

BUDAPEST'S THERMAL SPAS ON SCREEN

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of film-induced tourism has been well-documented in a number of locations world-wide. Feature films have become one of the most powerful tourism marketing tools offering an alternative selling method for destinations. Budapest's famous thermal spas several times hosted international film productions, such as Red Heat (1988) with Arnold Schwarzenegger and I, Spy (2002) with Eddie Murphy and Owen Wilson. The Hungarian capital, well-known for its health tourism, but not for film-tourism, is clearly identified in these movies as a city of spas. The types of attracting qualities are as diverse as the films in which they reside. Usually viewers attach an icon to the location they have seen in a film, therefore locations which carry an emotional charge can easily be identified. Swimming pools used by the Hungarian national water polo team are strongly linked to national identity. The primary sites for the CCCP-Hungary, so called 'blood in the water match' in The Children of Glory (2006) were swimming pools used by the Hungarian athletes (BVSC on Szőnyi street and Alfréd Hajós). In film-induced tourism literature much emphasis has been given to the significance of films and locations in terms of its economic generation and on the motivations of visitors (Provenzano 2008; Beeton 2005; Riley-Baker-Van Doren 1998; Toke-Baker 1996), or recently a growing interest exists in the study of the impact of successful television programmes on local enterprises (Connell-Meyer 2009; Irimiás 2008; Messina-Bocchioli 2008; Connell 2005). There, however, appears to be very little research on the films' impact on a different tourism product, like health and wellness tourism, and the role of a successful movie production in reinforcing the image of the spa and the location. The aim of this paper is to analyse the relationship between film-induced tourism and health tourism and to elaborate a model of a possible collaboration. The research is based on a questionnaire survey carried out in 2009 among foreign tourists staying in Budapest (the collected data was analysed with SPSS), and on semi-structural interviews with Hungarian film-commissioners.

Keywords: *film-induced tourism, destination image, Budapest, spas*

INTRODUCTION

Films provide the objects and subjects for the gaze of many people, and movies may induce them to travel to the location where the film was set (Riley-Baker-Van Doren 1998). Image is central to marketing, even more so in tourism destination marketing, which promotes an intangible product. Destination imaging is multi-dimensional, comprising both symbolic and tangible features (Beeton 2005). Image influences tourism related attitudes and it affects the individual's perception and consequent behaviour (Gallarza-Saura-Calderón García 2001). Moreover, image has long been considered as a primary decision-making factor in holiday travel. The importance of tourism destination image has been widely studied and the image has emerged as a crucial marketing concept in the tourism industry (Hall 1999).

Visual culture may influence many aspects of everyday life and the effect of film on human behaviour has long been debated mainly in psychological and sociological studies. In some feature films the development of a country's identity, image and cultural representations can be traced through popular film and television series. The Lord of the Rings saga and its impact on New Zealand's tourism is one of the best examples of film-induced tourism (BuchmannMoore-Fisher 2010; Corl-Kindon-Smith 2007). Tourism images are developed from the stories of returning travellers as well as the media of the day. In a wider sense, news coverage and popular culture (as in films, television programs, and literature) can

provide substantial information about a place in a short period of time. Additionally, while watching a film, people usually are more open to all the information because they do not feel to be targeted for selling promotion compared to traditional advertising. Further, news and popular culture products are so deeply embedded in every day life that they are likely to have high market penetration. Thus, portrayals of places in news and popular culture can alter an area's image significantly, even in a short period of time. Motion pictures are an important element of popular culture. They may impact on many people and few would deny that movie-going and television watching are the major leisure activities in the Western world. Usually popular films dominate the movies for a relatively short period, however, the impact of popular films on individual and societal beliefs and behaviours will continue to increase as cable television, DVD use, and internet downloads diffuse rapidly. A film may create and prolong interest in a destination. According to Butler (1990) what is shown in movies, videos, and television will become even more important than print media in shaping images of, and visitation to, places, due to expanding accessibility and high credibility of these information sources. It can be affirmed that contemporary tourists' organic images of places are shaped through the consumption of film and television series without the perceived bias of promotional material. Recognising that movies can enhance awareness of places and affect decision-making processes, marketers are increasingly working with film producers to promote their destinations as possible film locations (Beeton 2005; Seaton and Hay 1998). Tourism holds an important position in the substantial political, economic and social restructuring processes which have taken place in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in the past two decades. The 're'-imaging of the region faces different challenges and niche tourism products need to be developed and marketed in response to the changing nature of tourism demand. Similarly, CEE cities like Budapest in order to enhance their role as tourism destinations are trying to create new and unique experiences for visitors (Rátz-SmithMichalkó 2008). Brand identities are based on culturally distinctive features and new tourism trends like film-induced tourism may have a key role. This paper is concerned with the process of image formation related to film tourism. In the focus of the research the analysis of Budapest's identity on feature films can be placed, with special attention on spas and baths. The featuring of spa locations in the Hungarian and international film productions may offer different aspects of health and wellness tourism image formation and a co-operation between film commissions and the Hungarian tourism authorities would be auspicious.

