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Imagined Memories and Material Connections: The Warner Bros. Studio Tour London – The Making of Harry Potter™ as a Home for a Fanbase in Transition 2025

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Sofie Stobberup

Imagined Memories and Material Connections

The Warner Bros. Studio Tour London – The Making of Harry Potter™ as a Home for a Fanbase in Transition

ABSTRACT

I examine the *Warner Bros. Studio Tour London – The Making of Harry Potter™* (TMoHP) as a hybrid cultural arena where fandom, heritage practices and commercial logics are interwoven in a staged environment. Grounded in a museological perspective and sensory autoethnographic fieldwork across six visits between 2016 and 2024, I explore how the site's design blends material authenticity with embodied and affective "registers of engagement" (Smith 2021) to reveal processes of emotional and imaginative heritage (cf. Smith 2021; Reijnders 2020). Staged highlights and more quiet sensory details alike contribute to an "affective infrastructure" by shaping movement, memory-work, and a felt sense of returning to a familiar place. The analysis investigates these different layers and comprises three sections.

The first examines how scenography, spatial rhythm, and institutional choices produce shifting experiences of authenticity within a commercial context. The second turns to *Heimat* (cf. Sandvoss 2005), *imagined memories* (cf. Duffett 2013), and *punctum* (cf. Barthes 1981) to illuminate how recognition and affect surface in more unexpected ways as visitors navigate the attraction. The final section traces how upscaling, increased digital mediation and new visitor demographics alter the atmosphere and place pressure on fan modes of intimacy and participation.

By examining intersections between fandom and heritage tourism, I argue that TMoHP's ongoing negotiation of affect, materiality, and belonging reflects broader changes in contemporary culture. The longitudinal perspective also allows me to reflect on the tensions around cultural sustainability of branded experience sites, and how researchers can document research as "snapshots" in a franchise environment that both welcomes its visitors and yet remains closed.

KEYWORDS

media tourism, affect, experience design, autoethnography, fans, *Harry Potter*

AUTHOR

Sofie Stobberup Rasmussen is an Art Historian (MA) and former PhD researcher at The University of Southern Denmark. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she paused her research on iconic literary cultural heritage and popular media in tourism in Denmark and the UK to focus on a museum career. After working as a curator at National Museum of Denmark, she has now resumed her broader study of Harry Potter tourism (2016-2024).

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Introduction: From Fan Pilgrimage to Infrastructures of Emotional Heritage

In recent years, the relationship between cultural heritage and the experience economy (cf. Pine/Gilmore 2011) has shifted, opening research fields that include popular culture and fandom. Media tourism, defined as travel related to film, television, literature, gaming, and animation (cf. Reijnders 2020, 21), demonstrates how places associated with fictional universes are increasingly transformed into commercial destinations. These hybrid spaces blur the lines between fiction and reality, and between object-authentic heritage and branded experience (cf. Lovell/Bull 2017). The global scope is evident in Japan's *seichi junrei* ("contents tourism"), which has become a major cultural form (cf. Seaton/Yamamura/Sugawa-Shimada/Jang 2017). It includes attractions based on franchises like *Harry Potter*, such as the Warner Bros. Studio Tour in Tokyo from 2023. This article turns to its original Western counterpart: *Warner Bros. Studio Tour London – The Making of Harry Potter™* (TMoHP), which opened in 2012 at Leavesden Studios, an original film production site.

As Henri Lefebvre (2013) has shown, space is produced through rhythm and embodied practice, making TMoHP a hybrid as site *and* process. I extend material and intangible heritage theory into fan tourism by taking a design-centered, longitudinal perspective on how popular heritage operates both as emotional process and as curated site. Drawing on fieldwork, I examine how TMoHP performs its own theory as both object and method, a case for researchers and practitioners, and a personal "magical mirror" for fans who use it as a second 'home' across life stages. My understanding of fandom as both emotional and geographical aligns with Waysdorf and Reijnders' notion of fan homecoming as "a return visit to a familiar fandom-related place" that becomes "a true place" (2019, 52). The intangible heritage dimension connects with Wernecke and Massignan's idea of mediated "artificial" collective memory extending across all Potter-related sites (cf. 2023, 239). Framed this way, TMoHP appears not merely as a themed attraction, but as a complex cultural infrastructure. Neither museum nor theme park, but something in-between, as a site of both memory and imagination (cf. Reijnders 2011). My aim is to show that this in-betweenness, where design, memory, emotion, and imagination converge, is central to sustaining TMoHP's affective appeal.

