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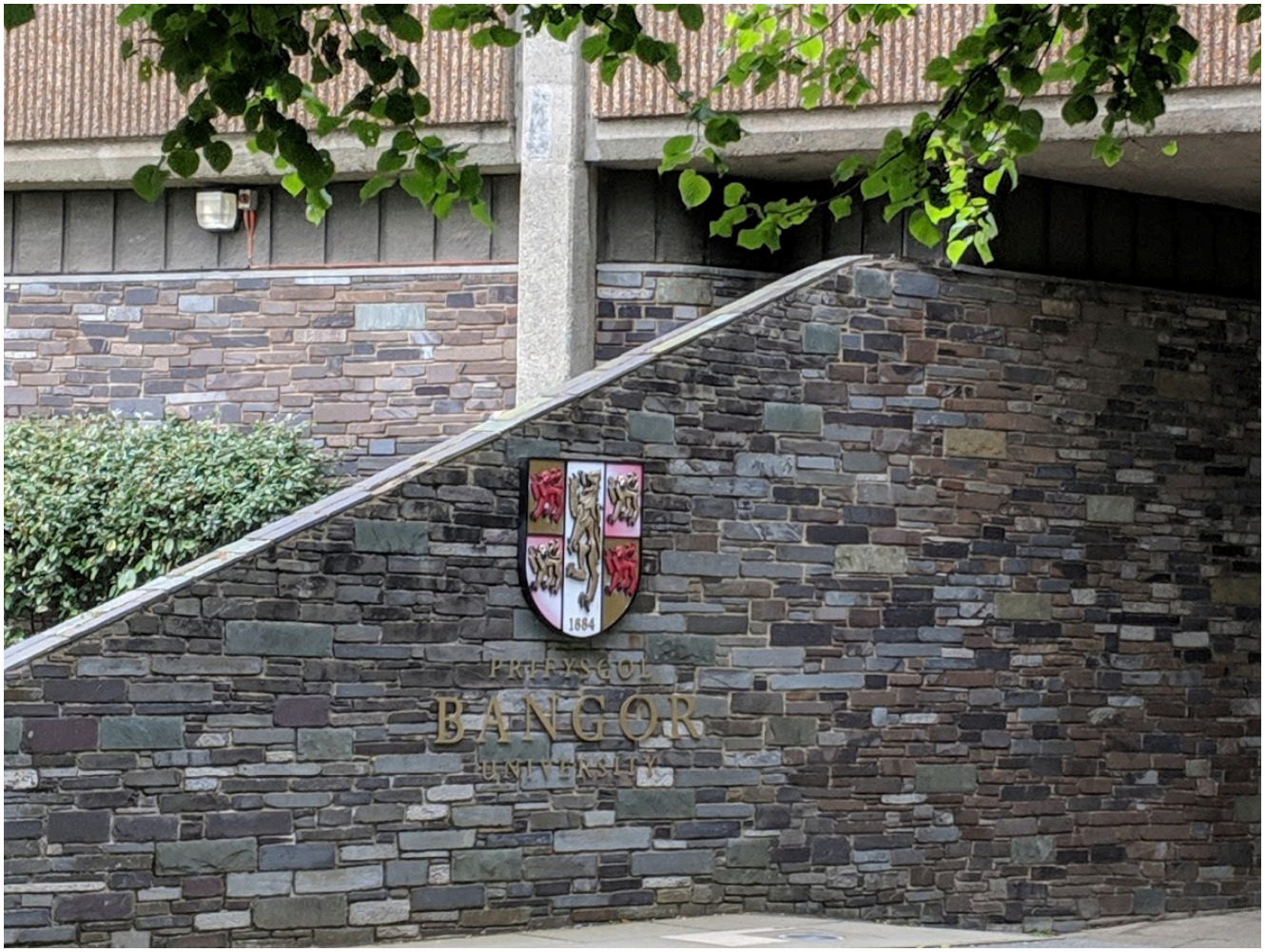

MeCCSA PGN 2019 Conference Issue

Media Evolution

Edited by Kate Stuart, Eoin Murray, Isabel Linton, and Jordan Glendenning

Image: Bangor University, by Bissie Anderson

MeCCSA Postgraduate Network 2019 Conference Special Issue: Media Evolution

KATE STUART, *Bangor University*

EOIN MURRAY, *Bangor University*

ISABEL LINTON, *Bangor University*

JORDAN GLENDENNING, *Bangor University*

Guest Editors

> 'Delivery technologies become obsolete and get replaced; media, on the other hand, **evolve**'. – (Jenkins, 2006, 13)

As technology continues to evolve, so too does media and our interactions with it. For creators, this may manifest in experiments with form, or an ability to adapt to suit a changing medium, while researchers may need to develop new skills and ways of understanding a phenomenon. Regardless of the creative developments chosen or methodologies applied, the continual evolution of media is a challenge new researchers meet in many innovative ways.

The theme of this edition of *Networking Knowledge* was drawn from the 2019 *MeCCSA PGN* conference held at Bangor University, Wales, UK. The attending scholars came from all areas of the discipline to discuss the evolution of media. Our opening keynote, Dr Melissa Kagen, discussed a number of case studies, such as *Smuggle Truck* (rebranded to the more acceptable *Snuggle Truck*) and *Bury Me My Love,* as an exploration of borders and the ways that users can evolve their gameplay as a form of protest. Later, Dr Lukasz Szulc expanded on his experiences of finding participants to engage in his study researching LGBTQ+ Polish citizens living in the UK, specifically gay men. Szulc discussed not only the methods he took to find participants but also the potentially ethical issues faced when working with minority participants. Some conference participants narrowed their focus to look at specific creators or creations, such as Arron Santry's examination of Sadie Benning's *A Place Colled Lovely1)* and the impact uploading their work to YouTube had on the piece itself. Others looked to their own practice, in considering the ethical and cultural implications of changing technology, the disruption in their fields of study, or the evolution of the researcher, as in Xin Cui's ethnographic exploration into film tourism. We were also lucky to welcome both Dr Kaitlynn Mendes and Dr Eben Muse, who helped us in our own evolution by talking about academic job hunting and academic publishing, thus developing our skills and understanding in ways that will help our progression as researchers. Our final keynote, Dr Crystal Abidin,

drew all of these perspectives together — from the evolution of the platform to the evolution of the researcher — to discuss her research on the social media platform *Tumblr*. This special edition of *Networking Knowledge* contains a snapshot of the knowledge exchanged at the Bangor conference, illustrating the varieties in media evolution, from the evolution of a researcher and the participants they observe, to the evolution of a platform like the photo sharing social network, *Instagram*.

The first paper in this special edition, "From home to the film location site, from a film audience to a film tourist", examines the evolution from film audience to film tourist. Xin Cui's ethnographic study builds upon their experience as both a researcher and participant visiting the *Hengdian World Studios*. Utilising this combination of observation and personal experience through the journey from home to the film studio, Cui discusses the strength of incorporating both ethnographic and autoethnographic methods in the study of film tourism as enabling a fuller immersion in the research and thus a greater understanding of the data collected. The article discusses the motivations and emotions associated with such a journey, with particular attention paid to the issue of authenticity within film tourism, mapping the participant's evolution from someone who only watches a film to someone who has been fully immersed in it.

Aaron Santry's paper, "'A Place Called Lovely1)': the HD Afterlife of Low-Res Feminist Video Art", draws the focus away from the researcher and instead examines a specific case study, exploring how Sadie Benning's *A Place Colled Lovely1)*, which was originally recorded on an analogue device (a *Fisher Price PXL-2000* camcorder), was altered by the process of being digitised and uploaded to sites such as *YouTube* and *Ubuweb*. The article evokes the evolution of enhancement, experience and the recipient. The change in the artefact due to its relocation online and the forced enhancement that resulted from this causes, in the author's own words, 'the sacrifice of sensorial quality for the sake of accessibility' (Santry, p.3). However, this change in platform does lead to something known as Haptic Visuality. The enhanced images forced upon the piece by *YouTube* show additional details the original recording device was unable to display in its primary form. These additional elements serve to embody the haptic, merging 'feminist materiality and strategies of embodied subjectification with an aesthetic and social critique of the conditions of image marginalisation', specifically within digital works. The overall piece provides insight into how evolving technology can serve to marginalise certain creative works, transforming a work's original queer, counter-hegemonic resistance in the process of hosting it in an accessible location.

Those who attended the Bangor conference demonstrated their ability to examine their specific fields and note how they had been affected by evolution in media, with the three keynote speakers being no exception. In March 2020, two members of the Bangor committee were able to speak on this further in an interview with Dr Crystal Abidin, where she reflected on her own evolution as a researcher, both personal and in practice, and provided insight into how current postgrads and ECRs may move forward. Drawing on her own experiences as a researcher in the Global South, Dr Abidin provides insight into how we, as researchers, can grow and learn from the subjects we explore and the people we work with; whether this is in

finding ways to support our fellow academics or in understanding when we need to take a step back from our research. As her final point suggests, media is ever-changing and as such, can evoke a sense of loss as everything is constantly updated and disrupted. Researching media allows us to capture these fleeting moments, to preserve and build understanding, and in doing so, bring meaning to the constant evolution.

And finally, this edition of *Networking Knowledge* also contains a review of *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* (Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin 2020). This book discusses *Instagram*, including how the platform has evolved based on both its users and its competition. The review provides an overview of the book, and its relevance to the evolution of media. In particular, the review highlights the way that the book itself has evolved further than many other academic texts through the addition of a dedicated *Instagram* account @polityinstabook, which allows the authors to expand the content of the book, continuing their conversation beyond the written page.

In conclusion, the Bangor conference served to stimulate discussion on the evolution of media from several areas of the discipline. Not only from the evolution of audience & recipient and enhancement & experience but also the evolution of academics themselves, studying these areas in new and innovative ways to constantly add to the discourse around media. As a crucial element of society, media will continue to evolve and change in ways that cannot be predicted, and promising new researchers will remain at the forefront of the subject area to provide this valuable and necessary insight. Everything from our perspective of borders, the ways in which we research, social media platforms, data-driven journalism, low-res art, big-data, feminism, news discourse, and many other areas remain crucial aspects of society for new researchers to tackle as media evolves.

The Bangor MeCCSA Team would like to thank MeCCSA PGN for giving us the opportunity to host this wonderful event, Bangor University for access to its facilities, and Dr Melissa Kagen, Dr Lukasz Szulc, Dr Crystal Abidin, Dr Eben Muse, and Dr Kaitlynn Mendes for their keynote speeches and workshops that stimulated much of the discussion between attendees, and ultimately added great value to the conference.

References

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Biographies

Eoin, Kate, Isabel, and Jordan are PhD researchers from Bangor University who formed the committee for the MeCCSA PGN Conference 2019. As a team, we research various areas in media: utopic manifestation in games, authorship and book culture, creating installations for transmedia texts, and how the web affects the writing of transmedia texts, respectively.

