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## **BETWEEN AUTHENTICITY AND ENTERTAINMENT:**

# THE FILM STUDIO AS A BRAND LAND EXPERIENCE – A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY

By

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#### ABSTRACT

Since the birth of Hollywood in 1912, film studios have provided interested film audiences with studio tours to satisfy the public's demand for first-hand insights and experiences into the world of film and filmmaking. However, as substantial industrial changes within the film industry since the 1950s have turned film studios into clearing-houses, economic pressure caused by declining income from auxiliary markets has meant that they are increasingly required to commercialise their corporate brand and intellectual film properties in the form of studio tours and theme parks, which attract millions of visitors worldwide every year. But how do the brand land experiences offered by film studios cater to the inherent needs and desires that consumers seek to fulfil? Based on the researcher's personal experiences and observations at two major Hollywood studios, this paper uses an introspective photographic essay approach to take a closer look at how consumers experience and engage with the world of film that film studios provide in the form of either studio tours or theme parks.

**Keywords:** Film Studios, Brand Lands, Experiential Consumption, Commercialising Intellectual Properties, Photographic Essay, Subjective Personal Introspection

**Track: Arts & Heritage Marketing** 

#### Introduction

On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2012, Warner Brothers Studios in Leavesdon, Hertfordshire, have launched The Making of Harry Potter Studio Tour - nearly two years after Universal Studios opened The Wizarding World of Harry Potter as the latest visitor attraction at their Orlando resort in Florida. Yet, whereas the latter recreates the magical world of Harry Potter as a theme park experience with appropriately themed sceneries, rides, shops and restaurants (www.universal orlando.com/harrypotter/), the Warner Brothers Studio Tour gives visitors the opportunity to explore the actual film sets, costumes, props, models and special effects of the films on the soundstages and backlots where they were filmed (www.wbstudiotour.co.uk). But to make it clear, this paper doesn't dwell on Harry Potter and/ or on how these two latest additions fit into the broader Harry Potter phenomenon or what this says about contemporary society although I have devoured the Harry Potter books and films like many others. Other marketing academics have already dealt with those themes beautifully (Brown, 2001, 2002, 2005; Brown & Patterson, 2010). Instead, what really caught my interest as a film buff is the mere coincidence that both The Wizarding World of Harry Potter and The Making of Harry Potter Studio Tour happen to represent two very distinct forms of themed brand land experiences (Mikunda, 2004; Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2007) through which film studios across the world increasingly seek to generate additional incomes from their intellectual film properties (Epstein 2005). In this introspective study I take a closer look from a visitor's perspective at how film studios offer consumers the (controlled) opportunity to enjoy the 'magic world of film' as a brand land experience that focuses either on the film text (narrative plot, characters, props and settings) or on the actual process of filmmaking. The questions of interest thereby are: What inherent consumer needs and desires do film studios cater to by commercialising their intellectual film properties and corporate brands as theme parks or studio tours? And how do consumers experience each of those two distinct brand land formats? Based on my personal experiences and observations at two major Hollywood studios, I shall explore how consumers experience and engage with the world of film that film studios offer them through their theme parks or studio tours by using a photographic essay approach (Holbrook, 2006).

