

## **Learning from the Professionals:**

### **Film Tourists' "Authentic" Experiences on a Film Studio Tour**

By

**Markus Wohlfeil**

Stirling Management School, University of Stirling, Scotland/UK

Accepted on 14<sup>th</sup> November 2017 for Publication in:

**Arts and the Market** (An Emerald Journal)

#### **The Author:**

**Mr. Markus Wohlfeil**, Lecturer in Marketing, Stirling Management School, University of

Stirling, Stirling, FK9 4LA, Scotland/UK. Tel: +44 1786 467321,

Email: [markus.wohlfeil@stir.ac.uk](mailto:markus.wohlfeil@stir.ac.uk).

#### **Author Biography:**

**Markus Wohlfeil** is a Lecturer in Marketing at the University of Stirling Management School. As a self-confessed film buff and devoted fan of the film actress Jena Malone, his research interests are in the fields of celebrity fandom, the experiential consumption of films, film marketing and the film industry in general. Hoping that someone may be interested in reading his work, Markus has already published in the *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Marketing Management*, *(European) Advances in Consumer Research*, *Journal of Customer Behaviour*, *Journal of Brand Management* and *The Marketing Review*.

## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to explore how consumers perceive, experience and engage with the art of filmmaking and the industrial film production process that the film studios present to them during their guided film studio tours.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** 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 an autoethnographic "I'm-the-camera"-perspective and a hermeneutic data analysis approach.

**Findings:** The findings reveal that visitors experience the 'authentic' representation of the working studio's industrial film production process as an opportunity and 'invitation to join' a broader filmmaker community and to share their own amateur filmmaking experiences with fellow visitors and professionals – just to discover eventually that the perceived community is actually the real 'simulacrum'.

**Research Limitations/Implications:** Although using an autoethnographic approach means that the breadth of collected data is limited, the gain in depth of insights allows for a deeper understanding of the actual visitor experience.

**Practical Implications:** The findings encourage film studio executives, managers and talent agents to reconsider current practices and motivations in delivering film studio tours and to explore avenues for harnessing their strategic potential.

**Originality/Value:** Contrary to previous studies that have conceptualised film studio tours as simulacra that deny consumers a genuine access to the backstage, the findings of this study suggest that the real simulacrum is actually the film tourists' '*experienced feeling*' of having joined and being part of a filmmaker community, which raises questions regarding the study of virtual communities.

**Keywords:** Film studio tours, film tourism, authenticity, simulacra, consumer experiences, community, autoethnography

**Article Classification:** Research Paper

## *Learning from the professionals: Film tourists' "authentic" experiences on a film studio tour*

### **Introduction**

Every year, more than 160 million consumers either travel to the distant locations they have seen on screen in their favourite films and TV shows (Batat and Wohlfeil, 2009; Beeton, 2005; Connell, 2005; Roesch, 2009) or visit film-theme parks (Beeton, 2015; King, 1981; Pettigrew, 2011; TEA/AECOM, 2015), film festivals (Unwin et al., 2007), film premieres and even the film studios themselves (Couldry, 1998; Kim, 2010, 2012) to catch a glimpse of *'film magic'* (Cousins, 2011) or *'Hollywood glamour'* (Barbas, 2001; Gabler, 1998). Contrary to popular perceptions and critical academic discourse, however, film tourism is not a recent global phenomenon but one that is nearly as old as the movies themselves (Barbas, 2001; Beeton, 2005, 2015). Indeed, from the early days of the film industry on, some film audiences have not felt content enough with only watching movies on the screen and, instead, travelled to the film premieres and the film studios in the hope of being able to see their favourite film stars in person or to witness first-hand how films are made. What is a rather recent development, though, is that the previously rather reluctant film studios have now begun to embrace and to capitalise from the growth in global film tourism by proactively catering with film-theme parks or guided film studio tours to this growing demand.

While the more popular and commercially more successful film-theme parks, such as the Disney-theme parks or the Universal Studios resorts in Hollywood, Orlando, Tokyo and Singapore, are thereby designed to provide consumers with an audio-visual environment, in which the fictional worlds of film texts (narrative, characters, settings and plots) are recreated as film-themed rides, shows, shops, restaurants and sceneries (Beeton, 2005, 2015; Costa and

Bamosy, 2001; Firat and Ulusoy, 2011; Houston and Meamber, 2011), guided film studio tours offer visitors informative insights into the actual art of filmmaking and the industrial film production process of a working film studio (Beeton, 2015). But despite the growing relevance and importance of the film tourism industry to film studios, tourism boards and local communities, Connell (2012) concludes in her detailed review of the literature that we still lack even a basic general understanding of how consumers actually perceive, experience, interact with and relate to on-site film tourism destinations in general – and to guided tours of a working film studio in particular. Moreover, while the film studios officially proclaim to invite their audiences with their guided tours into the backstage of the film business, so that they can witness with their own eyes how films are really made, many cultural critics argue instead that visitors would only be presented with a *'simulacrum'*, a staged representation, of a film studio rather than the *'real thing'* and, therefore, are constantly required to negotiate the *'(in)authenticity'* of the presented with their visitor experiences (Beverland, 2006; Couldry, 1998; MacCannell, 1973; Tzanelli, 2007).