From home to the film location site, from a film audience to a film tourist

XIN CUI, *University of Liverpool*

ABSTRACT

A range of scholars in media studies suggest that film can enhance the awareness and appeal of the film locations because of its power of imagery (Macionis 2004; Beeton 2016; Riley and Van Doran 1992). Induced and motivated by film-related elements, audiences are no longer merely the recipients of film contents but also tourists who are going to visit the film-related sites. The journey of audiences visiting the film-related sites in person can be described as film-related tourism.

In this paper, the basic characteristics of film-related tourism will be introduced, demonstrating audiences' film journey to different types of film-related tourism sites, i.e., on-location film site and off-location film site (Beeton 2005). Then, it will use an off-location film tourism site *Hengdian World Studios* (HWS) in China as a case study to see audiences' travel experience as film tourists at the destination. To illustrate the touristic experience, this paper is going to apply the ethnography research method to show my personal film tour from home to the film sites in *HWS*, and thus examine the process of identity change from film audience to film tourist in the physical movement from home to the film location sites. Finally, authenticity issues, such as staged authenticity and existential authenticity, in film tours will be discussed in order to better understand audiences' on-site activities as well as the marketing strategies at the destination.

KEYWORDS

Film-related tourism, Hengdian World Studios, film tourist, travel motivation, authenticity

Introduction

The power of film on audience's behaviour as well as the resulting social change has long been discussed and debated among the scholars and experts, who work in the area of media and social science. Besides its influence on the development of a country's modern identity, image and cultural representations (Beeton 2016, 7), scholars contribute their work on the effects of film on audiences' behaviours from different perspectives, with some specifically focusing on the movement of film audiences from their local places, for example, home and local cinemas, to the film-related sites (Beeton 2016; Busby and Klug 2001; Macionis 2004; Connell 2012). A number of relevant definitions about this phenomenon have been introduced in previous

studies, and some of them depict and define such phenomenon as film tourism/film-induced tourism/film-related tourism, i.e. people visit a destination as a result of it is being featured in a moving image, such as film, TV drama, DVD, digital media, video games, and film studio theme park 'reality' (Hudson and Ritchie 2006, 256; Connell 2012, 1009; Beeton 2015, 9).

Over the last three decades, there has been a growing interest in research in the field of film tourism (Oviedo-García et al. 2014, 714). People are witnessing the boost of film-related tourism and the popularity of some film sites around the world, for example, *Harry Potter* film tour and *James Bond* film tours in UK[1], Hollywood film studio tours in US, *The Lord of the Rings* film tours in New Zealand, and *Hengdian World Studios* film tours in China. Therefore, it is worth realizing a long-standing fact that film audiences are no longer merely media-content recipients but they are also seeking out the places in person where they have previously seen in screen media, or involving film-related elements, in person. The journey from home to the film-related sites, on the one hand, can show their identity change to film tourists; on the other hand, it can indicate how people consider the authenticity issues in their film tour. In this regard, this article is going to demonstrate audiences' experience in *Hengdian World Studios* (*HWS*) in China to examine people's identity change and the authenticity issues in film-related tourism. It is able to contribute to the literature and research on audiences' touristic experience and activities in a film-related site, which may be utilized as the filming site, provide film-related activities and services, or represent film elements.

Film-related tourism

Background Information

Film-related tourism can be seen as a form of cultural tourism, which refers to people's movements with the purpose to satisfy their cultural needs to certain cultural attractions, including heritage sites, artistic and cultural manifestations, arts and drama outside their residential places (Richards 1996, 24; Jewell & McKinnon 2008, 153). From this perspective, people's movement to film-related attractions and sites for satisfying their needs relevant to film art and culture could be generally understood as film-related tourism. In addition, the term 'film', in this case, includes film (movie), television, and the representations of other screen media (Yen & Croy 2016, 1029). Hence, in film-related tourism studies, screen media in all its forms can have the potential to motivate and catalyse people's travel to the screen media sites. However, due to the complexity of people's understandings of the power of film and other screen media in motivating peoples' travel to film-related sites and the variety of people's film-related touristic experience, until now, the united name of this cultural tourism has not yet been agreed upon. We can see the names or terms to describe this in certain literature like 'film-

[1] A range of travel agents in UK, such as *Brit Move Tours* and *Visit London*, organise the *Harry Potter* bus or walking film tours in Oxford and *James Bond* bus or walking film tour in London for tourists to visit the locations and relevant sites of *Harry Potter* films and *James Bond* films, such as the Great Dining Hall at Christ Church (featured in *Harry Potte*r films) and Regent Street and Langham Hotel (featured in *James Bond* films).

induced tourism' (Beeton 2005; Macionis, 2004), 'movie-induced tourism' (Riley, 1994), 'film tourism' (Hudson & Ritchie 2006; Buchmann, et al 2010; Connell 2012, Yen & Croy 2013), 'film-motivated tourism' (Karpovich 2010), 'screen tourism' (Connell & Meyer 2009), 'film-related tourism' (Beeton 2011; Roberts 2016), and so on, though these phrases to some extent are used to depict and describe the common and general features of film-related tourism and could be interchangeably applied in most cases. In its most straightforward context, the broad definition of film-related tourism refers to the tourist activity induced by the viewing of moving images, including film, television, pre-recorded products, and digital media (Connell 2012, 1009), as well as video/computer games, film studio/theme park 'reality' experience, and holograms (Beeton 2015, 9).

In this article, considering the diversifications of screen media, film-related sites, and people's film tours, it will employ the term 'film-related tourism' to describe people's movements to the film-related sites. On the one hand, as Connell & Meyer (2009, 194-195) expound, the term 'film' in film tourism serves to somewhat downplay the significance of TV dramas and shows in motivating tourism to the location sites, thus the term 'film-related' to some extent is trying to emphasize the importance of film in this cultural tourism as well as reduce the ambiguity of the inclusion of all screen media. On the other hand, in addition to filming sites or film location sites at the destination, for film tourists, other film-related elements, services, activities, events and facilities can also attract them to visit, for instance, film festivals, exhibitions, museums, workshops, theme parks, studios, souvenir stores, and so on. Beeton (2005, 180) suggests that the one-off film-themed events, such as film premieres and film festivals, can also generate tourism at the destination city. Therefore, the term 'film-related tourism' is also capable of comprehensively describing people's various types of film tour to the various types of film-related site.

On-location film site and off-location film site

Based on the features of different film-related attractions, Beeton (2005) systematically proposes two significant forms of film site - on-location film site and off-location film site. Generally, on-location film site refers to the existing buildings, built landscapes, and natural landscapes, for example, castles, hotels, main streets, and mountains (Beeton 2005, 210). Off-location film site refers to the constructed set, studio site (separate from the naturally occurring setting of the moving image), and the representation of natural landscape, produced by computer imaging and other techniques, for instance, film studio sound stages, external facades constructed at a studio site, and vistas (Beeton 2005). In a word, on-location film-related tourism to a large extent refers to film tourists' journeys to the natural and existing locations, places, and landscapes represented in films, while off-location film-related tourism mainly refers to film tourists' journeys to the man-made and constructed film settings and sites, which are deliberately designed and built for film making and tourists' visitation.

In the category of on-location film-related tourism, Beeton (2016, 10) further characterizes several sub-categories of it, for example, 'film tourism pilgrimage' and 'nostalgic film tourism',

which respectively characterize tourists' film tours as "visiting sites of film in order to 'pay homage' to the film" and 'visiting film locations that represent another era'. Cases of film tourism pilgrimage sites and nostalgic film tourism sites are relatively common and widespread around all over the world, since some of the destinations mark these sites as the film-related locations to tourists by using indicators and plaques, such as the *Hilary and Jackie* film-site plaque in Brithdir Mawr, a Grade II-listed farmhouse near the small village of Cilcain in Flintshire (Roberts 2016, 33), and some of these sites are frequently represented in films and other screen media, such as St George's Hall in Liverpool.

Liverpool is the UK's second most filmed city after London, and many of famous and popular sites have been used as the locations for hundreds of screen media works (Roberts 2016, 34). St George's Hall could be one of the most well-known architectures for media audiences and media works, like *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (David Yates 2016), and *Sherlock Holmes* (ITV Granada 1984) even used it to stand in for the locations in other cities and in other eras, such as New York city in the 1920s and London city in the late Victorian era. Due to the popularity of these screen media works, St George's Hall also becomes a popular on-location film tourism site, or more specifically, a film tourism pilgrimage site as well as a nostalgic film tourism site, for audiences who are willing to pay homage to these media works in Liverpool and who are interested in visiting the locations that represent different eras in these film-related works. To meet film tourists' needs to visit the film location, in 2019, Visit Liverpool also organized a 'St George's Hall – Film Tour' from April to May for people to better understand the connections between film and television works and this location. In their ticket-booking website of this film tour, Visit Liverpool (n.d) introduces:

> "St George's Hall has created a fantastic new film and TV tour. The Hall is the original Liverpool film set, being the first place in Liverpool ever to be filmed, and as such has since played host to many memorable moments in film and TV. The film and TV tour offers the perfect opportunity to stand on the same film locations as some of the best-known actors and presenters in the world. From *Brookside* to *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, from *Coca Cola*, *Coronation Street* to *Peaky Blinders*, St George's Hall has provided the perfect backdrop for them all." (Visit Liverpool, n.d)

From this we can see that on the one hand, organising film tours and providing opportunities for people to be closer to their favourite celebrities in film and TV industries through standing at the same positions in St George's Hall to some extent indicate and reflect the local pride that the site has been featured in so many famous screen media works. On the other hand, this kind of film tour is also able to satisfy audiences' curiosity to the real heritage building, which may be a little bit different from the representations of it in media works. Moreover, in addition to using the heritage building as a filming site in films and television programmes, employing St George's Hall as the on-location film site for a short term reflects the popularity of film-related tourism in Liverpool.

In the category of off-location film-related tourism, based on the diverse features of film sites and touristic activities, Beeton (2016, 11) also divides off-location film sites into several forms,

such as 'film studio tours', 'film studio theme park', 'museum', 'movie premieres', 'film festivals' and 'TV travel programmes'. Still, we can see many cases of off-location film tourism and off-location film sites around the world, such as film theme park tour in Disneyland (California, Orlando, Paris, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Shanghai), film studio tour in Hollywood, and film studio theme park tour in *Hengdian World Studios*. In this article, I will focus on the case of film audiences' travel to *Hengdian World Studios* in China through using the ethnographic research approach to narrate my personal experience from home to the film-related sites, from a film audience to a film tourist, as well as to show my observation of other local tourists.

Ethnographic research methods

As Andrews, Jimura and Dixon (2019, 1) state, tourism study is a part of anthropology cannon as it is able to yield many insights about subjects at the heart of anthropological enquiry, such as the nature of the social world, questions of identity, host-guest relationships, and development and sociality. Hence, in researching on the study of tourism, the use of relevant anthropologic research methods is essential. Ethnography is the method closely associated with the academic discipline of social anthropology (Andrews, Jimura and Dixon 2019, 1). Focusing on fieldworks, ethnographic approaches connect the researchers with the people and objects at the fields. According to Andrews, Jimura and Dixon (2019, 3), the use of ethnographic research methods allow researchers to spend a certain period of time living among the people of the community under study, suggesting the idea that this will generate a deeper relationship with the local community members and a more in-depth understanding of their social life. To some degree, the core factors in conducting ethnography are 'being there' and 'doing there'. Hence, the use of ethnographic research methods, such as autoethnography and participant (tourist) observation, is therefore appropriate for understanding film audiences' touristic activities at the film-related sites.

