

# THE FRAMING AND CONSTRUCTING OF EDINBURGH AS A 'MAGICAL CITY' FOR HARRY POTTER FANS

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It is afternoon at George Bridge, Edinburgh. A big crowd of people has assembled in front of a café. One might assume that this is a tourist group hungry after their long explorative stroll through the city of Edinburgh, now ready to relax with a cup of tea in the warmth of a café. However, rather than entering the café, the group remains standing outside, taking pictures in front of the shop window. 'Somewhat peculiar', the passerby might think, but then the group steps aside and reveals a sign in the shop front: 'The "birthplace" of Harry Potter'. Being a Potter fan myself, I have been curious to learn more about this peculiar place, which appears a rather inconspicuous establishment, and yet retains so much meaning for tourists. What were they looking for in this café – a piece of the 'Potter magic'?

But the Elephant House is not the only important place in connection with Harry Potter. In many conversations I had with friends and family, the city of Edinburgh itself was often described as 'magical' - with its majestic gothic cathedrals, the Castle, the Old Town. For many, it seemed only logical that the most famous book series about a young wizard and his fantastical world originated from a city such as Edinburgh.

In this essay, I want to explore these ideas further by situating the city of Edinburgh at the crossing of fact and fiction. I argue that tourists attempt to 'gaze' at the city of Edinburgh in a similar manner as the author Joanne K. Rowling did, by trying to follow in her footsteps. This process, in turn, has led to the construction of 'Potter tourist sites' in Edinburgh and the general framing of Edinburgh as the 'birthplace of Harry Potter', situated within the wider global context of the 'Potter business phenomenon' (Gunelius 2008).

My argument is structured in three parts:

First, I will briefly review the literature on tourism and explain why and how the phenomenon of tourism links with Edinburgh as the 'birthplace of Harry Potter'.

Second, I will analyze the way in which tourists and locals 'gaze' at the city of Edinburgh and its connection to Harry Potter by analyzing my fieldwork encounter during the 'Potter Trail Tour' through Edinburgh, as well as conversations I had in the Elephant House with tourists and locals over the course of a week. My research is based on both interviews and observations.

Third, I locate the tourist sites and tours revolving around J.K. Rowling and Harry Potter within the broader global framework of commodification and marketing of the 'Potter brand' (Gunelius 2008).

### **The 'Tourist Gaze'**

John Urry argues that 'tourism-related services [become a] commodity of consumption' (1995: 129). This consumption takes place both in form of material goods as well as services provided by different organizations. The 'tourist gaze' (Urry 1990) is the 'minimal characteristic of tourist activity' and determines that we perceive 'piers, towers, old buildings, artistic objects, food, countryside' as tourist sites (Urry 1995: 131; 1990: 1). This gaze, according to Urry, is 'socially organized and systematized', similarly to the Foucaultian gaze of the medic by which he examines his patients (Urry 1990: 1). The 'gaze' must be constructed, and this process takes place through the contrasting of the place or site with the mundane, everyday life experience. The difference between the ordinary, and the tourist site or extraordinary is anticipated in form of day-dreaming and fantasy spurred by different media such as 'film, TV, literature, magazines, records and videos' which construct and reinforce the gaze (Urry 1990: 3).

Chris Rojek states that in this realm of extraordinariness 'reality and illusion' converge, that myth and fantasy play an 'unusually large role in the social construction of all travel and tourist sights' (1997: 53). Travelling to the unfamiliar,

as Rojek remarks, means that speculation and fantasy are inevitably used to surmise about the unknown (*ibid*). The combination of both fictional and factual is 'gloriously portrayed' in many books and films, and these cinematic or literary elements are then consciously 'dragged' into real life, into the physical landscape (*ibid*. 54). Distortion, myth and fantasy hence operate in the social construction of the tourist site.