#### The Film Studio as a Brand Land Experience: A History

Since my early childhood I have always been fascinated by the imaginative world of films, which provide me with both a source of inspiration and an exciting way to escape temporarily from the mundane reality of a dull everyday life. Moreover, my keen interest in them has also included the art of filmmaking and the film industry. Thus, film parks and studio tours offer me great opportunities to see and experience the film industry and film production process in person and on location. And judging by the number of people visiting the film studios every year, I don't seem to be the only one – although many probably do not share my enthusiasm for film or even experiment with amateur filmmaking like me. In fact, more than 5 million people visit the Universal Film Studios in Hollywood every year, while their Orlando and Tokyo resorts counted another 6 million visitors each in 2010 alone (TEA/AECOM 2010). These figures are even dwarfed by the 10 to 17 million annual visitors that flock to each of Disney's global theme parks (TEA/AECOM 2010). And it is not only the major Hollywood studios that attract film audiences in large numbers to their studio gates. Indeed, the Bavaria Filmstadt near Munich counts approx. 500,000 visitors annually (Rössler & Kügler-Martin, 2010), while similar figures are reported at the Babelsberg Film Studios in Berlin, Cinecitta in Rome or Pathé-Gaumont near Paris. But while the visitor numbers these days may seem quite staggering, it must be pointed out that, contradicting popular belief, this is not even a new phenomenon. Universal Studios offered organised studio tours to interested audiences from as early as 1913 (Barbas, 2001), while the popularity of Disneyland, Anaheim, and Disneyworld, Orlando, has attracted academic interest ever since they opened (Boje, 1995). Much of this critical discourse centred on the view that consumers would mistake the encountered 'false' representations of reality as being 'authentic' (Bettany & Belk, 2011; Houston & Meamber, 2011; King, 1981). But as the film industry has for more than a century been one of the commercially biggest industries in the world (De Vany, 2004; Epstein, 2005; Kerrigan, 2010; Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2012), why do film studios actually feel the need to commercialise their intellectual film properties as studio tours or theme parks to cater to this consumer demand for informative or entertaining film-themed brand experiences? In light of those visitor figures, the simple and obvious answer would be that it is a very attractive market that provides the film studios with some significant extra revenues from their intellectual film properties.

The truth, however, is a bit more complicated than that. Indeed, during the silent film era, Hollywood studios initially allowed the public to visit their film sets and backlots as a tactical response to the social and political pressure they came under from influential social reformers like the Christian Temperance Union (Barbas, 2001). With thousands of young girls moving in the 1910s and 1920s to Hollywood in the hope of a film career that seemed to promise economic independence, social reformers accused the film industry of encouraging loose morals, promiscuity and vice (Barbas, 2001). As thousands of film fans came temporarily as well with the desire to see first-hand how their favourite films were made, the studio tour was born to address the three problems at once. By taking visitors on guided tours around the film sets and backlots, the film studios could show critics that their industry has the same work standards and morals as any other (Epstein, 2005). Film fans and aspiring actresses could satisfy their curiosity, see how films are made and observe that film production is not just glamour, but mostly pretty hard work. By the 1920s, the studio tours had turned into popular tourist attractions until their closure with the arrival of sound in 1929. Back then, Hollywood studios fully controlled and capitalised from producing, distributing and exhibiting their films. But the economic pressure that followed the enforced breakup of the studio system in the 1950s led to severe industrial changes in the film industry. The film studios were thereby turned into clearing-houses that seek to maximise profits through the commercialisation of their intellectual film properties obtained either via in-house productions or by acquiring the distribution rights of independent films. This includes distributing the films to cinemas and auxiliary markets (i.e. DVD, downloads, TV) and licensing film text elements for appropriate merchandising (Epstein, 2005; Kerrigan, 2010). In an attempt to benefit from the strong consumer interest in films and the film industry, film studios began to commercialise their intellectual film properties either by focusing on the process of filmmaking in the form of guided studio tours or by recreating the fictional worlds of their film texts as entertaining theme park attractions. These days, recreating popular film texts as entertaining theme parks has become a lucrative means to generate additional revenues from film properties and offset declining incomes from their auxiliary markets (Epstein, 2005; Kerrigan, 2010). This leads to the interesting questions as to what consumer needs and desires are those film-themed brand land experiences designed to satisfy and how do consumers actually experience them.

#### Methodology

Based on my personal experiences and observations at two major Hollywood film studios, I address these questions by using the following photographic essay approach (Holbrook, 2005, 2006; Houston & Meamber, 2011). In doing so, I take an introspective '*I'm-the-camera'*-perspective to explore first-hand how consumers experience and engage with the world of film that film studios offer them with their studio tours and theme parks. The two research sites are the Universal Studios and the Warner Brothers Studios, which are both located in Burbank/LA and which I visited within the space of three days. During each of the visits, I recorded my experiences, observations and conversations with other visitors and staff members as a series of photographs (66 at Universal and 40 at Warner Brothers) and field notes. The time spent at each research site and the freedom to take photos differed between the two studios for various reasons. The photographic essay, supported by a selected photo sample, reflects the findings that emerged from the hermeneutic analysis and interpretation of the photos and field notes and are shown in Table 1.