By introducing Laurajane Smith's concept of *emotional heritage* (2021) in a fandom context, I approach TMoHP as a site where visitors negotiate belonging within a curated yet commercialized environment. This article analyses TMoHP as an infrastructure reminiscent of a "total artwork" and asks: How does it function as a site of affective 'homecoming,' curated heritage, and large-scale commercial attraction? And what happens over time, when 'magic' scales up? Situating TMoHP within emotional heritage theory also foregrounds a wider spectrum of affective heritage practices (cf. Smith 2021, 59) across the *Harry Potter* fandom, as I synthesize anthropological fan and tourism research with institutional heritage theory through exhibition analysis.

In my analysis, I also draw on a range of other concepts: *Heimat* (cf. Sandvoss 2005), *imagined memories* (cf. Duffett 2013), and *punctum* (cf. Barthes 1981). Together, they provide a foundation for examining different *registers of engagement* (cf. Smith 2021), a term I use to describe how forms of memory-work and affective practice among visitors intersect with authenticity, commercialization, and cultural sustainability at TMoHP. Methodologically, my interdisciplinary approach is rooted in my background in art history and museology, combining critical heritage studies, fan studies, affect theory, and semiotics. This lens clarifies how emotion, atmosphere, place, and identity intersect at the attraction. I employ autoethnography to experience and analyze TMoHP through embodied observation and sensory documentation.¹ Autoethnography is necessary here because access was restricted in the franchise-controlled environment, which makes the researcher's own embodied experience a crucial, if limited, source of knowledge: a limitation I also reflect on in this article.

The article proceeds as follows: I situate TMoHP within theories of emotional heritage, authenticity, and affect before turning to a three-part analysis. The first part examines TMoHP as a curated 'object' in the context of authenticity; the second explores affective highlights of the tour, where the design nurtures different registers of engagement through *Heimat*, *imagined memories*, and *punctum*; and the third traces transformation over time (2016-2024), as I conclude with reflections on implications of studying branded experience sites as living emotional heritage. The three layers of analysis reflect the researcher's own registers of engagement, extending exhibition analysis into fan studies by treating TMoHP as a curated infrastructure where identity and authority are continuously negotiated.

Framing the Experience

Imagination and Enclavic Spaces

TMoHP is an institutional space where popular culture reshapes collective memory, aligning with Stijn Reijnders's concept of "imaginative heritage," where fictional narratives may "become heritage itself" (2020, 28). Reijnders mentions *Harry Potter* tourism in this context and calls for comparative research beyond single cases (cf. 29). While my broader research maps multiple *Harry Potter* sites in Denmark and the UK (see Stobberup 2018; Stobberup forthcoming), this article focuses on a single institutional design. TMoHP offers a clear example of an infrastructure where imagination and heritage merge with aesthetics and emotions. As an art historian, I find that concentrating on a single "object" can allow for a more attentive engagement that helps nuance observations across sites. My approach also differs from fan and tourism scholarship based on interviews and reviews by showing the curatorial design as integral to affective heritage practices in a commercial context.

My multi-sited approach parallels Jane Lovell's work on the "magical gaze" and "magi-heritage" in heterogeneous urban spaces, which highlights how the *Harry Potter* franchise produces forms of "fantastic" cultural heritage that transcend traditional authenticity claims (cf. Lovell 2019; Lovell/Bull 2017). Unlike many urban media tourism sites, TMoHP remains a closed enclave (cf. Edensor 2006) that merges museal, object-based authenticity with the commercial logic of affective experience design. Like Lovell, I focus on multimodal and performative dimensions to move beyond the visual paradigm of the tourist gaze (cf. Urry/Larsen 2011). For this analysis, TMoHP is more relevant than urban spaces and theme

¹ Note: This research was conducted in a branded tourist attraction and reflects the researcher's own engagement with the site in a role similar to other tourists. The research is not affiliated with the *Harry Potter* franchise itself and remains based on data available to anyone who might visit under similar circumstances.



parks,² because it is staged as a birthplace for a creative production, which links it to other literary sites in my research. However, I acknowledge how scholarship on *Game of Thrones* tourism and other global franchises has challenged the idea of a single, original “birthplace” by showing how imagination expands visitor engagement and reshapes museal understandings of objecthood (e.g., Waysdorf 2021; Williams 2020; Es/Reijnders/Bolderman/Waysdorf 2020).

