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European Film Commissions as Transcultural Promoters and Mediators

Abstract: This article investigates transcultural communication taking film commissions as case study. Film commissions are non-profit organisations looking to attract audiovisual productions to their areas and supply these audiovisual productions with services free of charge. Although relatively recent and little studied, film commissions are spreading fast worldwide. Combining the political economy approach with the most recent production studies, the article contends that film commissions can stimulate transcultural phenomena on three levels. First, they act as intermediaries between the audiovisual production and the host area. Second, they encourage collaboration between different production cultures. Third, they incentivise brand-new collaboration between the audiovisual production and the tourist sector.

Keywords: film commission, film production, creative industries, tourism, political economy

1 Introduction

Transcultural communication is a process involving stakeholders from distinct cultural contexts. In order for communication to be effective and fruitful, it is essential to find fertile common ground among these stakeholders so they can have productive discussions and, more than that, interweave their different traditions, expertise, competencies, sensibilities, and interests. This encounter can then bring forth collaborations, positive and lasting relationships, and sometimes even connections of some substance between different peoples.

This essay investigates transcultural communication through a case study of film commissions. These are usually public, non-profit organisations looking to attract audiovisual productions to their areas and supply them with services free of

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charge. Through this two-pronged effort (attraction and service provision), film commissions create various benefits for the local economy, from boosting employment and tax revenue to bringing in money as film crews purchase what they need.

Although relatively recent, film commissions are spreading fast in Europe and worldwide. That said, these entities remain little studied. More importantly, film commissions have never been analysed through a transnational-communication perspective. This is odd as film commissions' defining aim is to create collaboration between stakeholders from different backgrounds. Film commissions bring together industry and public bodies, local and non-local stakeholders (some from other regions or even countries from abroad), to make a complex cultural product – a film, TV series, web series or documentary – that meets all their interests and whose quality depends on the efforts and resources contributed by everyone involved.

The question this essay aims to answer is this: is it possible to view film commissions as modern, unprecedented intermediaries and transcultural communicators of increasing importance to the audiovisual-production arena and to local economic-development plans?

We contend that the film commissions can stimulate transcultural phenomena on three levels. First, they act as intermediaries between the audiovisual production business (production companies, directors and screenwriters) and the host area (local institutions and the community). These stakeholders have different goals; they are not in with the industry lingo; and their work is subject to time schedules that are hard to reconcile. Second, film commissions encourage collaboration between different production cultures – professionals that the audiovisual production businesses bring to a given place for filming and professionals recruited *in situ* locally and non-locally. In other words, film commissions help to create special teams whose members have different habits and ways of working. Third, film commissions give incentives to new collaboration between the audiovisual production business and the tourist sector. These two worlds have traditionally been separate, unaware of each other's dynamics, yet capable of achieving significant economic results as a joint group through synergies. These three forms of transcultural collaboration have a clear economic impact. But there's more. Film commissions' key role of negotiating with production companies, local bodies, and tourism agencies has its own impact, in turn, on the creative output. Therefore, through their mediation, film commissions exercise influence on the viewers too, some of whom opt to go and visit the film locations afterward, thus becoming film-induced tourists.

The essay demonstrates the above thesis in three separate sections. The first (Section 2) identifies the reasons why film commissions came into existence in Europe and describes what they do. The second (Section 3) examines the three

levels of transcultural communication and mediation on which film commissions operate. And the third (Section 4) gives the conclusion.

The research approach is a blend of political economy of media and production studies. The former analyses the main trends in the media arena in production, distribution, and market terms, especially the relations between media companies and public bodies, between corporate strategy and public policy (Wasko, 2014). The production studies strand, meanwhile, probes the operational dynamics created during the production stage, the relations among different stakeholders, and the implications for the creative output (Caldwell, 2008; Szczepanik & Vonderau, 2013). The essay stems from a continual investigation into film commissions operating in Western Europe which started about 10 years ago (Cucco & Richeri, 2013), which includes numerous interviews with various film commissioners as well as close observation of their work. It tries to offer a critical theoretical reflection on the phenomena observed and studied.

2 The Advent of Film Commissions in Europe

The 1990s brought an important new development in support and public funding for cinema in Europe, as local councils got involved (Milla, Fontaine, & Kanzler, 2016). Traditionally, local bodies took only a very marginal interest in cinema, confining themselves to helping to fund local festivals, supporting film collections and sponsoring film forums and shows. They saw cinema as a segment that brought only intangible benefits in terms of intellectual stimulation – nothing to justify public investment. So for a long time, local support for cinema was very limited, merely offering selected films for local audiences, leaving national government to provide regulation and support (Cucco, 2018).