Thus, this autoethnographic paper takes an *'I'm-the-camera'*-perspective (Holbrook, 2006) to explore how consumers like me perceive, experience and engage with the world of film and filmmaking, which the film studios present to them during their guided studio tours, and, also, how they negotiate its *'(in)authenticity'* with their visitor experiences. Drawing on my own personal film tourist experiences, field observations, photographs and recorded conversations both with and between fellow visitors and staff at a Hollywood film studio, I shall take a closer look at what inherent consumer needs, desires and aspirations the guided film studio tour is catering to, what kind of film tourists in particular they are appealing to, and how visitors actually perceive, experience and relate to the presented guided film studio tour on location. Particular emphasis is hereby placed on examining how consumers perceive,

experience and negotiate the *'(in)authenticity'* of what first-hand insights into the industrial film production process and the art of filmmaking is presented to them during the guided tour of a working film studio (Beverland, 2006; Goulding, 2000; Hede et al., 2014). In so doing, it emerged that the guided film studio tour appeals especially to consumers with a serious leisure interest (Stebbins, 1982) in the art of filmmaking, who perceive it as an invitation to access the backstage of professional film production and to feel part of a wider filmmaker community. The findings of this study, thereby, suggest these consumers do not feel the need to negotiate the authenticity of the observed with their visitor experience because they know that the presented film studio is indeed the *'real deal'*. Instead, it is actually the visitors' *'experienced feeling'* of having joined and being part of a filmmaker community that turns out to be the real simulacrum.

### **How the film studio became a tourist destination**

Ever since the birth of the movies more than 120 years ago, many consumers have experienced and only too often followed up on their desire to visit those very locations that either they have seen on screen in their favourite movies and TV shows (Batat and Wohlfeil, 2009; Beeton, 2005; Connell, 2005; Roesch, 2009) or where those films have actually been made (Beeton, 2015; Buchmann et al., 2010; Couldry, 1998; Kim, 2012). In fact, Hollywood was barely born in the sparsely-habited mangrove fields near Los Angeles, when thousands of male and female film fans already travelled every year throughout the 1910s and 1920s to Los Angeles with the desire to catch a glimpse of *'Hollywood glamour'* (Thorp, 1939) and to see first-hand how their favourite films were made (Barbas, 2001). However, along with them also came thousands of unaccompanied young girls, who had left their families behind and moved on their own to Hollywood in the hope of a film career that seemed to promise them fame, glamour and, most importantly, economic independence (Barbas, 2001; Gabler, 1998).

Subsequently, influential social reformers like the Christian Temperance Union quickly accused the film industry of promoting promiscuity and vice (Gabler, 1998; Thorp, 1939). Under such pressure, the early film moguls reluctantly responded by introducing film studio tours from 1912 onwards to tackle those problems head-on. By taking consumers on guided tours around their film sets and backlots, the Hollywood studios could prove to their critics that the film industry has the same moral values and ethics as the automobile industry or any other industries for that matter (Epstein, 2005; Freedland, 2009). In addition, both film fans and aspiring actresses were able to satisfy their curiosity and desire for insights into film production and Hollywood glamour by witnessing with their own eyes the industrial process of how films were made and observing that the film industry may be not so glamorous after all but actually involved a lot of hard work (Barbas, 2001).

By the 1920s, the guided film studio tour had eventually evolved into a popular tourist attraction beyond Hollywood. For instance, the German UFA-Studios in Berlin were forced to run guided studio tours on weekends to appease the hundreds of film fans that were gathering outside their studio gates on any given day (Kreimeier, 1996). However, the film studio tour also started to play an important marketing role for the film moguls of the Hollywood studio era (Epstein, 2005; Freedland, 2009). Besides spending one day per week reading fan mail, studio executives like Carl Laemmle, Samuel Goldwyn, David O. Selznick, Cecil B. DeMille, Jack Warner or Irvin Thalberg began to view their studio tours as a vital opportunity to have “a close ear to the voice of the audience” (Barbas, 2001, p. 139) and as a means of fostering strong emotional bonds between consumers and their studio brand decades before ‘relationship marketing’ became a buzz word in the marketing literature. Nevertheless, despite their popularity and marketing value, the initial curtain call for the early film studio

tours eventually came in 1929, when the arrival of sound made their continuation impossible (Epstein, 2012; Gabler, 1998; Kreimeier, 1996).

However, after the legally enforced breakup of the Hollywood studio system in 1950 led to severe economic pressures and major industrial changes within the film business (Epstein, 2005; Kerrigan, 2010), the guided film studio tours have since the 1960s enjoyed a renaissance. A new generation of studio executives has started to turn the major Hollywood film studios into today's clearing-houses that seek to maximise profits by commercialising their intellectual film properties obtained either via in-house film productions or via the acquired 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 film text elements to third-parties for suitable merchandising (Epstein, 2012; Kerrigan, 2010). Thus, when the Disney Corporation took the lead and began to commercialise their intellectual film properties as themed attractions in their film-theme park resorts (Epstein, 2005), Universal Studios and a few others followed suit. But despite the mass appeal of film-theme parks (TEA/AECOM, 2015) has proven to be a highly profitable way to offset the declining incomes from their traditional auxiliary markets, many global film studios like Warner Brothers, Paramount and Columbia TriStar have decided to revive their guided film studio tours as tourist attractions instead. As a result, the once reluctant film studios have started since the 1990s to cater proactively to the growing film tourism market by deliberately promoting their film studio tours as tourist attractions (Epstein, 2012).

### **How 'authentic' are guided film studio tours?**

In light of such a long history, it is quite surprising that film tourism – as a highly involved form of audience behaviour (Baumgarth, 2014; Halliday and Astafyeva, 2014) – has



only in recent years received growing attention in the arts marketing and tourism literatures (Beeton, 2005; Connell, 2012). Furthermore, early film tourism studies (Riley and van Doren, 1992; Schofield, 1996; Tooke and Baker, 1996) have looked primarily at what potential the either accidental or deliberate '*product placement*' of cities and landscapes in films may have for the marketing of tourist destinations. Soon, however, the scholarly discourse moved towards a more critical discussion about the economic, social and cultural implications that such film-induced tourism (Connell, 2005; Connell and Meyer, 2009; Hahm and Wang, 2011) or consumers' experiences with film-induced images (Gkritzali et al., 2016; Tzanelli, 2007; Zhang et al., 2016) may have on those affected locations and local communities. From here, it does not take much extrapolation to see why the issue of authenticity and the authentic tourist or visitor experience (Goulding, 1999, 2000; Hede et al., 2014; Hede and Thyne, 2010) has caught the attention of critical scholars in arts marketing, film tourism and consumer research as well.