Budapest as film location The power of film to motivate travellers, create new images, alter negative images, strengthen weak images, and create and place icons is recognised by many as a major factor in tourism promotion (Beeton 2005). Films familiarise audiences with places and attractions featured in them. Riley and Van Doren stated that 'Extended exposure to attractions through the medium of film allows potential tourists to gather information and vicarious knowledge, therefore lowering the anxiety levels caused by anticipated risk' (1992:269). Thus, it is proposed that observing a movie can increase the degree of familiarity with the places it portrays. That is, the popular view of a place offered by media may prompt that place to recreate its own identity in this image. This recreation of place identity implicates different levels of culture, and language, including the visual language of television, films, and other mass media. This implication provides representations that produce meanings which may reinforce place identity. These meanings regulate social practices, influence people's behaviour, and consequently might have real practical effects. In particular, movies, as visual language, have been one of the major vehicles to construct and transmit meaning, often of places with which people do not have first hand experience. The Hungarian capital has recently become 'film friendly' with a number of film commissions and film offices working on the promotion of the city as an ideal film location. Korda Studios established in the nearby of Budapest offers a wide range of film locations that might be attractive to film producers. Macionis

(2004) discovered the international exposure a film can provide a destination; a film is an advertisement potentially viewed by millions of people who may be tempted to become film induced tourists. Films are often not shot at the locations they purport to be, however benefits of film-induced tourism can be traced only if the viewers can clearly identify the film location with the destination they are interested to visit. Moreover, considering the issues of cultural identity of a place and its role on films it seems to be clear that a film can reinforce the country's identity if they are interrelated. Natural landscape or atmosphere can be featured as backgrounds in a film, however the storyline and the characters add some emotional charge to places. This interrelationship of cognitive and affective image components eventually determines the predisposition for visiting a destination.

METHODOLOGY

Research hypothesis

Based on the conceptual framework described in this study, two hypotheses were considered:

Ha 1: The perceived destination image of Budapest will be reinforced through the films set there

Ha 2: Budapest identity as a city of spas will be reconfirmed through the films

The study was conducted using bilingual (English and Italian) questionnaires among foreign tourists staying in Budapest. The research was carried out in March-April 2009 and 600 tourists were asked to fill in the questionnaire. Due to incomplete questionnaires a total of 67 were dropped out of the sample. Consequently, 533 usable responses were available at the end of the research, meeting the criteria for statistical estimation for data analysis.

The questionnaire comprised 17 questions and classified the respondents by age, gender, origin, first visit to Budapest, length of stay, whether they travelled independently or as part of a package. To measure the cognitive component of participants' image of Budapest, 11 image attributes, which were measured by five-point Likert type-scale, were included in the questionnaire. These 11 items refer to historical attractions, atmosphere of the destination, and lifestyle of local people. In order to measure the impact of films on Budapest tourism destination image, a popular motion picture was defined as a film produced for the entertainment of the general public employing plot and characters. A total of 38 film titles were selected to be included in the questionnaire. The selection of the films was based on the film location, all the 38 was set in Budapest, and the productions are Hungarian (17 films) and international (21 films) as well. Tourists who were familiar with some of the film titles were asked to underline those films which according to them, were set in the Hungarian capital city. They were also asked to nominate those films that give a positive image of the city, as well as those that give a negative image of the city in the film productions.

