Constructing the ‘cinematic tourist’
The ‘sign industry’ of The Lord of the Rings

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abstract The article examines the relationship between the culture (film) and tourist industries, suggesting that we reconsider the validity of their analytical differentiation. Contextually, it focuses on the generation of a new tourist industry in New Zealand after the global success of the cinematic ‘trilogy’ The Lord of the Rings (LOTR) (dir. Peter Jackson). It is argued that the LOTR tourist industry is characterized by simulation of a fantasy to such an extent, that we must reconsider the notion of ‘authenticity’ to examine this film-induced type of tourism. More insight is gained in this direction when we explore reactions of film viewers, and the way that commercial tourist providers use the films in the manufacturing of the tourist experience. The article also explores the response this global success instigated in New Zealand, making some observations on the relationship between cultural appropriation in tourist consumption, and cultural self-recognition.

Keywords authenticity Lord of the Rings sign value simulation tourism

Introduction

Although in the last three decades sociology has featured a proliferation of studies on film and tourist consumption, combined analyses of the fields are in their infancy. The primary aim of this article is precisely that: to provide a theoretical understanding of the relationship between the tourist and the culture (particularly film) industries, the impact this relationship has on consumption patterns and the cultures involved (mobilized, appropriated or re-invented) in this ‘enterprise’. The analytical model that I present is developed through extensive empirical research on the The Lord of the Rings (LOTR, 2001, 2002, 2003) cinematic trilogy and the tourist networks it generated in New Zealand; it is, therefore, full of contextual observations. Nevertheless, the substantive theoretical content proffers an alternative to sociological definitions of ‘authenticity’ in tourism, reconsidering thus the role that the tourist industry itself plays in the production and marketing of culture and identity.
The article has been divided into five parts. In the first two parts I situate my generic analytical model within current literature on tourism and consumption and present the case study in its specificity. In the third part I examine the reception of the LOTR films by a global audience. I explain that the way in which New Zealand landscape is ‘consumed’ by viewers is different from that we encounter in ecotourism, because it is governed by virtuality and simulation. In parts four and five I extend the argument, exploring the response of holiday providers and the New Zealanders themselves to this global success.

The Lord of the Rings cycle

The argument that the culture industry institutionalizes a production/consumption cycle in which literature and filmmaking cross and interact all the time is well developed in the domain of social sciences (Bordwell, 1988; Dudley, 1992: 421; McFarlane, 1996; Stam, 1992). Film adaptations of popular fiction have become the rule rather than the exception at the turn of the century. Whether one attributes this phenomenon to a lack of originality or not, it cannot be denied that especially Hollywood has shouldered the burden of a new ‘mission’: to further popularize novels or to reconfigure their mass consumption in new cultural milieux. Even small companies that aspire to ‘move up’ the production hierarchy have begun to appropriate these Hollywood practices to promote their own interests.

One of those was New Line, largely unknown before its breathtaking success that nowadays figures in every DVD home library. I refer to the LOTR trilogy that won more Oscars than any other ‘trilogy’ in the annals of cinematic history. New Line Cinema ‘gambled’ US$300 million on the three films and the talent of young director Peter Jackson, risking bankruptcy. The story had a happy ending, but an agonizing trajectory. Landmark in this trajectory proved to be the decision to film the story in Jackson’s native country, New Zealand, in order to control the costs. Jackson himself claimed that he was struck ‘by the similarities between New Zealand’s unspoilt terrain and Tolkien’s depiction of a ‘rugged Middle Earth’ (Guardian, 07/12/01). The comment shows that from its inception, the LOTR cinematic saga had started taking on a life of its own, blurring the boundaries between imaginary and real worlds. Interestingly, Jackson’s decision provoked the English fans of the novel, for reasons that deserve examination.

First, it is important to look at the original story, which was written by the British J.R.R. Tolkien (1892–1973), twice Professor of Anglo-Saxon (‘Old English’) at Oxford University (see Doughan, n.d.: para. 1–2). The story, which spans many ‘pre-historic’ centuries, explores the end of the ‘Middle Earth’ cultures of Elves, Dwarves, Orcs, Trolls and Hobbits (all Tolkien’s literary creations), and the accession of ‘Men’. It does so through Frodo Baggins’ and his friends’ heroic decision to challenge the plans of the newly-awakened ‘Dark Lord’ to rule Middle Earth, by destroying the powerful ring that will make him invincible. The story, which was originally published in three volumes (The Fellowship
of the Ring [1954], The Two Towers [England 1954, US 1955] and The Return of the King [1955]), captured the English imagination. At the time there were rumours that Tolkien derived inspiration from his WWII experience, but this was vociferously denied by the author in his foreword to the second edition of the novel (Tolkien, 1999: xvii). In this fantastic story Tolkien captures the life of a rural world that was slowly sinking into oblivion. To look at the LOTR through a sociological lens, one may claim that Tolkien provided a Weberian understanding of ‘disenchantment’, mirrored in the end of Hobbit and Elfish eras and the dawn of warfare and appropriation of natural resources – the beginning of rationalization in human history in short. But Tolkien’s work was influential in ways that the imaginative professor could not have anticipated: for example, in the 1960s the LOTR was happily adopted by an emerging ‘counter culture’ that politicized environmental concerns (implicit in Tolkien’s presentation of the war industry of the ‘Dark Lord’ and his ally, Saruman the White, that destroys the idyllic Shire and the universe of sentient trees). More importantly, however, the LOTR mythology became part of English cultural heritage. If we take seriously the National Geographic’s (n.d.) recent comment that the LOTR has provided a consistent and coherent narration of the English past (since English history stops abruptly in the era of Viking colonization), then we may be able to understand angry English responses to the filmic transposition of the story to New Zealand.