Similarly, Dean McCannell maintains that tourism today is a form of contemporary pilgrimage, in which the 'modern pilgrim' is in search of the 'authentic other'. Tourist spaces are often developed in a manner of 'staged authenticity' (1999: 107) in a process of sight framing and enshrinement of the object (*ibid*. 44- 45). 'Anything', McCannell opines, 'is potentially an attraction. It simply awaits one person to take the trouble to point it out to another as something noteworthy, or worth seeing' (*ibid*. 192).

I argue that this process of framing and enshrining of certain places into a category of special noteworthiness led to the construction of Edinburgh as a city of interest for Potter fans. Some of the places we visited as part of the Potter Trail tour might have been of more significance as there is a direct link to the author, however, others bear little or no connection to the story of the wizard if not viewed with a 'Potter gaze', and again others only take on special meaning through the construction and framing into a 'Potter tourist site'.

### **Edinburgh and the 'Potter connection'**

In interviews about the early beginnings of Harry Potter, the author Joanne K. Rowling reiterates the importance of her personal connection to the city of Edinburgh (BBC 2001; Runcie 2007; Taylor 2012). The first book of the series *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was completed in Edinburgh; so was the very last chapter of the seventh book, and she still lives in the city today.

Apart from the early beginnings of Rowling's 'Cinderella story' (Fraser 2011), in which she went from being a 'penniless single mother' living and writing in Edinburgh to

becoming the most successful authors of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the city was also the place of inspiration for the fantastical world of Harry Potter.

In an interview, J.K. Rowling states:

'I've always imagined that Harry starts off in London, or near London in Surrey, but he ends up in Scotland. The haunted school for wizards, I always imagine to be next to a loch, this big gothic thing that is set in the mountains of Scotland. That is never made clear in the book, but in my imagination it is set in Scotland. It is identifiable if you read the books, he travels to the north from London for a day, so where is he going to end up?' (Taylor 2012)

Visitors to the city of Edinburgh today are keen to trace Rowling's footsteps and her writing process of the early Potter books, and experience the 'magic' of the place that appears to have inspired the author. By visiting the places where Rowling wrote, tourists draw one step closer to the fantastical world of Harry Potter.

McCrone et al. remark that Scotland 'suffers' from too great an emphasis on the notion of heritage in its public image (McCrone et al 1995). Many of the sites tourists visit in and around Edinburgh seem to be places 'out of time for they operate in the here and now while involving visits to 'past times', allowing us to 'play for a while in another age and so they seem to deny the possibility of decay and death for there is no passage of time allowed to occur between "then" and "now"' (*ibid.* 11).

In a similar fashion, tourists and fans that come to Edinburgh seek to experience an immersion in the 'Harry Potter world'. By coming closer to the places where Rowling wandered, was inspired and wrote, they bridge the gap between this, the 'real', and the 'magical' world, despite the fact that such an act is impossible, just as it is impossible to factually travel back in time. However, it is an act of the imagination, of the fantastical, and at the locations where Rowling wrote, fact and fiction meet and converge into one, constructing the tourist site.

### **Exploring enchanted Edinburgh**

Upon my arrival at the meeting point for the 'Potter Trail Tour', the merging of fact and fiction becomes apparent before my own eyes for the first time. Waiting in front of an ordinary pub is a wizard – or so it seems: a young man who is wearing a cloak, a wand in his hand and a pair of glasses on his nose. He introduces himself as Richard. Other tour participants of all ages - families with younger children as well as university students - join us, and before the tour begins we all receive a 'magical wand' with which we have to 'bewitch' the traffic lights to turn green. We enter Greyfriar's Kirkyard, a graveyard where J.K. Rowling went from time to time to write, and from where she took some of the names found on gravestones and used them in the story. First stop: An inconspicuously looking grave with the name 'Thomas Riddell' on it. This, so Richard tells us, is the 'grave of Lord Voldemort', Potter's nemesis. All tourists take out their cameras and snap away. Behind the graveyard, the George Heriot's School is located, which is said to be the inspiration for Hogwarts, the 'School of Witchcraft and Wizardry'. Our tour guide explains to us that the colors of the four houses of George Heriot's School concur with the four houses in the Potter story. A boy is 'sorted' into one of the four houses using a 'magical sorting hat', similar to the one in the books.