Autoethnography can be considered as a critical method of inquiry (Noy 2007, 143), where the researchers' personal experience becomes part of the study itself. In tourism research, Beeton (2015, 30-31) expounds that autoethnography could be a powerful method because the researcher is immersed in the study and the more internal and personal reactions can be researched. In tourism research, researchers can also be a tourist to experience the tourism products and touristic activities in person, and apply the personal experience as the research data to manifest tourists' travel motivations, feelings, activities, emotions, and reflections as well as the characteristics of the destinations. Noy (2007, 143) suggests that 'autoethnography is a way of inquiry that is wholeheartedly – morally, emotionally and ideologically – committed to the subject of the research, namely to people and to their complex, intricate lives and experience'. In this respect, through conducting autoethnography, the research result is inevitably relatively subjective and privileges the researcher's personal emotions and experience. Even so, in addition to laying stress on the narrative of touristic experience on the locations, the autoethnographic approach can also be used to describe and depict the internal

ideas of the researchers, such as memories, feelings, travel motivations, and retrospections. In film tourism research, such a method is compelling in addressing a tourist's whole touristic experience, especially the real changes of feelings, the peaks and troughs in his/her mood, and the psychological behaviours during the travel to the film sites. In fact, in the process of applying autoethnography, researchers examine themselves as the 'data' (Beeton 2016, xxi). Also, due to the specialty of its discursive written mode, the use of autoethnography can communicate and reconstruct the experience in vivid, lively and sometimes painful ways (Noy 2007), which may reinforce the interestingness or authenticity of the research results and cultivate a particular type of readership.

Besides, as Mitchell (2010, cited in Andrews, Jimura and Dixon 2019, 3) indicates, when ethnographers arrive at the 'fields', they may employ a variety of methods to collect data, participant observation being one of the best-known ethnographic methods. In addition to narrating researchers' journey stories by using autoethnography, the use of participant observation (tourist observation) can broaden the depiction and analysis of tourists' activities and behaviours through showing different people's activities and conversations in the locations. In this respect, I, as the ethnographer at the film-related sites, am both also the participant and the observer, since I am one of the members of the tourist community to experience the film tour and observe other members' film tours simultaneously at the destination. In other words, both my personal experience and my observation of other people's experience become the research data for comprehending film audiences' movement from home to the film-related sites and analysing their identity change to film tourists.

Audiences' film touristic experience in Hengdian World Studios

Hengdian World Studios

Located in the Hengdian town, Dongyang City, Zhejiang Province in China, *Hengdian World Studios* (*HWS*), is now the largest outdoor film studio in the world, with more than ten shooting bases and studios built for standing in for different styles of Chinese traditional buildings, architectures, and gardens and representing Chinese people's life in the past dynasties, such as Qin, Song, Ming and Qing Dynasties as well as the city of Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Shanghai in the early modern era around the 1920s and 1930s [Figure 1-6]. Since the first film studio *Guangzhou Street & Hong Kong Street* built in 1996 for making the film *The Opium War* (Jin Xie 1997), until now, more than 60,000 films and dramas were finished there, including a range of popular national and international film works, such as *The Emperor and the Assassin* (Kaige Chen 1998), *Hero* (Yimou Zhang 2001), *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* (Rob Cohen 2008), and *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flam* (Hark Tsui 2010), as well as a large amount of television dramas such as *Chinese Paladin* (Taiwanese TV network 2005), *Scarlet Heart* (Hunan Television 2011), *The Journey of Flower* (Hunan Television 2015), and *Ashes of Love* (Jiangsu Television 2018).

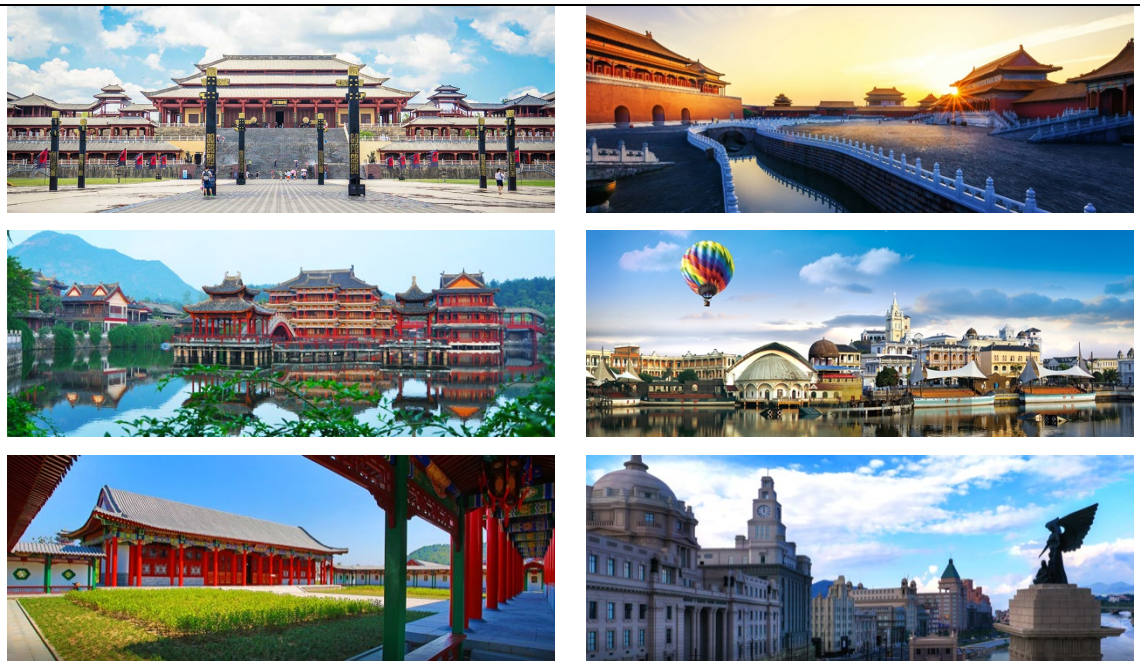

Figure 1-6: Film studios in Hengdian World Studios (Hengdian World Studios n.d)

It is also classified as the highest-level Tourist Attractions by China National Tourism Administration, and more than 2 million tourists visit Hengdian and *HWS* each year. In each studio, it has a specific theme to represent people's lives and landmarks in a specific period, and some of the studios are the simulations of the real heritage sites, for example, the film studio 'Palace of Ming & Qing Dynasties' is an actual-size simulation (1:1) of the Forbidden City in Beijing. Studios like 'Palace of Emperor Qin' and 'Qing Ming Shang He Tu' are designed and built according to the official archaeological and historical resources and information for authentically reconstructing the buildings and environments and representing the life of civilians and royals in past Chinese dynasties. Due to the disappearance or the destruction of some real heritage sites in the wars or in some other incidents, the simulations in the studios also become unique physical objects for people to know the history in China, for example, 'New Yuan Ming Palace' in *HWS* is the to-scale simulation and reconstruction of the 'Old Summer Palace' in Beijing, which was destroyed in Second Opium War around the 1840s, only broken walls and debris left. Hence, functioning as an outdoor film studio and a film theme park, *HWS* is open to both media crews and tourists for filming works and visitation.

Experience in Hengdian World Studios

In May 2018, induced by some popular film-related works I previously have seen at home or in the cinema, and attracted by the local film-related elements in *HWS*, I left from home to take a film studio theme park tour in Hengdian for 3 days. During the film tour, I visited four film studios/shooting bases, including 'Palace of Ming & Qing Dynasties' film studio, 'Palace of Emperor Qin' film studio, 'Qing Ming Shang He Tu' film studio, and 'Guangzhou Street & Hong Kong Street' film studio, which respectively represent buildings, streets, and rooms in Ming & Qing Dynasties (1368-1644, 1636-1912), Qin Dynasty (211-206 BC), Song Dynasty (960-1279), and early modern China (1910-1930s). The key reason I decide to visit them is

that my favourite film-related works, such as *Red Cliff* (John Woo 2008), *Painted Skin* (Gordon Chan 2008), *Empresses in the Palace* (Anhui TV Station 2011), and *The Legend of Mi Yue* (Shanghai Dragon TV 2015), use the settings and backdrops in these studios for narrating their stories. In addition, another local attractive element is the special film-related touristic activity that tourists are allowed to observe the on-going work of film crews in *HWS*, even though the filming site will be fenced up in case of disturbances by tourists.

The on-site activities I, as a film tourist, did most in *HWS* were site searching and image capturing. Induced by a series of film works, when I arrived at the film studios, I could not wait to seek out the places I have seen in some film-related works and figure out the 'authenticity' of the places. Through standing in the same places and doing the same poses with the film characters, the enjoyable memory of the film stories and characters' performance floods back in these locations. Also, for some film audiences, including me, when we arrived at the film locations, which are represented in our familiar and favourite film-related works, we will spontaneously and inevitably try to figure out if the real locations are as same as the fictional locations in the media works, and compare the differences between the real ones and the fictional ones. In the visitation to 'Palace of Emperor Qin' film studio, I noticed that one of the on-site tourists (audiences) excitedly said: "Look, this palace is the location in which Mi Yue (the female character in the television drama *The Legend of Mi Yue*) as the Queen Mother in Qin dynasty was standing to make the eve-of-battle speech for her soldiers! It is almost as same as the fictional location in this television drama, despite the lack of some special decoration".

I also had similar feelings when I found some popular film locations in 'Palace of Ming & Qing Dynasty' film studio, where in film-related works plays as the Forbidden City's body double, which means a place stands in for another place through its selected parts, buildings and views (Paasonen 2015, 7), and I am aware that colours of the buildings actually are not bright and vivid as the filmic representations of them in media works, which may edit the screen images in the post-production stage. Even so, in addition to Couldry's (2000, 83) description "a sense of completion: 'to finally see everything'", in the film locations, I also generated another sense of completion: to finally experience everything, through seeing the buildings and following the characters' footsteps to visit the attractions in person. This kind of experience, for me, is finished by capturing the images of these locations. Roesch (2009, 159) expounds that taking images in the locations can be considered as the 'shot re-recreation', which means a person places himself/herself in the frame to re-create and represent the position of the film character. It seems that standing in the same locations, doing the same poses, and framing the location and me in one photo, is a continuous process to 'become' the character. Through observing and talking with other on-site film tourists/audiences, I found some of them also prefer to dress in the same costume as film characters and imitate their actions and facial expressions in the same place where the filmic event taken place. For them, dressing the same costume in the locations can make them be closer to the film stories and film characters since these audiences/tourists believe they are performing as a certain character of the media work.