RESULTS

Budapest identity and its role in film tourism Tourists' perception of Budapest was measured by the 11 image attributes given in the questionnaire. In a five-point Likert-type scale these image attributes were measured, and the mean value 4.05 (n=533) clearly shows that those tourists who participated in the research identify Budapest as a city of spas. Budapest's imposing baths such as Gellért Spa Baths and Hotel on the Buda side, and Széchenyi Baths in the Pest side of the city are considered to be the landmarks of the capital, as well as to be the leisure places preferred by Hungarians.

Usually viewers attach an icon to the location they have seen in a film, therefore locations which carry an emotional charge can easily be identified. Swimming pools used by the Hungarian national water polo team are strongly linked to national identity (Table 1.). The Children of Glory (2006) Hungarian film production is a commemorative film about the national revolution of 1956 against the Soviet 'Empire'. The days of heroic fight and struggle against the Soviet army on Budapest's streets and in the major cities of Hungary coincide with the world-famous water polo match played in the finals of the Melbourne Olympic

Games. In the film, the primary sites for the CCCP-Hungary, so called 'blood in the water match' were located in swimming pools in Budapest used by the Hungarian athletes (BVSC on Szőnyi Street and Alfréd Hajós). In certain types of place-oriented movies, viewers are offered the opportunity to learn about the place by imaginatively participating in the place-related experiences of the characters (Kim-Richardson 2003). These swimming pools, however not considered as tourism attractions, may be identified as the spaces of national proud of Hungarians and the icon attributed to the film (national proud) could be indentified as a thematic icon. In *The Children of Glory* film the above mentioned water polo match against the Soviet national team takes place in Melbourne, and the name of the athletes swimming pools are not cited at all. The identification of the film location using the film icon related to the place may induce film tourism only if the film viewers are aware of original place where the film was actually set. In this case, it could be stated that *The Children of Glory* may not generate any film tourism phenomenon in Budapest, however it reinforces the image of Hungarians as heroic and proud people through a significant water polo match and film viewers may have the opportunity to learn about the city from a different angle of view. In the case of these two movies, Hypothesis 1 (The perceived destination image of Budapest will be reinforced through the films set there) seems to be confirmed and film images could be used to reinforce Budapest's tourism destination image.

Some icons, like built heritage and aristocratic beauty of the traditional spas in Budapest, can be recurrent or continuing images within a film, highlighted by the strong marketing communication based on these places as well. Other icons which may attract visitors can be single exciting events (the water polo match) which viewers can identify with the space they are interested to visit. Film icons may not all be visual as they may be storyline themes or atmospheric background for the plot that may become associated with locations. Example of visual icons is the American production *I, Spy* starring Eddie Murphy where Gellért Spa Baths, along with the Buda Castle district and the Chain Bridge over the Danube offer a powerful overview of the riverside and an outstanding panorama of Budapest. Gellért Spa Baths is not featured as the main spa and baths centre of Budapest, instead the location was used to host scenes in an elegant and sophisticated environment. In this film, the name Budapest and the Gellért Spa Baths are mentioned several times and film viewers may easily identify the locations. Hungarian film productions, even if translated, have limited distribution within Europe and even less overseas, on the contrary the *I, Spy* film has been broadcasted in the United States of America and in numerous European countries as well. Major films may have more than one icon that film tourist associate with locations. The physical icon has been illustrated above, however a detailed research on the effects of the *I, Spy* film on Budapest, and even more precise on Gellért Spa Baths still has to be done. The above mentioned film productions are clearly linked to Hungarian culture, to Budapest and to the spa traditions. However, in several feature films Budapest plays the role of another European capital, and the identification process is accessible only to those who are keen to search for the real location of the film or already has some knowledge of Budapest's iconic spas and baths. In the case of the *Red Heat* (1988) film starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, Rudas Thermal Baths is featured in the opening scene of the film. Schwarzenegger plays the role of a Soviet soldier searching for a cruel criminal within the spa. In a mysterious and vaporized atmosphere created by suffused lights the film viewer is guided through different parts of Rudas Spa, however the city plays the role of Moscow, the Russian capital. The other case of Budapest missed identity is the example of *Mrs Ratcliffe's Revolution* (2008) in a recent film production, twenty years after the *Red Heat*. This comedy is about a British family eager to move to East Germany during the years of the Cold War because they believe in the ideal life on the Eastern side of the iron curtain. In *Mrs Ratcliffe's Revolution* Budapest plays the role of East Berlin, and mainly derelict areas of the city were used as a film location. The Hajós Alfréd