The sites in and around the graveyard such as the gravestone or the school might be of no relevance for the regular Edinburgh visitor or local who holds little or no interest in the making of the Potter story, however, for the Potter Trail participants, these unexceptional places become of utmost importance since they served as inspiration to Rowling. Fiction is 'dragged' into reality, and places are framed and constructed to become important sites for the 'Potter tourist'.

The group moves on to the university campus and 'Potterrow', an alley leading toward Bristo Square. Again, to a local, these sites are nothing but ordinary, and I myself have walked there many times making no connection between them and Harry Potter. However, framed as part of the Potter/Rowling narrative, a seemingly insignificant street name can take on a 'Potter significance'.

On my second tour, I chat with one of the guides, Will, who tells me the story of an American couple that had come to the UK specifically to see all the 'Potter sites' around the country. The woman was dressed up as a witch and already knew most of the facts about Edinburgh that bore relevance to the Potter stories. However, to her it was of special importance to see the sites 'in flesh', gaze upon them with her own eyes.

When I asked the tour guides how they felt about Harry Potter and especially the significance of the city of Edinburgh in relation to Harry Potter, they mentioned that they were not particularly big fans, for them it was more of a 'job'. Two of them were hobby actors, and the tour provided an opportunity to practice their passion on a more interactive basis, whilst gaining money. In contrast to Reed's London literary guides, the Potter tour guides I encountered in Edinburgh shared no particular 'personal entanglements' (Reed 2002: 18) with the city through the Potter narrative, but they saw their role as tour guides more as a job or a response to the need of tourists coming to Edinburgh to explore the city under the premise of it being a 'Potter city'.

### **A 'magical' café?**

Something that struck me during the tour was the fact that the Elephant House was not actually 'the "birth" place of Harry Potter' as such. I knew from interviews that Rowling had conceived the idea for Harry Potter whilst on a train from London to Manchester, but due to the sign in the shop front I had always assumed that the first book of the series was mainly written in the café. I was not alone in my belief, as the crowds of people taking picture outside of the Elephant House clearly evidenced. Despite the fact that Rowling probably did frequent the Elephant House from time to time, it was only opened after the first book was finished, according to the Potter Trail tour guides, meaning that she could have only written parts of the later books there.

'Anything' as McCannell remarked 'is potentially an attraction' (1999: 192), it just needs the right person to frame it in such a way for the place to become of

importance for the tourist, which was successfully accomplished for the Elephant House. Through clever marketing, the coffee shop has been turned into a tourist site. The bathrooms are especially fascinating: hundreds of fans have scribbled messages all over the walls, doors; even the toilet lid was not spared. Many of the notes are direct quotes taken from the books, but a lot of them are little love messages to the author herself:

‘Thank you JK for changing our lives, we love you.’

‘Harry Potter is a part of my childhood I’ll never forget! Thank you for so many memories, JK! You’re awesome.’

‘JKR is my hero. Thank you!’

‘Thanks for the friends, family of childhood J.K.’

When I interviewed two students from Edinburgh University in the Elephant House, one of them told me she had expected the coffee shop to be somewhat more ‘Potter-y’. She had moved to Edinburgh, among other things, because of Harry Potter. She was a fan and the prospect of living and studying English literature in the city where J.K. Rowling had dreamed up some of the Potter plot was an incredibly exciting thought to her.