Furthermore, I fortunately got a chance to observe the on-going work of a film crew. It makes me feel excited to see how a film being made and how actors prepare their performance before acting. In my personal experience, the sense of self-fulfilment filled in my mind when I was close to the film-making sites, found the 'myth' of the film-making process, and understood the 'truth' and backstage of film performances. The sense of excitement can exactly show the evolution of audiences that we are no longer purely satisfied with the film contents represented on the media screens but we are also willing to know more about the behind-the-scenes stories and the backstage of film performance. In addition to the observation of film crews' work, some of the tourists in *HWS* also signed up for playing as the short-term extra actors in the film works, possibly to understand more knowledge about film making.

In reality, people's movement from home to *HWS* to some extent results in the identity change of them from film audiences to film tourists, and their on-site activities also change in relation to how they consider the authenticity issues in a film tour. In the next two sections, I will specifically discuss the features of people's identity change and their thoughts on the authenticity issues of film-related tourism.

Identity change from film audiences to film tourists

As Busby and Klug (2001, 316) indicate, when audiences are seeking the sites seen in films, they become film tourists. Namely, in the movement from home to film-related sites, audiences' identity is also changed to tourists, since they are not just 'watching' the sites on screens but they are going to 'see' and 'experience' the sites in the real locations. Hence, when discussing audiences' movement to the film-related sites, it is also worth considering the questions about the change of their identity to film tourists, for example, 'what motivates them to visit the film-related sites as film tourists?'. Such a question is actually relevant to the discussion of people's pre-trip motivations in film-related tourism.

For analysing people's pre-trip motivations, Dann (1977) suggests the 'pull' and 'push' motivational factor theory, and 'pull' factors and 'push' factors here respectively refer to the tangible features of a destination and the intangible and intrinsic desires of tourists. In other words, people can be motivated by the local natural environment, buildings, facilities, humans, services, activities and other tangible elements (pull factors) as well as the internal ideas, wishes, needs and other intangible desires (push factors) to visit a specific destination. Stemming from these, in film-related tourism, pull factors could therefore refer to all tangible film-related elements at the destination. Taking up Dann's theory (1977), Macionis (2004, 90) builds a '3P' framework in the category of pull factor, suggesting the concepts of 'place', 'performance' and 'personality' in the investigation of the specific attributes of film-related tourism motivation. Place as a possible pull factor in this framework involves film location attributes, scenery, landscapes, cultural origin, social origin and activity origin. Performance relates to the filmic and fictional contents, such as storyline, plot, theme and genre, which draws people to the sites. Personality refers to human elements in a film, including film characters and the casts of them (Macionis 2004). Hence, for film audiences, some or all of

these are able to motivate them to join in a film tour and move to the film-related sites. Moreover, in terms of push motivational factors in film-related tourism, based on some scholars previous' works (Dann 1977; Riley and Doren 1990; Macionis 2004; Meng and Tung 2016), they can be concluded as the issues about fantasy, escapism, search for self-identity, and partaking in a vicarious experience and educated tour, which are all related to the intangible desires of film audiences. As a result, it can be seen that the characteristics of local tangible elements at the destination work alongside audiences' personal intangible travel desires to motivate film tourists to visit the film-related sites.

In the case of film-related tourism in *HWS*, the local tangible film-related elements, such as the filming sites, film museum, film souvenir stores, film-themed live performance, film crews, actors/actresses, and props, can be understood as the pull factors, which play certain roles in motivating and stimulating film audiences' travel to Hengdian. With regards to the push factors, different people may have different travel desires, so the push factors could be various and comprehensive. For me, the push motivational factors can be seen as curiosity regarding the backstage of screen works and performances as well as the needs to partake in a vicarious experience of film characters in the environment full of film-related elements, and these factors also to a large extent result in my main on-site touristic activities, i.e., searching for the film locations, observing on-going works of film crews, and standing in the same places as film characters do in the media works and then taking photos. Similarly, for other audiences, their on-site activities are highly influenced by their push motivational factors. At the rest area in *HWS*, one on-site tourist told me that she is a superfan of the television drama *Empresses in the Palace* (Anhui TV Station 2011), which mainly uses the sites in 'Palace of Ming & Qing Dynasties' film studio as its settings and backdrops, so she desires to seek out these location sites, take photos of them, and dress the same costumes of some female characters in this TV drama in order to have a deep connection with the dramatic story and the characters. From this we can see that in the same film-related sites, audiences could have different touristic activities. In other words, when audiences arrive in the film locations, their on-site activities more or less depend on their push motivational factors.

As Chhabra (2010, 798) suggests, previous research in tourism studies has established that tourists are not homogeneous. Indeed, people's different pre-trip motivations and on-site activities can lead them to become different types of tourist. It follows that in the movement from home to the film-related sites, audiences' identity is changing to different types of film tourists, considering their different motivations, demands, and consumption patterns (Cohen 1979; 1988; Pearce 1995, cited in Lovell & Bull 2018, 5). Based on these, a range of scholars design and propose the film tourist typology for categorising different types of film tourists, for example, Macionis' film tourist typology (2004) of *specific film tourist*, *general film tourist*, and *serendipitous film tourist*. For Macionis (2004, 87), specific film tourist refers to the people who actively search for the places that they have seen in moving images; general film tourist refers to the people "who are not specifically drawn to a film location but who participate in film tourism activities while at a destination"; serendipitous film tourist refers to the people

who are incidentally present in the film location site. Therefore, the term 'film tourist' can be regarded as a general concept to define audiences' identity in the film-related sites.

Staged authenticity and existential authenticity in the film-related sites

The debate about the authenticity issues in tourism research and studies has never stopped. One of the early discussions about it is Boorstin's arguments of the 'pseudo-event' (1964), which can be understood as a kind of ambiguous truth, and tourism is the prime example of the pseudo-event. For Boorstin (1964;1972), tourists in essence do not care if the touristic experience is authentic or not, and they travel to the destination, feel good in inauthentic contrived attractions, and place themselves in the 'environment bubble' (cited in Beeton 2016, 214; Urry & Larsen 2011, 7-8). In contrast, MacCanell (1973, 597) insists that "touristic consciousness is motivated by its desire for authentic experiences […]', namely, rather than overlook the authenticity, tourists are motivated by a quest for authenticity in their travel experience. In fact, the debate about whether tourists care about authenticity or not in tourism studies is long-standing but with no clear conclusion, perhaps because tourists are a heterogeneous group with various motivations and ideas about authenticity issues in their touristic experience. As tourism research continues, regarding authenticity in people's touristic experience and in tourism destinations, more and more scholars and experts further research on the different notions and concepts of authenticity in tourism, such as 'staged authenticity' (MacCannell 1973; Moscardo & Pearce 1986; Lovell & Bull 2018) and 'existential authenticity' (Berger 1973; Wang 1996; Brown 1996; Pons 2003; Lovell & Bull 2018), which are also applicable to the research of film audiences' travel to the film-related sites (film-related tourism).

Staged Authenticity

In tourism research, MacCannell (1973, 597) suggests that touristic space can be called "a stage set, a tourist setting, or simply a set depending on how purposefully worked up for tourists the display is". From the perspective of a destination, the touristic site is regarded as a kind of commercial product, which is elaborately designed and laid out by the host for selling to tourists. Hence, in some ways what tourists see and experience in the touristic space is actually staged and, for MacCannell (1973), tourists who search for authenticity in their travel to a site can be the consumers of staged authenticity, which refers to the staging of local elements in order to create an impression of authenticity for the visitors (cited in Lovell & Bull 2018, 5; Gotham 2010, 612). Based on Goffman's (1959) frontstage and backstage theory in performance, MacCannell (1973, 598) further points out the categorization of six stages in the discussion of staged authenticity (Form 1). For demonstrating the realm of social performance, Goffman (1959) generally divides the social area into two regions: front-stage region and back-stage region, which respectively refer to the place where accentuated facts make an individual's appearance and the other place "where the suppressed facts make an appearance" (Goffman 1959, 118). In a word, a front-stage region is the place for the visitors, while a back-stage region is the place only for the host. However, MacCannel (1973) suggests that the touristic space

cannot simply be categorised into front-stage and back-stage regions but into several more specific stages. In some film-related tourism destinations, including *Hengdian World Studios*, some of the stages indeed exist with certain functions for certain purposes.

Stage 1	Goffman's front region: the kind of social space tourists attempt to overcome, or to get behind.
Stage 2	A touristic front region that has been decorated to appear, in some of its particulars, like a back region: a seafood restaurant with a fish net hanging on the wall; a meat counter in a supermarket with three- dimensional plastic replicas of cheeses and bolognas hanging against the wall. Functionally, this stage (two) is entirely a front region, and it always has been, but it is cosmetically decorated with reminders of back-region activities: mementos, not taken seriously, called "atmosphere."
Stage 3	A front region that is totally organized to look like a back region: simulations of moon walks for television audiences; the live shows above sex shops in Berlin where the customer can pay to watch interracial couples copulating according to his own specific instructions. This is a problematical stage because the better the simulation, the more difficult it is to distinguish it from stage 4.
Stage 4	A back region that is open to outsiders: magazine exposés of the private doings of famous personages; official revelations of the details of secret diplomatic negotiations. It is the open characteristic that distinguishes these especially touristic settings (stages 3 and 4) from other back regions; access to most non-touristic back regions is somewhat restricted
Stage 5	A back region that may be cleaned up or altered a bit because tourists are permitted an occasional glimpse in: Erving Goffman's kitchen, factory, ship, and orchestra rehearsal cases; news leaks
Stage 6	Goffman's back region: the kind of social space that motivates touristic consciousness.

Form 1: MacCannell's categorisation of six stages in staged authenticity (1973, 598)

Film studios like *HWS*, can be seen as a huge back region for film audiences/tourists, in which people can see the settings, backdrops, and the real locations of the film scenes or sequences as well as know more information behind the scenes. According to MacCannell's (1973, 598) categorization of six touristic stages, sites and attractions in *Hengdian World Studios* can be classified as the environment open to the tourists but which is actually considered a back-stage region (Stage 4), the environment with some limited access to tourists (Stage 5), and the absolute back region where all tourists are not allowed to enter (Stage 6). Specifically, film sites and attractions in *HWS* which have been represented in screen media works for general audiences can be regarded as the back-stage region where audiences at home or in the cinema almost have no chance to see the full view of these places, while for film tourists, these places to some extent are the open areas, because they are legally allowed to enter in and visit the

touristic sites in the studios. When audiences become film tourists in *HWS*, they may 'gullibly' believe they are visiting the back stages of the media works, however these places are actually the staged back regions, where the host intentionally operates for the commercial profits. In addition, there are still some other places, such as the on-going filming sites, in *HWS* where tourists have very limited access to visit and wander around. Through fencing up the filming sites, media crews clearly separate the spaces into front stage, where tourists can stand in and observe their on-going work, and the back-stage, where is the working places only for the crews. Also, inevitably, *HWS* needs the space for preparing their staged performance, and these places are the real back region, where only studio staff have the access to enter, such as film directors' working areas, prop rooms of film crews, and the restaurant kitchens in the studios.

