Where am I standing?
The Aotearoa/Middle Earth/New Zealand Question
The Journey Begins

Scholarship is based on the premise of objective critical analysis. As an impartial observer the academic chooses a subject, commences with research, comes to conclusions, and presents findings. Unfortunately, like all purportedly objective situations, the idealized objective analysis is always tarnished by the very real and subjective nature of the individual. This of course is understood within the discourse of academia and these biases taken into consideration in the review of any work. But what happens if you really really like something and really really want to study it and really really want to tell everybody you know all the really neat little details that they won’t probably care about but you just find ultimately fascinating in a way you can’t even describe. Well then you’re probably a geek who needs a new hobby. But that’s okay, embrace the inner fanatic, and move forward with the project in a professional manner, because it is in fact possible. However, when you are on the other side of the world in the middle of the New Zealand bush standing with a GPS and three other geeks fighting over where Peter Jackson was standing when he shot a particular scene from the second film and you need to get back in the car before it gets dark and you are lost forever, really enjoy the moment because however difficult and objectively challenging it can be to be a tourist-fan-scholar it can be really really the best feeling in the world as well.

In April of 2003 I set out on a personal journey of significant magnitude. I boarded a plane from New York City and made my way to New Zealand to escape the states and encounter a faraway place. I was very much a tourist, looking forward to a different culture, stunning vistas, and even a plummetous drop off a bridge. At the same time I was also a scholar, as the first of my three weeks of vacation would be spent attending the Performance Studies International conference. Lurking beneath and connected to these two identifications was my
persona as a *Lord of the Rings* geek. A Rings geek I am proud to be and inextricably so. It lurked underneath the desire to be a tourist in New Zealand (I can still remember seeing a shot of mountains the first time I saw the first film and thinking immediately that I needed to visit wherever they had filmed that shot) and was connected to my attendance at the conference as I was in a group that was to do field research on the impact of the Rings phenomenon on New Zealand culture and tourism. Carrying my geekdom on my lapel like a badge of pride I ventured forth experiencing the land, meeting people, conversing with my colleagues/fellow geeks, recreating a mythical world on top of a warm and inviting environment, and at all times managing the balance of my existence as a tourist-fan-scholar.

Upon reflection I now realize that this threefold existence was crucial to my understanding of exactly what I had gone to study. Tourist studies often engages concepts of the gaze. What the tourist sees, why they may see it that way, and how it is presented for them are crucial questions to the study of the visitor-host interaction. Traditionally in these types of studies, researchers have tried to step out of the way and perform the type of objective analysis expected of scholarly work. I have decided to consciously make a methodological decision to engage my role as a tourist-fan-scholar, and continually reflect on how my personal experiences as a tourist and enthusiasms as a fan influence my analysis and research as a scholar. Rather than try and ignore this inevitable geek factor, I have embraced the benefits of my specific presence in New Zealand with the understanding that any type of analytical and empirical study

![Fig 1. A true geek sees the Rings everywhere](image)
of this Rings/New Zealand phenomenon would not have been fully informed without the fulfillment and recognition of the three different levels I was enacting during this trip. While on my outing I was able to negotiate between and among these different personas and their interplay enhanced my recollections of those experiences. The reason for this very specific and detailed description of my experience in New Zealand is that it was constantly reiterated and mirrored in my direct experience with the landscape of the country, and it is the shifting role that the landscape has taken in New Zealand tourism that is the focus of this study.

