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Learning Film Magic from the Professionals:

The Film Studio as a Tourist Destination

By

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Abstract

The phenomenon of film tourism is about as old as the movies themselves. Many consumers have been inspired by their favourite films to travel either to the locations they have seen on screen or to the locations where they have been filmed. Nevertheless, Connell (2012) argues that the film tourism literature is still in its early stages and lacks a decent understanding of how film tourists perceive, experience and relate to tourist destinations in general. And this is particularly true for the film studio as a tourist destination. Drawing on the author's own film tourist experiences, observations and participatory interactions with fellow visitors at a major Hollywood film studio, this paper takes a photographic essay approach to explore from an autoethnographic *'I'm-the-camera'*-perspective to explore how consumers experience and engage with the magical world of film and filmmaking that film studios present to them in their guided studio tours. The study finds that the 'authentic' nature of the film studio tour appeals in particular to amateur filmmakers, who seek informative insights into the film business and to share their knowledge and experiences with other like-minded amateurs and professionals.

Keywords: Film studio tours, film tourism, authenticity, consumer experiences, photographic essay, autoethnography

Learning Film Magic from the Professionals: The Film Studio as a Tourist Destination

Introduction

Since my early childhood, I have enjoyed watching films not only for their hedonic and/or aesthetic pleasure value (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). In fact, the magical world of film (Cousins, 2011) has always meant much more to me than just entertainment, as films provide me either with an exciting way to escape for a while the mundane reality of a dull and lonely life (Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2008) or even with a source of inspiration. But my fascination with film extends even further into the art of filmmaking and the film business itself. Apart from engaging in amateur filmmaking, this interest has also created an inherent desire to visit real film sets and film locations to see first-hand how films are made by the professionals. And I am not the only one. Film tourism is about as old as the films themselves (Barbas, 2001) and has grown into a global phenomenon, where consumers want to travel to the distant locations that they have seen on screen (Batat & Wohlfeil, 2009; Connell, 2005; Roesch, 2009) or visit film festivals, film premieres and film studios to catch a glimpse of “Hollywood glamour and magic” (Barbas, 2001; Kim, 2012). What is a rather recent development, however, is that around the world the previously reluctant film studios now seek to capitalise from the global film tourism by actively catering to this consumer demand with film-theme parks or guided studio tours. While film-theme parks, such as the Universal Studios resorts in Hollywood, Orlando and Tokyo or the Disney theme parks, are designed to provide consumers with an audio-visual environment in which the fictional worlds of film texts (narrative, settings, plots and characters) are recreated as film-themed rides, shows, restaurants, shops and sceneries, guided film studio tours offer the visitor informative insights into the actual art of filmmaking and the industrial production process of a working film studio.

In her detailed literature review of the film tourism literature, Connell (2012) argued that we still lack a general understanding of how visitors perceive, interact, experience and relate to on-site film tourism destinations. Because her observation is especially true for guided film studio tours, the current development in the film industries presents us with some interesting questions: What inherent consumer needs and desires do film studios really cater to with their guided film studio tours? What kind of film tourists are film studio tours really appealing to? And how do consumers actually experience, interact and relate to the guided film studio tour? In this paper, I take a photographic essay approach to explore from an autoethnographic *‘I’m-the-camera’*-perspective (Holbrook, 1998, 2006; Houston & Meamber, 2011) how consumers experience and engage with the magical world of filmmaking that film studios present to them in their guided studio tours. Drawing on my own film tourist experiences, field observations and participatory interactions with fellow visitors at a major Hollywood film studio, I shall thereby examine how the film studio offers consumers like me the (controlled) opportunity to gain first-hand insights into the industrial film production process.

The Film Studio as a Tourist Destination

Film tourism is nearly as old as the film industry itself (Barbas, 2001). Ever since the birth of the movies over a century ago, many consumers have experienced and often followed up on their desire to visit those very locations that either they have seen on screen in their favourite films or TV shows (Batat & Wohlfeil, 2009; Beeton, 2005; Connell, 2005; Roesch, 2009) or where those films have been made (Buchmann, Moore & Fisher, 2010; Couldry, 1998). Indeed, although Hollywood barely born in the sparsely-habited mangrove fields near Los Angeles, thousands of male and female film fans travelled throughout the 1910s and 1920s to Los Angeles with the desire to see first-hand how their favourite films are made and to catch a glimpse of *‘Hollywood glamour’* (Thorp, 1939). But with them came thousands of