Authenticity in Fan Tourism

TMoHP highlights how cultural institutions not only preserve artefacts but also curate affective states of belonging and negotiate tensions between commerce and heritage. Here, authenticity oscillates between object and experience, and between what is strategically staged (cf. MacCannell 1976) and existentially felt, positioning my analysis within broader tourism debates, where authenticity is understood not only as object-related but also performative (cf. Wang 1999; Knudsen/Waade 2010). It is both material (original props and sets) and experientially performed through scenography, sound, and ritualized visitor practices as a liminal play experience (e.g., Lee 2012; Larsen 2015; Stobberup 2018; Milazzo/Santos 2022; Milazzo 2023).

Rather than relying on historical authenticity, media tourism often memorializes fiction as something that “took place” (Reijnders 2011, 14), positioning TMoHP as a hybrid site that merges museal structures with an active transmedia franchise. Authenticity was central to my case selection, especially the tension between TMoHP as an “authentic” fan pilgrimage site and a more generic commercial hub that could be situated anywhere (as exemplified by the Tokyo Studio Tour). Scholarship shows that commercialism and authenticity are not necessarily mutually exclusive in fan tourism (e.g., Williams 2018; Baker 2018; Lovell/Bull 2017), and Lovell and Bull’s (2017) work on (in)authenticity in heritage sites and theme parks synthesizes many recent debates. The concept perhaps remains relevant precisely because it appears irrelevant in a globalized transmedia context. I draw on this when arguing that TMoHP’s distinctive spatial design both builds on and challenges material understandings of authenticity.

Emotional Heritage as Affective Infrastructure

The oscillation between objecthood and performativity (site and process) helps explain why Laurajane Smith’s work (2021) on institutionalized affective heritage practices is central to my approach. Smith characterizes emotional heritage as “a performative process that is ultimately about expressing and negotiating an affective state of belonging and believing” (57). This is useful for understanding the fan-driven affective heritage practices at TMoHP. Drawing on theories of cultural memory as performance (cf. Macdonald 2013; Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1998) and affect as discursive and pre-discursive practices (cf. Wetherell 2012), Smith reframes heritage as performance and memory-work rather than static material culture.

Like Smith, my museological background follows traditions that view museums not only as repositories of objects, but as sites where power, knowledge, and affect are actively shaped through design

² Work on fan engagement in theme parks and conventions has informed my understanding of simulated, franchise-controlled environments (cf. Waysdorf/Reijnders 2018; Williams 2020; Williams 2025; Baker 2018; Lamerichs 2014), while recent publications on TMoHP in contexts of pilgrimage, transmediality, and media power also shape the field (e.g., Larsen 2015; Freeman 2018; Martens 2019).

and (re)interpretation (e.g., Bennett 2018; Gregory/Witcomb 2007; Hooper-Greenhill 2000). This is evident in TMoHP's immersive scenography, where curatorial intention meets affective fan response, and meaning is not simply 'contained' and 'learned' but also felt. These perspectives help me position TMoHP as a franchise-owned cultural infrastructure reminiscent of museums. My longitudinal documentation of TMoHP demonstrates how affective engagement and curatorial design co-produce heritage, which illustrates Smith's point that how we engage with heritage through practice is as important to analyze as the material sites themselves.