As MacCannell (1973, 597) expounds, "it is always possible that what is taken to be entry into a back region is really entry into a front region that has been totally set up in advance for touristic visitation". Indeed, in the case of *HWS*, the back region of film works is designed as a kind of staged back region, functioning as the front region. What the studios represent and exhibit to audiences and tourists are set up as a regular touristic and theme park rides, however the real back regions in the studios are still invisible and inaccessible. In other words, for the audiences, who move from home to the film-related sites, the authenticity they can find in the destination is the staged authenticity that is well-designed by the studios. The authenticity here is 'invented' and manufactured represented as a commercial touristic product (Bruner 1991, 241; MacCannell 1973, 106, cited in Lovell & Bull 2018, 5), provided for the audiences who look forward to seeing and experiencing the back region of screen media works and searching for the authenticity of sites related to these media works.

Existential Authenticity

In fact, not all tourists fail to realize that what they see in the destination could be a staged performance, but some of them may achieve an existential authentic experience through visiting the sites and doing the touristic activities. Rather than search for the objective authenticity, which highlights the sense of genuineness or realness of artifacts or events (Steiner & Reisinger 2005, 299), some of the tourists are willing to seek out the existential authenticity in their travel, which refers to a state of being in which people are true to themselves (Berger 1973, cited in Steiner & Reisinger 2005, 301). Namely, instead of looking for the authenticity of sites and attractions, tourists here are looking for the authenticity of themselves. Oriented by activities, in film-related tourism, existential authenticity is capable of helping film tourists to establish or extend their identity, and build the enjoyable connections with the film-related sites or the characters showed in screen media (Wang 1996; Rittichainuwat et al 2018). In the process of visiting the film-related sites and doing the film-related activities, audiences in the destination gradually reinforce their identity as film tourists and believe what they see and experience is authentic, even though some may be aware of the staged authenticity in the destination. In this regard, we can say audiences are the judges to determine whether their film tour is authentic or not, for example, in the case of *HWS*, existential authenticity indeed occurs

in tourists' on-site experience when they find the sites they visit meet their pre-trip expectations, and they will thus believe their travel in the destination is existential authentic.

For the destination in film-related tourism, designing the film-related touristic activities and managing film-related site images could be able to catalyse the creation of film tourists' existential authenticity. In the case of *HWS*, the services and activities like film characters' costume rental services, the express photos of a film scene service, and extra actor services, can further help film audiences and tourists to be immersed in the on-site film-related environment and to feel enjoyment in the film-related sites, and thus have an existential authentic experience in their film tour. Catalysing tourists' existential authenticity can be also seen as a kind of marketing target in some film-related sites, which leads people to actively create a sense of authenticity rather than force them to be convinced of the so-called 'authenticity', intentionally designed by the host for commercial profit.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the movement of a specific group of audiences from their home to film-related sites. Undoubtedly, film has the power to attract audiences to visit the film sites and create a destination's tourist expectation, and the journey people go to the film-related sites, which are utilized as the filming sites, involve screen media elements, provide film-related services and activities, or represent film settings, can be understood as the film-related tourism. Through using an off-location film sites *Hengdian World Studios* as the example, this paper described film audiences' pre-trip motivations and on-site activities and feelings to see the reasons that people travel to the film-related sites and what they would do in the film-related sites. In the process of moving from home to film-related sites, people's identity is inevitably changed from audiences to tourists by doing a series of touristic activities. Also, in the discussion of staged authenticity and existential authenticity in film-related tourism research, *HWS* can be seen as a case that the places film tourists see, visit and experience in the destination is the staged region and purposefully designed for tourist consumption. Nevertheless, audiences in the film-related sites do not passively accept the staged authenticity, purposefully set up by the host, but instead they can actively have an existential authentic experience, through achieving a state of being in which they are true to themselves.

The use of ethnographic research methods, including autoethnography and participant observation, in the case of *HWS* is the foundation of this research project. Not only narrating the touristic experience in *HWS*, the use of ethnography can also demonstrate much more characteristics of film-related tourism in the destination, such as the impacts of film-related tourism on local residents' life. Moreover, due to the variety of ethnography, other relevant research methods, such as face-to-face interviews and questionnaires, can also be utilised to collect the data from different aspects and perspectives. Hence, in the further stages of the research on the film-related tourism in *HWS*, it is worthwhile to see the integration of multiple ethnographic research methods for enriching the research contents and results.

Filmography

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Ashes of Love., 2018. [TV Programme] Jiangsu Television

Chinese Paladin., 2005. [TV Programme] Taiwanese TV network

Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flam., 2010. [film] Directed by Hark Tsui. China: Huayi Brothers

Empresses in the Palace., 2011. [TV Programme]. Anhui TV Station

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them., 2016. [film] Directed by D. Yates. US: Warner Bros. Pictures.

Hero., 2002. [film] Directed by Yimou Zhang. China: Beijing New Picture Film.

Scarlet Heart., 2011. [TV Programme] Hunan Television

Sherlock Holmes., 1984. [TV programme] ITV Granada

The Emperor and the Assassin., 1998. [film] Directed by Kaige Chen. US: Sony Pictures Classics

The Journey of Flower., 2015. [TV Programme] Hunan Television

The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor., 2008. [film] US: Universal Pictures.

The Opium War., 1997. [film] Directed by J. Xie. Hong Kong China: Golden Harvest.

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Biography

Xin Cui is a PhD candidate at the Department of Communication and Media, University of Liverpool. In her PhD research project, she is looking at the impacts of film-related tourism on the destination city's place image, identity and history through using a Chinese town Hengdian as the case. Her primary research interests are in film-related tourism studies and the impacts of media tourism.

Email: Xin.Cui@liverpool.ac.uk

"*A Place Colled Lovely1)*": The HD Afterlife of Low-Res Feminist Video Art

ARRON SANTRY, *Goldsmiths, University of London*

ABSTRACT

The digitisation and networked distribution of the PixelVision videos of Sadie Benning presents a challenge to aesthetico-protocological hegemonies that determine the value of digital videos. Subverting their status as 'poor images', the uploaded copies of Benning's works restage their queer, counter-hegemonic resistance via the controls of a new digital context. This paper calls for a re-examination of traditional attitudes towards the digitisation of 'analogue' moving image artworks and proposes that compression standards and their artifacts may be recuperated as part of a queer feminist-materialist artistic strategy.

KEYWORDS

MOVING IMAGE, DIGITISATION, VIDEO ART, HAPTIC CINEMA, SADIE BENNING

Introduction

Discussions of the digitisation of analogue moving image artworks often attend to the reconciliation of two conflicting beliefs about the digital. On one hand, it is argued that the process of digitisation degrades analogue artworks by stripping them of their materiality and medium specificity and redeploying them in a digital *dispositif* that lacks the prosthetic support of the black box or the white cube. On the other hand, it is acknowledged that digitisation promises the liberation of the artwork from elitist or exclusive institutional confines—that digitisation expands audience engagement via the broadening of conditions of access.[1] Erika Balsom (2017) has explored the tension between these two claims in terms of digitally bootlegging experimental film and the ethical questions of the unauthorised circulation of moving image artworks. So here, in looking at a particular upload of Sadie Benning's 1992 video *A Place Called Lovely*, I want to consider an alternative to these positions, one that appreciates the liberating potential of digitisation while at the same time grounding this digitality in the material and protocological conditions that are the very basis of this newfound liberty.

Protocol

[1] In a discussion held at the Oberhausen Film Festival, 2013, the heads of LUX, Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), and the Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre (CFMDC) agreed that access was the most important opportunity afforded to such organisations by digitisation (Cook et al., 2014).

The utopian promise of art's digitisation is both structured and undermined by its protocological determination. A computer protocol, understood here as defined by Alexander Galloway, is "a set of recommendations and rules that outline specific technical standards" (2004, 6), "the principle of organization native to computers in distributed networks" (2004, 3). The moving image does not circulate 'freely' within networks as an immaterial presence but is at all times subject to protocological controls governing its encoding/decoding and communicability within the network. As digital video files, moving image artworks are transformed by compression algorithms that reduce their information content (and, as a result, file size and streamibility) with the aim of increasing their viability on platforms that depend upon the instantaneous availability of content. Adrian Mackenzie summarises that the function of codecs—the software that encodes and decodes a digital data stream—is to reorganise relations "within and between images and sounds, between things and experience" (2006, 2). The dematerialized artwork has its internal organisation reconfigured— re-standardised—so that it is no longer structured by the physical limitations of its storage media but by the techniques of compression that facilitate its digital existence and accessibility.

In nearly all cases, and certainly in the case of the video I want to discuss here, video codecs deploy 'lossy' compression algorithms that reduce the amount of information necessary to display a video with the least possible damage to its audio-visual fidelity. Mackenzie acknowledges that this process is transformative, but concludes that "the advent of realtime digital networked media afforded by codecs does not constitute a radical re-ordering of the content of video" (2006, 5), making the argument that there is a phenomenological or experiential congruency between digital video and its analogue counterparts, such that the images retain their identity despite the processes of encoding and decoding. Codecs prioritise that which is "most perceptually relevant to human eyes and ears" (Mackenzie 2006, 3) based on an idealised human standard, redistributing the colour, contrast, sharpness, and so on, according to predefined limits rather than intrinsic media qualities. So, while there is a self-evident truth to the claim that works in principle retain their identity across media, the deep digital reorganisation of the content of an artwork is rarely without perceptual consequences, which in turn may produce unexpected conceptual consequences.

As Sean Cubitt has noted, the MPEG-4 codec, an amalgam of standards and features including the H.264 standard, widely used by platforms including *YouTube*, appears at first glance as "an apolitical aesthetic vehicle" (2014, 247) of which nothing is expected or demanded but efficiency. Even to the extent that this belief holds true among the committees responsible for producing these standards, video codecs and compression standards play a role in sustaining a politico-aesthetic hierarchy premised on the supremacy of high definition, high performance, and high fidelity that determines both what is seen and how it is judged and valued (even prior to the algorithmic sorting that co-determines a video's visibility). The codecs and compression standards that facilitate the near-instantaneous transmission of digital video are a necessary condition for the protocological hegemony of HD. Image resolution is valorised as an indicator of aesthetic quality and desirability. Screen size and an image clarity premised upon photographic realism, qualities long-associated in cinema and television with wealth or costliness and techno-social 'progress', retain in this digital *dispositif* a contentious and ill-defined affinity with the beautiful and the good. It is in the context of their challenge to this aesthetic hegemony that Benning's videos (both in their analogue and digital instances) are here reconsidered.

