Plaza de Armas and the Sierra de Irta natural park) distributed throughout the city centre, only includes 14 of the 22 audiovisual productions listed above (the productions included in the route are the national films *Calabuch* (1956), *Todos eran culpables* (1962), *El hijo del cura* (1982), *El cura ya tiene hijo* (1984), *Tramontana* (1991), *El día nunca, por la tarde* (1994), *París-Tombuctú* (1999) and *Fin* (2012); the international films *El Cid* (1961) and *Il conquistatore di Maracaibo* (1961); the Spanish series *El barco* (2011–2013), *El chiringuito de Pepe* (2014–2016) and *El Ministerio del Tiempo* (2015–2020) and the international series *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019)) and can be consulted on this agency’s website [76]. To this end, 16 informative signs have been placed in the filming locations, except in the Sierra de Irta due to environmental criteria, thanks to funds of 35,000 euros provided by the Provincial Council of Castellón [77]. These signs contain information about the film or series, images that help to recognise the setting and a QR code that allows the tourist to consult the website to find out the location of the rest of the panels—Figure 1. In addition, the page includes other content related to the Peñíscola de Cine project, such as the activity “Plato de cine”, which associates the words *plato*—dish—and *plató*—set. This gastronomic route “combines filming locations and local products to offer tourists a unique experience” [78].

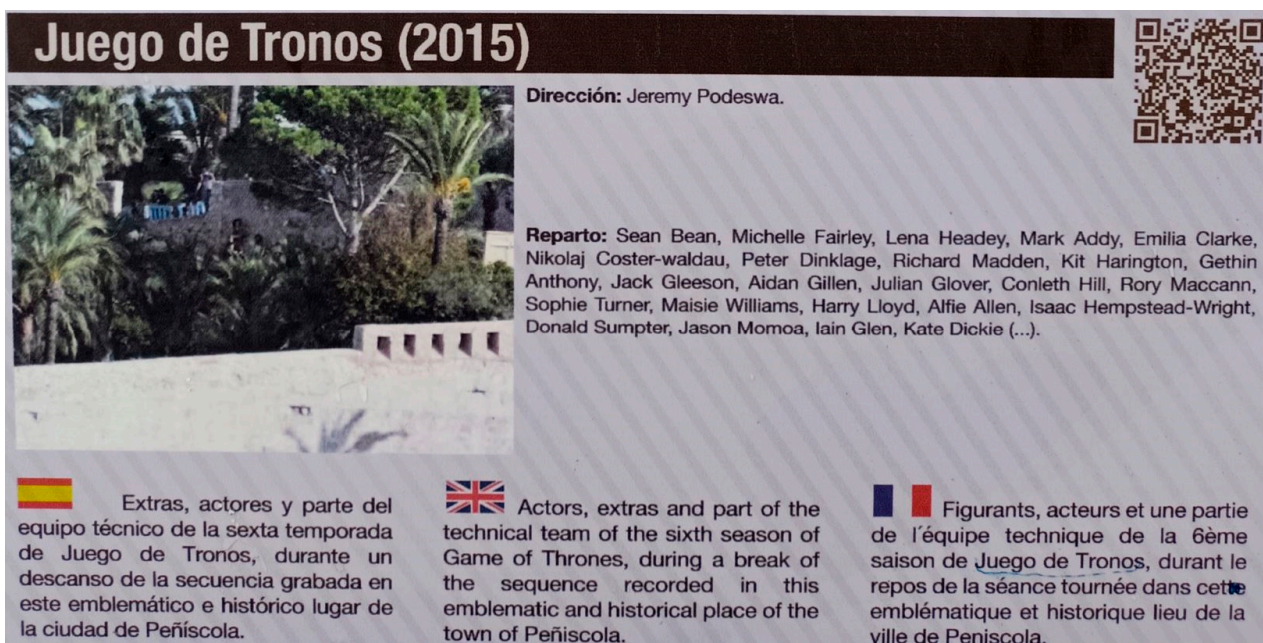


Figure 1. Poster with the filming of *Game of Thrones*.