Rojek argues that through books or films, cinematic or literary elements are consciously ‘dragged’ into the physical landscape and framed into tourist sights, but the actual experience of the place can be rather anti-climatic since the visitor expects the place to look just like its literary or cinematic representation (1997: 54). Although Edinburgh as such is neither portrayed in Potter films nor books, the myth surrounding the city and certain places within it distorts its reality in such a way that it becomes inextricably bound to the Potter narrative, drawing visitors and tourists in, and perhaps sometimes resulting in a somewhat anti-climatic feeling, just as for one of my informants.

Another afternoon while sitting in the Elephant House, a couple walked in and sat down at the table next to me. The girl showed the boy the view of the castle and he remarked how it looked 'just like Hogwarts'. When I started a conversation with them, the girl mentioned that she had been studying in Edinburgh since September, but had never been to the Elephant House before as she was not interested in Harry Potter and this was just 'another café, right?'. The boy, on the other hand, was really excited to be there: a true Harry Potter fan he had just been to the Warner Brother's Harry Potter studios before his visit to Edinburgh.

Several people I talked to who were either locals or had been living in Edinburgh for a while perceived the Elephant House as a normal coffee shop, and they enjoyed coming here not so much because of the fact that J.K. Rowling wrote parts of the book series here, but because of the 'nice view of the castle' or the 'really good carrot cake', reasons that differ from the tourist ambition.

### **The Potter Buzz – A Global Business Phenomenon**

The fact that the Elephant House has become a tourist attraction although Rowling probably did not spend as much time there as popular lore purports, is certainly brought about not only by the 'tourist gaze', but through the framing and constructing of the café in such a way that tourists perceive it as a place of relevance and noteworthiness. This process of constructing the tourist site must be located in the wider context of the 'Potter brand'.

Endless of companies and industries in the tourism sector have been impacted by Harry Potter and benefitted from it through revenue accrued by selling their product under the Potter brand. No brand in literary history has 'ever achieved anything like the success of Harry Potter' (Gunelius 2008: 29). The readership is very much involved emotionally with the book series, they feel a deep sense of loyalty and that emotional investment makes for a good selling of a product (*ibid.* 27). Additionally, Harry Potter is a 'societal brand'; it creates a sort of community and social feeling among consumers and networks of different demographics. And so people from around the world sign up to 'enjoy the sights and sounds of the Harry Potter brand in



person' (*ibid.* 122). The creator of the Edinburgh 'Potter Trail Tour' himself felt that there was a need from consumers' side to fill a 'gap': 'I have always thought there was a gap in the market for Potter fans [in Edinburgh]', and that 'Potter devotees are not especially catered for, with only a couple of cafés espousing their connection' (Scotsman 2012). By starting the literary tour under the Potter premise, the tour organizers also joined the global 'Potter buzz'.

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As Marilyn Strathern describes in *The Limits of Auto-Anthropology* (1987), carrying out fieldwork 'at home', i.e. in the social context I am familiar with and engaged in a topic I myself am very fond of, is no easy task. I had to be extremely self-reflexive in analyzing and presenting my encounter, in order to represent the accounts of others as a 'product of a shared experience' (*ibid.* 22), but not completely replace their understanding with my own interpretations and thoughts.

I come to the conclusion that during my ethnographic fieldwork I encountered different people who have different connections to the story of Harry Potter. For some, it seems to be a predominantly financial link in the sense that by joining the 'Potter buzz', they also get 'a slice of the cake'. Those might be businesses or individuals, but they manage to cleverly sell their product to the Potter-hungry consumer visiting Edinburgh for an experience of magical extraordinariness. Others, however, tourists but also several locals I spoke to perceive Edinburgh to be imbued with a somewhat fantastical atmosphere. Rowling used some of the locations around Edinburgh as places of inspiration for the books, which those groups now visit and 'gaze' upon. They might only take on special significance because they were framed in a particular way, but for many visitors, they often become real, tangible entities that make for a magical and fantastical experience.

A quote by Dumbledore in the very last book of the Potter series might be pertinent in this regard: 'Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?' (Rowling 2007: 723).

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