Traditionally, '*authenticity*' was perceived as an inherent property of a certain object, artwork, heritage site, local culture and practices, community or production process denoting that it is '*real*', '*genuine*', '*truthful*', '*legitimate*' and even the '*original*' (Beverland, 2006; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010) – and, thus, sets it apart from the commercial, mass-produced '*replication*', the '*imitation*', the '*fake*' and, subsequently, the '*inauthentic*' (Baudrillard, 1970; Benjamin, 2006; Boorstin, 1961). Grayson and Martinec (2004), however, argue that authenticity is primarily a sociological-theoretical construct that describes what and how the real thing '*ought to be*', as perceived, judged and expected by cultural critics, experts and also consumers. Since the judgement is largely based on personal expectations, a growing concern among scholars, therefore, is that the distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic becomes blurred (Hede et al., 2014). Museums and heritage sites present visitors increasingly

with staged replications, imitations and '*truthful*' re-enactments of historic settings, cultures and everyday life or wildlife for a more '*realistic effect*' rather than with just displaying genuine, authentic artefacts (Goulding, 2000; Hede and Thyne, 2010). Thus, critical scholars theorise that consumers would constantly be on a quest for the authentic in life (Grayson and Martinec, 2004), but instead are only presented with false realities or staged replications and imitations of reality – so-called '*pseudo-events*' (Boorstin, 1961) and '*hyper-realities*' (Baudrillard, 1970) – and, subsequently, required to negotiate the authenticity of their visitor experiences with the presented inauthentic (Hede and Thyne, 2010). It is in this context that the critical discourse regarding the authentic visitor experience of film tourism sites is set.

Ever since the first Disney theme park opened in Anaheim in 1954, critical scholars in sociology, cultural studies and consumer research (Baudrillard, 1970; Bettany and Belk, 2011; Boorstin, 1961; Costa and Bamossy, 2001; Houston and Meamber, 2011; Johnson, 1981; King, 1981) have been concerned with questions of whether, how and to what extent consumers would be duped into mistaking Disney's themed (and '*sanitised*') hyper-realities for authentic representations of reality. In this context, Schickel (1985) often spoke of an ongoing '*disneyfication*' (aka '*dumping down*') of society. Much of the recent critical film tourism discourse, however, is actually informed by MacCannell's (1973) earlier work, which suggests that tourists often seek incursions into the everyday life of the visited destination's community in order to experience its truly authentic culture and place. But although these tourists, according to MacCannell (1973), often believe that they have entered the intimacy of the visited destination's hidden back regions, what they have really encountered would actually be a staged tourist setting (a simulacrum) that merely gave them the impression of having experienced the authentic local culture. The reason for it, as Urry (1990) and Tzanelli

(2007) argue, is that the visited local community feels the need to cater to what it predicts to be the tourist's expectation of the consumed culture (Brennan and Savage, 2012).

What has thereby caught the attention of critical film tourism scholars in particular is the fact that, due to financial and/or artistic reasons, film productions often use alternative locations as film sets to '*stand in*' for the fictional or '*real*' places shown in the film (Beeton, 2015). For example, New Zealand had famously stood in for Middle-Earth in Peter Jackson's '*Lord of the Rings*'- and '*The Hobbit*'-trilogies, which have in return encouraged every year thousands of film tourists to go on organised 'Middle-Earth'-visitor tours (Buchmann et al., 2010; Roesch, 2009). Therefore, the critical film tourism discourse has focused especially on the existential question of what exactly constitutes an '*authentic tourist experience*', when the tourist destination is in fact a world of make-believe to start with. While much of the research has focused so far on film locations (Buchmann et al., 2010; Connelly, 2005; Roesch, 2009) and film-theme parks (Beeton, 2005; Costa and Bamossy, 2001) linked to particular film texts, even the few studio tours that have been studied are closely tied to a specific film or TV production like '*Coronation Street*' (Couldry, 1998), a Korean soap opera (Kim, 2010, 2012) or '*Harry Potter*' (Beeton, 2015). In reference to MacCannell (1973), film tourism scholars (Beeton, 2005; Couldry, 1998), thereby, argue that the primary motivation of film tourists to visit those film locations, film-theme parks or studio tours is to take a closer look behind the curtains and to enter the backstage area of their favourite film and TV productions or even the film industry in general.

For that reason, this often ideology-driven scholarly discourse views film locations, film-theme parks and even studio tours as '*simulacra*', inauthentic reconstructions of reality. Although Couldry (1998) and Beeton (2015) challenge its inherent cognitive bias, this film

tourism discourse seeks to examine how film tourists, in their search for a genuine backstage access to their favourite film texts and film productions, would constantly be required to negotiate the *'authenticity'* of their tourist experiences with visited film locations, film-theme parks and even film studio tours (Beeton, 2005; Buchmann et al., 2010; Connell, 2005). What is still missing from these critiques is an understanding of how consumers actually perceive, engage, experience and relate to on-site film tourism destinations in general (Beeton, 2015; Connell, 2012) and to guided film studio tours in particular. This paper seeks to address this deficit by exploring what kind of film tourists in terms of their personality and interests (Bachleda and Bennani, 2016) the guided film studio tour is appealing to, what inherent consumer needs, desires and aspirations it caters to and how visitors perceive, experience and negotiate the *'(in)authenticity'* of what is presented to them during the film studio tour.