Another reason why this brand image has achieved a positive reach is due to the involvement of local businesses, unlike in Tobermory. In line with the above, some companies have adopted a filmic name to benefit from this factor. For example, in the Plaça de Bous—Bullring Square—is the bar-restaurant *Calabuch*, in honour of Berlanga’s famous film, although more representative is the case of *El Chiringuito de Pepe*, located on Jardín Street. This establishment imitates the design of the one that appears in the *Mediaset* series, with the same colours and identical distribution of furniture, and even rescues the original recipes of the chefs Pepe Leal and Sergi Roca, characters played by the actors Jesús Bonilla and Santi Millán, respectively. In fact, on the door, you can see the poster of the series, which includes the *Tele5* logo—Figure 2. It is not known what agreement the restaurant has or will have with the television channel or the amount of the exploitation rights—if any—or the turnover that the business will obtain thanks to this commercial strategy, but this paradigm serves to stage once again the capacity that cinema and series have to enhance the tourist phenomenon.



Figure 2. Collage made with the photographs taken at *El Chiringuito de Pepe*.

In fact, in an attempt to assess the impact of *Game of Thrones*, the city council commissioned the consulting firm JP Media to conduct a detailed study of it. According to its conclusions, the HBO production generated an estimated €1 billion in media coverage between June 2015 and January 2016. In addition, the advertising value of the 4000 press hits collected in the different international media amounted to 31 million euros [79]. Other relevant results emphasised in this report are (1) the publication of more than 5000 news items in national, international, digital and print media; (2) the achievement of an audience of 2675 million unique users, of “42 million readers in print media, 4 million viewers on television and 5 million listeners on radio”; (3) a 40% increase in visits to the locations where



the filming took place; (4) the promotion of the filming by 1200 travel agencies; (5) the occupation of 500 accommodation places, with a direct contribution of nearly one million euros; and (6) the involvement of 1200 local extras and the creation of tourist employment by more than 21%.

All this has contributed to the fact that Peñíscola has become the municipality with the highest ratio of tourism per inhabitant in Spain, with a proportion of 25.49 tourists per registered resident [80]. According to this study, which initially recorded a population of 7882, this town attracts 200,943 visitors annually. However, from our point of view, the real success of Peñíscola does not lie in its induction capacity but in the efficiency with which it has managed its business model. There is a high likelihood that a town of these characteristics would succumb to such tourist overcrowding, as observed in other destinations before. Still, its ample hotel offering has managed to neutralise this effect. In addition, this year, in 2023, many local businesses in Peñíscola have obtained the Green Flag for hotel sustainability. This qualification rewards the commitment of hotels and local councils to recycling and the fight against climate change [81]. This sustainability criterion has also been extended to other issues of concern arising from tourism saturation, such as the maintenance of traditional culture and natural resources.

Regarding the first issue, a distinction must be made between tourists and resident foreigners. In the case of the former, they are a temporary public who, after a short stay, return to their region of origin, while the latter settle in a territory and complement it with their habits and customs. An imposition of cultural elements is likely to occur in the latter situation, but not when a tourist travels to consume the traditions and history of the destination—unless the destination is adapted to meet such expectations. Peñíscola is one of the three cities that have become a papal see, along with Rome and Avignon, after hosting Benedict XIII. To avoid confusion between this historical narrative and the *Game of Thrones*' fictionalised account of the town, the cinematic discourse has been de-emphasised in the places where this distortion is most plausibly happening. Thus, in the exhibition of the castle where the pope resided, there is no mention of any element linked to the HBO series, nor is there any inside Artillery Park—the sign indicating the filming location is outside. This way, the local identity is not compromised, as in Dubrovnik.

Finally, as far as pollution is concerned, no studies show that the incidence of tourism has worsened the air quality index—AQI—of this town. Daily records reveal that the “AQI is good and pollution presents little or no risk” [82]—Table 1. Moreover, Peñíscola is a coastal territory that allows the entry of fresh air from the Mediterranean Sea. For their part, the natural and landscape resources also present an acceptable level of conservation. In this sense, the natural park of the Sierra de Irta enjoys the status of a protected area and, therefore, is administered by a special legal regime. It should be recalled that the Peñíscola Film Office did not obtain authorisation to place the informative sign about the film route in this spot for fear of turning the area into an overcrowded tourist stop [77]. Finally, the city council has undertaken various actions to keep the main tourist attractions in good condition. For example, a surveillance service has been hired in Artillery Park to prevent visitors from stepping on the grass or damaging its heritage.