What Happened Down Under

The filming of the *Lord of the Rings* has left a definite indelible mark on New Zealand culture, one that has been embraced by much of the population of the country. Everyone seems to know someone else who was an Uruk-hai or served coffee to a famous actor, and there is a joy that stems from the New Zealand hosts when they talk about the involvement of the entire nation in bringing Middle Earth to the screen. On more than one occasion I have heard Kiwis say that they have willingly become “hobbits” and they even have a Minister of the *Lord of the Rings* (appointed apparently because of his Gandalfesque appearance.) But the tourist industry that has developed has real (and also virtual) implications on the landscape of New Zealand and continues to play a part in affixing a Northern European mythology to the heritage of this southern Pacific nation. The production of this new heritage results in the loss of prominence for other factors— the indigenous Maori, adventure sports, unique geology, colonial history—that at other times had been the focus of different heritages and the major selling points in tourism. Within the negotiation and creation of this new heritage, global trends particular to the cultural logic of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century are recognizable in the *Lord of the Rings*
phenomenon in New Zealand. Key words such as virtuality, simulacrum, erasure, authenticity, real, and hyperreal are unavoidable and are foundational terms for the discussion of the analysis of the landscape(s) that are Aotearoa (the Maori name for New Zealand)/Middle Earth/New Zealand. As digital paintbrushes make a field a mountain range and a clear sky full of ashen black clouds questions such as these are brought to bear: when you are standing in New Zealand, where are you, where do you want to be? Why do you come to New Zealand, are you coming to Middle Earth? Is Middle Earth there, can you make it there? What happens to the Maori, what happens to the Kiwis, what happens to the bungy jumps? Where am I standing? These are questions of global culture, high-speed travel, of books and films, of colonization and re-colonization and entertainment colonization, all of which are connected and at times elusive and as ephemeral as the 1s and 0s of digital code.

I wish briefly now to return to my individual role as the tourist-fan-scholar adventuring across these now uncertain terrains. I return because I want to reemphasize how vital to my interaction with the New Zealand landscape all three facets of my persona on this journey were. As a tourist I was looking at a different place with an outsider’s gaze, eager to be hosted, looking for new experiences, seeking out the beautiful and memorable. As a fan I wanted to soak in as much of the Lord of the Rings phenomenon as possible. The Lord of the Rings saga has one of the most noticeable fan bases in contemporary culture, and the lore created by J.R.R. Tolkien has spawned an entire fantasy subculture with many loyal followers, a group that I am most certainly a part of. I wanted to visit the sites, talk to the people, and recreate the fantasy world I have enjoyed since my youth when I first watched the book and watched the animated version endless times with my brother. But accompanying this geek-tourist enthusiasm was the scholar in me who was forever critical and wary of these experiences. What did it mean that I could never find
a location in Middle Earth when I was looking at a map of New Zealand? What would people have said to me if I visited New Zealand in the summer of 2001 before the first movie even came out and what would we have in common? Would I have ever gone to New Zealand had it not been for the movies? While the geek in me got me on the plane, how did my complete and multi-faceted self experience the places I found? Where the geek might find disappointment, the tourist might be deeply satisfied, and it was my critical self that found this most compelling. It was also through this constant shifting and questioning of person and place that the nature of the landscape was revealed.

Despite moving from one emphasis to another within my travels, I was always in New Zealand, always present and always aware. In the same manner, the theoretical question: where am I standing? as a single question can have multiple answers, multiple levels of satisfaction. These different answers can be found by looking at the different levels that the creation, dissemination, and enactment of Rings tourism occurs on. In complement to the promotion of the tourist industry is the experience of the tourist, in this case myself, while negotiating the different media across which the tourist interaction occurs. In searching for the way the landscape marks and is marked by this interaction one must sift through a deluge of information as the Rings experience globally has occurred across many. Among this voluminous array of source material an understanding of the real physical presence of the landscape of New Zealand in this conversation can be found, but only by experiencing the events that encompass the tourism and traversing that land. These experiences sometimes were in accordance with how the presence of the land was promoted while at other times it was the incongruities that occurred with respect to one’s expectations that were most telling. This paper will ultimately look to come to conclusions based on both the accordance and incongruity within my experience. Once
I establish certain heritage and cultural developments in New Zealand that provide the foundation for what I found with my compatriots out in the New Zealand bush, I will locate my arguments in a number or particular moments where I was able to synthesize the tourist, the fan, and the scholar, and come to understand the complexity of how the landscape of New Zealand functions within this particular scope of tourism.

**The Production of a New Stage of New Zealand Heritage**

The landscape of New Zealand has a character that reveals the multiple layers that heritage can accrue through time. In her 1998 book *Destination Culture*, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes about the development of heritage in New Zealand.