## **Methodology**

This paper takes an interactive autoethnographic approach (Gould, 2012; Patterson et al., 1998), which explores from an *'I'm-the-camera'*-perspective (Holbrook, 2005, 2006; Houston and Meamber, 2011) how consumers perceive, experience, interact, relate to and negotiate the *'(in)authenticity'* of the world of film and filmmaking that film studios present to them during their guided tours of a working film studio. While the overall research has studied the guided studio tour at three different film studios (Warner Brothers Studios, Paramount Studios and Babelsberg Studios), the present paper focuses exclusively on the Warner Brothers Studio Tour in Burbank/LA, which I had visited as a genuine film tourist during a short vacation in Hollywood and which is representative for the observed visitor experiences at all three sites, for reasons of detail and clarity in providing a compelling consumer story of the film tourism experience. My personal experiences, observations and conversations with or between fellow visitors and staff members were recorded during the

visit as written field notes and a series of photographs (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2012). Due to a previous research project, I was still in the habit of collecting my detailed experiences, thoughts and observations in an A6 notebook diary (Patterson, 2005), which I always kept on me at the time. As I was not the only person taking notes during the visit, neither staff nor fellow visitors perceived the recording of field notes as intrusive. Permission for using the recorded quotes at some later time was obtained whenever the opportunity arose.

In addition, I also took 40 useable photographs during the Warner Brothers Studio Tour to gain further hermeneutic insights. While the use of photographs in marketing and consumer research is not new (Basil, 2011), their role has often been limited to supporting ethnographic observations as objective visual evidence (Heisley et al., 1991; Houston and Meamber, 2011; Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2012) or as auto-driving devices to elicit consumer responses on their behaviour (Heisley and Levy, 1991; Scarles, 2010). The autoethnographic *'I'm-the-camera'*-perspective, on the other hand, ascribes instead two simultaneous roles to photographs (Holbrook, 2005, 2006). Firstly, they provide an objective representation of the observed reality (their *'content'*). Secondly, they are also subjective representations of the researcher's personal gaze and experiences, which reveal themselves in the way the observed has been captured and framed in the picture (its *'focus'* and *'composition'*).

Hence, the photos were analysed hermeneutically with regard to their *'content'*, *'focus'* and *'composition'*. First, they were reviewed regarding their objective depiction of what exactly I observed during my visit. Then, the photos 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 is even excluded) reveal about my subjective experiences as a visitor. The field notes and recorded conversations with fellow

visitors or staff members were examined in a similar pattern through part-to-whole readings (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2012) and put into context with the photos. The following first-person consumer narrative summarises and presents the data and findings that emerged iteratively from the hermeneutic analysis, before I discuss the key findings in more detail.

### **Taking the Warner Brothers Studio Tour**

Since my early childhood, I have not only enjoyed watching films for the pleasure they provide as an exciting way of temporary escape and a source of inspiration, but I have also been fascinated with the art of filmmaking and the film business. As a keen amateur filmmaker, I took the Warner Brothers Studio Tour during a short vacation in Hollywood to see first-hand how professionals produce their films. The Warner Brothers Studios have invited film fans like me onto their elaborate studio tour ever since Jack Warner moved them in 1918 from their original Sunset Boulevard lot to their current site in Burbank. Nowadays, the guided WB Studio Tour takes visitors around the actual soundstages and backlots of their real working film studio for between 2-3 hours. The tour starts every hour from the visitor center at the studio gates that also serves as the retail outlet for Warner Brothers-themed merchandise. From here, a personal guide picks up the visitors in groups of 10-14.

Because the next tour group was already full when I arrived at 2.30pm, I booked instead a place with the following tour that was scheduled for 4pm. While waiting in front of the visitor center, I experienced the meaning of '*working studio*' first-hand, when I joined a group of people watching from behind a fence when a film crew was shooting an opening scene for one of Warner Brothers' TV crime dramas in the car park. What is particularly interesting is how film crews, with a bit of imagination, can make virtually anything within the studio grounds '*stand in*' for the '*real*' locations. An office building is quickly

transformed into an airport, as in the film *The Terminal*, while a car park becomes a busy street along New York's Central Park, as it was the case here. In order to create the necessary foot traffic, the crew even asked me and a few other onlookers to be extras. Thus, provided with a smart jacket and an attaché case, my film/TV debut in one of Warner Brothers' TV crime drama required me 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-minute film introduced us to the history of Warner Brothers. Picking us up afterwards from here, our personal tour guide – who tends to be a scriptwriter, camera assistant, editor, art designer or sound technician employed by Warner Brothers – had a free hand in showing us whatever soundstages, backlots and other areas he thought were interesting to us or which we 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 for on-going film shooting. Thus, every WB studio tour is different. Sadly, taking photos is restricted to certain areas and video-filming prohibited altogether. Hence, our cameras were locked into a safe on the cart-tram and handed out at those locations, where we were allowed to use them. The tour guide explained this policy to us as a) art directors hold the full copy-rights for their set designs, and b) that taking photos may also interfere with film shots.

The first thing we visited was the central backlot of a small US town's marketplace, which is seen, e.g., in *Gilmore Girls*. Here, we were able to watch from a safe distance how a scene for a TV drama was shot. Next, we were introduced to two different types of soundstages. First, we visited the set of *Two and Half Men* on their day-off, which represents the live-audience set common for the ½-hour TV sitcom format. Basically, the audience is

seated opposite the length of the soundstage, which is divided into several sections (here from left to right: Outside the front door, the living-room (can be rotated), the kitchen, a bedroom, and the balcony). The camera always shoots from the viewpoint of the audience. This was followed by two typical soundstages used for movies and TV dramas. Here, we learned how flexible the film sets are built to enable shooting a scene from various camera angles and lighting without the film audience noticing anything on screen.