Then in the late 1990s, a change occurred. Local government began to see creative industries in general and cinemas in particular as strategic levers for creating cultural benefits and promoting economic development. The creative industries are based on exploiting not material resources but knowledge. So they are theoretically more sustainable than other industries, and they lend themselves better to being marketed overseas. The late 1990s saw a transition in the conception of the cultural industries – from a sector to be supported to one to be invested in (Drake, 2013; Garnham, 2005; Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Schlesinger, 2007).

Policymakers Europe-wide applied this new perspective to cinema too (Doyle, Schlesinger, Boyle, & Kelly, 2015). Film began to be seen as a strategic sector – in terms not of the population's cultural education but rather of creating benefits for the local economy (Cucco, 2018). National governments focused mainly on granting tax credits to those investing in cinema, prompting a boom in tax incentive schemes that

lasted for the first two decades of the new millennium. Local bodies, meanwhile, were mainly interested in the production stage, especially the shooting. Audiovisual productions were wooed with what translated into a series of economic benefits for the local area. Their extent varied according to how large the production was and how long it stayed in the area (Goldsmith, 2015). The economic incentives included money spent on local goods and services, employment, tax receipts, developing or consolidating skills specific to the audiovisual world and, sometimes, increasing or creating new tourism demand.

To attract audiovisual productions to their area, local public bodies use two main tools: film commissions and film funds. Film commissions are non-profit organisations set up by a public body. Be specific to attract audiovisual productions and facilitate their stay in the local area. Whatever their organisational or legal form (associations, foundations, etc.), all film commissions exist to provide logistical support to save productions time and money while generating economic benefits for the local residents and businessesity.

A film commission's core role (Cucco & Richeri, 2013) is:

a) to provide information about the area. Film commissions give details about the weather, local taxes and laws, the infrastructure available, etc., to enable the productions to make the most of what the area has to offer and to plan their stay effectively.

b) to scout locations: film commissions seek out the locations that a production needs, offering various alternatives. Film commissions can do this better than anyone, as they have strong local roots and know the landscape and its possibilities intimately. Once the ideal locations have been found, the film commissions open negotiations with local stakeholders about using those places and organising the shooting (permission to use public or private spaces, temporary closures of businesses, museums, churches, etc.).

c) to sign contracts: film commissions conclude agreements with hotels and providers of the various services that productions might need (catering, laundry, etc.). Thus, they help production companies save money while encouraging them to use local services and pump money into the local economy.

d) to obtain permits: film commissions take care of the admin, applying for permits, coordinating with the police, etc., to facilitate filming on location. The production companies used to do all this themselves, which could be particularly onerous when filming in a foreign country.

e) to map out and promote the local professionals: film commissions identify the relevant professionals on the technical and artistic sides in their area and put them forward to the hosted productions. Thus, the film commissions create jobs and increase the benefits to the local economy from the productions.

These new job opportunities also enable local professionals to improve their skills, making the area even more appealing for future productions.

 f) to provide spaces: film commissions can often provide access to offices, car parking, meeting rooms, casting rooms, etc., facilitating work on the production and making it all more efficient.

Nowadays, any area wanting to host film productions needs a film commission. It is tricky to establish just how many film commissions are operating in Europe, because there is no common definition of what a film commission is; in particular, no national or EU film commission registries existing. Commissions' importance to the film industry varies from country to country, based in particular on the powers that local administrations enjoy in the cultural arena. Regardless of these variations, local government has a more important role now in supporting cinema throughout the continent. The local bodies provide this support under their own initiative, not as an obligation under national laws or European directives.

The second tool that local administrations use is the film fund. This provides financial support for productions hosted in the area and is managed either by the local film commission (as is mainly the case in Italy, Cucco & Richeri, 2013) or directly by the public body holding the purse strings (the primary model in the rest of Europe). It may seem unwise for local bodies to offer money to audiovisual productions, sometimes even to foreign ones, especially during difficult economic times. But film funds exist precisely to create real economic benefits for the host area. Payments are subject to the proviso that the production spends more in the local area than it receives (usually 150%). And other conditions may apply, e.g., to recruit a minimum percentage of local workers, to spend a minimum number of days in the area, to give a certain visibility to the local sites in the final version of the product. These stipulations assure a return on the funding body's investment. The situation is different with film commissions, as they provide services to all comers, in the hope (far from certain) that the productions receiving this logistical help will spend more in the area than what the film commission costs to the local administration.