young girls as well, who had left their families and moved alone to Hollywood in the hope of a film career that seemed to promise fame, glamour and, especially, economic independence (Barbas, 2001; Gabler, 1998). This quickly invited social reformers such as the Christian Temperance Union to accuse the film industry of promoting promiscuity, questionable morals and vice (Barbas, 2001; Munsterberg, 1916; Thorp, 1939). Under political pressure, the early film moguls reluctantly responded by introducing their guided film studio tours from 1912 onwards to tackle those problems head-on. By taking visitors on guided tours around the film sets and backlots, the Hollywood studios could prove to their critics that the film industry has the same moral values and ethics as any other industry (Epstein, 2005; Freedland, 2009). In addition, film fans and aspiring actresses could satisfy their curiosity by observing how films are made and witnessing with their own eyes that filmmaking is in reality less glamorous and involves mainly a lot of pretty hard work (Barbas, 2001).

By the 1920s, the film studio tours had finally evolved into very popular tourist attractions beyond Hollywood. The German UFA-Studios in Berlin were also required to offer guided studio tours on the weekends to appease the hundreds of film fans gathering everyday outside their gates (Kreimeier, 1996). The film studio tour also began to play an important marketing role for the film moguls of the Hollywood studio era. In addition to spending one day per week reading fan mail, studio executives like Carl Laemmle, Samuel Goldwyn, Jack Warner, David O. Selznick, Cecil B. DeMille or Irvin Thalberg viewed their studio tours as a vital means of having “*a close ear to the voice and pulse of the audience*” (Barbas, 2001, p.139) and fostering strong emotional bonds between consumers and their studio brand long before ‘*relationship marketing*’ became a buzz word in marketing literature. However, despite their popularity and marketing value, the initial curtain call for the film studio tours eventually came in 1929 when the arrival of sound made their continuation impossible (Gabler, 1998).

Nevertheless, the film studio tour should experience a comeback since the 1960s. After the legally enforced breakup of the Hollywood studio system in the 1950 led to major industrial changes and severe economic pressure within the film business (Epstein, 2005), a new generation of film studio executives turned the major Hollywood studios into clearing-houses that seek to maximise profits by commercialising their intellectual film properties, which are obtained either via in-house film productions or via the acquisition of the distribution rights for independent films (Epstein, 2012; Kerrigan, 2010). This includes the distribution of films to cinemas and auxiliary markets (i.e. TV, VHS/DVD or VoD) and the licensing of individual film text elements for suitable merchandising (Hennig-Thurau, Henning & Sattler, 2007; Kerrigan, 2010). Therefore, when Disney Corp. took the lead and began in the 1950s to commercialise their intellectual film properties as themed attractions in their film-theme park resorts, Universal Studios and a few others followed soon. But even though the popularity and mass appeal of film-theme parks has proven to be a profitable means of offsetting their declining income from traditional markets, many film studios like Columbia TriStar, Warner Brothers or Paramount have opted instead for reviving the guided film studio tour. And, since the late-1990s, these once reluctant film studios now seek to appeal to the growing film tourism market by actively promoting their studio tours as tourist attractions to consumers.

Yet, film tourism has only in recent time received a growing interest in the marketing and tourism literature (Connell, 2012). The early studies in film tourism (Riley & van Doren, 1992; Schofield, 1996; Tooke & Baker, 1996) have looked primarily at the potential that the accidental or deliberate ‘*product placement*’ of cities or landscapes in films may have for the marketing of tourist destinations. But the scholarly discourse soon moved towards a critical debate about the economic, social and cultural implications that such film tourism may have for affected communities and locations (Connell, 2005; Hahm & Wang, 2011). And as film productions, for either financial or artistic reasons, often use alternative locations to stand in

as film sets for the 'real' or fictional locations depicted in the movie, the critical film tourism discourse has also begun to look at the issue of authenticity and the 'authentic tourist experience' (Buchmann et al., 2010; Connell & Meyer, 2009; Roesch, 2009). For example, New Zealand famously stood in for Middle-Earth in Peter Jackson's 'Lord of the Rings'- and 'The Hobbit'-films that have attracted thousands of film tourists to go on organised "Middle-Earth"-visitor tours ever since (Buchmann et al., 2010), while the Wicklow Mountains in Ireland served as film sets for the battles at Stirling, Falkirk and Bannockburn in the film 'Braveheart'. The critical debate, therefore, looks at the existential questions of what exactly constitutes an 'authentic tourist experience' in the first place, when the tourist destination is a world of make-believe. Similar questions have also driven the critical discourse surrounding the Disney theme parks ever since the first ones in Orlando and Anaheim opened in the 1950s. Critical scholars have been concerned with the questions of whether and how consumers might be duped into mistaking Disney's themed (and 'sanitised') hyper-realities for authentic representations of reality (Bettany & Belk, 2011; Costa & Bamossy, 2001; Houston & Meamber, 2011; Johnson, 1981). But as Connell (2012) argues, the literature still lacks a general understanding of how consumers perceive, interact, experience and relate to on-site film tourism destinations in the first place. And unless they happen to be the unique film set for a very specific popular soap opera with a loyal following (Couldry, 1998; Kim, 2012), this observation is especially true for the film studio tour as a tourist destination.