From the outset Peter Jackson tried to differentiate his films from the book. His relationship with the Tolkien Estate, which manages LOTR profits and interests, was restricted to an initial consultation regarding permission. Tolkien Estate distanced itself from the venture, allowing Jackson to innovate and ‘interpret’, as he stated in an interview with fans (see FortuneCity, 2000). He spent three years with screenwriter Phillipa Boyens and his wife adapting the novel and debating the visual presentation of Tolkien’s numerous characters. The aspiration was to create something that ‘felt much, much more real [than standard fantasy films]’ (Jackson, 2002). A quick look at the official LOTR website convinces us that Jackson achieved much more: not only is the site copyrighted by both New Line Productions and New Zealand Tourism, but it also hosts a number of computer games, toys and other items modelled on the cinematic representation of LOTR characters. The three films created a massive tourist industry in New Zealand (‘Home of Middle Earth’, as the website states), as well as a microcosm of consumption practices. The idea that the three films and new types of tourism development in the country are interrelated may seem to be obvious, but it is actually not. Its complexity demands close inspection and critical analysis. Let us consider then the connections between the culture (film) and tourist industries before we focus on the case study.

The ‘sign industry’: critical theory and Baudrillard

The term ‘culture industry’ was coined in sociological enquiry by the critical theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (Adorno, 1991; Adorno and
Horkheimer, 1993). Adorno and Horkheimer referred to the media industry that began to emerge after WWII, and which allegedly served to divert collective consciousness from actual social problems. The argument had a Marxist vein as it claimed that the culture industry was always controlled by the powerful to reproduce existing power structures in society, consolidating a single ideological vision. Adorno saw this manipulative pattern in all aspects of popular culture, claiming that there is a direct correspondence between the recipient of the culture industry’s messages (the film viewer, in our case) and the (general) consumer, because both lose their individual identity as well as the ability to understand the corroding function of mass culture. Adorno and Horkheimer suggested that the recipients of cinematic messages become consumers in *abstracto* – that is, consumers who have lost their particularity and have become interchangeable and quantifiable. As Kellner (1989) clarified, according to Adorno and Horkheimer’s version of critical theory this *reification* is omnipresent in capitalist societies. Quantifiability, interchangeability and abstraction may also point to what Marx described as a shift from use value (value as such, exemplified in the use of things) to the exchange value (value acquired in and through the act of exchange) in capitalist systems. This shift applies to the consumers themselves as well as to the products that they consume.

But exactly what do film viewers consume in the LOTR? How can we link their cinematic consumption patterns to the development of the New Zealand tourist industry and to LOTR consumption milieux in general? In films and film-induced tourist practices we never seem to consume specific objects, but clusters of signs: we are invited to buy holidays to New Zealand because the country signifies Middle Earth; we are asked to buy replicas of Elfish ears because they appeared on the mythical creatures of the movies; we are told to visit LOTR exhibitions because they are carriers of Tolkien’s stories. Tourist production is made possible through film consumption only because film produces cultural messages in the first place. The distinction between the culture and tourist industries ceases to be central, as they both participate in the circulation of what Jean Baudrillard (1973) has termed symbolic ‘sign values’. This observation allows us to transcend the classical Marxist distinction between production and consumption (see Lash and Urry, 1996: 123), and to observe that the two modes become identical in what I will term a *sign industry*. Central to the operative forces of this sign industry is a game of endless hermeneutics: by filmmakers (of novels), by audiences (of films) and by holiday providers (of audiences’ film readings). Even tourists engage during their holidays in collection and appropriation of signs (Urry, 1990: 12) that sometimes originate in films. Hermeneutics itself thus is a mode of both consumption and production, which promotes a type of capitalist exploitation that even Adorno and Horkheimer would not have anticipated. The vision is dystopian and rather deterministic, however, and does not take into account the resistance that those who are included in the signs may develop (for a critique see Hall and Jefferson, 1975). In the following sections I will suggest that initiatives in New Zealand point to an appropriation
of the LOTR sign industry for purposes of economic growth. But we must also bear in mind that film viewers and prospective tourists do not necessarily consume what is produced by the ‘sign industry’. As Dean MacCannell (2001) has recently suggested, actual tourists are often conscious of the fact that what they are offered is fake. Re-examining Urry’s understanding of the tourist as a subject that ‘gazes upon’ other cultures, MacCannell points out that tourists themselves can be ‘appropriated’ by the tourist industry for marketing purposes. It is precisely their self-recognition as manipulated (and not manipulative) subjects that makes them re-consider what holiday-makers offer them. This ‘second gaze’, to which I will also refer later in the article, enables them to enjoy their holidays in ways different from those suggested by tourist markets. Regrettably, this article does not include an analysis of actual LOTR tourists to New Zealand. Such a case study, which demands to be undertaken by a brave researcher, may reveal more about differences between virtual and actual tourism. But some of the ‘cinematic tourists’ that I explore (LOTR viewers) already support MacCannell’s argument with their critical attitudes towards the sign industry’s construction of the tourist experience.

The analysis that follows is based on a variety of materials. To look at consumption practices as sign-production in the viewing of the LOTR films I consulted over 7000 on-line reviews of the films from IMDB (the Internet Movie Database) and Amazon.com, the two most popular global film markets. They both provided me with a pool of film viewers from around the world who participate in sign-consumption and want to share ideas with other fans. Web-based fan sites are, in effect, virtual communities of consumption (Hills, 2002: 29; Kozinets, 1999), so important for this article. We do, however, need to consider the baggage of ethical and practical problems such research material generates for sociologists of popular culture. If fans/viewers belong to virtual communities, then their reviews may be influenced by the textual networks that their community produces. As Henry Jenkins has noted, fan reading is ‘a social process through which individual interpretations are shaped and reinforced with other readers … [expanding] the experience of the text [review] beyond its initial consumption’ (1992: 45). In addition, there are viewers and fans who worry more about the image that they project in their review and peer reaction, than about their own opinion (Brooker, 2003: 207). Others attempt through their review to claim the status of a ‘critic’ to assert their identity as ‘knowledgeable’ fans (Hills, 2002: 41–2). Moreover, the content of such web reviews often responds to the ephemeral concerns and impressions of the viewer, which may change significantly with time. In the final analysis, the problem with such research is that it forces the sociologist to reconstruct from traces of consumption/production experiences and practices. Issues of place and time cannot be meticulously examined. The actual actors of this article will never ‘play their part’ live for the ethnographer.