New Zealand tourism projects an imagined landscape that segments the history of the country into three hermetic compartments. The nature story stops with the coming of people. The indigenous story stops with the coming of Europeans. And the Europeans (and later immigrants) have until recently not been convinced that their story is very interesting.¹

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett shows here how heritage can be mobilized in different ways to reflect different cultural stages in a nation’s history. Tourism as a business can then draw from and develop in relation to the historical structure that is formulated and the resultant pool of information. As the people perceive themselves anew the heritage will take shape and be redefined in order to enhance the outward image of the nation as well as bolster the internal self-image in support of the tourist industry. But the coming of the *Lord of the Rings* phenomenon has added to this accrual of heritage in a new way that is specific to the circumstances of the

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current global cultural logic. This cinematic heritage portends a new impact on the real and the historical by the virtual and popular cultural. In light of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s comments relating to heritage, the *Lord of the Rings* phenomenon can be looked at as the next stage of New Zealand tourism. The European story has begun to come to a close and been replaced with the Middle Earth story. This new stage functions slightly differently from the others in that it is derived from an occurrence with very little tangible evidence remaining. As the 11th edition of the Lonely Planet guidebook relates

> If you’re one of those travelers who was inspired to come down under by the scenery of the Rings movies, you won’t be disappointed . . . However if you’re come seeking scenes of Middle Earth itself, you might be disappointed. Filming occurred at over 150 locations, but, despite the fact that a handful of tour companies offer tours to actual film sites, there’s not much to see anywhere. NZ’s great attraction as Middle Earth, remember, was the *unspoiled* [author’s emphasis] nature of its wilderness . . . Jackson’s agreement with DOC [Department of Conservation] included dismantling all the sets immediately afterwards.²

For the natural, indigenous, and European stages in New Zealand there remained landmarks and sites of importance. Even with the change in emphasis and different eras there were obvious physical reminders that could be visited and tours taken to as well as artifacts that can be displayed in a museum. The *Lord of the Rings* stage of tourism however is not as grounded as these previous stages and hinges most particularly on a collective memory of the 16 months when New Zealand was temporarily turned into Middle Earth, but then dutifully restored to its previous condition as part of the real New Zealand landscape. This fourth stage shows that

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although the stories may end as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests, in fact the places do not lose the history that accumulates in those spaces over time. Rather the different cultural and natural heritages share the sites and it is how the tourist industry portrays those landscapes that define them at that moment. There is in fact a mobilization of very similar language in describing the landscape to promote different types of tourism in different stages. In *Destination Culture*, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett quotes the back of a pre-*Lord of the Rings* postcard: “Tranquil lakes, snow-clad mountains, rolling pastures, native forests, magnificent seascapes—all combine to make New Zealand a land of unparalleled beauty and a joy to tourists.”

In Ian Brodie’s *The Lord of the Rings Location Guidebook*, *Lord of the Rings* film stars use almost the same language as the postcard. Viggo Mortensen (Aragorn) says, “The woods were nearby. A beautiful river was always nearby. No matter how urban a place was, it was never very far away from something that felt more or less primeval.” Here the different heritages share the land and beauty that transcends heritage constructions.

However the land can also be activated to differentiate between the stages of tourism and the differentiation that has occurred with respect to landscape reveals how the *Lord of the Rings* has caused a shift in the tourist industry as well as in the nation’s cultural identity. The Kiwis

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3 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 142.
never found themselves content with their European heritage as a tourist draw because they did not believe that people would travel so far to visit a cultural heritage that was ultimately more accessible and authentic in England. But the filming of the *Lord of the Rings* has been a uniquely Kiwi experience with all of the filming occurring within the country and most of the post-production work occurring at the WETA studio facilities that the director Peter Jackson had constructed specifically for the film. You can see from talking to Kiwis that there is a distinct pride derived from Jackson’s decision to do all the work on their and his home soil because it has given them something distinct and globally notable. Rather than being England on the other side of the world, New Zealand is unique as being the home of Middle Earth, a land that had never been brought to life until now, and this new differentiation is mobilized in the literature of this newest tourist industry. In Brodie’s guidebook, Ian McKellen (Gandalf) says

> Everything here is more magnificent. The landscape is familiar in the sense it’s been formed by rain—just as Tolkien’s Oxfordshire was—but the vegetation is unusual and the mountains seem so much sharper. If you’re looking for what the poets used to call ‘the awful—a sense of awe—that is what you find in New Zealand. And it's wild in a way that England isn't wild." \(^5\)

Elijah Wood (Frodo Baggins) is quoted on the front of a pamphlet of one of the *Lord of the Rings* tour, Safari of the Rings, as saying that “New Zealand IS Middle Earth. It has every geological formation and geographical landscape you can imagine . . . and some you can’t.”\(^6\)

Not only does New Zealand make a spectacular Middle Earth, it makes a better one than England. On this level the landscape is less a common ground for shared heritage than a

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\(^5\) Brodie, 91.

competitive space where the enactors of these heritages look to vie for attention both locally and globally from tourists.