PixelVision

Sadie Benning began making videos in 1989, at the age of fifteen, after having been given a *Fisher Price* PXL-2000 camcorder (often referred to as *PixelVision*). The camera recorded black-and-white images and sound onto the two channels of standard audio cassette tapes, with each tape holding about eleven minutes of footage in total. To decrease the required bandwidth for storing video, it produced frames at a very low resolution (120x90 pixels) and scanned the image sensor only fifteen times per second. To compensate for the small image size, a thick black border was added to the frame, preventing pixel loss to overscanning. The result was a highly distinctive visual style, characterised as grainy, blurry, dream-like and primitive in comparison to the images of high-end camcorders and television. The camera was released in 1987 and marketed as a toy for children, but its $179 price tag (the equivalent of over $400 or £300 today) meant it found little success in this market. However, the distinctive aesthetic and relatively low cost compared to high grade camera equipment made it an attractive option for a generation of artists and filmmakers for whom professional video technology was not available or simply not desired. Benning, who produced work using her *PixelVision* camera from 1989-1995, is the most well-known of these artists. Her works, largely made in the safety of her own bedroom, confront the anxieties of adolescence and her burgeoning queerness in a fragmentary, diaristic way that draws on popular media while rejecting the conventions of mainstream television and cinema. The marked 'Otherness' of the *PixelVision* image in relation to the hegemony of commercial image production served as a potent formal vehicle through which Benning was able to express and experiment with her queer adolescent experience.

The question of the value of images has long been a concern of Benning's. In a 1993 interview she remarked: "when I started making videotapes, I didn't realize their importance"; "I'd been taught all my life that because I was young, a woman, and queer, what I thought and felt was not valuable, so I was embarrassed by my creations"; "I don't see my images on TV. That means I'm not valuable. That means my sexuality doesn't sell beer" (Yablonsky 1993, 20). Decades prior to the digitisation and upload of her work to platforms like *YouTube* and *Ubuweb*, Benning perceived the devaluation of her work according to a representative regime which marginalised images that did not offer themselves up for exploitation. At this time, her work circulated almost exclusively though film festivals and institutional screenings through which it accrued some measure of cultural capital, but now, as digitally distributed video files, her works sit directly alongside conventionally valuable images on a platform which capitalises upon spectatorial attention itself. To watch Benning's work on *YouTube* is to participate in a system of exploitation in which the artworks exist primarily as content appropriated to extract data, command attention and generate advertising revenue.[2]

In relation to the increasingly high-resolution videos that flood *YouTube*, Benning's work—unlawfully uploaded and unauthorised, hidden from copyright claims behind a misspelt title[3] and safeguarded from deletion by its algorithmic invisibility—is typical of what Hito Steyerl has called the poor image, "a copy in motion": "an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution" (2012, 32). In Steyerl's account, the poor image is liberated from the cinema

[2] Exemplary descriptions of this new mode of extraction and exploitation, generally seen as a new variation of capitalism, are found in Srnicek (2017), Wark (2019), and Zuboff (2015, 2018).

[3] This misspelt title, "A Place Colled Lovely1)", gives its title to this essay. That the title remains easily recognised by human users of *YouTube*, and that the video is discoverable by contextually-informed searches perhaps highlights the limitations of an algorithmic approach to copyright enforcement, though the video's persistence on the platform is probably better understood as a signal of moving image distributors' inability to devote time and financial resources to the fight against illegitimate circulation of their works.

(or the archive), yet the result is the sacrifice of sensorial quality for the sake of accessibility. The poor image is degraded by its acceleration through digital networks, a process that mocks the promise of digital technology. Within the hierarchy of digital video dominated by crystal-clear high-resolution images, the poor image is marginalised—but poor images also reveal "the conditions of their marginalization, the constellation of social forces leading to their online circulation as poor images" (38). In Benning's case, the socio-aesthetic processes of exclusion and delegitimation that were the context for her *PixelVision* videos are reanimated as a set of protocols, software standards, and algorithmic decisions that determine the conditions of the work's visibility, whether on corporate content platforms, curated online archives, or peer-to-peer file sharing networks.

However, Benning's *PixelVision* works and their uploaded copies deviate from Steyerl's account of the poor image in an important way. Rather than degraded copies of 'superior' originals, the digital videos that circulate online or on DVD are encoded and decoded at a resolution higher than their native 120x90. Even at 144p, the lowest resolution at which Benning's *A Place Called Lovely* is viewable on *YouTube*, there is a significant transformation of the image which is particularly evident in the smooth blurring of the once-jagged edges of objects, especially those in motion. Where the sensor of the *PixelVision* camcorder was scanned at a mere 15Hz, producing a discrete image fifteen times per second, MPEG-4 videos, subject to lossy compression algorithms, coordinate the movement of pixels between keyframes at a much higher rate. The result is an image that does not flicker from one image to the next, but is in constant motion, displayed with constant luminosity. Compression artifacts, media distortions like fuzziness or blockiness caused by lossy compression, are thus common, ironically distorting Benning's work by artificially and arbitrarily subjecting the video to processes which find themselves tasked with compensating for a lack of information, rather than a surfeit. The work's sound, too, is subject to lossy compression, involving the removal of certain frequencies (outside the standardised range of human hearing) and of sounds below a certain decibel threshold, and the introduction of audio distortions especially noticeable at the lowest resolutions.

These digital effects also serve to add a new layer to what Laura Marks has called haptic visuality, "a term contrasted to optical visuality, [that] draws from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinaesthetics": "Haptic cinema does not invite identification with a figure so much as it encourages a bodily relationship between the viewer and the video image. Thus, it is not proper to speak of the object of a haptic look so much as to speak of a dynamic subjectivity between looker and image" (1998, 332). For Marks, Benning's work was already characteristic of a haptic cinema, with the unfocusable, low-resolution *PixelVision* camera producing images which exhibit an "uncanny loss of proportion in which big things slip beyond the horizon of [...] awareness while small events are arenas for a universe of feeling" (1998, 331). This erotic dimension of haptic video is, for Marks, the result of the viewer's look being pushed back to the surface of the image, which they respond to as to another body; "to the screen as another skin" (1998, 333). The compression artifacts present in digitised versions of Benning's video emphasise both the image's surface and its materiality; block boundary artifacts and 'mosquito noise', the shimmering aura that appears around objects as a result of pixel motion prediction, make sensible the algorithmic and protocological functions to which the image is subject. Rather than seeing these features as degradations of the image, their presence in this digitised version of Benning's work amounts to their recuperation as part of "the haptic as a feminist visual strategy", expressing a disaffection with hegemonic optical visuality and inviting not the deep gaze of cinema but the "caressing look" of haptic video (1998, 337-338). This mode of perception is

intimately connected to embodied ways of knowing, attending to the deep connection between (non-visual) sense and memory as an escape from an increasingly optical regime of capture and control. Benning's videos, in their digital form, embody a notion of the haptic that merges feminist materiality and strategies of embodied subjectification with an aesthetic and social critique of the conditions of image marginalisation within digital video networks.

Benning's videos reveal the limits of the protocological hegemony of digital images, inverting the standard functioning of the codec-induced transformations on which this HD hierarchy depends. In this way, the videos demonstrate how evolving technology continues to marginalise certain content based on aesthetic standards and socio-economic privilege while, from this marginal position, rearticulating the critical resistance and oppositional strategies that characterised Benning's *PixelVision* works in the first place. For all the supposed evolution of imaging technologies and channels of distribution, the imperfect upload of Benning's low-resolution artworks demonstrates how little the conditions of their marginalisation have changed. In our post-Internet context, their unruly pixels signify the same queer counterhegemonic opposition all the more sharply.

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Biography

Arron Santry is a PhD student at Goldsmiths, University of London, researching the aesthetics of digital artists' moving image. His work explores the question of art's autonomy and capacity for resistance in the context of digital control.

Email: arron.santry@gmail.com

Interview with Dr Crystal Abidin

KATE STUART, *Bangor University*
EOIN MURRAY, *Bangor University*

Dr Crystal Abidin is a digital anthropologist and ethnographer who examines internet culture, based at Curtin University in Western Australia as a Senior Research Fellow and ARC DECRA fellow in Internet Studies. Her current research focuses on influencer cultures, online visibility, and social media pop cultures, especially in East Asia and the Asia Pacific, reflecting also on life as an anthropologist whose work traverses both online and physical spaces and relationships. In her visit to Bangor as a keynote speaker for the Evolution of Media MeCCSA PGN conference, Dr Crystal discussed one of her more recent projects about vulnerable communities on tumblr, exploring the evolution of culture, practice, and her research within this space.

- **You describe yourself as an anthropologist and ethnographer of digital cultures and your research stretches from commercial blogging to your recent book, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* with Associate Professor Tama Lever and Dr Tim Highfield. What would you say drew you to research digital cultures and internet studies?**

- I guess I have two answers: one is personal, one is more political. I'll start with the personal story. I am born of a generation and in a country that was prepared to groom cohorts of citizens to be extremely IT savvy, so encountering digital culture, the internet, the rise of technology was like a second nature to me, like a fish to water. We began to learn to type, if I'm not wrong, maybe in Kindergarten at age six, and even in primary school we got to learn to organise our fingers along the keyboard and monitor our typing speeds. So as part of a whole national and generational culture in my upbringing, being 'extremely online' was very normal. When I encountered internet culture as a young adult or when moving into my undergraduate studies and developing my academic career, it was a natural progression that the thing that I enjoyed growing up with also became the thing that I enjoyed working on professionally. Many of us have work lives and then like, secretly embarrassing behind-the-scenes recreational lives—I brought both of these worlds together and I enjoy making analyses and making deeper meaning out of the things I enjoy, vice versa enjoying my work as well.

  Also, since there are probably going to be junior scholars reading this interview, I think a word of caution is due: Everyone always says if you enjoy your work it's not going to *feel* like work. Now that is a lie! It's just going to feel like everything *is* work and we have to be

extra careful about policing our work/life boundaries and ensuring that our wellbeing is taken care of. In my case, one of the gripes that I always put out to the universe is that when I'm not working and using social media recreationally, I always feel compelled to still have my work brain on in the background, or worse, at times feel pressured by others to be working all the time. To combat this, I decided to set up boundaries and guidelines for myself. I've got separate accounts for secretly closeted embarrassing fandoms, my various interests, and my work and professional front. I also set specific times where I am online for work versus being online for leisure. I've got colleagues who are really great and well-versed in code-switching, so we can be on a chat stream talking about work, but if it's on a weekend or a holiday we may use the exact same chat stream to catch up but with a mutual understanding that if our discussion evolves into more serious work, then these can wait for another time and context. All of these choices are now second nature to me. They were the practices I had studied, the habits that I practiced, and now the ethos that I maintain for my own sanity. I want to be clear that as much as I love my research, academia is my job and being an academic is not my master status or my entire identity. It is important to preserve and grow these other facets of oneself.

The political reason for a lot of my work being focused on internet culture, and more specifically a Global South perspective to internet cultures, is that it's very easy for us to run with the adage that the internet is global—it has allowed us to reach all corners of the world, we're basically borderless, that everyone now has equal access, you know, that 'big tech democratic utopian' idea—but yet we also know that for the everyday person, our individual experiences of the internet can be vastly different dependent on your geolocated accessibility, government and state gatekeeping, ISP and server preferences, platform norms, digital cultures, and the like. There are machine and human conditions that factor into play, ranking and mapping and delivering information to each of us differently. I wanted to focus more on the socio-cultural aspect of this internet experience.