**Table 1.** Air quality in Peñíscola on 19 October 2023 [82].

| Pollutants          | Value                        | AQI |
|---------------------|------------------------------|-----|
| Ozone               | 37 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  | 17  |
| Fine particles      | 5.3 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ | 22  |
| Inhalable particles | 23 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  | 21  |
| Carbon monoxide     | 265 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ | 3   |
| Nitrogen dioxide    | 12 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  | 6   |
| Sulfur dioxide      | 3.8 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ | 2   |

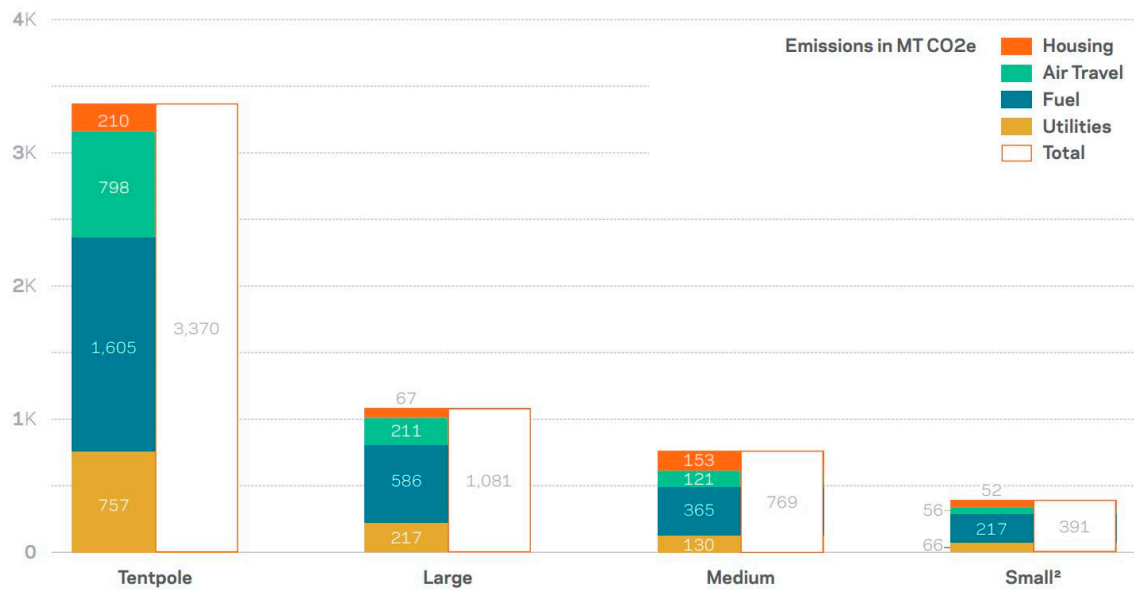
#### 4. Discussion

The favourable results described in the previous section have motivated the regional government to renew the agreement with Peñíscola and increase by 50% the subsidy to develop its film project. Thus, in April 2023, the Generalitat, through the Turisme Comunitat Valenciana, approved a grant of 150,000 euros for the municipality to continue promoting its film-friendly product [83]. This budget increase, compared to the 100,000 euros received in 2019, 2021 and 2022, demonstrates that film tourism can become an essential asset to the offering of a territory. In addition to being useful in the promotion that makes itself a destination in the international market, this model offers two other fundamental advantages. Firstly, it contributes to the deseasonalisation of tourist flows since a temporary nature does not govern the activities that constitute it [84]. Secondly, it attracts “people with a medium-high income level, fond of cinema and literature and with a certain cultural level” [85].