Viggo Mortensen, Ian McKellen and Elijah Wood’s comments with regards to their New Zealand experience are also useful in discussing how heritage is constructed by the recollection and conveyance of memory. A nation can have all the landmarks and artifacts it can handle, but without a memory of the significance of each person, place, or thing, a heritage will slowly fade out of existence. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s discussion of the termination of the stages of tourism is again useful in this analysis to explain how the emphasis is not only shifted for the business needs of the tourist industry but also because other memories become more potent and establish themselves more readily in the fabric of the tourist experience. The *Lord of the Rings* phenomenon recognizes and engages the memory side of tourism with vigor because the people involved directly in the industry and the citizens of the country understand its particular temporality. There is virtually nothing left to be seen at the filming sites and the remaining props and costumes are warehoused at WETA in the hopes of someday opening a museum. The entire industry is based on the memory of those people who worked on the films and the hopes that the sites in their current state will be a sufficient tourist draw.

The group I was traveling with during the conference got to take a tour that survives primarily on these types of memories. The company, Glenorchy Air, runs flights under their Trilogy Trail programs to remote filming locations for people interested in seeing where the film team created such locales as Isengard, Cormallen Fields, the Orc Mound, Lothlorien, and Amon Hen. Our tour guide was Robert Rutherford, who had personally flown Viggo Mortensen, Ian McKellen, and a number of the producers and site coordinators. The tour was approximately three hours, half spent in the air and the other half on the ground walking around the different
sites, many of which were very close to one another in New Zealand although far apart in the books in both time and place. On the ground we spent a half hour just hearing all of the stories that Robert had collected from his prolonged involvement with the films flying people around the area. Here is an example of one of his stories from the Trilogy Trail website that I can recall him telling us almost word for word:

We received a frantic phone call in the early afternoon of the first of December “Could we fly a key to Paradise immediately Apparently, someone had forgotten the key to the property container which held the bow that Legolas used during the battle of Amon Hen and everything had come to a grinding halt until it could be got out. We were met by a very relieved production crew member when we landed in Glenorchy 20 minutes later.7 This story is revealing in that it takes advantage of the voraciousness of fandom for all and any information that is in some way connected to the stories in the film. That information can be about the characters, the actors, the site locators, the truck drivers, and even the pilots who fly them all around. It is part of the geek’s desire for total knowledge of a world and an almost insatiable search for as much knowledge as possible. Robert was very aware of how the geek principles worked, being an avid fan of the books and films himself, and this familiarity

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combined with his knowledge of the local area and the intimate details of the filming appealed to the inner geeks in our fellowship and represents how this tourist heritage functions. There are many Robert Rutherford’s around New Zealand ready to share their brushes with stardom with anyone interested in getting caught up in the mystique that they generate. Now that the movies have been completed it is only by the perpetuation of these memories that New Zealand can act as Middle Earth.

The finite life of this tourist stage is evident if you look at the kind of tours Robert Rutherford told us he gave before Peter Jackson began bringing hobbits down under. When we asked him, Robert would tell us that each mountain peak we were cruising around has its own significance in the Maori culture and that near where much of the filming was done there were large deposits of greenstone (jade), which the Maori use to make jewelry and other goods. There was also the briefest mention of the unique geological history of the area and of the flora and fauna, but all of these concerns clearly played second fiddle to Rings stories that Robert knows will make him more money and which he knew we would probably be more interested in. He was right.