It is not easy to count the number of active local film funds in Europe, as the situation is in constant flux. While the level of public funding directly from the EU is largely stable, and national support is on a downward trend (national governments now tend to invest in cinema mainly through indirect funding), local efforts continue to grow (Milla et al., 2016). Moreover, these local contributions are awarded mainly according to automatic criteria based on money spent in the area, which considerably expands the potential range of productions that might apply for funds (Cucco, 2018).

3 Film Commissions as Promoters and Mediators

The analysis of the reasons behind film commissions' emergence and their roles casts film commissions as modern promoters and transcultural mediators. The following three sections examine this role on three separate levels.

3.1 Audiovisual Producers, Local Institutions, and the Local Population

This new way of looking at the audiovisual sector as a catalyst for economic as well as cultural development spawned an unprecedented market between film producers and local administrations. These are two parties with seemingly no common interests: the producers want to make films at minimum cost and maximum profit; the administrations want to encourage the development of the area they govern and assure their citizens' wellbeing. But producers need places to shoot in (technically speaking, *locations*), places the administrations can provide. This meeting of supply and demand creates a kind of on-location market, where competition to host filming is growing increasingly intense. Within these dynamics, shooting a production is like a major event (like the soccer World Cup or the Olympics) for which various destinations compete to get it in the hope of a return on investment, both economically and culturally (for the image benefits). Clearly, very few cities are capable of hosting the Olympics, but any place can potentially host a film, not least because location requirements vary considerably (Cucco, 2015).

A factor underlying this on-location market is that what audiovisual productions need is often not a specific location (a particular square, church, street or beach) but rather a certain *type* of building, town or landscape. Many producers and directors, therefore, are open to different but equally fitting filming locations. They might decide to shoot where the logistics are convenient and the price is right (Goldsmith, 2015) or where a film commission offers quality services and generous funds.

An analysis of the relationship between audiovisual producers and host areas (i.e. the local bodies and resident population) shows how film commissions provide an important link between some very diverse stakeholders. Film commissions must mediate not only between different interests but also between different needs, sensibilities, work schedules and communication styles. Audiovisual producers and public bodies have no shared language; the administrations' timeframes seldom dovetail with the producers' often frenetic, chaotic way of

working; and the residents often don't understand the benefits a production brings, so they resent the inconvenience caused by the shop closures, road diversions, etc., that are essential in order to shoot. So the film commissions have a delicate mediatory role (explaining, translating, reconciling) between these stakeholders to foster mutual understanding and encourage fruitful working relationships all round. These efforts are all the more complex because cinema is still seldom seen as a driver of economic development. Often, some local politicians and residents are unaware of the complexities in making a film. Similarly, the productions tend not to comprehend the interests and concerns of the local areas whose help they seek. Thus the work of communicating and mediating between audiovisual productions and host areas requires, above all, an effort to educate. And that falls to the film commissions too.

3.2 Local and Non-local Audiovisual Professionals

As mentioned earlier, film commissions encourage the recruitment of local professionals to the on-location filmmaking teams. The audiovisual products, then, are often the fruit of a joint effort between local and non-local professionals, some from other regions of the country or even abroad. These professionals all tend to share the same lingo and understand how the industry works. However, as production studies have shown in these last 15 years (Caldwell, 2008; Mayer, Banks, & Caldwell, 2009; Szczepanik & Vonderau, 2013), there is no single production culture that applies to every context. On the contrary, every country, locality and production has its own production culture, which influences the final creative output. The audiovisual product can be imagined as permeable – a kind of sponge that absorbs the cultural context where it is conceived – and as the outcome of the combined action of different agents (companies, individual workers, institutions and their policies) and the negotiations between them.

In this framework, film commissions play a vital, delicate role. They help to assemble a one-off production team including local workers, a melting pot of different production cultures. The film commission's role, though, is also to facilitate the work of the hosted productions. Thus, besides bringing professionals together, the film commission must also ensure that these professionals work together harmoniously with minimal conflict. That is, it must take care to ensure that the production cultures reasonably acceptable to all for an effective production process and a good creative output.

3.3 Audiovisual Producers, Tourist Offices, and Audiences (Potential Tourists)

The local administration's interest in the audiovisual sector is also prompted by its ability to bring in visitors in what is termed "film tourism", essentially a form of tourism that is somehow linked to cinema (Beeton, 2005). But what has recently aroused administrations' and scholars' attention is primarily *on-location* film tourism – regarding only those places where films and other audiovisual products have been shot. An audiovisual product can raise an area's profile considerably and thus stimulate visitor interest. By showing another side to it, people who have already been there may be enticed to return, and first-time visitors may be induced to stay longer than they might otherwise have planned. But audiovisual story-telling may also help to build or reshape a place's identity and thus help to promote it, with benefits that go beyond tourism (Beeton, 2005; Berneman & Meyronin, 2012; Connell, 2012; Lavarone, 2020; Reijnders, 2011; Roesch, 2009).