Her analytical tool 'registers of engagement' further helps clarify how fan spaces function as heritage spaces. Visitors engage on multiple levels: from deep identification, where they reinforce existing beliefs, to lack of connection (cf. Smith 2021 155). Acknowledging the latter register becomes increasingly relevant not only in museums but also in fan tourism, as "pilgrimage" sites attract broader publics and as fans grow more ambivalent towards Rowling (cf. Williams 2025). TMoHP is not a static tourist site (monument) celebrating a 'dead author' (cf. Barthes 1967), because a living franchise continually shapes access, design, and atmosphere. 'Registers of engagement' is a useful tool in demonstrating how remembrance and representation are always negotiated between personal experience and institutional boundaries, which is relevant when fandoms and general audiences intermingle (cf. Hills 2018).

Although TMoHP aspires to stage itself as a symbolic 'home' for fans (cf. Sandvoss 2005), a shared nostalgic or national-romantic sense of belonging does not magically occur. Rather, I argue that a range of affective heritage practices (cf. Smith 2021) work as a performative form of upkeep that sustains the site's lasting significance within the *Harry Potter* fandom. This significance unfolds visually, materially, bodily, and discursively through both the franchise's spatial design and the more intangible elements of what I call its affective infrastructure. By this, I refer to the institutionalization of memory-work and affective practice through spatial sequencing, sensory cues (light, sound, material), and scripted participation such as staff rituals, selfie stations, and queuing routines that elicit and regulate visitor emotion. The concept frames TMoHP as a dynamic, affectively charged performance space, where bodies, technologies, narratives, and objects intertwine like an assemblage (cf. Deleuze/Guattari 1987)—though sometimes visibly strained, when upscaling and new crowds emerge. As my fieldwork proves, entanglement is rarely tidy, even when the institutional strategy appears clear. It not only shapes the site but has also defined my methodological approach.

Methods and Positionality

Autoethnography as a Method of Necessity

My approach combines sensory autoethnography with museological observation to analyze TMoHP as both an embodied and analytical site. Although informed by fan studies and anthropological autoethnography (cf. Crouch 2000; Ingold 2011), my method remains primarily museological, shaped by institutional atmospheres and curatorial logics. Here, autoethnography functions less as personal narrative (cf. Duffett 2013, 272) than as a museological tool, even if my own experience and network inevitably helped structure the work under franchise restrictions. I have treated my embodied responses as data rather than bias to trace how design and atmosphere can shape perception, and how playful or photographic rituals emerge through spatial and social flows.

Across six field visits (see Table 1), I observed how scenography, spatial rhythm, and sensory cues modulate atmosphere (cf. Anderson 2009; Böhme 1993; Bille/Bjerregaard/Sørensen 2015) and guide



visitor behavior, allowing a longitudinal perspective on design changes and shifting affective appeals. Where fan studies emphasize community (cf. Hills 2002; Jenkins 1992; Duffett 2013) and tourism studies also often rely on interviews or reviews, my concern was also how space, rhythm, and materiality act as agents in shaping the fan experience. I experimented with sensory ethnography (cf. Pink 2009) to note mood, sound, light, and material textures through short descriptions and sketches, although photography remained my main documentation tool.

Visit	Date	Context	Focus
1	Sep. 23, 2016	Solo visit during special event <i>Back to Hogwarts</i> ; arrival by train and shuttle bus	Early-stage research to experiment with limits of data collection at HP destinations, e.g., writing and drawing <i>in situ</i>
2	Jan. 11, 2017	Solo visit during special event <i>Hogwarts in the Snow</i>	Visit to evaluate whether it was possible to collect data and include TMoHP in the study; photography of tour A-Z, but no writing
3	Apr. 5, 2017	Solo visit during Forbidden Forest opening and expansion	Strategic writing and drawing; sensory notes on sound, light, and mood
4	Apr. 24, 2017	Family visit to observe what it was like as part of a group (time-restricted visit because of bus company)	Focus on shopping/food experiences; atmosphere notably dominated by younger audience and tourists, perhaps due to Easter
5	May 5, 2017	A co-fan experience with brother (time-restricted)	Focus on merch and participatory fan rituals, e.g., wand duel
6	Apr. 9, 2024	Return visit after pandemic with partner (time-restricted)	Focus on re-design (foyer, security), up-scaling (Gringotts, food areas), and tech (screens, selfie-spots); changes observed in design, rhythm, and visitor demographics (children, strollers, etc.)