Robert Rutherford is involved in the process of shaping the landscape he knows through his memory and experience. This type of cultural production is happening all over New Zealand as people embrace the *Lord of the Rings*. But the adoption of this new heritage and the shift in emphasis on what is more significant to the identity of the people and places concerned also becomes a point of contestation because of the origins of the *Lord of the Rings* phenomenon. J.R.R. Tolkien was an Oxford professor who wrote the trilogy in order to create for England a mythology that equaled those of other Northern European countries. Tolkien found English prehistory to be lacking when compared to the Norse and Icelandic pantheons and legends, so by
drawing from many of these other mythologies and combining them with his own original stories, Tolkien created a rich and diverse world within which to develop his plot and characters. The stories are therefore connected directly to the enrichment of English history, an important factor when taken into consideration with New Zealand’s history as a British colony. By adopting Tolkien’s story through the development of the film, New Zealand can be viewed as having allowed a recolonization by English heritages through Tolkien’s lore. The connection of pakeha (non-Maori) Kiwi’s to Western culture is very strong but there is a strong sense of sovereignty and individuality in the New Zealand national character that would not seem eager to accept this type of recolonization. Added to this mythological colonization is the colonization of the country by the transnational cultural entity that is the motion picture industry. With the development of a prominent movie industry and an increased relationship with Hollywood, New Zealand is left open to an industry that is not held in high regard when questions of cultural maintenance, diversity, and quality come to the fore as they very often do in New Zealand. And the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is not the only movie to find a home in New Zealand as Gwyneth Paltrow’s Sylvia Plath used the University of Otago for her English university, and Tom Cruise has become a samurai while New Zealand acted as a temporary Japan. While the presence of these two colonizing forces is not the most obvious part of the tourist experience it does act as a reminder of what can be lost in the negotiation of the tourist performance and how the host and visitor have a complementary agreement in the interaction. There is agency in these choices however, and it is apparent that most New Zealanders agree to the consensus directions in which the *Lord of the Rings* has carried the national identity.
The Land Within the Scope of Heritage

My discussion so far has positioned me within my tourist-fan-scholar framework, as well as sketched out some of the history and structures that contribute to the generation of a *Lord of the Rings* heritage in New Zealand. To ground this argument I want to draw upon my travels to expose the exultation as well as the frustration of someone experiencing the *Lord of the Rings*. The parameters of my particular geek tourist experience of course included the acquisition and coordination of gear. Our fellowship set off into the New Zealand bush with the following automation and gadgetry: a 4-wheel drive Subaru Legacy, two laptops with DVD players, two digital video recorders, two still cameras, and a Global Positioning Satellite locator. This gear distinguished us not only as a certain breed of perhaps over enthusiastic tourist-fan-scholars with a penchant technology, but is also revealing of the type of interaction with the rugged bush that is generated by the Rings phenomenon. We quickly realized that just as the flexibility of memory is responsible for the maintenance of the ephemeral heritage we were in search of, the flexibility of imagery in contemporary cinema made the actual locales we were searching for continually elusive. Time, space, and digital imagery all conspired to leave every experience just short of satisfaction. It was this continually elusive search for a landscape that was never really there that marked our tourist-fan-scholar experience, and as the enthusiasm of the fan

![Fig 4. The Towers of the Argonath on screen but not in the landscape.](image-url)
ebbed, and the tourist took a rest, the scholarly aspect of our group realized that as we traveled across the New Zealand landscape, we traversed not the desert of the real but a battleground where the undeniable authenticity of a physical space clashed with the simulacra of a virtual world.