Photo 1: Props from *Matrix*, *Batman*, etc.



Photo 2: Flying Car from *Harry Potter*

The first stop, where we were finally allowed to take photos, was the storage room for specifically-built cars and other trademarked props. Once each of us entered the storage room it was a bit like children being let loose in a candy store, where everyone gravitated to and rapidly took photos of those cars and props that s/he recognised. The different *Batman* cars, *The Matrix* props and, of course, the *Harry Potter* car proved to be particularly popular, as Photos 1 and 2 show. And something else also happened in the moment we had access to our photo-cameras and camcorders, as we began to compare our experiences with them. Up to that moment, there was very little interaction within the group. But suddenly each of us seemed to realise that s/he is not the only one with a strong interest in the art of filmmaking,



but among other like-minded people. Our tour guide also seemed to have picked up on these exchanges and led us on foot to a nearby storage room for camera equipment, where we were able to talk to and get some professional advice relating to lenses and lighting from members of Warner Brothers' camera crews.

Due to the social exchanges and the earlier popularity of the soundstages with the group, our tour guide brought us to an old soundstage, where we, as Photo 3 shows, were allowed to take photos of the heritage-protected set design from the hit-sitcom *Friends* that Warner Brothers is not allowed to dismantle (which may also apply to the *Harry Potter* sets in Leavesdon). Interestingly, Photo 3 is the only photo taken during the tour, which has the lead author or any other person as its central focus. Afterwards, each of us was given the exciting opportunity to play for the first time with a bluescreen. As can be seen in Photo 14, each visitor received a free digital photo with the Hogwarts train from the *Harry Potter* films as a reminder.



Photo 3: On the Studio Set of *Friends*



Photo 4: Playing With the bluescreen



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



Photo 6: Warner's Backlot: The Inner City

Partially on foot, the tour went on through Warner Brothers' different backlots, which every one of us found pretty amazing and which we were allowed to photograph. At the city backlot, which serves as the background for various outdoor shots in most Warner Brothers films, we learned how these city street settings shown in Photos 5 and 6 can replicate with a few adjustments virtually any city in the world throughout all possible historical ages as well as any fictional or 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.'*



Photo 7: Warner's Backlot: Suburbia



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

The other backlots that we were shown included an American suburbia, where films like *The Burbs*, *Uncle Buck* or *Home Alone* and countless others have been shot, and the forest-and-lake backlot that is home to many adventure, war and horror films. As with the inner-city backlot, the suburbia backlot only includes the facades of buildings shown in Photo 7 for outdoor-/street shots. Only a few individual houses have a room built in, so that the camera can capture the look from the street into a house. All indoor shots are filmed on soundstages instead. The forest-and-lake backlot, on the other hand, is mainly a 'nature' resort with a few individual cabins like the one in Photo 8, which 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 (as in *The Beach*). It was particularly interesting to learn that the film studios, rather than competing with each other, share their respective backlots. For instance, a path through the woods was used for the T. Rex chase scene in *Jurassic Park*, even though the film was actually made by Universal Studios, as revealed in the following exchange between our tour guide and a fellow visitor:

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...'*

The Warner Brothers Studio Tour's informal and personal atmosphere seemed to allow for a communal spirit to emerge between us visitors and the tour guide that enabled on-going conversations to take place. During these conversations I learned that my fellow visitors ranged in age from 13 to the mid-50s, seem to come from a middle-class backgrounds and were overall well-educated. More importantly, however, every single one of us had some background knowledge of the film industry and a keen interest in filmmaking rather than Hollywood's mythical glamour. Our personal experiences in amateur filmmaking were particularly evident in our displayed ownership and familiarity with (semi-)professional film equipment. Each visitor (including 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 especially with the tour guide and other staff members as *'more experienced'* filmmakers.

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!'*

When we finally returned to the visitor center after nearly 3 hours and the studio tour officially concluded with the opportunity to buy some Warner Brothers-themed merchandise, the informal and excited conversations with the tour guide and among us visitors continued for another half an hour. Like my fellow visitors in the group, I found the Warner Brothers Studio Tour a much more exciting, informative and memorable experience than the standardised, orchestrated and, especially, inauthentic counterpart at Universal Studios' nearby theme-park, which – by coincidence – each of us had also visited over the previous days. But, sadly, once we left the studio grounds, each visitor also left the communal spirit behind and went their own ways.

### **Concluding Discussion**

The consumer narrative offers some interesting insights into how consumers perceive, experience, engage with, relate to and negotiate the '(in)authenticity' of a guided film studio tour and what is presented to them, which have emerged iteratively from the hermeneutic

analysis of my autoethnographic data and which would have largely been inaccessible to traditional methodologies. In so doing, this study offers a deeper understanding of a highly involved group of arts consumers – the film tourist – and how film studios might be able to benefit from catering to their aspirations. Since critical scholars have previously discussed film studios and film locations mainly as the production site for a specific film text (Beeton, 2005; Buchmann et al., 2010; Connell, 2005; Kim, 2012) and the film studio tour usually in relation to the choreographed Universal Studio Tour or the stunt shows of the old movie ranches (Beeton, 2015), it should therefore come to no surprise that the critical film tourism, arts marketing and consumer research discourse conceptualise film studio tours as staged representations of a film production’s actual ‘backstage’, which present film tourists with mere reconstructions of the film sets, stunts and special effects rather than the real deal (Beeton, 2005; Couldry, 1998). Hence, consumers searching for ‘backstage access’ would constantly be forced to negotiate the ‘authenticity’ of their tourist or visitor experiences with the inauthenticity of what has been presented and observed (Buchmann et al., 2010; Hede et al., 2014; Hede and Thyne, 2010).