Bearing these limitations in mind, I used recurring tropes in the viewers’ readings to construct an interpretative framework for my article. I have found
out that these tropes often matched some marketing practices of the New Zealand tourist industry. More specifically, I use tropes I identified in the reviews to argue that the LOTR tourist development in and around New Zealand was based on an anticipation of the viewers’ cinematic reception of the films. I examine the type of experience that these holiday providers, most based in New Zealand, promise through brochures and other on-line materials. My aim is to offer a theoretical understanding of how the ‘authentic’ is constructed in these marketed ‘experiences’. In tandem, I look at other LOTR paraphernalia that complete the imagined journeys of LOTR fans. Finally, I investigate state-driven responses in New Zealand to the whole phenomenon, to shed light on the changes that the LOTR introduced in New Zealandish self-perceptions. Hence, the methodological approach comprises a combination of structuralism (with an examination of the deep structures of consumption) and hermeneutics (with an exploration of how signs are interpreted in the production/consumption chain).

Hyperreality and the tourist gaze

Chris Rojek has recently explained that the mythical element ‘is unavoidable in discussions of travel and tourism’ (1997: 52), as place is always a category socially constructed though an index of real and imagined references. The construction of New Zealand’s natural backdrop as Middle Earth in the LOTR films and film reviews is an excellent example of this process. It exemplifies Barthes’ (1993) understanding of myth-making as the process of destruction of old, and production of new, meanings. Numerous film viewers claimed that the cinematic scenery is located in a fantastic world (see for example IMDB, Annapolis, Maryland, 19/04/04) whereas others completely identified New Zealand’s ‘sheer beauty’ with Middle Earth (see for example IMDB, Annapolis, Maryland, 19/04/04, Yorktown, Virginia, 6/03/04). As one viewer put it, in the LOTR films we experience a…

…mystical journey though places that seem ripped off a fairy tale. Every location … is so detailed and rich, that it can lead some to believe that these locations actually exist – all locations are so fantastic, yet have an incredible historic undertone to them. (IMDB, Montreal, Canada, 23/03/04; see also Amazon, 07/12/01)

The identification of the historic and the fantastic allegedly originates in Tolkien, who presumably wanted his work ‘to match other great epics like the Iliad’ (IMDB, Stoke on Trent, England, 09/02/04). We note that viewers move from literature to history and then to cinematic technology, making them interchangeable terms. It may be worth recalling Michel de Certeau’s argument that history writing insists on the exposition of the ‘false’ and ‘error’ in the past and not with reality as such (1988: 200). Historians’ main interest is on the mythical elements of story-telling which are often granted arbitrarily with an objective, ‘real’, status in order to become meaningful carriers of a society’s past. More
correctly, for some viewers the New Zealand scenery is integrated into the cinematic narrative though what Lévi-Strauss (1964) termed ‘totemism’: it is transformed from nature into a cultural product that audiences consume, just as story-telling becomes socially meaningful history when it manages to conceal its fabulist origins.

The cinematic consumption of New Zealand incorporates some striking sensory experiences that we encounter in actual tourism. My reference to the senses does not take us back to an analysis of the tourist experience through universal aesthetic categories, as Harrison (2001, mobilising Porteous [1996]) has claimed; on the contrary, it examines senses in the specific context in which they operate. In general, some viewers’ comments are occulocentric, as they seek ways to visually encapsulate the LOTR background (see for example IMDB, 17/06/03; Amazon, UK, 31/12/02). Interestingly, ‘gazing’ (in John Urry’s [1990] terms), that is subjecting landscape to scrutiny and enjoying it as a tourist commodity, is often equated with the specific cinematic technologies that the makers of the LOTR use. As a viewer explains:

Certainly the most breathtaking scenes in the movie are the moments of patient observation, when the camera spans around and captures the beautiful settings of Middle Earth. (IMDB, Chicago, 11/04/04)

Such cinematic scenes are numerous, and involve long-distance shoots of mountains and valleys from helicopters, often with the story’s heroes in focus. It may not be an exaggeration to argue that especially the two Hobbits, Frodo Baggins (Elijah Wood) and Sam Gamgee (Sean Austin), whose trek to Mordor unfolds in the trilogy, enable viewers to enjoy the whole tourist experience: not just to see, but also to taste, touch, smell and actively partake in adventure (see Langkeek, 2001). Frodo and Sam are, in other words, virtual tourists with whom the viewer is invited to identify. Watching the film becomes thus more real than actual touring, as the following viewer claims:

For a student who lies by the suitcase and the airplane … as a way of life, it is a joy to have these films accessible to watch everywhere I go. And not because I carry my laptop and DVDs always, but because I find equally enthusiastic and cheerful fans who are willing to share the happy viewing with me, whether it be in Frankfurt, New York… and yes, even Auckland. (IMDB, Annapolis, Maryland, 19/04/04)

The viewer encapsulates dramatic changes on the global social map. The ‘community’ of LOTR fans in which he places himself is a highly fluid formation. It is not defined in relation to ‘belonging’, but in terms of commonality of temporary interests that some sociologists attribute to youth culture (see for example Bennett, 1999; Hetherington, 1998). Maffesoli’s (1996) analysis of tribalism (or ‘neotribalism’) applies here, not least because the viewer seems to traverse urban space and cultures in which social cohesion is under threat and new forms of socialization emerge. In this new social landscape the ‘traveller’ is the viewer and imagined journeys are inscribed onto the image-text of the film:
Hobbiton is perfect. The houses have flower patches and old fences, and roads look worn and made through decades of travel. And the Old Mill spins with the laziness of a quiet town. Every colour is vibrant and every moment looks as though it was taken from a picture book. (IMDB, Chicago, 11/04/04; Ottawa, Canada, 24/01/04)