Table 1: Overview of field visits (2016-2024)

Iterative Methods Under Access Restrictions

Working within access boundaries raised early ethical considerations, especially during the introduction of GDPR legislation in 2016-18. Because of commercial ownership and copyright restrictions, interactions had to remain within the limits of touristic behavior. I contacted TMoHP about publishing photos, backstage access, and the possibility of interviews, but the work had to be done “frontstage” (Larsen 2015). My researcher status was always mentioned to staff, but I could not speak to other visitors. Photography was permitted, though not for publication. Alongside fieldnotes, these images were kept for private analysis and remained central for visual interpretation, for instance, in mapping routes and expansions. Frontstage, *in situ* autoethnography then became not only a methodological choice but a necessity for tracing how affects ‘stick’ to objects, places, and practices (cf. Ahmed 2004). With interviews excluded, I relied on processual observation to explore how both site and experience develop and shift over time.

During the earliest visits, I had not yet decided whether TMoHP would become a primary case or remain a comparative reference point, and my notes reflect this exploratory mode. From Visit 3 onwards, documentation became more systematic, though irregularities remained. While initially frustrating, the uneven material now reveals the limits of conducting research in a branded environment ‘on the move.’

It nevertheless proved valuable for tracing changes in design and crowd management, so eventually, the constraints became methodologically productive, as they redirected my attention to the site's shifting affective and sensory dynamics.

Reflections on Researcher Position and Limits of Study

As a white Scandinavian woman who turned eleven when the first *Harry Potter* book was released, I matured alongside the franchise and attended book releases and film premieres. This aca-fan background (cf. Hills 2002; Duffett 2013) sharpens my art-historical sensitivity to curatorial decisions and to the generational nostalgia embedded in the attraction. This dual “affective-aesthetic” position strengthens my sensitivity to exhibition design and facilitates access to fan communities, but it requires ongoing attention to the interplay between fannish attachment and institutional critique. While familiarity benefits analysis, it also risks over-identification and may obscure how visitors from other generations or cultural backgrounds experience the space. In this way, visiting as a foreign researcher, tourist, art historian, and aca-fan was both methodologically challenging and productive. Over time, fannish curiosity shifted into a more bodily mode of knowledge production. My own responses, like excitement, hunger, and irritation, became analytical tools for identifying potential friction or ‘glitches’ in the design, as autoethnography’s embodied reflexivity (cf. Ellis/Bochner 2016) heightened my awareness of how institutional strategies and spatial design affect visitors and vice versa.

From Fieldwork to Analysis

To trace developments in design, participatory practices, and affective dynamics over time, the fieldwork has been coded thematically in NVivo, quotes translated from Danish, and divided into the following three-part analysis of TMoHP’s transformation from analogue, artefact-based scenography to a more screen-based environment with increased crowd control. The first part examines design infrastructure in the context of authenticity. The second explores affective practices as performative memory-work through *Heimat*, *imagined memories*, and *punctum*. The final section traces the site’s development over time, drawing on not only fieldnotes and photos, but also complementary public data such as revenue and maps.

Part 1: Encountering a Magical Enclave

A Sensory Journey

TMoHP is a site where tactile objects, craftsmanship, playful proportions, museum-like displays, and even the smell of paint and sawdust allow materiality to underpin the filmic experience. Choreography begins in the foyer, where sound, light, and visual elements immediately stir anticipation. Every detail is carefully planned to engage visitors emotionally from the first moment. The basic sequence—from bus arrival, security, foyer, exhibition halls, cafés, and the large shop—has remained stable over the years, though expansions and pandemic adjustments have transformed the atmosphere (Visit 6). Today, TMoHP vibrates more like a high-capacity tourist complex than a fan pilgrimage site, as it absorbs thousands of daily visitors.

The journey begins in a thoroughly curated space where design and atmosphere interweave the mundane and the magical (cf. Pine/Gilmore 2011, 164), much like the *Harry Potter* story itself. Above the



entrance, Hogwarts letters carried by owls mark the ‘beginning,’ leading visitors to the exhibition entrance in a hub that brings together all key functions: café, lounge, and a large merchandise shop that also serves as the tour’s endpoint. By 2024, this area is more dramatic, engineered to spark awe and bodily readiness while setting the scene for photography and sharing. Like a treasure vault, the hub is guarded by a dragon from the latest Gringotts expansion as a spectacular sight, replacing the more modest blue Ford Anglia once suspended from the ceiling in the old foyer (Visit 1).