Both premises demonstrate that film tourism aligns with the principle of sustainability. On the one hand, it complements other activities that depend on climatic criteria, such as sun and beach tourism, mycological tourism or other different categories, thus helping counteract periods of saturation. On the other hand, the tourist profile that consumes it tends to maintain a more respectful attitude towards the environment to which it travels. In addition, these visitors are usually well-informed before starting their trip since the degree of prior planning is high, so they are aware of the circumstances and heritage of the destination. Another reason that justifies the DMOs’ commitment to film tourism is the need to differentiate their strategy from the growing competition in the tourism sector. The constant search for specialised market niches has forced these organisations to diversify their offer and, above all, to position themselves as catalysts of a genre. They must therefore take a risk and offer new avenues of exploitation that match their interests and enhance the attributes of the territory they represent.

If a destination decides to undertake a marketing proposal related to the audiovisual industry, it must ask itself what incentives can attract the attention of production companies. Without going into detail, some of the main initiatives will be outlined below: (1) the release of funds and the provision of subsidies for filming—direct aid; (2) tax exemptions and tax refunds—indirect support; (3) investment in infrastructure, such as film studios, audiovisual equipment and training of professionals, which allows production companies to subcontract services in the region instead of moving their own resources, thus saving costs; And (4) the implementation of film-friendly measures at the local level, including the establishment of film offices and film commissions to facilitate the needs of production companies. This category comprises a wide variety of activities such as the processing of filming permits and the possible elimination of their fees, the processing of visas and the sending of location guides or communication with the different city bodies—with the local police if traffic has to be cut off, with the Municipal Parks and Gardens Autonomous Section, etc.

Likewise, the destination institutions can negotiate the conditions under which aid is provided. To this effect, the city council of Valencia—Spain—decreed the elimination of municipal filming fees (These fees amount to €2.33 per square meter and a week or fraction thereof [86]) for those productions that project a favourable image and collaborate with the promotion of the city [87]. This type of measure promotes the introduction of modifications into the script to meet the requirements. Alternatively, direct and indirect support can be used to encourage a green transition towards sustainable filming. According to the results of the Sustainable Production Alliance report [88], the range of emissions associated with an audiovisual production in the United States varies between 391 and 3370 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> depending on the size of the project—Scheme 1. The Albert 2019–20 report [89] recognises that during 2019 in Europe, “one hour of TV contributes the equivalent of 9.2 tCO<sub>2</sub> e/hr, a 10% reduction since 2017”. Scheme 1 shows that the carbon footprint generated by the audiovisual industry can be reduced.



**Scheme 1.** Average emissions per feature during filming in the USA [88].

With this orientation, organisations such as the Instituto de la Cinematografía y de las Artes Audiovisuales—ICAA—published two calls in 2021 for proposals that rewarded applicants’ commitment to sustainability. The first one offered an extra point in the general aid scale to those productions that calculated their carbon footprint [90]. The data correspond to criterion 4.4 of Annex I of the resolution of 7 June 2021 of the General Directorate of the ICAA. This document can be downloaded from the bibliographic reference provided. The second, linked to aid for distribution, envisaged as eligible expenses associated with promoting environmental sustainability [91]. These initiatives are in line with the objectives set by the Spanish Climate Change Law approved in May 2021, whose preamble IV states that “emissions of the Spanish economy as a whole in 2030 must be reduced by at least 23% compared to 1990 and climate neutrality must be achieved by 2050 at the latest” [92]. Some authors, such as García-Larriú [93], propose feasible alternatives to achieve this goal in the audiovisual sector. Some of them include incorporating an eco-manager in the working group or connecting the equipment to the power grid to avoid using generators.

The same author also mentions the case of the blockbuster *The Amazing Spiderman 2* (2014), which managed to save more than 400,000 dollars thanks to the use of sustainable measures, such as using biodegradable snow and water-based smoke, eliminating plastic bottles and using environmentally friendly detergents on set. Progressively, the entities responsible for approving subsidies and filming permits are rewarding these actions by endowing distinctive certificates to companies that put them into practice. In this sense, the Academia de las Artes y las Ciencias Cinematográficas de España presented in December 2021 the Guide of Good Practices of the Green Seal for Audiovisual Sustainability [94]. Similarly, in Germany, the Hamburg Schleswig-Holstein Film Fund grants the green shooting card; in Italy, the T-Green Film of the Trentino Film Commission requires the provision of a sustainability plan to make the application; and, finally, Screen Ireland offers the Green Production Guide toolkit, where it details a series of instructions to carry out an environmentally friendly shooting [93], to cite some similar issues outside Spain.