Another political reason for wanting to study internet culture is to publicise the plurality *internet cultures,* to shift away from Anglo-centric discourses, and to push back against ethnocentricism. In much of the research on influencer cultures, there are the unspoken, unmarked, normative or mainstream perceptions of how this world works that usually draw on American phenomena and examples. And in the difficult terrain of academic publishing, it is not uncommon for many non-US focused scholars who study on other cultures to be asked to qualify our choice of scope, sampling, research decisions, and the like. I hope that as more of us focus on the diversity of influencer cultures and online visibility around the world, we can slowly but surely change this type of academic gatekeeping. I would like to contribute to building more of this sort of research. So yeah, I quite enjoy being an ethnographer on the internet—it's a bit like being a Mars Rover on an expedition discovering new things, and then trying to scientifically make sense of them, by

collaborating with other people who may also encounter these new things, by building relationships and listening to people who are so-called "native" to these spaces, to make sense of these phenomena through social scientific modes of thinking..

- **Would you say your practice has evolved as you've moved forward from your early days as a researcher to where you are now?**

- This is a very strange question for me to answer, because I graduated less than four years ago so when you say early days, it feels like all my days were my early days – but I get what you're trying to say. I have been studying influencer cultures since my undergraduate research days in 2008. The internet moves quickly. There is a lot of research on the concept of 'internet time' that is compressed, accelerated, linked, anomic, et cetera. Likewise, research practices that develop around the internet—changing platforms, changing rules, changing norms, moralities—also are very accelerated. I would say, in terms of my overall politic, strategically focusing on East Asian and Asia Pacific influencer cultures and from here developing theories and concepts that can be mappable and have far-ranging use value is still my main bread and butter. I think, in my earlier postgraduate years, when I discovered that so much effort was needed to communicate the 'Other', I would just air my frustrations and leave it at that. For instance, why is it that when I submit a journal article, the reviewer or editor comes back with feedback like 'Great article, great title, but in your title can you please add in the country you are looking at?'. And there I was recalling the numerous other studies I read throughout my schooling years, often based on a convenient sample of college students in the, and how none of these were 'marked' but instead taken as a unspoken 'standard'. But as an Early Career Researcher now, I think I've got a little bit more experience, mentorship, and resources to do something about this. For instance, curating edited collections and special issues, bringing resources to events that I specifically want to shape in order to make visible and amplify some research or researchers over others, giving more voice and access to good work that is struggling to register on people's radars, working closely with junior scholars around the world who may struggle with conveying their very smart thoughts in the format of an English-language journal article and spending time to assist them with translations. Much of this is unseen labour, but I have learnt from some good mentors and role models that those of us who have resources and capacity should work to develop or even just signal boost such underrepresented scholarship.

  I hope that if you ask me this question again a few years down the road as a Mid-Career Scholar, I will be able to exhibit more action and more leadership in this area. What has remained consistent though, I think, is the importance to maintain a low intensity of anger or frustration with the state of things, to be used as a motivating force to go and do something productive about the situation. I do this for myself by writing very honest confessions and

thoughts in various online and paper diaries, and periodically review how I have processed these feelings and what has changed since then.

In terms of the content of my research, my very, very earliest research started in the country where I grew up, which is Singapore, and then—by virtue of my migration, personal interests, education, resources, access—expanded to South East Asia, Australia, the Nordic, and East Asia. I now consider my work broadly looking at internet cultures in the Asia Pacific region. I have also gotten to experience various disciplines from my positions at different departments and universities, but still primarily consider myself an anthropologist of digital and media cultures.

- **So, you've kind of touched on this already, but what attracts you to examine a particular aspect of the cultures you look at? Are they groups you've already encountered through your online research self or personal self, or do you choose topics that you think is worth exploring and delving into that part of digital culture?**

- I think both. All good anthropologists will never be able to completely divest themselves—their research selves, if there is such a thing as that—from their personal selves. In fact, it makes you a good anthropologist to be able to draw on your own experiences, your own perception of the world, and to use your body as the canvas or a mediator for understanding people in a cultural context you are wanting to study. And to understand other people, you need to hone that inter-personal skill. Even if you are not one for small talk or interacting with strangers, sometimes you need to learn to develop a research persona to do this work well, so there will definitely be an investment of a very deep, personal side of yourself in your work. The extent of this is probably something you can control or decide, based on your project, politics, and preferences though.

  To answer your question in brief, many of the projects focus on phenomena that I'm already interested in and want to pursue more analytically. Many of them are issues that I may have chanced upon and do not yet understand, maybe because I am not the target demographic, but want to invest time to study systematically. There are others, especially of late, that are time-specific urgent events that require some sort of research intervention or archival work, and if I feel that I am best placed to do it—whether it's because it's already connected to my work, or that I'm part of a privileged minority to observe this phenomenon in real time—I go and do it. So, I guess I have three different types of research pursuits, and always have multiple projects going on in each of these streams.

  For example, I spent some time interviewing Singaporean punk rockers in the underground music scene. Across the age spectrum and genders, most of them were ethnically Malay. Now, I'm part-Malay myself, but my skin tone and appearance may not convey this

evidently, so many of my Malay punk informants may perceive me with a little bit of otherness and are extra welcoming towards me. This means that when I ask them very basic questions that I probably already know the answers to, they may be more than willing to guide me through like a wanderer, and explain to me things that they would otherwise have assumed that I would know. As a good anthropologist and ethnographer, you know you've got all these tools. You don't use them to deceive people, but rather you rearrange yourself and your interactions to get the best ethnographic data, work very closely with your informants, and then make sense of this for your research.

- **You refer to these different roles—hats, almost—that you can wear as an anthropologist in your recent article "Somewhere Between Here and There", and you also talked about the genuine friendships that you can cultivate in this research experience. How do you find yourself navigating that, as this would be blending your researcher self with your personal self a lot more closely?**

- There are a lot of hits and misses, so just because you attempt, or have the desire to cultivate a work relationship into a sincere friendship doesn't mean it always happens—it has to be reciprocal. Sometimes it's not for not wanting, sometimes maybe for mental health, or for work/life balance. As a researcher I can also choose limitations on who and what can crossover into my personal life as a deep and genuine friendship. But I think the virtue of being an ethnographer or an anthropologist, especially if you work long-term with a community of people, is that you want to be someone who gives back to the community. You don't want to be an extractor who continually goes back, takes from them, then go away and publish things without any reciprocity. Even if your work does not call for it, or if your paycheck does not depend on it, I think it's a personal ethic and choice to return and sow that back into that space if you have the resources and capacity to do so.

  Many of the friendships I build from fieldwork formed organically because of our personalities or ethos or interests. Others were born out of adhoc moments like crises. Say if someone was in a difficult situation and I happened to be available to assist, these types of co-shared struggles can help people to bond and find friendships in the midst of troubles. Still some other friendships were more intentional, for instance, knowing that I needed to have a good relationship with a specific gatekeeper in order to gain more understanding of their milieu.

  I think that the positionality you choose to adopt in the field can also sometimes be time-specific. For example, having looked at internet celebrities and influencers since 2008, when I catch up with my old informants now, some of them laugh and joke about how we've literally grown up together and are on our way to growing old! We met when we were in university, when I first started my undergraduate projects with them, and many of them are

now married and birthing children, so it's be nice to have these 'girl time' catch-ups about the rites of passage that we go through.

- **With building those friendships, particularly around some of the serious topics you've looked at (grief, cyberbullying, et cetera), how do you separate yourself and protect yourself in exploring these topics and relationships? What do you do for self-care?**

- I don't know if research projects ever have an expiration date, or if you can truly complete something, especially if they are longitudinal anthropological studies. I supposed that logistically, some projects may have an end date – say if you were commissioned to work on something, completed the research, and submitted the report to your sponsors. But if you're developing a field of research, I don't think you ever stop thinking about how to improve and mature your work. It can be that you come upon something in the very early years of your study, only to continuously revisit, redevelop, extend, and follow up on it through the years. Likewise, with my informants, I often follow up with them over the years, whether for ongoing research projects or because I valued our time together and want to sustain our friendship. I like to think that we dip in and out of projects with different intensities across our research careers.

  There are some projects that I entered into specifically because of my personal experiences. I started research young people and online grief shortly after I had lost my younger sister to cancer. When Carissa passed away, many of her friends in their late teens and early twenties were writing instant messages, emails, hand letters and going 'Can you not delete her account on *Facebook*? Can you please print all the photos we have? Can you not delete her cellphone number? Can you maintain this, can you not-'. While these were not my immediate concerns as I was busy tending to post-death paperwork and sorting out my sister's belongings, the intense emotions and volumes of such correspondence clearly indicated that such digital connections were very important to these young people. At that time I was also beginning to befriend many of my sister's friends, in part because our commiseration brought me some comfort, and in part because I felt a sense of duty as a 'big sister' to ensure that they were doing okay.

  After a few weeks, I wanted to document and study these young people's experiences of grief more systematically, and asked a small group of them if they would be willing to chat with me in my capacity as a researcher. With the support of a small NGO and a community service, I worked on this pilot study and channeled my grieving into research on grief. This wasn't because I felt pressured to be academically productive, but rather than I needed to create this busy-ness for myself as a meaningful distraction. And while this carried me through the difficult time, after a while it began to feel heavy. By the time when my first chapter on this project was published, I was in a very bad place and did not even page

through the book to read my writing. When I eventually found the headspace to reenter this project, I continued with interviews. Eventually, I saw how this side project 'for the heart' also connected to my older work on grief tributes on viral Instagram hashtags. I have since taken a break on this specific project, but will return to it in the future.

- **Thank you so much for sharing that with us—there's obviously a lot there that can apply to any area of research, as we as researchers so often get personally invested in our projects and struggle to work out where to go from there. To round up, you've looked at so much in—as you say—quite a short time as a researcher, but what do you think you want to explore next? Are there particular platforms you want to look at, or where do you want to go from here? You've obviously got a new book coming soon?**

- I do. My fourth book is being published as an edited collection of chapters around June this year, looking at bodies on social media. My fifth one is being co-authored with my colleagues and also very good friends, Katrin Tiidenberg and Natalie Hendry, looking at *tumblr* – I presented some snippets of this in Bangor. Following this, my next two sole-authored books are extremely precious to me, looking at my longitudinal anthropological work on the origins, development, and cultures of internet celebrity in Singapore and the region. One focuses on online shopping in the form of blogshops, and the other on influencer cultures.

  I have had the privilege and experience of having my work profile by some reporters, and many of them tend to end our interviews with the question you just posed: 'What are you going to do next? Which platform will you look at? What's new?'. This assumes that we tend to prize novelty above everything else, and as an internet studies scholar, I cannot deny that there is an ongoing pressure to always be up-to-date and to keen an eye on what's on the horizon. It is part of our jobs to make sense of these new phenomena, to historicize, contextualise and analyse them, to find patterns and question systems, and look for circumventions and subversions and creative appropriations. You know, when we told our friends that we were writing book on *tumblr*, some of them mused: 'But why? Isn't *tumblr* like, dead?'. But just because platforms lose their mainstream popularity and media hyper-attention does not mean they no longer function for those who stayed; there are still values and meanings and lessons to glean.