‘Travel’ here becomes an extension of the ways in which LOTR fans index the fantastic. But it is the consumption of this fantastic world that never refers to reality as such that dominates films reviews. Currently, there is a battle on IMDB and Amazon.com around the artificiality of the movie images, which is quite revealing. On the one hand, there are viewers who welcome Computer Generated Images (CGI) because they enhance the novel’s ‘futuristic space setting’ (IMDB, Sweden, 03/01/04), enable the camera to play the role of the ‘Rough Guide to Middle Earth’, staying ‘wholly true to the original’s aesthetic’ (IMDB, UK, 23/04/03) and making Middle Earth ‘a real place’ (IMDB, Greece, 10/11/03, 11/04/03; IMDB, US 25/11/02; IMDB, Oakland, Canada, 24/10/02). For this group of viewers, New Zealand becomes a ‘footnote’ in the cinematic text: the role of the exotic landscape becomes auxiliary to the reproduction of a fantastic narrative. To quote another two IMDB commentators: ‘the landscape is foreign enough and without 21st century hindrances as to make it a believable substitute for Middle Earth’ (IMDB, Canada, 14/09/04) and give a ‘touch of mystery’ to the movie (IMDB, Wales, UK, 29/08/04). Given that the LOTR films are a fiction constructed upon fiction, reality as such disappears from the plane and is replaced by a universe of images that appear to be real but never refer back to a ‘real’ world (Baudrillard, 1998). Following this analytical path, we cannot speak anymore of cinematic representations (as they should always refer back to a reality they represent), but about simulation of a non-existing place. However, it is worth pointing out that even within the hyperreal regime of the LOTR, viewers recognize the use of representational modes of simulations (e.g. CGI of the Middle Earth). This point is further supported by almost 100 viewers from Amazon.com, who recommend the DVD version of the trilogy because of its extended ‘special effects’ documentary that deconstructs the New Zealand ‘digital experience’.

Another, smaller group of viewers, nevertheless, criticized the digital technology that the LOTR makers used to mediate Middle Earth imagery. This group is infuriated with the whole ‘cgi induced hypnosis’ of the films, which pays no attention to the plot and the idea of ‘a well-told story’ (IMDB, USA, 23/06/03). Here the literary (the novel) is separated from the pictorial (digitized images), although the fact that both have no ‘real’ referents remains the same. More critical was another viewer who clearly rejects the whole enterprise together with its simulatory value:

[These] movie[s] ... appeal to those of us who are sheltered, suburbanites or are urban individuals caught in an urban struggle and want to escape through some loser’s imagination.... That is the whole movie right there, nothing more, nothing less, overall it's
The viewer condemns the pathological aspects of LOTR consumption, highlighting its concealed links with modern lifestyle (see also Slater, 1997: 99). S/he claims, in effect, that the LOTR films offer escapism to their fans from the everyday and the mechanic, while at the same time they conceal the fact that the very experience is standardized, mechanical and inauthentic – a mere simulation of a simulation. Interestingly, s/he also situates this form of misrecognition of the artificial for real in urban milieux, providing thus another link between the ‘loss of the self’ in consumption and modern life in the developed world. I will argue, however, that a critique of LOTR simulation is already inherent in the comments of other viewers, who do not necessarily oppose CGI technology, but value the natural beauty of New Zealand as such. In these reviews Jackson is criticized for ‘going over the top’ with the aesthetic ‘enrichment’ of the landscape, making it artificial (IMDB, Australia, 01/10/04; London, England, 18/09/04). Others stress the ‘bucolic peaceful setting’ of the film (IMDB, 21/02/04; Maidenhead, Berkshire, 27/01/2004; IMDB, New York, 27/12/03). It is true that even here the reproduction of ‘natural’ authenticity (or nature as authentic) is mythologized (IMDB, Helsinki, Finland, 13/09/04), but this is, as I have already explained, a constitutive element of the tourist experience. In any case, such reactions to CGI technology further validate MacCannell’s suggestion that the ‘second gaze’ (of the tourist as manipulated) ‘is built into the structure gaze’ (of the tourist as a manipulator) (MacCannell, 2001: 31). To make the point specific: our virtual tourists know that they deal with ‘simulations’, even though some of them seem to enjoy them.

References to urban life make one suspect that the aestheticization of LOTR natural backdrops maintains its links with the romantic turn in travel and tourism during the 19th century. The need to ‘escape’ from an increasingly industrialized world, which offers no possibilities for the redemption of a unitary self but promotes fragmentation, rationalization and self-discipline, was part of the romantic project. The ‘authentic’ and the sublime merged in the age of romanticism, and were pursued though an interest in nature and an increasing valorization of peasant, agrarian ways of life (Stocking, 1987). Agrarian life acquired value within the context of nationalist movements in which the ‘folk’, came to represent the origins of the ‘nation’. For some viewers the Shire is seen as ‘a fairy vision of England’ (IMDB, Chicago, 21/01/03), for example. The idea of representing the ‘Old English’ way of life was thought to be implicit in Tolkien’s story. The little Hobbit houses with their gardens and the small Shire community occupied some space in English reviews of the LOTR trilogy (see for example IMDB, London, England, 20/11/04). Here, although the controversy was over the ‘appropriate’ simulation of a fantastic community, the idea of an authentic ‘way of living’ (which is British, not New Zealandish!) persists,
constructing a form of cultural resistance that originates in the very genealogy of travel and tourism.