#### Universal Studios, Burbank/LA, California

Studio founder Carl Laemmle moved the Universal Studios in 1915 from its original home on Gower St. off Sunset Boulevard to its current 415 acres site West of Griffith Park, which makes it the world's largest working film studio. The current theme park opened on this site in 1964; and the Universal CityWalk, LA's current No.1 night-life-&-entertainment address, was added in 1993. Taking the advice from a friend, I arrived at 9am at the ticket booths with virtually no need to queue. Only an hour later, the picture would be very different. Although a day pass costs \$70, it pays to buy a front-of-line pass for \$110 that grants first in line access to all attractions, shows and rides, especially when the queues are getting longer later in the day, and allows for taking a look behind-the-scenes of individual shows. With my first impression being that of a well-oiled clockwork, the first thing a visitor see when entering the Universal theme park is a fountain celebrating the golden era of Hollywood filmmaking (Photo 1). I find this nostalgic image quite ironic, as the fountain is surrounded by retail outlets selling various film-related merchandises (Photo 2) and the film production process seems to play only a minor role. The emphasis is clearly on commercialising the studio's intellectual film properties in form of exciting rides such as Jurassic Park: The River Ride or Revenge of the Mummy, spectacular shows like T2 3-D: Battle Across Time, Shrek 4-D or Waterworld: A Live Sea War Spectacular and, of course, the countless film-themed merchandise sold in retail outlets throughout the park. The theme park is divided into an Upper lot and a Lower lot that are connected through a series of elevators called *The Starway*, which offers an amazing view over the Universal backlots, Burbank and the Warner Brothers Studios 'next door'. But the tape of two moderators endlessly praising the studio's legacy during the 15 minutes it takes to travel up or down got on my nerves and made me feel as if I were lost in a shopping channel.

Located next to Universal's actual soundstages, which are separated from the theme park with secure fences, the Lower lot is home to the Jurassic Park and The Mummy rides. Even though the Jurassic Park ride is quite fun, as a film fan I was more interested in two shows that are housed in former soundstages and promise insights into the art of special effects. The first one is a demonstration of pyrotechnics effects in film based on a set inspired by the film Backdraft, where the visitor witnesses from a railing how fire spreads through a warehouse. It's getting pretty hot in there – especially when the railing drops half a metre under your feet! The second show introduces the visitor to the special effects in the classical horror films. A small museum called The Universal Experience displaying props, costumes and art design from famous Universal films is also quite interesting. In contrast to the soundstages of the Lower lot, the Upper lot is characterised by what are supposed to be backlot film sets of the Wild West, a French courtyard, an English town's high street, a US town in the 1900s, etc. (Photo 3 & 4), in which themed shops, restaurants and smaller attractions are housed. But these backlot sets are fakes and produced solely for the theme park. The Upper lot is home to a number of family-friendly rides, the Blues Brothers Revue, the Universal House of Horror and the half-film, half-live show spectacles T2:3-D and Shrek 4-D (Photo 5), which are absolute fun to watch. Interestingly, some film properties like *Shrek* (owned by DreamWorks) are not part of the Universal stable and are merely licensed for the theme park. The 20-minute Waterworld stunt-show, nonetheless, was the most memorable experience, as my front-of-line pass enabled me to meet the actors afterwards for a chat and a personal photograph (Photo 6).

The Upper lot is also the starting point for the famous studio tour – the attraction I, as a film fan, was most looking forward to. My experience, however, was one of mixed feelings. The studio tour is essentially a small tram taking a fixed route past the soundstages and through Universal's vast backlots – the biggest one in the world. While seeing the different backlot sets used in films like *War of the Worlds, King Kong, Psycho, Desperate Housewives, Jaws, Murder She Wrote, The Grinch, Earthquake* amidst simulated earthquakes, flashfloods, shark attacks and so forth is really exciting, the artificial nature of the tour is, at the same time, also quite disappointing. I never got the feeling that I was really touring a film studio, which already started with the tour guide being an impersonal videotape of Whoopi

Goldberg (now replaced by Jimmy Fallon) rather than a real person. Instead, it was more like a 'love tunnel' ride through the world of Universal films with actors re-staging iconic scenes and characters (i.e. Norman Bates at the Bates Motel) that could be anywhere. Even when the tour seemed to bump 'by accident' into a few stunt-people that were supposedly preparing for a film shoot, it was quite clearly a rehearsed and endlessly repeated part of the tour.