But as the hermeneutic analysis of the autoethnographic data clearly shows, film studio tours like the Warner Brothers Studio Tour, whose central themes are the art and craft of filmmaking and the industrial realities of the film business, actually take their visitors on a guided tour through an actual working film studio. Therefore, consumers are indeed given a genuine temporary access to the backstage of the industrial film production process instead of being merely presented with staged reconstructions of a film studio and some film sets. As a result, the autoethnographic data have revealed that film tourists on the Warner Brothers Studio Tour do not feel the need to negotiate the authenticity of their tourist experiences with a visited inauthentic representation (simulacrum), as critical scholars have theorised, **because**

they *'know'* that the working film studio they are visiting is the real deal (Beverland, 2006) – and not just a staged simulation of a Hollywood film studio. As visitors are shown in small groups around the actual film sets, soundstages, backlots and any other interesting and administrative facilities by a knowledgeable studio employee in an interactive, flexible and personalised manner while real film and TV productions take place all around them, the authenticity of the presented, observed and experienced has – for them – never been in doubt.

It should come to no surprise that the autoethnographic narrative identifies a specific type of film tourists to whom the guided tour of a working film studio appeals in particular. Unlike those studio tours that are associated with the set of a specific film or soap opera and, thus, are clearly aimed at their fans or wider media audiences (Couldry, 1998; Kim, 2010), the guided studio tour of a working film studio seems to appeal especially to those film tourists, who have a serious leisure interest (Pestana and Codina, 2017; Stebbins, 1982) in the art of filmmaking and are keen to take a closer look behind the scenes at the professional film business and the industrial realities of the film production process. As my observations and conversations at the Warner Brothers Studio Tour reveal, many visitors at the guided studio tours of a working film studio seem to have (some) personal experiences as amateur or hobby filmmakers, which is also evidenced by the semi-professional camcorders and DSLR cameras that each of them was carrying with them as well as their understanding of advanced editing software. Hence, they tend to take the guided film studio tour with a view to pick up some useful tips, advice and practices from the professionals that could improve their own creative filmmaking skills as amateurs or hobbyists. In addition, they appreciate in particular that the informal, social atmosphere of the film studio affords them with the opportunity and site to connect with other filmmakers and to share their personal experiences with specific (semi-) professional camcorder models, editing software, etc. and filmmaking techniques in personal

dialogues with each other, the tour guide and any of the film studio's technical crews met on the tour as *'kindred spirits'*.

Similar to Buchmann et al.'s (2010) findings, the tour guide is thereby ascribed the role of the *'facilitator'*, whose knowledgeable enthusiasm and professional expertise as a *'fellow filmmaker'* and whose approachability as a *'kindred spirit'* is strongly appreciated by visitors, and this is key to their enjoyment of the film studio tour and to stimulating a feeling of community to emerge within the group (Wood and Moss, 2015). But despite the visitors' expressed desire to continue the experienced social connection among *'fellow filmmakers'* beyond the guided studio tour of the working film studio itself within a creative, co-creating filmmaker community (Halliday and Astafyeva, 2014), it also is apparent that neither studio executives nor professional filmmakers working at those film studios like Warner Brothers seem to share their desire. This interesting finding, therefore, suggests that, even though film tourists are briefly granted as visitors a genuine access to the backstage of a Hollywood film studio, where they are indeed presented with a genuine, authentic representation of a working film studio, it is instead the visitors' 'experienced feeling' of having joined a filmmaker community that turns out to be the actual simulacrum. Hence, it is only fitting that the obligatory sale of Warner Brothers-branded merchandise at the end of the guided film studio tour (Brennan and Savage, 2012) symbolically closes the door again and returns everyone back into their respective place(s). Of course, such a response is not only confined to guided film studio tours, as many museums, art galleries, theatres or music venues also fail to engage with those audiences, who have not only a serious leisure interest in such arts as amateurs or hobbyists but also seek to be(come) a part of the community, beyond their immediate visit.



For film studios, such as Warner Brothers, this failure to offer a platform for those visitors, who engage in filmmaking as a serious leisure activity (Pestana and Codina, 2017; Stebbins, 1982), to sustain their experienced feeling of community as filmmakers beyond the guided studio tour itself is very short-sighted and presents a lost opportunity to build a long-term consumer-brand relationship with a very eager and highly involved film audience. Maintaining the dialogue with and among those amateur and hobby filmmakers both online and in a series of local meetings and events with a studio-brand community, as Halliday and Astafyeva (2014) suggest, could result in the creative co-creation of value in terms of brand reputation and new talent development that may benefit the film studio in the long-term. For example, by providing a dedicated website to filmmaking, where professional, amateur and hobby filmmakers could share their personal experiences with each other, give and receive advice with regard to their own projects and, perhaps, even to showcase their own creative works to an appreciative, but also critical audience of *'kindred spirits'* rather than the average YouTube viewers, the film studio could position itself as a champion for creative filmmaking and talent development among all levels of 'professionalism', gender and ages and reengage millennial consumers with the joys of cinema. This could be supported with the provision or sponsorship of localised film festivals as an opportunity for amateur and hobby filmmakers to showcase their creative work to a broader audience, which are not only legitimated by the championing film studio but also fosters the development of new filmmaker talent and film narratives for the film studio's future film production output.