In this light, film commissions play a new key role. They may prompt directors and producers to leverage the locations and raise their profile by featuring them in films, documentaries, TV series, etc. Film commissions, once again, must mediate between host area and producer, to take on board the local authorities' tourism ambitions and persuade directors and screenwriters to develop stories that further these goals. Film commissions can also become important partners for tourist offices looking to promote film tourism. In recent years, indeed, tourist offices have introduced numerous initiatives to exploit their status as audiovisual-production locations to attract visitors, such as: a) signs indicating that a production has been shot in a given place; b) dedicated tourist trails (movie tours) taking in one or more audiovisual product locations; c) paper and digital movie maps and dedicated apps for tourists to find their way around these locations; d) commemorative statues (only if the hosted audiovisual product has acquired cult status, as with the Rocky statue in Philadelphia). All these tools induce viewers to become tourists, to come and visit – as a destination to see (for a selfie with statue or sign, etc.) and, on a simpler level, as a showcase for the area, given that tourists who happen upon these initiatives unawares will see the place in a more positive light.

It is not easy to establish when film tourism began or to study it. There are cases that demonstrate its existence as a significant phenomenon (as with the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, 2001–2003, in New Zealand, Leotta, 2011), but it is highly complex to quantify. First, existing studies focus on individual success stories that do not lend themselves to generalisation, omitting to enquire why film tourism fails to take off at all for most movies. Second, there is no reliable methodology for understanding the extent to which an audiovisual product has influenced

decisions to visit (the effect may amount to anything from a mere internet search with no commercial upshot to purchasing an air ticket or booking a specific film-related service.)And third, establishing the existence of film tourism and quantifying it is especially complicated when the filming locations are already major travel destinations (e.g., cities like Rome, Paris or London), unless the audiovisual product is promoting specific parts thereof (streets, squares, shops, churches, monuments, etc.) that were hitherto little visited. That said, studies conducted thus far show that the phenomenon exists and is prompted above all when the film plot is closely bound up with the location (or when the latter is not just a backdrop); it is associated with a specific film genre; its duration and intensity may vary; and it is not tied to the audiovisual product's commercial success.

The desire to stimulate and exploit film tourism does have a downside, one albeit rather drowned out by the current general enthusiasm for the phenomenon. This desire risks burdening films and audiovisual products with undue, overblown expectations, to the detriment of local support for the film industry. Local administrations' interest in film tourism (fanned by media curiosity) is leading them to overestimate what it can achieve. There is an expectation, in particular, that it somehow happens automatically for every hosted production, with the hope that it will necessarily amount to more than just the money spent by the production team in the local area and the impact thereof. That is, it is often forgotten that, while all productions have some economic benefits, very few attract tourists. The risk is that local administrators' unrealistic expectations result in a reluctance to renew local support for the audiovisual sector.

Some local administrations may also decline to make their locations available because the audiovisual product that would have been shot there might put the area in a negative or controversial light. Such a refusal may also be grounded in an overestimate of the audiovisual product's tourism impact, which may well not materialise if the portrayal is controversial. But more generally, an unfavourable depiction risks (in theory) putting off potential tourists from visiting and companies from future collaborations with the area. It may also erode the community's pride in and affection for its home area. And it may be seen as ingratitude, not only flying in the face of the local institutions' goodwill (in making available locations, offering free services and even awarding grants) and of the local people's forbearance (in accepting the inconvenience that filming often entails) but also letting them badly down. But if all these worries turn into a refusal to grant access to the locations, the risk is then that only productions providing a chocolate-boxy image "approved" by the local administrations would ever be filmed – an undue interference by local politics in the creative process and in directors' and

screenwriters' artistic freedom. Film tourism would thus load the movie with local interests alien to its artistic and/or commercial ends.

So a win-win relationship between local host administration and hosted audiovisual production is not always straightforward or to be taken for granted. Although every production generates an immediate and typically positive economic impact, there is also the symbolic impact – which may prove divisive and hard to manage. These critical considerations illuminate how important and delicate the film commission's role is. The film commission must reconcile two different conceptions of what a film is: the producer sees it as a commercial and/or artistic product for an audience, whereas the travel trade sees it as a marketing tool to promote the destination to potential visitors. These two visions can coexist harmoniously, but there is no guarantee.