This vault has several selfie spots as visitors wait for their time slot in a queue longer and more segmented than in earlier years (Visit 6). People gather in groups and are led by staff into a cinema. Before 2024, the cinema introduction was longer and highlighted the studio’s history as an authentic site of filmmaking (Visit 1). It has now been shortened to make room for more explanatory formats of “do’s” and “don’ts.” Actors recall growing up on set, while ‘magical portraits’ assist staff in explaining rules by embedding narrative control through familiar voices. These small rituals of gentle instruction show how participation and control are woven together as part of the emotional heritage fabric (cf. Smith 2021). Introductions are framed within a “magical logic” by using humor and recognition to make visitors feel welcome. Photography and sharing are encouraged but restrictions apply in certain areas.

After the cinema section, the threshold of the exhibition is immediately encountered as an affective space, when visitors are invited to open the doors to the iconic Great Hall: “...which is so familiar. It feels like coming home” (Visit 1).

Gasps, camera flashes, and collective excitement create an affective atmosphere further activated by a scenographic surprise. As visitors “walk in Harry’s footsteps” (Visit 1), staff regulate the timing, so each group can experience the magic without lingering too long. From here, visitors enter Hall J, where they can move through museum-like tableaux at their own pace. The rest of the tour alternates between fully staged highlights and quieter passages with small displays: from The Forbidden Forest to Platform 9¾ with the Hogwarts Express (ending Act 1 in Hall J), then the café and outdoor sets, before moving on to Hall K’s Art Department, Gringotts, Diagon Alley, Hogwarts model, and the shop. There is a delicate balance between dwelling and flow in the experience design to accommodate different registers of engagement.

Three zones illustrate the atmospheric rhythm particularly well. In the Forbidden Forest, experiments with scale, darkness, steam, and strobing lights establish a magical yet slightly uncanny atmosphere, like when a child shouts: “Now I know why the forest is forbidden!” (Visit 3). Here, the sensory design and emotional responses form the affective infrastructure as a layered choreography of atmospheric rhythms and reactions.

On Platform 9¾, Molly Weasley’s voice drifts through the air, explaining how to disappear through the wall, while steam and whistles blend with visitor chatter to merge into a convincing station atmosphere: “It really does sound like a train station” (Visit 3). Transmedia elements, such as trolley photo opportunities and Visit London advertisements, directly reference the real King’s Cross as a pilgrimage site, also staged by Warner (cf. Lee 2012; Larsen 2015; Stobberup 2018). This smoothly connects TMOHP to a wider tourist infrastructure network. Everything culminates in the Hogwarts model—the exhibition’s most auratic climax, where a slow descending spiral ramp extends the encounter with a monument: “Perhaps I should have seen it coming [...] but I’m still taken by surprise. Perhaps it’s the music. In a large, fairly dark room – it’s just suddenly there. Hogwarts! Set to dramatic, grand music, like the score from the final film after the battle is over” (Visit 1).

The shifting illumination from daylight to nighttime supported by a music loop extends the experience beyond the visual gaze (cf. Urry/Larsen 2011). The model simultaneously operates as art piece, memory device, and emotional trigger across seasons, because it is curated for special events (Visit 2, Visit 6). Its seasoned auratic presence resonates with Smith (2021) when fan emotion is explicitly integrated into the object's perceived value as heritage.

In transitional, more informal areas such as the Backlot Café and outdoor sets (the Hogwarts bridge, Sprout's greenhouse, Hagrid's motorbike, and the Knight Bus), visitors can 'breathe,' touch objects and take selfies. The design works phenomenologically with the body, when some zones invite participation (stamping passports, folding paper 'howlers') while others hold visitors at an observational distance. Staff and technological installations guide this choreography, balancing playful fan imagination with crowd-control. This creates a topographic experience, in which feelings like excitement, tiredness, irritation, amusement, or momentary enchantment are evoked by shifts in tableaux and more technological or dramatized staging. The newest Gringotts expansion heavily reinforces this rhythm through scale and special effects that align perfectly as a narrative loop with the dragon in the foyer.