This leads to the question as to what type of visitors does the theme park appeal to. From my observations and conversations with other visitors during my day at Universal Studios, I identified roughly three types of consumers. A tiny minority were, like me, film fans with an interest in the film-production process. The majority of visitors can be split equally into those, who primarily want to enjoy the rides ("I'm definitely here for the rides; especially the Mummy ride... it's exhilarating... Each time I'm just off it, I'm queuing already for the next trip." M 21), and those, who seek to absorb a bit of what they view as 'Hollywood glamour' ("I'm in love with cinema. It's such a glamorous world... and here you can dive into it. I just hope I can spot someone famous; that would make my day." F 43). The consumer appeal of the Universal Studios theme park obviously lies in the entertainment value it provides them through themed attractions based on popular films and the illusion of glamour that the popular imagination often ascribes to Hollywood. Thus, when they are faced with the remark that the theme park isn't an authentic representation of the film industry, the usual response is that this doesn't matter, as film would be "a world of illusion designed to entertain and enjoy" (M 44) anyway. Well, I have to admit that, even though my primary desire to see how a film studio really works wasn't satisfied, I still had a great day.

#### Warner Brothers, Burbank/LA, California

Ever since Jack Warner moved the Warner Brothers Studios in 1918 from its first location on Sunset Boulevard to its current site in Burbank, right opposite the Universal Studios, the film studio has invited interested film audiences to take their elaborate studio tour. Nowadays, the guided Warner Brothers Studio Tour, which leads visitors for 2-3 hours through its actual soundstages and backlots, could not offer a bigger contrast to Universal's orchestrated studio tour. The tour starts every hour from the reception and visitor centre at the studio gates, which also serves as the retail store for Warner Brothers merchandise, from where a personal guide, joined by a cart-tram driver, picks up the visitors in groups of 10-14. While waiting outside for my tour to start, I experienced the meaning of a working studio first-hand. A film crew were just shooting in the car park a scene for one of Warner's TV shows and, like a few other waiting visitors, I was asked to stand in as an extra. What quickly became apparent during the studio tour as well was how film crews, with a bit of imagination, can turn virtually anything on the studio grounds into a film set standing in for the real places. Thus, an office building for accounting and HR staff is quickly turned into an airport, as done in case of *The Terminal*, while a car park is transformed into a street at Central Park. When, after an introductory 30min film about the film studio's history, the studio tour finally began, a few other differences became apparent. The personal guide - who usually is a scriptwriter, camera assistant, costume or art designer employed by the studio - had a free hand in showing us whatever soundstages, backlots and other areas he thought were interesting or visitors were asking for. Toward that end, he was constantly informed via walkie-talkie which areas of the studio were free for visit and which were closed off by on-going film productions. Hence, every studio tour is different. Secondly, video-filming is prohibited, while taking photos was restricted to a few areas. Our cameras were locked into a safe on the cart and handed out at those places, where we were allowed to use them. We were told that art designers hold full copyrights for their set designs and that taking photos may interfere with film shots. The first we visited was the central backlot of a small US town's marketplace, known among others from Gilmore Girls, where we were able to watch from a 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 Man* on their day-off, which represents the live-audience set common for