As our fellowship journeyed to different locations the real landscape revealed how digital technology and cinematic technique can appropriate locations and with the swipe of a digital paintbrush transform them into a fantasy world. In the course of the filming and release of the *Lord of the Rings*, this digital appropriation has displaced a terrain with millennia worth of geological and historical significance with a mythical land created less than a hundred years ago by an Oxford professor on the other side of the world. But, the tourist experience as you move across New Zealand is not an immersion in a totally mythical land, and the collapse of the cinematic appropriation can result in a disjointed and uncertain tourist experience. Even as you are looking for the Pillars of the Kings or the Ford of Bruinen, the sprawling beautiful landscape that surrounds you exposes the artificial simulated nature of those virtual places. You realize that you are in fact on the Kawarau River or in Arrowtown. These are real places and no matter how tempting and illusionary the virtual experience becomes they are evident. Thus, *Lord of the Rings* tourism in New Zealand is an encounter with the hyperreal and its machinations in the truest sense because even in the search for the virtual spaces created by the filmmakers there is a world, hard, physical, and in every instance stunning, that is the world of the real, the geological, the indigenous, that world is the landscape of New Zealand.
Perhaps it is fitting that in “The Precessions of Simulacra,” Baudrillard begins his essay recollecting an allegorical Borges story about maps, because the tourist’s encounters with the hyperreal and simulacra while trekking across New Zealand is greatly influenced by the remapping of the countryside by the digital and cinematic techniques used in filmmaking. *The Lord of the Rings* after all is about a journey across a harsh landscape, a tireless battle where perhaps the most perpetually daunting foe is geography. As a tourist therefore this struggle and interaction with geography becomes a very important part of the journey, especially since the only remnant of the filming are those physical spaces that Peter Jackson, Ian McKellen, and Viggo Mortensen spent eighteen months running around and brandishing swords. While watching the movie, the viewer connects the images constructed from this New Zealand landscape and applies it to the map that appears in the book, and is shown quite clearly in the film. For those people who visit New Zealand the map of Middle Earth becomes the guide by which they are journeying, not one published by the New Zealand ministry of tourism. But as one sets out in search of the film locations that represent in toto the journeys of Frodo and his companions, the compression of time and space and reconfiguration of landscapes that occur on the screen become dislocated. The pristine wilderness constructed within the simulacra of the film and Ring mythology are fractured and broken apart revealing almost uncomfortably the cinematic mechanisms that are used to create the fascinating feats of scale on the big screen. How bizarre was it to find that as the Nazgûl rode to their doom in the first movie they spent thirty seconds in one location in New Zealand, and for the ten seconds immediately following they were in a location hundreds of miles away in a remote part of the wilderness that we could not even reach in our trusty Subaru Legacy. The reality of a particular New Zealand geographic

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continuity rather than a Middle Earth continuity reveals the hyperreality of the film and can be disturbing and unsatisfying to someone on a quest to relive (in the real world) what are very often vivid fantasies within ones imaginations. To add to the geographic disjointedness of the different locales is the influence of digitization in creating the filmed product in contrast to what we were able to find in the wilderness. The *Lord of the Rings* franchise, for all of its grit and gore, is a highly digitized, computer-generated collection of films that has used to the fullest effects cutting-edge technologies. While the result in the cinema is a stunning visual epic, there is a direct impact on how the landscape of New Zealand is reconfigured and sometimes erased along with previous heritages.

In order to portray how I experienced different levels of this virtual-real disjointedness I will convey three particular site visitations that my group made on our journey. These three sites show three different aspects of the manipulation of the landscape in Rings tourism. The first site is from the movie locale Dimrill Dale that was located in New Zealand at the top of the Remarkable mountain range. The second location is Isengard, which actually is in a place called Paradise and was part of the Trilogy Trail tour with Robert Rutherford. The final location is the Pillars of the Kings, the Argonath, which were digitally inserted onto the Kawarau River. Each of these sites was worthwhile and memorable but revealed the discord between the expectations generated by the Rings tourism phenomenon and the physical reality of the landscape.

The most physically taxing trek that our fellowship took was to a location at the top of the Remarkable mountain range near Queenstown. Home to a ski resort, the Remarkables are a jagged mountain range with one very rocky road winding towards the upper peaks where the slopes and our destination lay. After almost an hour on the treacherous road and another thirty minutes hiking we were still not at the GPS coordinates indicated in our trusty location
guidebook, and we decided that we were not of the alpine fortitude necessary for this particular challenge and had gotten close enough. We took some pictures of the area we had been able to reach and headed back down the mountain. Upon returning to the car I referred to the DVD of the first film to try and see if perhaps we had come close to our goal and simply missed it. I scanned through the film and found the scene that was referred to. It lasted no longer than three seconds. This almost impossible to attain destination which had taken the better part of three hours of our day was insignificant in the film. To add to this disappointment, the splendid vista that Aragorn looks out upon in the film, the mountains that form the Spine of the World and the forest of Lothlorien, were completely missing. These features had been completely digitally generated and had replaced what I was now looking at a large, grey, not particularly interesting mountain. Because of our exertion, the short duration of the scene in the film, and the missing digital scenery this was the most disappointing of our experiences and was a moment that clearly revealed how this particular tourist

**Fig 5.** Aragorn trekking through Dimrill Dale.

**Fig 6.** What I found in the Remarkables. Rocks.
industry leaves the discernment to the traveler, as nothing in the literature that we had would have warned us of the particular insignificance of this place. Here the virtual landscapes and our fandom had led us to an unfulfilling experience, one that I will not note as important as a tourist or fan but find particularly interesting as a scholar. It shows how the portrayal of New Zealand in the films can be deceptive. When you are watching the films you are not watching New Zealand, you are watching Middle Earth and it is important to note that difference when you are huffing and puffing in frustration and exhaustion at the top of a mountain. In the theatre you are watching a simulacra, a place that never really existed although it apparently has some ties to a real location. The images in the film of Dimrill Dale are diffuse and elusive if you are searching for them in the real world because that is not where they are meant to exist, and any attempt to relive those places will fail because they are unlivable.