Contrariwise, New Zealanders welcomed the films, re-discovering their country in the cinematic (natural) background. “The Fellowship of the Ring” is a film that makes me appreciate my home of New Zealand so much more. I always loved it, but the success of this film has changed New Zealand so much and made it a lot better known” said one (IMDB, 25/12/04). ‘Thanks to the film everyone can see the beauty of my country and one day I hope they have the chance to come here and fall in love with it as I have’, cunningly stated another New Zealander (IMDB, 28/04/03). We note that even in reviews the locals recognize the economic avenues that the films opened up. They were not the only ones: another viewer exclaims that ‘the New Zealand tourist board must have love[d] Peter Jackson!’ (IMDB, Dublin, 05/03/03). A second commentator feels tempted to visit the country, stating: ‘I never knew New Zealand was SO beautiful!! What a great advertisement this film makes for the director’s homeland!’ (IMDB, Northern California, 21/01/03). ‘It works as a very effective commercial for New Zealand tourism’, said a third (IMDB, 30/12/03) and a fourth viewer (IMDB, Australia, 25/12/01). ‘A bunch of New Zealand-born people [e.g. the makers of LOTR] eventually put the world at their feet’ (IMDB, 15/12/03), concludes another one. But, bearing in mind the virtual role that the vast majority of viewers attributed to New Zealand landscapes in the film, what kind of world did the makers of the LOTR actually create? In order to answer this question we will have to examine how the exploitative potential of the films was mobilized by the tourist industry.

Welcome to Orcland: from ‘staged authenticity’ to the authentic stage

New Zealand was largely unknown to the rest of the world before the mid 1800s, when it was colonized by the British (1840, treaty of Waitangi) (Belich, 1986). Independence came after just over a century and a half, when the demographic makeup of New Zealand had already changed: today, the country has approximately 3.6 million people, with only 15 percent of native, Maori stock. The rest of the population are of British and Northern European origins (Perkins and Thorns, 2001: 193). The New Zealand economy was traditionally agricultural. The country has only five urban enclaves with the Auckland area leading in numbers of residents (almost 1.5 million). Historically the country attracted adventurous European and Australian travellers (Watson, 1993). But internal mass tourism is situated in economic changes that took place from the 1960s regarding the regularization of paid holidays and urban development. The generation of ties between local and global capitalist economy also contributed to an influx of foreign tourists, notably eco-tourists from Japan, Taiwan, Korea and Germany (Pease and Simons, 1997). Jackson’s LOTR trilogy certainly complemented (or often ‘re-invented’) ecotourism, when a number of local and
international tourist providers began to offer holidays that were framed on the cinematic trilogy. The shift from an appreciation of wild nature, scenery and indigenous Maori culture (of which some New Zealanders are very proud and which often constitutes a tourist attraction after all) to tourist trajectories that follow those of the LOTR films exemplifies a breakdown of Dean MacCannell’s (1973) differentiation between front and back stages of the tourist experience.

In his groundbreaking essay MacCannell drew upon Goffman’s analysis of the performative nature of self-presentation in everyday life (1987[1959]: 114). Following Goffman’s identification of an ‘offstage’, a secret space in which the ‘self’ is prepared before it enters the public domain, MacCannell (1973: 596) explained that tourist destinations are divided by locals into two different regions: the front and the back. In the front region, the tourist watches a series of magical performances that the locals conjure for consumption by visiting ‘others’. These performances are, in effect, interpretations of tourist understandings of local authenticity (the ‘unique’ and ‘unspoiled’ qualities of alien cultures that we presumably want to experience during our holidays). What is concealed from the tourist-observer is the chaotic ‘backstage’ where the cultural masks are tried on and colourful costumes still hang on the rails. The ‘backstage’ of local experience is, in other words, the intimate space of a culture, which the tourist is not allowed to enter. Some sociologists have criticized MacCannell, because his assumption that something ‘authentic’ has been tragically lost fosters an ‘imperialist nostalgia’ (for a critique see Grang, 1997: 148–9). Cultures are not watertight compartments, on the contrary, they are always dialogically constructed through encounters with the ‘other’. Another comment, which will lead straight to my argument, is in order here: we cannot assume that the differentiation between ‘authentic’ and ‘staged’ is present in all tourist destinations. Indeed the LOTR tourist experience does not require a distinction between front and back regions, as the LOTR authentic is always-already the ‘staged’. In other words, the ‘authenticity’ that LOTR-related holidays offer is the ‘enhanced’ locales in which the story was filmed.

To illustrate the point, I will examine a number of holiday offers by commercial providers. First in the list is Air New Zealand, one of the major LOTR sponsors, which operates through Concorde International, an integrated travel company. Before the Wellington premiere of The Return of the King, the company unveiled another in a series of its themed aircrafts, featuring images of two major LOTR stars, Liv Tyler (Arwen) and Miranda Otto (Eowyn) (B&T, 29/04/04). At the same time it offered two special package deals to New Zealand with extended tours of the regions in which the motion pictures were filmed. The first package (‘Christchurch – Lord of the Rings Escape’) included ‘a full-day Lord of the Rings location tour at Geraldine, where Edoras was built for the filming of the movie’. The second one (‘Queenstown – Middle-Earth Explorer’) included visits to
Some of the locations used to film significant scenes in The Lord of the Rings … Nomad Safaris operates 4WD tours into the heart of New Zealand’s high country, which embodies Middle Earth brought to life in the films. (Concorde International, 03/02/04)

The company assumes that visitors are more interested in the places in which the LOTR films were staged, than in the natural beauties of the country. Positively Wellington Tourism, another tourist agency, has an even more detailed website with archived footage from the world premiere of the LOTR films and two detailed tour options. Significantly, it warns potential customers that ‘conservation and legal requirements mean no film sets from the Lord of the Rings remain. However, there is still a lot of Middle Earth to see’ and that ‘a Rover Rings or Flat Earth Tour will take you to the best former filming spots’ (Positively Wellington Tourism, 2003). The tours also include visits to some of the actors’ favourite places and cafes, as well as many LOTR sign-posted locations (especially related to the Shire ‘rural’ area). Again, we are invited to visit the ‘stage’, under the assumption that this is what we ‘look for’. Another holiday provider based in New Zealand, Hassle-free Holidays replaces such itineraries with photographic images of the glacier carved valleys that figure in the film, relating them to the story (Hassle-Free Holidays, n.d.). In addition to such visual attraction ‘posts’, Wanaka Sightseeing promises reviews of the scenes on the spots and ‘the opportunity to handle and try on items featured in the movies’ (Lord of the Rings Tours, n.d.). The archetypal consumer that is constructed by these holiday makers is not the ‘post-tourist’ (Urry, 1990) who tries to avoid the mechanical and the fake, but the visitor/viewer who indulges in merchandized fantasy: in simulacra.