Walter Benjamin's (1982) idea of the passage as a modern dreamscape (cf. 17) resonates with how the infrastructure evokes dreamlike mobility and layered affective journeys of memory and imagination. Some transitions are smooth and cinematic; others are more abrupt, like the shift from Diagon Alley's Victoriana to the Modernist aesthetics of the Art Direction section. These modes make it more-than a museum exhibition as a sensory journey where practical "muggle" logistics and the "fantastic" intertwine (cf. Lovell 2019).

Materiality and Authenticity

Concepts from the experience economy (cf. Pine/Gilmore 2011) have gained importance alongside the rise of the *Harry Potter* franchise by shaping branding strategies across the cultural sector that promise "magical" encounters in "authentic" tourist locations. As filming location, TMoHP is historically linked to canon and marketed as authentic through original props but also by offering emotional proximity to a storyworld already familiar to visitors. It stages both "frontstage" and "backstage" as experience, for example, when each box in Ollivander's Wand Shop bears the name of people working on the films (cf. Larsen 2015). A gesture emphasizing that objects were authentically crafted by real people (and many), which leaves one: "*in awe of the attention to detail*" (Visit 1).

Across different registers of fan engagement, TMoHP has become a way for visitors to actively (re) experience and perform their own sense of authentic belonging to the magical universe. The continuous insistence on originality becomes a curatorial gesture situating fandom within a heritage framework, where authenticity operates across material, experiential, and institutional registers throughout the attraction. This was evident not only in the branding, but also when I asked a guide about the window displays of Diagon Alley: "*they tried to stay as close to the original as in the films. The use of the word 'original' was almost like a mantra*" (Visit 4).

In areas not staged as filmic highlights, the attraction borrows from museum aesthetics when it privileges a contemplative gaze attentive to detail. My notes describe the Magic is Might column from the Ministry as "*Parthenon-like*" in monumentality, and even macabre scenes like the hovering cursed body in Malfoy Manor appear as an aesthetic tableau (Visit 1). The curated displays become a strategic marker of museal object-authenticity (cf. Wang 1999) within a commercial setting. Like art installations, they



show the sensuous qualities of the exhibition, especially in the immersive full-scale sections. However, smaller displays also support quieter, more introspective modes of engagement.

While celebrating this material object-authenticity, storytelling simultaneously exposes TMoHP's construction-as-site. The actors transform a work community into shared production history, just like in corporate museums, when their scripted commentary is mixing facts and reflections on craft with humor and nostalgia. This creates a double layer of staged authenticity (cf. MacCannell 1976), because they appear both as iconic characters and actual eyewitnesses to a decade of film production now framed as cultural heritage. The Halls J and K (Rowling's initials) further underscore the staging of TMoHP as 'birthplace' for this creative production.

Transitional Zones

The visitor experience is not defined solely by a contemplative gaze. In transitional zones with shops, cafés, queues, and selfie spots, "aesthetic order" gives way to social and performative practices. Here, commercial and digital cultures intersect with museum logics, as photography and branded consumption become part of the experience design and merge with the exhibition. In Ollivander's set, visitors exit directly into the merchandise shop, which aesthetically mirrors the exhibition space and includes real props. As museal objecthood blends with commerce (cf. Baker 2018, 57), consumption is a natural design extension, leading to mixed reactions: *"a British woman yells loudly at her husband and children for picking up a wand box. Total confusion. Because just a bit further on, you can actually buy your own wand. Ollivander's shop becomes the real shop"* (Visit 3).

Merchandise sections extend emotional heritage into souvenirs and food. Butterbeer plays a central role in the franchise, as it is branded as available only at franchise attractions. As key medium of both memory and materiality, Butterbeer functions equally as a ritual taste experience and a token of belonging. In my notes, I reflect on the taste as "indescribable," and perhaps not for everyone (Visit 3). This is exactly what makes the trademarked exclusivity a paradoxical yet significant marker of both objective and experiential authenticity, as Butterbeer is both object and experience. In 2024, several Butterbeer products had been launched along with a washing station, where visitors could rinse the sticky souvenir glass before taking it home (Visit 6). This sensory ritual helps secure a tactile afterlife of the experience, which then becomes not only a memory (good or bad) but visible proof of participation.