## 5. Conclusions

This article has discussed an alternative idea of tourism progress that does not focus on quantitative criteria but rather on the ability of destinations to build a sustainable brand image that aligns with their cultural and commercial interests. To do this, local stakeholders must exercise an honest reading of the destination’s heritage—what do I see?—and the representation of the destination outside the community—how do I want to be seen? In this sense, cinema and fiction series have proved to be influential builders of imaginaries

capable of conditioning the tourist gaze. For their part, DMOs have the responsibility to use this symbolic image as a more efficient promotional tool than the advertising discourse itself. In essence, betting on film tourism helps to deseasonalise the offer, to achieve a specialised product that stands out from the competition, and, furthermore, it attracts a better-educated tourist profile and tourists who are more responsible with the environment they visit.

However, not all destinations that seek to implement this model or that are represented on screen are likely to reap profitable situations. If the film projects a pejorative image of a region, the opposite result is expected to occur, as in the case of Brazil with the movie *Cidade de Deus* (2002) or in Colombia with *Loving Pablo* (2017) and the Netflix series *Narcos* (2015–2017). Another possibility is that the destination may not be prepared to manage the impact generated by an audiovisual production, as is the case with the municipalities of Goathland after its appearance in the ITV1 series *Heartbeat* (1992–2010) or Tobermory, the setting of the BBC children's production *Balamory* (2002–2005). Finally, there may also be a situation where the intention is to attract an audience through film, but the impact that this medium can have on the audience is neglected, as has happened on the island of Skellig Michael for *Star Wars* (1977–2019) or in Dubrovnik for *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019).

On the other hand, Peñíscola has used its cinematographic heritage to build an identity by which it intends to be recognised in the tourism market. Thanks to the filming of *El Chiringuito de Pepe* (2014–2016) and *Game of Thrones*, among others, and the successive support of Turisme Comunitat Valenciana and the Diputación de Castellón, the town has developed the *Peñíscola Ciudad de Cine* project. With this initiative, the film office has devised cultural activities such as film or gastronomic routes and an effective promotion plan. This strategy has acquired greater importance due to the involvement shown by local stakeholders, who have come to adopt filmic elements in their businesses to take advantage of the pull generated by films and fiction series. All this has helped Peñíscola to become the town with the highest ratio of tourism per inhabitant in Spain, with 25.49 tourists for every resident registered in the census. However, the real achievement lies in the fact that this influx has not distorted the historical heritage, as the municipality's tradition and *Game of Thrones'* diegetic discourse is differentiated, unlike in the case of Dubrovnik.

Concerning this last issue, filming can generate a carbon footprint of up to 3370 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> in the case of North American blockbusters. In order to minimise this impact and promote a green transition in the audiovisual sector, public institutions can offer incentives to reward environmentally friendly work. These incentives can take the form of direct aid—subsidies—or indirect support—tax exemptions and reimbursement of fees. In addition, if a destination's marketing strategy decides to focus on the film industry, it can also attract the attention of production companies in different ways. On the one hand, it can do this by investing in infrastructure—film studios and the like—as well as audiovisual equipment and professional training. On the other hand, other local measures can be undertaken, such as establishing film offices and commissions to act as one-stop shops and facilitate filming. This creates a film-friendly climate that is conducive to the arrival of future film shoots and, with it, a possible increase in the region's popularity.

In short, this article has carried out an unprecedented review of how the Peñíscola Film Office has managed to create an attractive and sustainable cultural offer model based on film shoots. In addition, this study has served to expand research into the impact that *Game of Thrones* has had in Spain, a subject that has not yet received the attention it deserves. In this way, the analysis of the Peñíscola paradigm can inspire DMOs seeking to establish a tourism strategy for municipalities with less than 10,000 inhabitants based on taking advantage of the benefits of the audiovisual industry. Moreover, the information on these pages can also be a precedent for future researchers assessing the reach that the HBO series has generated in destinations other than Dubrovnik and Northern Ireland. Finally, this paper highlights the usefulness of qualitative methodology, as well as the consultation of local newspapers and the use of interviews with municipal organisations to obtain specific data that are relevant for the review work.

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