More remarks need to be made on the authentic stage of the LOTR films in New Zealand. GINZ.com, a very well known on-line travel shop, suggests to prospective travellers a 4–6 or full 15-day tour though New Zealand to visit all the famous LOTR locations. The travel shop includes a map of the country which is pencilled with all the important LOTR markers – an excellent example of the ways in which the fantastic creates virtual journeys. The site also suggests that travellers to New Zealand obtain a copy of Ian Brodie’s The Lord of the Rings Location Guidebook (Harper Collins, 2002 exclusive edition; 2003 revised edition) which is already available globally through all the important on-line bookshops and other on-line commercial providers. The book is highly recommended by those readers who have already visited the country (see Review Centre, n.d.). Ian Brodie is curator at the New Zealand Fighter Pilots Museum in Wanaka (one of the LOTR cinematic locations) and he is currently advertising his work through the Museum’s official website. Not only is this companion a popular version of the middle-class oriented Rough Guides (with comments and maps on the films’ set locations, B&B comments etc …), but it is also an effective advertisement for the films, as it contains movie photographs, before-and-after CGI photos, and sections written by Peter Jackson, Alan Lee
The suggestion that the sign industry creates a self-referential system in which ideas and imagery circulate between the cinematic and tourist regimes seems to apply in this instance. Journeys mythically create the place that we visit, according to de Certeau (1986: 37), just as writing re-creates its object. In this LOTR companion the fantastic journey that we make is already pre-scheduled and lived through the films and the LOTR companion.

GINZ.com also invents an imaginary guide who takes us across LORT-land. The site invites us to ‘immerse in Mordor’, to ‘experience River Anduin’ and to ‘drift though the scenery’; it takes us to the home of the LOTR crews and makers, and offers us Harrington beer ‘brewed for Hobbiton and the scenes from the Prancing Pony’ (GINZ.com). Finally, it suggests a 45-minute ‘Middle-Earth helicopter Explorer Tour’, which will take us to all the inaccessible locations of the films. We do, indeed, deal with the creation and re-creation of the tourist gaze and the tourist himself as a whole person, who can smell, taste, gaze and participate in the LOTR adventure. This has created some very unusual problems for UK tourist providers, who are currently scratching their heads on how they can ‘provide accommodation at Bang End’ and how to explain to their customers that ‘the Mines of Moria live only in the director’s computer’ (Guardian, 06/01/02). How can it be otherwise, when we note that in GINZ.com holiday packs the tourist is identified with the little Hobbits, the virtual tourists of the films who walk through Hobbiton, sleep in the Prancing Pony and drink their special beer. Moreover, the helicopter tour places the visitor in the position of an omnipresent cameraman who encapsulates the spectacular LOTR world ‘from above’ – a technique that is constantly employed in the films.

The argument concerning the emergence of an ‘authentic stage’ in New Zealand has other ramifications. One of them is concerned with hiking as ‘adventure tourism’, an established type of tourism in New Zealand (Cloke and Perkins, 1998), which is less passive than helicopter sightseeing. This option cannot be identified as an organized (‘package’) holiday offer. However, it must be examined for three reasons: the first reason is that it takes us to the lower budget end of the holiday range. Yet, it is not necessarily the less ‘well off’ who prefer this option, but those most infatuated with the movies. The second reason, therefore, is that it allows us to gain interesting insights into the LOTR fan culture. And the third reason is that it highlights the impact of the LOTR trilogy on pre-existing holiday options in New Zealand.

Following the tenth death of a foreign mountain-climber, New Zealand Mountain Safety Council executive director Ian Nicholson complained about the marketing of the country’s mountainous areas as what he called ‘an adventure playground’ that ‘lures adventure seekers’. He warned that ‘more deaths are likely to follow’ if precautions are not taken by ‘Lord of the Rings’ would-be hikers (USA Today, 31/03/04). It must be stressed that adventure-seeking here is not intended as an ecotourist ritual that connects the visitor with the environment. The religious sublimation that may overwhelm Adler’s (1992: 408–13)
‘anchorite’ pilgrim, who looks for spiritual purity in the wilderness, or the ‘as-ceptic’ subject who rejects the homely comforts are more useful starting points. We should not forget that Tolkien’s story (the viewers of the film and Peter Jackson himself inform us) is that of a battle between good and evil. The undertaking of a dangerous venture by LOTR fans becomes thus a re-enactment of Frodo’s heroic journey to Mountain Doom – but with no ring to destroy and with a tragic twist in the story’s cinematic ending. On the one hand climbing transforms the LOTR viewers into mythical participants and their experience into myth-simulation; on the other hand, it re-dramatizes an experience of purification (from the ‘Dark Lord’, the source of evil). Fantasy and reality thus merge into a single vision.

A general point one can make about these developments is that the New Zealand LOTR tourist industry begins as a de-centralized and, by and large, private ‘enterprise’. It was simply that local and global commercial providers rushed to grasp the opportunity for profit making without worrying too much about state control – with the exception of natural preservation regulations that everybody, including the LOTR makers, had to respect. Following Lash and Urry (1987) one may argue that global LOTR tourism in New Zealand was rather ‘disorganized’, as it was characterized by independence of monopolies from state regulation and regional, rather than national growth initiatives (the Wellington and Christchurch examples are prominent). The ‘authentic stage’ of the LOTR can, therefore, be understood within the framework of a local battle for brand monopolies. Nowadays, countries are increasingly using brands to secure a ‘place’ in the global markets – or, alternatively, they produce their own brands to compete in global markets: Cuba is the place of ‘salsa dancing’; Ireland is the land of ‘Guinness’; and New Zealand has become ‘the home of Middle Earth’. The process often involves a number of factors and actors (state and private), as the case of New Zealand itself proves (Ryan, 2002). But we may also note here that there are signs that the networks of branding initiatives in New Zealand may change. As I will explain in the following section, the recognition of the LOTR films as part of New Zealand’s ‘legacy’ brought some state initiatives back to the picture.