Methodology

This paper takes a photographic essay approach to explore from an autoethnographic 'I'm-the-camera'-perspective (Holbrook, 2005, 2006; Houston & Meamber, 2011; Scarles, 2010) how consumers perceive, experience, interact and relate to the magical world of filmmaking that the film studio presents to them during the guided film studio tour. The present study was conducted at the Warner Brothers Studio Tour in Burbank/LA, in which I took part as a genuine film tourist during a short vacation in Hollywood in 2008. My personal experiences, observations and conversations with fellow visitors and staff members were recorded during the visit as a series of photographs and field notes. Due to an earlier research project, I was still in the habit of collecting my detailed experiences and observations as hand-written field notes in an A6 notebook diary on-site either at the time of occurrence or as soon as the opportunity arose (i.e. after a walk). Furthermore, I collected 40 useable photos for data analysis. While the use of photographs in marketing and consumer research is not new (Basil, 2011), their role is often limited to supporting ethnographic observations as *objective* visual proof (Haisley, McGrath & Sherry, 1991; Houston & Meamber, 2011) or as auto-driving devices to elicit consumer responses on their own behaviour (Heisley & Levy, 1991; Scarles, 2010). The autoethnographic 'I'm-the-camera'-perspective, on the other hand, ascribes two simultaneous roles to photographs (Holbrook, 2005, 2006). Firstly, they provide an objective representation of the reality that the researcher has observed (their 'content'). Secondly, they are also subjective representations of the researcher's personal gaze and experiences, which reveal themselves in the way how the individual has captured and framed the observed in the picture (its 'focus' and 'composition'). Hence, the photos were analysed hermeneutically in relation to their 'content', 'focus' and 'composition'. First, they were reviewed regarding their objective depiction of what exactly I observed during my visit. Then, they were interpreted in terms of what the camera angles, framing and figure-ground compositions (i.e. what is the picture's central focus, what is pushed to the background and what has been excluded) reveal about my subjective experiences as a visitor. The field notes were examined in a similar way and brought into context with the photos to allow for a coherent narrative to present itself iteratively from the data analysis. The following essay summarises the findings.

Taking the Warner Brothers Studio Tour (Burbank/LA)

Ever since Jack Warner moved the Warner Brothers Studios in 1918 from its first location on Sunset Boulevard to its current site in Burbank, the film studio has invited interested film tourists to take their elaborate studio tour. Nowadays, the guided Warner Brothers Studio Tour leads visitors for 2-3 hours around the actual soundstages and backlots of a real working film studio. The tour starts every hour from the reception/visitor center at the studio gates that also serves as the main retail outlet for Warner Brothers-themed merchandise. From here, visitors are picked up in groups of 10-14 by a personal guide and his cart-tram driver. Since the next tour group was already full when I arrived at 2.30pm to buy a ticket for \$15, I had to book a place with the following tour instead, which was scheduled for 4pm. The long wait for my tour to begin, however, turned out to be quite fortunate. While waiting in front of the visitor center, I could experience first-hand the meaning of '*working studio*'. A film crew were just shooting an opening scene for one of Warner Brothers' TV crime dramas in the car park and, like a few other waiting visitors watching them, I was asked to stand in as an extra. What was particularly interesting and became even more apparent during the studio tour itself was how film crews, with a little bit of imagination, can turn virtually anything on the studio grounds into a film backlot standing in for the real locations. Indeed, an office building for HR and accounting staff is transformed into an airport, as done for the film *The Terminal*, while a car park is quickly turned into a street along New York's Central Park – as it was the case of my own film shoot experience. Provided with a smart jacket and an attaché case, my role was basically to walk up and down the “street” looking busy.