Swimming Pool is featured in the scene when Mrs Ratcliffe tries to organise her family's escape from 'East Berlin' and the only neutral place to discuss such a crime is the swimming pool. Budapest missing identity in several films when the Hungarian capital plays the role for example of Buenos Aires (Evita), München (München), Moscow (Red Heat) or Berlin (Mrs Ratcliffe's Revolution) is evidenced also by the questionnaire research carried out among tourist staying in Budapest. From the 38 film located in Budapest, only a few films were linked to the Hungarian capital as the film's location.

DISCUSSION

The respondents could identify Budapest as the film location only in those films that can be clearly related to Hungarian culture or history (like Sunshine, The Children of Glory, Fateless). This means that the other films, even if successful movie productions, miss to contribute to Budapest promotion through films because the featured sites, however being of national pride and the key tourist attractions, for the general movie-goers can hardly be recognized and linked to Budapest.

In the second part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to value on a scale from 1 to 4 six different statements, all related to film tourism in Budapest. In the questionnaire the statements follow the 38 film set in Budapest in order to help association of Budapest as a film location, and to make the participants remember the films they might have seen. The mean value of the answers shows that those who participated in the research think the Budapest's thermal spas are well represented on films (2.15) and that it is interesting to know which films were shot in Budapest (2.21). However, according to the mean value of the answers it cannot be stated that films strongly influence tourism towards Budapest.

According to the mean value of the answers given for the statements, it can be stated the Hypothesis 2 (Budapest identity as a city of spas will be reconfirmed through the films) cannot be reconfirmed, nevertheless several key attraction spas feature in different movies located in Budapest. In the research it has been evidenced that Budapest's missing identity, her acting as other European cities, might cause some confusion in place identification.

CONCLUSIONS

Films have been, without a doubt a tourist inducing ingredient, turning destinations of little or no importance into much visited tourist attractions. Even if not all films have such an effect, nonetheless it cannot be disputed that films in general do affect the image of destination. For that reason, it is important that a well-planned image management plan to be produced for destinations. A tourist visiting a destination after seeing the location in a film or television series is an emerging phenomenon and due to the momentous impacts, many films have had their locations research into the issues relating to film induced tourism. Film-induced tourism in Budapest is a new phenomenon and what has emerged from the research is that tourist even if they are familiar with some films set in the Hungarian capital, would not acknowledge a strong motivational influence on their decisional process when selecting their holiday destination. By understanding the film tourist phenomenon, tourism and film stakeholders can better meet experiences, thus expanding on the positive impacts of such destinations. Tourism destination marketing ideally requires cooperation and input from all the sectors of community – businesses, interest groups and local inhabitants. During the planning of tourism development, conscious destination strategies that aim to create positive images of the destinations and imprint them in potential visitors' imaginations are developed. In Hungary health- and wellness tourism have become key tourism products and a strong marketing strategy has been based on them, promoting the medical and treatment services, leisure time in spas and baths. However, in the marketing strategy the powerful images shot in different spa locations of Budapest are unfortunately missed out. As stated above, several feature films, Hungarian and international productions as well, used Budapest's flagship attractions like Gellért Spa Baths, Széchenyi

Spas or Rudas Spas as key film locations. On screen Budapest's spas carry a well-defined identity and emotional links to the location may be recognised in some feature films. The meaning of a place reinforced in some movie productions and the film-viewers familiarity with the place starring on screen could offer unparalleled possibilities to enhance the marketing strategy based on different tourism products. Film commissions in Budapest are already promoting and selling the unique places of the Hungarian capital city to host films, but until now this promotion has not been linked to tourism marketing. A possible collaboration between the film industry and the tourism industry could reinforce Budapest's cultural identity.

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