‘National elf services’: organized capitalism as resistance

Thorns (1997) called for more attention to urban tourism in the last decade in New Zealand. According to Thorns, the need to compensate for an internal decline in manufacturing advanced the development of new urban attractions that are also available in other parts of the world (night clubs, casinos and museums) and which are ‘addressed’ to global urban tourists. The LOTR success contributed even more in this direction, as Guardian correspondent Matthew Brace informs us (Guardian, 05/09/03). The city of Wellington in particular has become a paradise for LOTR fans who want to visit all the places at which the film crew have been spotted in the past three years. There are clubs, cafes, restau-
rants and bars that are advertised as ‘the favourites’ of LOTR actors Elijah Wood, Ian McKellen, Billy Boyd, Liv Tyler and Viggo Mortensen. Alongside these attractions, Wellington boasts its theatres, galleries and its national museum, inviting LOTR fans to visit these places as well (there is a long list of Wellington ‘Places to Visit’ in Brace’s article).

Yet, until recently New Zealand’s urban space was not embedded in the LOTR experience; it was only after the launch of the Lord of the Rings Exhibition at Te Papa National Museum on 19 December 2002 (just before the New Zealand Premiere of The Two Towers) that this was achieved. Te Papa representatives had previously travelled to Los Angeles to discuss the possibility of an exhibition of LOTR costumes with New Line Cinemas. In fact it took them two years to prepare a colossal show, which embarked in 2003 on an international museum tour that will last until 2005 (The New Zealand Herald, 22/05/04). The exhibition opened in the Science Museum in London just before the release of the last instalment of the LOTR trilogy, The Return of the King. It admitted fans from all over Europe and sold more advance tickets than any previous exhibition at the Science Museum (see Talking Pictures 1, 2003). The exhibit showed in Singapore before visiting the Museum of Science, Boston in August 2004 (which announced ticket sales from 1 June 2004) and then Sydney (see Museum Of Science Boston website).

Before we move on to discuss this initiative, it is worth having a quick look at the content of the exhibition. It features film footage, props, costumes and artefacts from the films, including armoury, animatronics and miniatures. An interview with the cast (all dressed in the original costumes), the crew and the director also features amongst the exhibits. It is striking how much the experiential and interactive aspects are stressed, as first and foremost the exhibition enables visitors to enjoy and participate in some of the special film effects. Visitors are not there to be ‘instructed’ in history, but to ‘immerse’ themselves in popular culture (Featherstone, 1991: 24) – to touch, for example, Orc armoury. A section that deals with ‘scaling down’ (of the Hobbit-actors who are supposed to be smaller than humans) involves interviews with the film-makers, but also facilities for the visitors who want to be photographed in a film set (see Te Papa website for more). It is significant that demonstrations of special effects ‘including the combining of “real” and “digital” action and CGI’ (Talking Pictures 1, 2003) predominate. We do indeed deal with an ‘implosion’ (McLuhan, 1964) of reality – or, to be more precise, the LOTR digital becomes more ‘real’ than the ‘real’ (Baudrillard, 1983, 1998).

The museum exhibition has attracted various categories of what a Guardian reporter calls ‘races’ of fans (the ‘neotribes to which I refer in the second section of the article). She is particularly impressed with the ‘die-hards’: ‘those who know the book by heart, have bought special edition DVDs, audio tapes and artwork, camped out Wimbledon-style for the premieres […] spent an embarrassing amount of money on collector items’ (Guardian, 22/10/03). She is fascinated by the cries and shrieks of those who encounter for the first time the ‘shard of
Narsil’, the ‘phial of Galadriel’ and the ‘one ring’. She is also impressed by the type of ‘collectomania’ that possesses them: ‘Jim’ has bought a ‘Sting’ (Frodo’s sword) for 120 Euros from a website, Heleenman wears his stick-on Elf ears and two girls from Denmark are dressed as Elves. A party of Japanese teenagers walk out of the gift shop with ‘two life-sized cardboard cut-outs of Legolas and Aragorn’, explaining that ‘they will put them in their bathroom’ (*Guardian*, 22/10/03). There is no doubt that these items begin their life as consumption objects within the system of capitalist exchange. However, what they signify for LOTR fans *sacralizes* them, because it bestows upon them an emotional value that contributes to their de-commodification (Kopytoff, 1986; Weiner, 1992).

This parting of the commercial and the sacred/symbolic can be read as symptomatic of a general tension between consumer communities and markets that Kozinets (2001:81–5) has identified elsewhere. The idea of ‘sacralization’ applied even more to the original costumes and props of the LOTR films. As Peter Jackson stated, he will never put original items on auction and he would hate to see them on websites such as e-bay, as this would damage their ‘value’ (*Guardian*, 13/12/03).

From the outset, the problem Te Papa Museum encountered was the difficulty of claiming The Lord of the Rings enterprise as part of New Zealand’s ‘heritage’ in order to better exploit it for financial purposes. Even Peter Jackson despaired in a 2003 interview:

> I’m hoping to open a Lord of the Rings museum down there, which we can’t at the moment because of the Tolkien Estate. But I’m hopeful that it will happen. A lot of tourists come to New Zealand because of the films, but there’s nothing for them to see in terms of sets and so on. We’ve kept everything – every costume, every prop (in anticipation of a museum). (*Guardian*, 13/12/03)