  These days, most of my research still looks at the broad umbrella of internet pop culture. This comprises anything from celebrities, to influencers, to memes, virality, emoji, et cetera, but my specific slant is always to look at minority groups, subversive appropriations, user agency. For instance: What kind of communities thrive under the radar? What kind of practices are elaborated and expanded on when you have always needed to thrive under the radar, when you've either struggled to be seen by people or the algorithm, or struggled to be

unseen so that you can just glide and remain there? Such visibility techniques and what it can be used for are the basis of my research and my work.

I'm also working very hard on expanding my language repertoire, in part to fulfill a childhood dream of being competent in many languages, and in part to be a better anthropologist. I hope that in addition to working with my local research teams and field assistants, I will eventually be able to understand East Asian cultures a little bit more thoroughly with the intimacy of shared language. Throughout my fieldwork, I meet a lot of informants who appreciate this effort. When I stuff up with grammar or vocabulary, they are always kind and encouraging. These displays of affirmation are very precious to me, and it makes me want to work harder to be a better researcher when I connect with people in my research fields.

- **Thank you so much for speaking to us, once again, and we're looking forward to having this interview in the *Networking Knowledge* journal to, as you say, highlight a more global perspective.**

- For sure! And I'm suddenly thinking again, of our walk to take pictures [in Bangor] of that very elaborate university emblem you have on that brick wall [outside of the main university building]. We were asking Eoin how to pronounce his name [Eoin being the Irish variant of the more familiar Welsh and English name, Owen], and you gave us a mini-lecture on how it's very complicated to be Scottish, and Irish, and English in your part of the world. So likewise, right—there are just so many Englishes, even if we are reading the same script, and MeCCSA is probably a really good avenue to tease that out. Because, even scholars like me or my Asia-based colleagues are sometimes guilty of essentialising and saying 'The West', or 'older White scholars', but there is not one monolithic 'West' and so many types of 'White'. Inter-cultural and inter-regional work is very important, and I would love to watch the MeCCSA network birth more research in these areas.

- **[Eoin] — I know my father would love that, because as we were growing up he often liked to tell me about growing up as an Irishman in Belfast during the Troubles period. Again, it was predominantly white, but there was such a cultural break that if you were considered Irish it was essentially like being a secondary citizen. People used to put up signs saying 'No Irish' in the windows of boarding houses because there was such a stigma. Even though my dad has now moved over to Wales, he still has always remembered that simmering anti-Irish mentality from when he was younger, and he won't forget it because it was something so prevalent while he was growing up. So that was something you really made me think of when you said about there being so many different layers to any group of cultures or races of people when you have that**

prefacing knowledge that other people may not be privy to. I'd never thought about it that way before.

- And documenting is so important. It's not just the job of historians to speak to the generations who aren't there to find out these things. If you were to ask me about my experience of *tumblr* ten years ago, my memory is hazy but the importance of growing up on *tumblr* is still close to my heart – this is exactly what motivated my co-authors and I, who are all in our thirties, to write about *tumblr* because, how dare you tell us *tumblr* is dead now! We'll prove you wrong, right? I'm only half-joking! I think archiving something intangible like internet culture is all the more important, because much of it is transient and fleeting, and we overly rely on automation to self-archive. The knowledge of disappearing data is also a big motivation for us to quickly archive what we have taken for granted to be permanently online forever. Platforms close, websites shutdown, internet friends go away. I think we actually grapple with a lot of loss when we study internet cultures, and it can be a low-intensity, ongoing anxiety. But contributing to archiving and understanding something that is constantly disappearing and changing, while difficult to do, I think that can be very meaningful.

Book Review
Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures

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KATE STUART, *Bangor University*

KEYWORDS

Instagram, Social Media, Culture, Society, Digital Media

Starting life under the name of *Burbn* as a check-in app to help users share details of the best bourbon locations in 2010, *Instagram* has risen to become one of the world's top social media platforms (Leaver, Highfield & Abidin 2020, 9), synonymous with selfies, self-representation, and all things aesthetic. *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* by Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin is the first book-length exploration of the popular platform, exploring how its evolution has influenced the cultures and communities that live there. The authors argue that *Instagram* is "a conduit for communication" where "the visual focus is particularly important in the success and relevance of the platform" (2020, 1). In exploring how the app has been shaped by, and shaped, the behaviour of its users across its history, Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin demonstrate the importance of Instagram as a form of visual social media and a platform for human connection.

The main argument of *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* is that *Instagram* is more than just an app used to share photos; it is a communication platform that provides the key to "understanding and mapping visual social media cultures" (2020, 2). The book explores the app's history, noting how the platform and aesthetics have evolved, before moving on to how its affordances have been shaped by the users as they engaged in building communities, commercialising their presence, and living an 'instagrammable' life. Drawing on an impressive established body of work by the three authors, along with many others, the book offers an overview of the platform and its history that has not yet been explored in book form, drawing examples from *Instagram* communities and cultures around the world.

The book's blurb promotes it as "essential reading for students, scholars and practitioners of media and communication" and this is demonstrated throughout the text. The writing is accessible, explaining the points made clearly and effectively and illustrating these with relevant examples. As the first book of its kind, the authors provide an in-depth history of *Instagram*, but do so in a

way that would be easily understood by those new to the field of Visual Communications. The focus does remain on *Instagram* only, however, presuming some understanding of social media generally, therefore avoiding the repetition that could discourage established scholars from reading.

While *Instagram* has developed into a social media platform intrinsically linked to influencer culture, the authors begin the book by stepping back into the platform's early history and mapping the spaces between its start as an app similar to *Foursquare* and through to its more recent history as a component of *Facebook*. Much of this history highlights the way that the platform's evolution was born out of competition. The relationship with *Facebook* is given a suitable level of attention, noting how the integration of *Instagram* into the "Facebook empire" (2020, 13) affected both companies, but also looking at how competition with other apps, such as *Snapchat*, gave rise to *Instagram* stories, third party apps, and song stickers. The authors also nod towards the role of users, particularly in relation to how the app tries to protect its community, but this does not always align with the chapter's overall aim of showing the issues and changes that have shaped the platform. For example, the authors discuss the way that *Instagram*'s content moderation and boundary is handled, directly tying the changes *Instagram* has made to the needs of the unified community they wish to promote. Comparatively, their discussion of Russian-based groups attempting to manipulate the outcome of the 2016 US elections feels out of place, as it is highlighted as an event that demonstrates the importance of *Instagram* as a platform rather than showing how the platform was shaped.

The authors continue to explore *Instagram*'s development in the second and third chapters, focusing on its aesthetic evolution, both in terms of the app's visual identity and the vernacular associated with it as shaped by its users, and its place within visual, social, and mobile contexts. Drawing on previous scholarly discussions of digital photography, influencer culture, and social media generally, these chapters create a bridge between the more descriptive exploration of Instagram's development as a platform and the subsequent discussions of how it is embraced by its users. As the authors note in their discussion of *Instagram* filters, "the visuality... reflects Instagram's evolving relationship with its early aesthetics and aims" (2020, 58). The addition of the *Instagram Stories* embodies this point, as *Instagram*'s prior reputation as a carefully curated space moved to provide more ephemeral and "fun" moments for users to share while also demonstrating the app's ability to adopt features typically associated with popular rivals. Though the focus stays on visual communication, *Instagram* evolves to more firmly establish itself in the social media landscape and to enable its users to better shape their communication through the app. User behaviour similarly responds to these developments, adapting to embrace changes that suit their aesthetic or manipulate those that do not, creating a shared set of practices across the many *Instagram* communities that grow out of the app's ongoing development.

The subsequent chapters focus more specifically on how *Instagram* is used, pulling in threads from the earlier chapters to explore the economic side of the platform, the cultures that grow there, and

Instagram's impact on lifespan. While clearly building on established themes within the field of Social Media Cultures, such as influencers and teen use, these chapters are also the ones that most explicitly draw on the expertise and personal experience of the authors. Chapter Four's discussion of the *Instagram* economy, for example, begins with a flashback of one author's first experience with the platform following a discussion with an influencer informant. This enables them to establish their position more clearly, connecting each author's established bodies of work to the previous chapters to show how the findings of their research tie in with *Instagram*'s evolution. Together, these chapters demonstrate the way that *Instagram* has been adopted and adapted, influencing practices both on and off the platform, to become "the Instagram of Everything" (2020, 213). The authors conclude issue a warning, however, highlighting that the *Instagram* experience that they describe increasingly promotes 'templatability' for a platform "whose currency is communication and authenticity" (2020, 216). They conclude that *Instagram* must continue to evolve to maintain its place as the icon of visual social media culture.

As the first book-length examination of the platform, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* does well to provide an overview of the important topics related to the subject. It explains clearly and makes effective use of examples to illustrate the points made. Unfortunately, as an overview, it is not always able to go in depth into the points it raises (see, for example, the 2016 US elections example mentioned above). As such, it works well as an introduction or a reminder, but may be less useful to those already familiar with the subjects covered. This limitation is somewhat mitigated, however, by the inclusion of links to the *@polityinstabook* – a dedicated *Instagram* 'home' of the book - in the introductory chapter. Not only is this a clever way to promote the book and its subject matter, but it also serves to enhance and expand the conversation by bringing those reading about *Instagram* to the platform to talk further. Many of the figures found in the book – such as selfies of an author's face or snapshots of another author's *Instagram* story – can be found on the *Instagram* page, which also pulls in more recent examples of the subjects covered. The Fifth chapter, for example, briefly discusses *Instagram* as a potential platform to discuss social awareness initiatives (2020, 151-152), highlighting the ways that *Instagram* can be used by individuals and groups to draw attention to a cause. The *@polityinstabook* page then demonstrates this itself through the authors' post about @celestebarber's campaign to fundraise for the *NSW Rural Fire Service and Brigades Donations Fund* in light of the Australian bushfires (2020). In posting a snapshot of the fundraiser post on *Facebook* and connecting it with relevant hashtags, the *@polityinstabook* provides a relevant and up-to-date example related to the book while also using their own platform to draw attention to the cause. While *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* is, in some ways, limited by being the first of its kind, its connection to the *@polityinstabook* page pushes it beyond the confines of its pages and allows the authors to expand the conversation about *Instagram*, social media, and connected subjects.

Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin's *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* provides an engaging overview of the platform, weaving the history of its development with the way it is used by the individuals that embrace it. They show how the app has been shaped not only by its competition,

but also by the communities that it hosts as they navigate the strengths and limitations of the platform against commercial needs, cultural norms, and living for the 'gram. As the first book-length introduction to the subject, it navigates the tricky balance of clear communication and depth well, but also expands the conversation through a connected Instagram account. A read well-suited to those new to the study of social media, interested parties looking to examine *Instagram* more deeply, or those already established in the field looking to refresh their knowledge.

References

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Biography

Kate Stuart is a PhD candidate at Bangor University, Wales, researching authorship and online book culture. Her other research interests include, among others, fantasy, adaptation, and online identity.

Email: copa1a@bangor.ac.uk