Obviously, I do not imply that the presented autoethnographic data and the presented findings can be generalised. Nor do I pretend that my interpretation of the collected complex autoethnographic data would be only possible one; far from it. Moreover, I do not pretend that many readers of Arts and the Market may share my interest in filmmaking, film tourism

and film studio tours either. What I do suggest, however, is that some really interesting insights with regard to the authenticity of the backstage access that is presented to consumers during the guided studio tour through an actual working film studio, whereby the presented and observed is authentic while the experienced feeling of belonging now to a community of filmmakers turns out to be the true simulacrum. What I also suggest is that this finding has some implications beyond the immediate context of this study of film tourism in general that warrant further debate. And the moment, too many managers believe that audiences visiting their museums, heritage sites, theatres, music venues or art galleries would only have a casual leisure interest (Stebbins, 1997) in an entertaining frontstage experience or 'show'. While this would be true for many visitors, they would also do well to consider offering a backstage access to those audiences with a serious leisure interest in the presented art or heritage (Pestana and Codina, 2017) and finding a way to integrate them. A further implication of the main finding is that, with a growing number of academic studies researching online communities on websites and social media as authentic representation of the actual arts audiences and co-creating brand communities, questions need to be raised whether consumers and academic scholars alike may mistake what are actually simulacra, inauthentic online representations or pseudo-events (Baudrillard, 1970; Boorstin, 1961) of such communities, for the real deal.

## References

- Bachleda, C.L. and Bennani, A. (2016), "Personality and interest in the visual arts", *Arts and the Market*, Vol. 6 No. 2, pp. 126-40.
- Barbas, S. (2001), *Movie Crazy: Fans, Stars and the Cult of Celebrity*, Palgrave, New York.
- Basil, M. (2001), "Use of photography and video in observational research", *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, Vol. 14 No. 3, pp. 246-57.

- Batat, W. and Wohlfeil, M. (2009), "Getting lost 'Into the Wild': Understanding consumers' movie enjoyment through a narrative transportation approach", *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 36, pp. 372-77.
- Baudrillard, J. (1970/2017), *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures, Revised Edition*, Sage, London.
- Baumgarth, C. (2014), "'This theatre is a part of me': Contrasting brand attitude and brand attachment as drivers of audience behaviour", *Arts Marketing: An International Journal*, Vol. 4 No. 1-2, pp. 87-100.
- Beeton, S. (2005), *Film-Induced Tourism*, Channel View, Clevedon.
- Beeton, S. (2015), *Travel, Tourism and the Moving Image*, Channel View, Bristol.
- Benjamin, Walter (2006), "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction", in *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, (ed.) Redmond, Sean and Su Holmes, London: Sage, 25-33.
- Bettany, S. and Belk, R.W. (2011), "Disney discourses of self and other: Animality, primitivity, modernity and postmodernity", *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, Vol. 14 No. 2, pp. 163-76.
- Beverland, M.B. (2006), "The 'real' thing: Branding authenticity in the luxury wine trade", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 59 No. 2, pp. 251-58.
- Beverland, M.B. and Farrelly, F.J. (2010), "The quest for authenticity in consumption: Consumers' purposive choice of authentic cues to shape experienced outcomes", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 36 No. 5, 838-56.
- Boorstin, D.J. (1961), *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, Schuster & Schuster, New York.
- Brennan, L. and Savage, T. (2012), "Cultural consumption and souvenirs: An ethical framework", *Arts Marketing: An International Journal*, Vol. 2 No. 2, 144-90.

- Buchmann, A., Moore, K. and Fisher, D. (2010), "Experiencing film tourism: Authenticity & fellowship", *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 37 No. 1, pp. 229-48.
- Connell, J. (2005), "Toddlers, tourism and Tobermory: Destination marketing issues and television-induced tourism", *Tourism Management*, Vol. 26, pp. 763-76.
- Connell, J. (2012), "Film tourism: Evolution, progress and prospects", *Tourism Management*, Vol. 33, pp. 1007-29.
- Connell, J. and Meyer, D. (2009), "Balamory revisited: An evaluation of the screen tourism destination-tourist nexus", *Tourism Management*, Vol. 30, pp. 194-207.
- Costa, J.A, and Bamossy, G.J. (2001), "Le Parc Disney: Creating an "authentic" American experience", *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 28, pp. 398-402.
- Couldry, N. (1998), "The view from inside the 'simulacrum': Visitors' tales from the set of Coronation Street", *Leisure Studies*, Vol. 17, pp. 94-107.
- Cousins, M. (2011), *The Story of Film*, Anova Pavilion, London.
- Epstein, E.J. (2005), *The Big Picture: Money and Power in Hollywood*, Random, New York.
- Epstein, E.J. (2012), *The Hollywood Economist 2.0: The Hidden Financial Realities Behind the Movies*, Melville House, Brooklyn, NJ.
- Firat, A.F. and Ulusoy, E. (2011), "Living a theme", *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, Vol. 14 No 2, pp. 193-202.
- Freedland, M. (2009), *The Men Who Made Hollywood: The Lives of the Great Movie Moguls*, JR Books, London.
- Gabler, N. (1998), *Life: The Movie – How Entertainment Conquered Reality*, Vintage, New York.
- Gkritzali, A., Lampel, J. and Wiertz, C. (2016), "Blame it on Hollywood: The influence of films on Paris as product location", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 69, pp. 2363-70.