The battle for securing the LOTR branding for New Zealand could be explained on a purely commercial basis. In this respect, it is worth pointing out that reaction boils under the surface in Britain against this commercial success that put New Zealand on the global map but ignored the English origins of the novel. Quite a few British on-line reviewers of the LOTR expressed discontent with the ‘repression’ of these origins, and some attacked ferociously Peter Jackson for ‘privileging’ his home country. We note then that British viewers and fans understand this battle over the LOTR rights as a national and cultural issue. This is not always the case: in a *Guardian* article (13/12/03) Jonathan Hewat, marketing and admissions manager for Stonyhurst College in Ribble Valley, complained that New Zealand will be taking all the glory when Tolkien allegedly had the green Lancashire in mind when he was writing the story. In a cunning entrepreneurial move, the *Guardian* reporter links the article to numerous suggestions for weekend breaks and holidays in Lancashire, replicating thus the commercial logic of the LOTR tourist industry. We may also read a tinge of competition in the London Film Critics’ Circle awards in February 2004: with fury, *The New Zealand Herald* reported that the final instalment of the
trilogy ‘was overlooked by 100 British critics’, despite the fact that it had won ‘four US Golden Globe Awards’ (12/02/04). With the Tolkien Estate retaining copyright of the novel and some commercial goods, global competition over the LOTR industry becomes even more fragmented and difficult.

The New Zealand state decided to take some initiative to protect commercial interests in the country. The stakes are high: the New Zealand Institute for Economic Research, an independent economic forecast group, predicted that ‘tourism will be the “star” of the country’s export sector in the next two years’, attributing this change to the LOTR success (CNN, 22/03/04). Between September 2002 and 2003, LOTR-induced foreign tourism earned NZ$6.4 billion (US$4.4 billion) and the amount has been growing since – something that pleased the Tourism New Zealand chief executive, George Hickton. Opinions converged behind one observation: New Zealand, a country that historically was seen as ‘the dullest place on earth with more sheep than people’ (Guardian, 06/01/02) attained a new identity as the exciting Middle Earth of Tolkien and Jackson. It is this identity that the New Zealand government decided to defend, appropriating thus the LOTR culture as New Zealand’s new heritage. State initiatives (announced by the Minster of Arts, Culture and Heritage, Helen Clark and Economic Development Minister Jim Anderton) involve a ‘$10 million annual funding boost for the NZ Film Commission, a review of the sector’s funding agencies and the establishment of an industry led Screen Council’ (Ministry of Economic Development, NZ, 10/11/03). Jim Anderton proudly added:

A strong screen production sector helps strengthen our sense of national identity, our sense of ourselves as New Zealanders and internationally helps differentiate New Zealand, its people and its products by promoting our very special New Zealand brand. (Ministry of Economic Development, NZ, 10/11/03)

So, the expansion and modernization of the country’s culture industry is not simply a response to global economic competition, but a long-term investment in New Zealand’s self perception and global image. To extend the argument, the organized form that capitalism may take in New Zealand may be seen as a rigorous response to the challenges of globalization – a form of state agency from ‘within’ the global capitalist structure, as it were. Another development, which might be placed within the same framework, is the launching of the first New Zealand The Lord of the Rings collector coins by the Royal Mint in conjunction with official licensee, New Zealand Post (Talking Pictures 2, 5 November 2003). National currency has always been a representational device for nation-states: even though these are commemorative coins, what is engraved on them traditionally tells us something about the history of the ‘nation’. Things come full circle here, as one ‘myth’ (of the LOTR) serves to promote and revise another (that of the ‘nation’). The initiative should not be read as an expression of nationalist consciousness, but as a mobilization of practices of nationalist self-promotion for economic returns. The ‘myth’ of the ‘nation’ that is implicit in this project is therefore a clever recourse to established understandings of
'cultural identity’ that may assist in New Zealand’s tourist growth. In such initiatives we may discern the ‘resourcefulness’ and ‘do-it-yourself attitude’ that academics recognized as part of the New Zealandish ‘character’ (see Tarrant, 1998, cited in Perkins and Thorns, 2001: 198). This is an image that stands poles apart from that of the dull sheep farmer, which plagued New Zealand for decades until the materialization of hyperreal consumption. Middle Earth is truly being relocated in the Antipodes, after all.

The dawn of New Zealand

In this study I offered some theoretical reflections on the relationship between the culture (especially film) and tourist industries with particular reference to the case of the LOTR and New Zealand tourism. I have suggested that both industries partake in the circulation of signs that secure the viewers’ and fans’ investment in the LOTR cinematic trilogy. More specifically, I have argued that the tourist industry mobilizes this sign investment in the films to present potential tourists with attractive ‘offers’. Because the whole tourist experience in New Zealand is based on the simulation of a fiction, we may reconsider the notion of ‘staged authenticity’ to grasp the new phenomenon. I suggest that the tourist marketization of New Zealand is regulated by a search for what I termed the ‘authentic stage’. This is expressed through the construction of an archetypal tourist who wants to visit the locations of the original film shoots. Despite the strong competition that New Zealanders face around the globe, they managed to employ the LOTR cultural image for the promotion of their economic interests, displaying an interest in investing in similar future enterprises.

The production of ‘authentic stages’ for tourist consumption poses an interesting question concerning the re-configuration of place and culture in tourism. In the LOTR sign industry ‘place’ and ‘culture’ are not exclusively attached to physical loci, but to fictional and virtual environments. To be more precise, ‘virtual tourism’ does not simply re-narrate ‘place’ and ‘culture’: it is the fictional, cinematic, narrative itself that becomes the destination for the ‘archetypal tourist’ of the LOTR sign industry. The narrative itself is always mediated through simulation, losing its initial attachment to physical places. There is a danger that tourist consumption of simulatory landscape and cultures will overwrite specific histories of actual places and cultures. However, I have noted that not every potential tourist-viewer is disposed to accept this attractive packaging. What remains to be seen in the case of New Zealand is whether the LOTR sign industry will replace traditional tourism or not. This study thus concludes with two questions that beg future research: do actual tourists fully embrace the LOTR vision of New Zealand, or do they re-discover (or recover!) the pre-LOTR ‘authenticity’ of local culture? And if this re-discovery is never fully achieved, what type of tourist narratives does the LOTR sign industry produce for them?
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Tzanelli Constructing the ‘cinematic tourist’
tourist studies 4:1


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