While the experience at Dimrill Dale was disappointing, our earlier trip to Paradise, despite a similar lack of signification was one of the most valuable and more memorable of our journey, and really put the virtual and real in contestation for our attention. Paradise is an area at the northern end of a glacial lake that combines a beautiful riverbed with forests, open fields, tree covered slopes, snow capped peaks, and rolling hills. We landed in the small plane of the Trilogy Trail directly on a field that cattle and sheep were grazing in, an area known as Dan’s Paddock, and were immediately struck by the scenery. Standing on its own the vistas are stunning, and the variety of terrain remarkable. But what made

![Fig 7. Paradise on Earth.](image-url)
the landscape especially enriched for us as travelers was our ability to pick out how the filmmakers had used the area as a backdrop for the digitally constructed city of Isengard with its solitary black spire Orthanc. This city, which is crucial in both of the first two films, is completely computer generated and then situated within the mountains of Paradise. What distinguished this experience from the Dimrill Dale experience was that the presence of the landscape was in its own right stunning and dramatic. Sure, the *Lord of the Rings* had brought me to New Zealand and got me on a small plane out to Paradise, but the beauty of the location was not because of the *Lord of the Rings*, the beauty of the location was why the *Lord of the Rings* had come here. Here the landscape reigned supreme. The virtual can take a place and change it, but many landscapes do not need virtual enhancement to have a spectacular existence. This is particularly true of New Zealand, which consists of a never-ending variety of scenery. My reactions to Paradise reminded me that the land does not need the *Lord of the Rings* and that there is an undeniable strength and presence in natural phenomena that cannot only be dampened by a dependency and need for the virtual simulacra that are products of cultural processes. The production of tourism and heritage will come and go, and the land will continue to act as a pallet for human imagination, ingenuity, and sometimes unfortunately abuse. Paradise is particular poignant in playing this role in the *Lord of the Rings* tourist phenomenon because of the interplay

![Fig 8. Isengard, with the spire of Orthanc, digitally inserted into Paradise.](image-url)
between the allegory of Isengard and the name of the location. Paradise is given its name because of its natural beauty and Isengard represents the force of industrialism that challenges the durability and beauty of the land. Through the destruction of Isengard by the Ents, industrialism is thwarted, and perhaps Jackson’s ability to create a fountainhead of industrial strength as a virtual space and then wipe it away completely, preserving Paradise can be interpreted as an ecological statement.

My last example of the discoveries I made while negotiating the threefold landscape and my threefold persona occurred upon visiting the site where the Pillars of the Kings, the Argonath, were filmed for the first film. The pillars, two massive monoliths guarding the gates of humankind in the movie, are completely digitally constructed and blended in with landscape filmed on the Kawarau river on New Zealand’s south island. Upon visiting the filming site and discerning where the towers where inserted, two things quickly became apparent. First, the use of camera angles and distortion had made the river and canyon used for the scene seem much larger on screen than they were in person. Second, the next scene in the film revealed how the digital creation of landscapes to juxtapose and supercede those of New Zealand creates a type of erasure through simulacra.

Right after passing through the pillars, the

![Fig 9. The Kawarau River minus Argonath. In the distance is construction for a new bungy center.](image)
fellowship goes around a bend and come out of the ravine onto a lake. Although the scene in the film is quite beautiful, the real geography has been significantly altered for the sake of story and in the process manipulates some very important cultural and historical landmarks because on the other side of the bend in the river is not a lake and waterfall, but the Kawarau River Bungy Jump. This bungy jump, the world’s oldest commercial bungy jump, has its own cultural capital because before the Lord of the Rings adventure sports was one of the most globally noted attractions New Zealand had to offer. Adventure sports, which are in their own right a struggle with landscape and physical limitations, are literally erased from the significance of this geographical space with one digital imposition as Middle Earth maps over an important landmark. Standing near the towers and looking downriver at the bungy jump the stark contrast between Middle Earth and New Zealand was never more apparent.