- Gould, S.J. (2012), "The emergence of consumer introspection theory (CIT): Introduction to a JBR special issue", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 65 No. 4, pp. 453-60.
- Goulding, C. (2000), "The museum environment and the visitor experience", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 34 No. 3-4, pp. 261-78.
- Grayson, K. and Martinec, R. (2004), "Consumer perceptions of iconicity and indexicality and their influence on assessments of authentic market offerings", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 31 No. 2, pp. 296-312.
- Hahm, J. and Wang, Y.C. (2011), "Film-induced tourism as a vehicle for destination marketing: Is it worth the efforts?", *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 28, pp. 165-79.
- Halliday, S.V. and Astafyeva, A. (2014), "Millennial cultural consumers: Co-creating value through brand communities", *Arts Marketing: An International Journal*, Vol. 4 No. 1-2, pp. 119-35.
- Hede, A.-M., Garma, R., Josiassen, A. and Thyne, M. (2014), "Perceived authenticity of the visitor experience in museums: Conceptualization and initial empirical findings", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 48 No. 7-8, pp. 1395-1412.
- Hede, A.-M. and Thyne, M. (2010), "A journey to the authentic: Museum visitors and their negotiation of the inauthentic", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 26 No. 7-8, pp. 686-705.
- Heisley, D.D. and Levy, S.J. (1991), "Autodriving: A photoelicitation technique", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 18 No. 3, pp. 257-72.
- Heisley, D.D., McGrath, M.-A. and Sherry Jr., J.F. (1991), "To everything there is a season: A photo-essay of a farmer's market", in Belk, R.W. (Ed.), *Highways and Buyways: Naturalistic Research from the Consumer Behaviour Odyssey*, Association for Consumer Research, Provo, UT, pp. 141-66.

- Holbrook, M.B. (2005), "Customer value and autoethnography: Subjective personal introspection and the meanings of a photograph collection", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 58 No. 1, pp. 45-61.
- Holbrook, M.B. (2006), "Photo essays and the mining of minutiae in consumer research: 'Bout time I got to Phoenix'", in Belk, R.W. (Ed.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, pp. 476-93.
- Houston, H.R. and Meamber, L.A. (2011), "Consuming the 'world': Reflexivity, aesthetics and authenticity at Disney World's EPCOT Center", *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, Vol. 14 No. 2, pp. 177-91.
- Johnson, D. (1981), "Disneyworld as structure and symbol: Re-creation of the American experience", *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 157-65.
- Kerrigan, F. (2010), *Film Marketing*, Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford.
- Kim, S. (2010), "Extraordinary experience: Re-enacting and photographing at screen tourism locations", *Tourism and Hospitality: Planning and Development*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 59-75.
- Kim, S. (2012), "Audience involvement and film tourism experiences: Emotional places, emotional experiences", *Tourism Management*, Vol. 33, pp. 387-96.
- King, M. (1981), "Disneyland and Walt Disney World: Traditional values in futuristic form", *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 116-40.
- Kreimeier, K. (1996), *The UFA Story: A History of Germany's Greatest Film Company 1918-1945*, Carl Hanser Verlag, München.
- MacCannell, D. (1973), "Staged authenticity: Arrangements of social space in tourism settings", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 79 No. 3, pp. 357-61.

- Patterson, A. (2005), "Processes, relationships, settings, products and consumers: The case for qualitative diary research", *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, Vol. 8 No. 2, pp. 142-56.
- Patterson, A., Brown, S., Stevens, L. and Maclaran, P. (1998), "Casting a critical "I" over Caffrey's Irish Ale: Soft words, strongly spoken", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 14 No. 7-8, pp. 733-48.
- Pestana, J.V. and Codina, N. (2017), "How to analyse the experience of serious leisure onstage: Actors and spectators", *World Leisure Journal*, Vol. 59 No. 3, pp. 240-48.
- Pettigrew, S. (2011), "Hearts and minds: Children's experiences of Disney World", *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, Vol. 14 No. 2, pp. 145-61.
- Riley, R.W. and van Doren, C.S. (1992), "Movies as tourism promotion: A push factor in a pull location", *Tourism Management*, Vol. 13, pp. 267-74.
- Roesch, S. (2009), *The Experiences of Film Location Tourists*, Channel View, Bristol.
- Scarles, C. (2010), "Where words fail, visuals ignite: Opportunities for visual autoethnography in tourism research", *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 37 No. 4, pp. 905-26.
- Schickel, R. (1985), *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity*, Doubleday, New York.
- Schofield, P. (1996), "Cinematographic images of a city", *Tourism Management*, Vol. 17 No. 5, pp. 330-40.
- Stebbins, R.A. (1982), "Serious leisure: A conceptual statement", *Pacific Sociological Review*, Vol. 25 No. 2, pp. 251-72.
- Stebbins, R.A. (1997), "Casual leisure: A conceptual statement", *Leisure Studies*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 17-25.
- TEA/AECOM (2015), *2014 Theme Index: The Global Attractions Attendance Report*, Themed Entertainment Association, Burbank, CA.

- Thorp M. (1939), *America at the Movies*, Yale Press, New Haven.
- Tooke, N. and Baker, M. (1996), "Seeing is believing: The effect of film on visitor numbers to screened locations", *Tourism Management*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 87-94.
- Tzanelli, R. (2007), *The Cinematic Tourist: Explorations in Globalization, Culture and Resistance*, Routledge, New York.
- Unwin, Elinor, Finola Kerrigan, Kathryn Waite and David Grant (2007), "Getting the picture: Programme awareness amongst film festival customers", *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 231-245.
- Urry, J. (1990), *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*, Sage, London.
- Wohlfeil, M. and Whelan, S. (2012), "'Saved!' by Jena Malone: An introspective Study of a consumer's fan relationship with a film actress", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 65 No. 4, pp. 511-19.
- Wood, E.H. and Moss, J. (2015), "Capturing Emotions: Experience sampling at live music events", *Arts and the Market*, Vol. 5 No.1, pp. 45-72.
- Zhang, X., Ryan, C. and Cave, J. (2016), "Residents, their use of a tourist facility and contribution to tourist ambience: Narratives from a film tourism site in Beijing", *Tourism Management*, Vol. 52, 416-429.