the <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>-hour sitcom format. Then, we were shown the typical soundstage used for films and TV films and how flexible the set is set up to enable filming a scene from various angles without the film audience noticing. The first thing we were allowed to photograph was the storage room for specifically-built cars and other unique props (Photo 7 & 8). The tour, then, led us to an old soundstage, where we were allowed to take photos of the heritage-protected set of the hit sitcom Friends (Photo 10), which Warner is not allowed to dismantle (something that may also apply to the Harry Potter set in Leavesdon). Another unique experience for a visitor is to play for the first time with a bluescreen. And as a reminder, each visitor is given a free digital photo with the Hogwarts train (Photo 9). Next, the tour went, partially on foot, through the backlots, which we were allowed to photograph and which every one of us found pretty amazing. At the city backlot, we learned how this city street setting (Photo 11), which serves as background for most Warner films, can be transformed for outdoor shots to replicate various cities across various eras from the Middle Ages to the future. Other backlots include suburbia, where The Burbs or Home Alone were shot (Photo 12), and the forest-and-lake that are home to many adventure, war and horror films. It was also interesting to learn that the film studios are actually not competing, but cooperating with each other by sharing their individual backlots. For example, the T-Rex chase scene from Universal's Jurassic Park was actually shot on Warner's forest backlot. Like most of my fellow visitors, I found the Warner Brothers Studio Tour much more exciting, informative and memorable than its orchestrated counterpart at Universal. Indeed, we all shared a mixed feeling about the Universal Studios theme park, which - strangely - each of us had already visited over the previous days. But then again, the visitors taking the studio tour differed enormously from those at Universal. Just like me, many had a keen interest and often some basic background knowledge in the film-production process rather than the film text and the glamour attributed to Hollywood.

#### Discussion

So, what can we take away from my introspective photographic essay? And how do my personal observations and experiences from the Universal studios theme park at the Universal Studios theme park and the Warner Brothers Studio Tour relate to the opening case of the two brand land commercialisations of the Harry Potter film property? Well, the attentive reader has probably noticed that Universal Studios and Warner Brothers happen not only to be the two studios behind those two Harry Potter brand lands but also apply the same format as in Hollywood – a theme park recreating the film text vs. a studio tour of the film set. Obviously, the different visitor numbers alone would suggest that a theme park attracts more visitors and, thus, generates bigger revenues. Yet, the photographic essay shows that, depending on what aims the film studio seeks to achieve and what inherent consumer desires they like to satisfy, both *formats* have their place and value in commercialising intellectual film properties (Table 1), as theme parks and studio tours attract very different consumer segments. The Universal Studios theme park provides a highly orchestrated, commercial and endlessly replicable filmthemed experience that appeals mainly to those consumers who are primarily interested in the entertainment provided by film-themed rides and shows, by which they can escape reality for a day and absorb the illusion of glamour associated with Hollywood, rather than forming any emotional bonds to the film studio or the film industry. The Warner Brothers Studio Tour, by contrast, provides a flexible, accurate and personalised experience that appeals to visitors with a keen interest in filmmaking, who seek genuine insights into the film business. The dividing factor, thus, is the issue of authenticity (Hede & Thyne, 2010). However, while critical studies of theme parks have traditionally implied that consumers are fooled into mistaking the themed 'hyperrealities' of brand lands for an authentic representation of reality (Houston & Meamber, 2011; King, 1981), the observed consumers were pretty aware of what is authentic or not. The visitors at Universal's theme park simply did not care much about authentic representations, as they were only interested in entertainment and distraction. On the other hand, the visitors have taken the Warner studio tour *because* they know that the working studio is the real deal, not just a mere representation of a film studio.

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## Appendices

# Universal Studios, Hollywood



Photo 1: Universal Studios entrance

Photo 2: Shops in fake set designs



Photo 3: Backlot Set of French courtyard

Photo 4: Backlot Set of English Town Centre



Photo 5: Shrek 4-D Film Experience

Photo 6: Meeting the leading actress at the Waterworld Stunt Show

## **Warner Brothers**



Photo 7: Props from Matrix, Batman, etc.

Photo 8: Flying Car from Harry Potter



Photo 9: Nearly Run Over by Hogwarts-Train: Photo 10: On the Studio Set of Friends Playing With the Blue-Screen



Photo 11: Warner's Backlot: The Inner-City

Photo 12: Warner's Backlot: Suburbia

# Table 1: Universal Studios versus Warner Brothers Duality

	Universal Studios	Warner Brothers
Brand Land Format	Theme Park	Studio Tour
Focus	Film Text	Film Production
Represented Theme	Popular Imagination	Industrial Reality
Provided Experience	Entertainment	Informative Insights
Service Delivery	Standardised	Flexible
	Mass-Produced	Personalised
	Commercial	Accurate
"Feel"/ Experience	Fake & Artificial	Authentic & Real
Type of Customer	Fun-Seeker	Information Seeker
Sought Experience	Glamour & Illusion of Hollywood	Art & Craft of Filmmaking
"Cultural Capital"	Low-brow	High-brow