I was able to return to this location a second time with a different lens of visitation. A week and a half later after my first visit I was whitewater rafting down the Kawarau River and I realized we would be going through the gap in the rocks from the film and then under the bungy jump bridge. Of course my geek instinct first took total control, but after my initial reaction I reflected on how I was shifting between different industries within adventure sports as well as different tourist heritages. This return was particularly insightful in displaying how tourist productions are not hermetically sealed occurrences and there is a constant contestation across boundaries between experiences, memories, cultural capital, and heritage with commerce.
ultimately underlying all transactions. It seems that bungy jumping seems to be holding its own as this bulletin from the AJ Hackett Bungy (operators of the Kawarau site) website attests.

With only 6 months to go, the count down is on for the opening of the new $4 million development at the World’s Original Bungy site, the Kawarau Bungy Bridge in Queenstown.

Set underground, the 800 sqm visitor centre will house an extensive retail collection, modernise bungy check-in system, the latest technology in digital photos for the bungy jumper and spectator alike.\(^9\)

4 million dollars NZ (approximately 2 million US) is a significant amount of money, and as the different forms of tourist feed off of one another different heritages stake their claim for the cultural and economic capital available in the market. For the moment at least, all parties seem to be benefiting from one another, with the *Lord of the Rings* providing a substantial boost that has prevented New Zealand from suffering from the post-9/11 slump in tourism that many countries have suffered.\(^10\)

**Where Am I Standing? Aotearoa?**

So what is the end result of this continual interaction with the collision between the virtual and the real and how does a tourist reconcile this experience while on his journey. The digital and cinematic appropriation of the New Zealand landscape and the resulting manipulations and erasures are representative of trends that are continuing undercurrents in contemporary culture. But, while simulacra and virtuality allow the fantasy world of the *Lord of


\(^10\) Hunt, 35.
the Rings series to be created and become the cultural force that it is, the tourist experience destabilizes the very foundations of simulation that are necessary for the illusion to be maintained. Inevitably the search for Frodo’s footsteps take Ring tourists to lands and places that are not in the movie and are grounded in a reality that is in stark contrast to the images of the film. Often this reality supercedes the experience of the movies themselves but never completely regains its original prominence. It is this landscape of oscillation between two worlds Middle Earth/New Zealand that the Ring tourist travels simultaneously experiencing the real and the hyperreal. This interplay between the real and the hyperreal is situated within a new heritage, constructed as a draw for tourists and taking advantage of the natural resources of the land, the memories of the peoples, and the cultural capital of the Lord of the Rings mythology.

The events that lead to the development of this new tourist industry in New Zealand mirror the global spread of culture and homogenization that sees Western preferences dominate. In reviewing my experiences in New Zealand I am now asking myself where is Aotearoa in the discussion and proliferation of the Lord of the Rings. It is the indigenous history of the islands that seems to have the most to lose from the adoption of New Zealand as Middle Earth. The bicultural issue is always present in New Zealand, a country with two national languages and a significant population of indigenous peoples. In the past it is the heritage and culture of indigenous peoples that have had to fight the hardest to resist the capital forces that drive tourism, struggling to keep their identity and sovereignty. The Lord of the Rings for all the apparent innocence of its geek hordes is also a money making machine, with DVDs, extended versions, book reprints, action figures, video games, etc. saturating every marketable media milking the phenomenon for all it is worth. If such a powerful light is now shown on New Zealand since it is Middle Earth perhaps people will more readily see Aotearoa and its wonderful
indigenous culture. Because remember that for every *Lord of the Rings* there is a *Whale Rider* just waiting to happen.
FIGURE SOURCES

Fig. 1 - Photo by Kimon Keramidas

Fig. 2 – Brodie, cover.

Fig. 3 - Photo by Kimon Keramidas

Fig. 4 - Photo by Kimon Keramidas

Fig. 5 – Brodie, 70.

Fig. 6 - Photo by Kimon Keramidas

Fig. 7 - Photo by Kimon Keramidas

Fig. 8 – Brodie, 75.

Fig. 9 - Photo by Kimon Keramidas

WORKS CITED


