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Research Paper

The Great Escape:
The Cultural Impact of Media as a Vehicle for Travel

For many, both cinema and travel are synonymous with the idea of a great escape. The image that we construct for a country is often the sentimental image that has been created in our minds from narrations from hearsay, books, and from watching films that have been shot in the country, utilizing the natural and built environment, the history, certain types of residents etc., for the plot of the script. (Loumioti 359) Whether due to romanticized notions or otherwise, our travel destinations are often inspired by this sentimentality, "lead[ing] spectators to identify themselves among the heroes of [a] film and unconsciously want to experience a piece of the plot and thus seek to be in the corresponding environment" (360). With the expediency of modern travel, it's a small wonder that people yearn to visit the places that set the mood for movie magic. Film tourism is increasingly becoming both a popular industry and subject for academic study. Recent research demonstrates its massive potential for economic and socio-cultural impact. This paper attempts to contextualize and expound on the cultural implications surrounding film tourism, and answer the question: Whether across cultures or coastlines, how, if at all, does film tourism serve to facilitate positive cultural exchange through the celebration and appreciation of visual media?

"Films are not generally produced to with the intent to attract tourists to a destination, but tend to influence viewers indirectly as a background part of the movie's message," (Hudson et al 177). Because the film industry can reach out to a wider audience than promotional markets with

specific targets, it provides more of an opportunity to encourage travel to various locations. The system it creates is mutually beneficial because not only does it give tourists and movie enthusiasts the chance to experience film-inspired worlds, it serves to boost the economies of the host countries, which is especially advantageous for those that do not otherwise have the financial means to back or strengthen advertising campaigns from within. But how exactly does this system work? According to Hudson et al, film tourists are usually motived by one or more of three main pull factors – place (location, scenic attributes, landscape), personality (cast, characters, celebrity), and performance (plot, theme, genre) (179). In their case study, American, Canadian, and Spanish students viewed the film *The Motorcycle Diaries*, their perceptions of South America before and after the screening recorded for comparison.

The results indicated that place had the most influence among the three pull factors, but that for the majority of Hispanic/Latino participants, the change in image perception was largely negative. Hudson and his team believe these results demonstrate the theory of cultural distance, referring to the discrepancies between the participants' cultures and that of the host countries in question, noting a positive correlation between greater disparity and increased interest upon viewing the film (187). The study results correspond to the North American reaction towards the film after its release, with tourism to South America increasing by 30%, as tours inspired by Guevara's journey became available in more than just his home country of Argentina (188). In this case, we can safely conclude that *The Motorcycle Diaries* did indeed stimulate foreign interest in Latin American history, culture and politics, in part due to the cultural exchange it represents as an example of an international collaborative production. However, it is important to remember that the interest generated here was done so in a controlled environment, where the participants did not actually visit any part of Latin America, though they may have done outside

the context of the study. Our next examples take things a step further, exploring travel motivations and their impact as they are likely to occur in the real world.

What happens when we consider the fantasy genre, where history and culture are invented or redesigned to create entirely new worlds that cannot be fully replicated in ours? It is more than just the scenic aesthetics of a film that pique our interest in a place; sometimes it is the ethereal environments home to the supernatural and beyond our material, science-based world, those that capture our imaginations and never quite let go, that appeal to the idea of "wanderlust." Such films provide an escape from the mundane and the jaded attitudes we often develop towards our daily lives, allowing us to glimpse at impossible, dream-come-true worlds. While they must draw from our own history and cultures in order to remain relatable, they represent more of a spiritual journey in that we suspend our belief to indulge in the fantasy they create. In cases such as *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings,* some of this desire is likely rooted in childhood nostalgia and the idea of finding a sense of return in traveling to the sets and locations that helped create these uniquely stunning atmospheres. Some researchers believe that part of the attraction of these hugely successful franchises stems from the public fascination with historical or fantastical epics, more specifically medieval or medieval-rooted fiction, and indeed, both narratives in their own way mirror the English identity (Firnigl 28), which may share implicit significance with Western Imperialism as much as it does with globalization. The *Lord of the Rings* franchise exemplifies this notion, turning Peter Jackson's "digital retrieval of Tolkien's utopia into an object of international discord reviving old colonial conflicts" (Tzanelli 40). While tourism to New Zealand remains strong despite such concerns, the implications they foster only furthers the need to examine the issue of cultural ignorance in film tourism.

The idea that tourists can now "visit" Hogwarts or Middle Earth enchants many, but such examples are not the first to exploit a landscape for its apparent mythical or primeval qualities or filmic adaptability. Filmmakers have taken advantage of this all over the world, displacing cultures and historical events to represent narratives and time periods not native to the shooting location (10) – consider the historical dramas *Braveheart*, taking place in Scotland but filmed in Ireland, and *Casablanca*, shot almost entirely in studio. Marketers then extrapolate on this manufactured reality to attract tourists to the "destination image," (Loumioti 355) rather than the host country itself. As a result, cultural identity can become caricaturized to appeal and conform to the foreign gaze as perceived by both native and non-native marketers. Depending on an individual's motives for travel, this may or may not be of concern. But should it be, regardless? Do tourists have an obligation to respect the true legacy of the land they travel to and not only the legacy of the films that inspire their journey, or not? Rodanthi Tzanelli may be able to shed some light on the issue with a phenomenon she terms "heritage entropy," the cultural hybridity created through the embedding of the cinematic presentation of a location within the traditional heritage it represents. (42)

Where some might view said fusion as a means of perpetuating misrepresentation, others see it simply as a natural and positive element of socio-cultural transformation. In the second installment of the *LOTR* trilogy, one battle scene depicts several Uruk-hai and Orc extras performing the "haka," a traditional Maori war dance. Its inclusion in the final cut of the film could be viewed from either perspective regarding heritage entropy. Some would say that showcasing the dance is a great way to give audiences a taste of the Maori culture and inspire further learning, while others would argue it perpetuates the "fear of the Other" phenomenon because the dancers are portrayed as the enemy in the film, distancing non-Maori people from

the culture to a negative effect rather than Hudson's theory suggests. From the DVD bonus features and commentary, it is obvious that the cast and crew's relationship with the Maori people was extremely positive, and it is evident that they did their best to respect one another's heritage during and after filming (Jackson). While such ethical considerations deserve appreciation, the mentality may not be shared by more casual viewers still interested in touring "Middle Earth." Thus, the obligation factor in film tourism remains unclear, and the definition of what constitutes "positive cultural exchange" becomes blurred.

Part of the intention of the movie-watching and travel experiences is to provide a sense of escape, but it seems that in our search for the perfect getaway we sometimes get away from the culture that surrounds us once we've reached our destination. Blaming involved parties, whether filmmakers, tourism marketers, audiences, or tourists, is not the answer; action is. Devising marketing campaigns that showcase not only the country behind the cult attractions it offers, but respect for its people and culture, will likely help rectify this problem and separate the association of "an escape" with "not caring" (i.e. an entitlement to indifference/ignorance.) Though the main comparative focuses of this paper, *The Motorcycle Diaries* and *The Lord of the Rings*, differ vastly in genre, they can both be categorized as travel films. Continuing the analysis from this point, the next logical step would be to discuss films that do not incorporate travel as a theme for comparison with those that do in order to ascertain whether or not foreign films themselves (or other types of content) can stimulate interest in the cultures they represent and inspire trips to those countries. Although we cannot currently declare any conclusive evidence regarding this particular branch of film tourism, one fact remains clear: In exploring a setting whether on screen or in life, we explore ourselves, and both provide powerful opportunities for close and comprehensive evaluation.

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