4 Conclusions

This discussion has shown how film commissions are now key players in a film or audiovisual-production process. Film commissions communicate and negotiate with different stakeholders: film and television companies and professionals, public institutions, tourism workers, etc. These stakeholders all have their different interests, sensibilities, expertise and languages, and they work in different time frames. Film commissions must therefore find common ground where the various stakeholders can come together and make a positive contribution to the production of a complex creative product. Film commissions may therefore be termed cultural mediators, promoters of transcultural communication and bringers of synergies (interactions of two or more agents that produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effect). This will be particularly important in the pandemic and post-pandemic era.[1] In these completely new scenarios, film commissions could play a key role in mediating between local rules (for instance, measures imposed by local health authorities) and producers' needs, in convincing policymakers that film and audiovisual production could be a strategic sector for supporting local economy and relaunching local tourism, and in making the collaboration between audiovisual companies and local institutions efficient and effective.

This delicate transcultural-mediation task is the everyday work of people who have actually never been properly trained to do it. Indeed, there is no study pathway or qualification to become a film commissioner – apart from the training

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1 For an analysis about the COVID-19 impact on the film and audiovisual industry in Europe, see European Audiovisual Observatory (2020).

course by the Association of Film Commissioners International (AFCI), which represents around 360 film commissions across 40 countries.[2] The AFCI course is a key opportunity for those looking to join this business with the relevant skills. That said, a film commissioner's work is strongly rooted in certain specific geographies, and what it entails can differ from place to place according to how it is administered, what it has to offer, the local politicians' interest in the audiovisual sector, etc. In other words, a training course seen as an international benchmark is all very well, but it is not enough to train people to be film commissioners. Film commissioners' role today is still informed by experience gained in the field. Those who now work in or run film commissions have very diverse educational backgrounds that did not involve transcultural-communication courses.

Despite this lacuna, film commissions seem to be playing their intermediary role with success. This is confirmed by how the geography of audiovisual production has changed in the last 20 years, becoming increasingly multi-centric and multilingual (Augros, 2008; Brannon Donoghue, 2017; Cucco, 2015; Elmer, Davis, Marchessault, & McCullough, 2010; Elmer & Gasher, 2005; Mayer, 2017; Miller, Govil, McMurria, Maxwell, & Wang, 2005; Mingant, 2010; Pardo, 2007; Wasko & Erickson, 2008). Shooting has become more delocalised, in both the United States (independent and mainstream films) and Europe.[3] In Europe, infrastructure has been put in place to support large productions from outside the continent, and there are more and more areas in every nation looking to offer filming locations. The knee-jerk tendency to film in big cities (Rome, Paris and London) is receding in favour of other cities that now offer high-quality services, know-how, and infrastructure. This means that films and audiovisual products shot in Europe are broadening their horizons, bringing places to the screen that had previously not been considered. In short, audiovisual production is offering a broader, more diverse vision of the continent's landscapes. This shows once again that the impact of the film commissions' work is not just economic but also creative; this is so considering how it is part of the impact on audiences and especially on their imagination.

Film commissions' role in the production process continues to consolidate and grow. But they are facing some increasingly urgent issues. Lack of dedicated training is one, which could impair film commissions' ability to mediate with different cultures. The audiovisual productions' sustainability (both economic and environmental) is another, with particular reference to: a) the Sustainable Development

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2 For more information on the AFCI: https://afci.org.
3 Besides the emergence of film commissions and local film funds, the delocalisation of shooting is also due to the advent of digital – which has made the technical kit much lighter and easier to transport – and globalisation, which has increased collaboration between countries.

Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015 and incorporated in the Agenda 2030 resolution; b) the EU Green Deal signed in 2019, which establishes the Union's sustainable-development initiatives. Film commissions often attract productions to places with no production experience, established practices or suitable supporting structures. Filming may therefore use the area in a way that harms the environment and this may be felt invasive by the residents. Film commissions are now required to encourage audiovisual productions to use green protocols and to provide economic rewards (grants) to those who do. Sustainability is also key to film tourism, which is often spontaneous, unexpected and hard to manage (Buchmann, 2012; Tzanelli, 2019). The visitor influx can be massive immediately after films are released to theatres or when TV series are aired, before evaporating as quickly as it appeared. This leads to areas being exploited intensively and in an ill-managed fashion – rather than acquiring cultural or economic value. So film commissions' challenge for the future is to build a culture of sustainability into their communications, their education campaigns, and their stakeholder's promotions. Which implies, once again, the need for dedicated film commissioner training.

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