When the studio tour started at 4pm, my group of 12 visitors was led into a small cinema in the visitor center, where a 30-minutes film introduced us to the history of Warner Brothers. Afterwards, our tour guide picked us up from here to get the show on the road. The personal guide – who usually is a scriptwriter, camera assistant, editor, sound engineer or art designer employed by the film studio – had a free hand in showing us whatever soundstages, backlots and other areas he thought were interesting to us or visitors were asking for. Toward that end, he was constantly informed via walkie-talkie which areas of the studio were free to visit and which ones were closed off by on-going film productions. Every WB studio tour, therefore, is different. Sadly, video-filming is prohibited and taking photos is restricted to a few areas. Our cameras were therefore locked into a safe on the cart-tram and handed out at those places, where we were allowed to use them. The tour guide explained to us a) that the art directors generally hold the full copy-rights for their set designs and b) that taking photos may interfere with film shots. Anyway, the first place we visited was the central backlot of a small US town's marketplace, which is seen among others in *Gilmore Girls*. There, we were able to watch from a safe distance how a scene for a TV show was shot. Next, we were introduced to two different types of soundstages. First, we were on the set of *Two and a Half Men* on their day-off, which represents the live-audience set common for the ½-hour TV sitcom format. This was followed by two typical soundstages used for films and TV dramas. Here, we were shown how flexible the film set is built to enable filming a scene from various camera angles without the film audience ever noticing any differences.

The first stop, where we were eventually allowed to take photos, was the storage room for purpose-built cars and other unique props, which was like entering a cave full of treasured film memories, as shown in Photo 1 and 2. A particularly great experience for all visitors was being able to play with a bluescreen. And as a reminder, each visitor was given a free digital photo (Photo 3) with the Hogwarts Express from the *Harry Potter* films. Following up on the popularity of the previous soundstages with the visitors, our tour guide led us to an old soundstage. Here, we were allowed to take photos of the heritage-protected set design of the hit sitcom *Friends*, which Warner Brothers is not allowed to dismantle. None of us could

resist the temptation to be photographed on the famous couch (Photo 4). Partially on foot, the tour went on through the backlots, which every one of us found pretty amazing and which we were allowed to photograph. Photos 5 and 6 reflect my gaze at the inner-city backlot that serves as the background for various outdoor shots in most Warner Brothers films. Here, we learned how these street settings can with a few adjustments replicate virtually any city in the world throughout all possible historical ages and future settings.

Guide: *'We always use the same backlots for all films. If you look carefully, the streets here will be very familiar to you... It's like Lego; the art directors attach a design to the facades and the streets look like NYC or Chicago in the 1930s or like London in Tudor times or like Gotham City... But only the outdoor scenes are shot here. All indoor scenes are filmed on soundstages.'*

The other backlots we visited included an American suburbia, where films like *The Burbs* or *Home Alone* among many others have been shot, and the forest-and-lake backlot used in many adventure, war and horror films. Similar to the inner-city backlot, the suburbia backlot (Photo 7) includes mainly facades of buildings for outdoor/street shots. Only a few individual houses have a room built in to allow the camera capturing a view from the street into that house, while all indoor shots are filmed on soundstages. The forest-and-lake backlot, on the other hand, is mainly a 'nature' resort with a few individual cabins (i.e. the one seen in Photo 8) that can be turned into a farm, a diner, a petrol station or even a holiday camp. The lake has an adjustable water flow, so that it can simulate a lake, a river or even a beach (i.e. in *The Beach*). For us, it was interesting to learn that the film studios actually not compete against, but cooperate with each other and share their respective backlots, as the following exchange between our tour guide and a fellow visitor reveals:

Guide: *'This forest path was used among others for the T. Rex chase scene in Jurassic Park.'*

Male (30s): *'But Jurassic Park was made by Universal Studios. Why would they film here? Aren't you supposed to be competitors?'*

Guide: *'It's a paradox, I know. But the truth is that the film studios always share their backlots with each other. Columbia's Spiderman was filmed here, too. Some Warner films are currently shot at Paramount, while...'*

During the entire time, the Warner Brothers Studio Tour was characterised by an informal atmosphere that allowed for on-going social interactions both among the visitors and with the guide. These conversations made it obvious that the visitors in my studio tour group ranged in age from 13 to the late-50s, were overall well-educated and seem to come from a middle-class background. But, more importantly, none of them was really interested in Hollywood's mythical glamour. Instead, just like me, every single one of them had a keen interest in film production, some background knowledge of the film industry and certain personal experiences in amateur filmmaking that was especially evident in their displayed ownership and familiarity with (semi-)professional film equipment. Encouraged by the studio tour's informal nature, all visitors (incl. a 13-year old girl who was very skilful with her DSLR camera) enjoyed sharing stories about their personal experiences with specific camcorder models, editing software and filmmaking practices with each other and the tour guide.

Female (13): *'I just got a Sony HVR cam and I need a good editing software now. Which one is better? Final Cut or Premiere Pro?'*

- Guide: *'Truth is there's absolutely no difference between them. Editors use both of them equally. It's mainly a question of whether they prefer Mac or PC.'*
- Male (50s): *'I bet, digital technology is making filmmaking easier and much cheaper these days...'*
- Guide: *'It makes things easier for editors, definitely, and allows them more creative opportunities. But cinematographers and directors still prefer film. Better colours, better feel! But with film, a lot of expensive footage ends up in the bin – and producers hate that!'*

After nearly 3 hours, the tour returned eventually to its starting point at the visitor center and concluded with the opportunity to buy some Warner Brothers-themed merchandise. But the informal conversations with the tour guide and among the visitors continued for another half an hour after the official conclusion of the studio tour. Like all the fellow visitors in my group, I found the Warner Brothers Studio Tour to be much more exciting, informative and memorable than its orchestrated and standardised counterpart at Universal. In fact, we all shared mixed feelings about the Universal Studios theme park, which – strangely enough – each of us had already visited previously. But then again, the film tourists taking the Warner Brothers Studio Tours looked for different experiences than those at Universal's theme-park.

Concluding Discussion

The photographic essay has revealed some interesting insights into how film tourists perceive, experience, interact and relate to the guided studio tour of a working film studio. Of particular interest is hereby the issue of *'experienced authenticity'*. Unlike earlier studies on film tourism related to specific film texts (Buchmann et al., 2010; Couldry, 1998), consumers taking the Warner Brothers Studio Tour do not feel the need to negotiate the authenticity of their tourist experiences with a visited inauthentic representation (simulacrum), *because* they *'know'* that the working film studio they are visiting is the real deal – and not just a mere representation of a film studio. Visitors are shown in small groups around the actual film sets, soundstages, backlots and many other less glamorous but interesting technical facilities by a knowledgeable employee in an interactive, flexible and personalised manner that *'just feels'* genuine and authentic to them. More importantly, the photographic and field note data clearly show that the guided film studio tour appeals especially to film tourists with a keen interest in the art and craft of filmmaking and the film business, who seek informative insights from the professionals into the nitty-gritty side of the film industry. Many of these film tourists tend to be very knowledgeable about filmmaking and to have some practical experiences as amateur or hobby filmmakers, which is made evident by the semi-professional camcorders and DSLR cameras that every one of my fellow visitors carried with them. The studio tour's interactive and informal nature enables them to share their personal experiences with (semi-)professional film equipment (i.e. specific camcorder models and/or editing software) and filmmaking practices with each other, the tour guide and other professionals they may meet during the tour. Similar to Buchmann et al.'s (2010) findings, the tour guide is thereby ascribed the role of the *'facilitator'*, whose knowledgeable enthusiasm as a *'fellow filmmaker'* and *'kindred spirit'* is appreciated by visitors as key to their enjoyment of the studio tour. But although the visitors have expressed a strong desire for continuing the dialogue among *'fellow filmmakers'* beyond the studio tour itself, film studio executives have unfortunately made no effort to take advantage of this opportunity besides the obligatory sale of branded memorabilia. Instead of providing an interactive social platform that enables interested amateur filmmakers to interact with professional filmmakers, they seem to be keen on keeping the producer-customer divide.

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Supporting Photographs from the Warner Brothers Studio Tour, Burbank/LA



Photo 1: Props from Matrix, Batman, etc.



Photo 2: Flying Car from Harry Potter

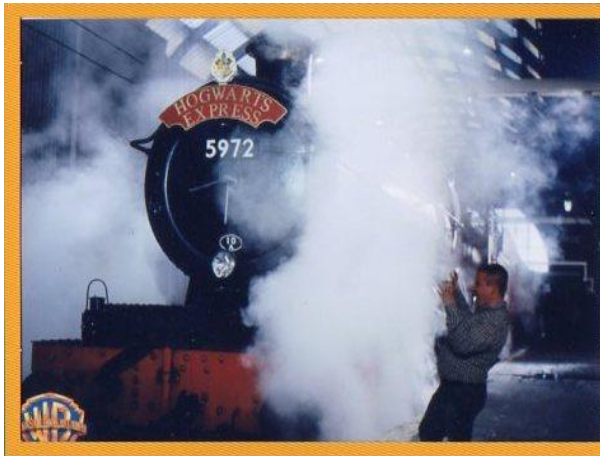


Photo 3: Nearly Run Over by Hogwarts-Train:
Playing With the Blue-Screen



Photo 4: On the Studio Set of Friends



Photo 5: Warner's Backlot: The Inner-City



Photo 6: Warner's Backlot: Inner City



Photo 7: Warner's Backlot: Suburbia



Photo 8: Warner's Backlot: Forrest-&-Lake