Shop architecture, merchandise, and interactive features like wand duels and treasure hunts cultivate a sense of material belonging to the fiction and has repetitional value during revisits. The immersive architecture oscillates between film set, museum, theme park, and shopping mall with security check and the washing station serving as authentic reminders of a carefully managed commercial flow. In this sense, TMoHP does not present itself as a pure simulacrum, but openly exposes its own mechanics, inviting visitors to participate knowingly in managed enchantment (cf. Waysdorf/Reijnders 2018) through practices that actively merge the fantastical and institutional gazes as "magi-heritage" (Lovell 2019).

An Archive of Imagination: Potentials of the Analogue Exhibition

During my first visits, the analogue props and textures created a museal enchantment where materiality acted as both backdrop and catalyst for my imagination. My encounter with the static serpent door from *The Chamber of Secrets* automatically activated a vivid mediated version in my mind: *"the exhibition is*

remarkably undigitized. And yet it works fantastically. Why is that, I wonder? Because you use your imagination?" (Visit 1).

This example both demonstrates my position as aca-fan and how the analogue exhibition allowed artefacts to function as pop-cultural archaeological evidence inherently meaningful to fans who already knew the story world. Ultimately, object-authenticity is what enables the cinematic magic to "take place," but the depth of the experience also depends on access, proximity and the visitor's own background and imagination. Especially because the exhibition offered few explanatory signs.

In 2024, technological and screen-based environments had intensified, showing how the scenography remains processual rather than passive in shaping the experience. New zones like Gringotts rely heavily on digital immersion, perhaps to cultivate performative authenticity for visitors who feel 'at home' using screens. However, as visitor demographics change, TMoHP may face challenges like traditional museums in terms of translation, mediation and provenance. It illustrates how the notion of authenticity, even when repeated as a "mantra," carries its own paradox, shaped by the continuous adjustments that occur when objects are rearranged or replaced for special events. The once heavily promoted *Fantastic Beasts* sets (Visit 3) have already disappeared, and the [studio tour in Japan](#) presents reconstructions never used in the films and is marketed as authentic through its "craft heritage." Meanwhile, HBO's forthcoming *Harry Potter* series, planned for 2027, will introduce new actors. The franchise cannot treat TMoHP as a stable archive of emotional heritage and it remains an ever-curated media environment in which authenticity, in practice, remains fluid and renegotiable.

Part 2: Heimat, Imagined Memories, and Punctum

The first part of my analysis has shown how emotional heritage is curated as both tangible and embodied through a visibly affective infrastructure. However, it also unfolds through less visible structures of memory and belonging. To clarify the analytical lens for this section, I draw on three interrelated concepts. Sandvoss's (2005) notion of *Heimat*, the mediated sense of "homecoming" (64) produced through fandoms, helps to examine the site's emotional and symbolic attachment to the media text. Duffett's idea of *imagined memories* as emotionally real recollections of fictional events (cf. 2013, 229) is useful to describe how fiction in media tourism "takes place" (Reijnders 2011). Finally, Barthes's concept of *punctum*, the sudden affective shock triggered by seemingly minor details (cf. 1981, 27) shows the more individual memory-traces that exceed the postmodern frameworks often used in tourism research (cf. Urry/Larsen 2011). These concepts allow me to approach TMoHP not only as a branded semiotic territory, but as an affective space that links lived experience with imagined worlds (cf. Duffett 2013, 226). They illuminate how visitors might engage not only with the curated sets and displayed objects but also with their own embodied memories and attachments when mediating between the fiction and more personal stories. I treat the three concepts as complementary registers of emotional heritage, as they operate through different temporal and sensory channels, but together help trace how belonging is both remembered communally and felt in distinctly individual ways throughout the attraction.

Designed Homecoming

When defined as *Heimat*, TMoHP offers "the rare opportunity to relocate in space a profound sense of belonging which has otherwise shifted into the textual space of media consumption" (Sandvoss 2005, 64). This sense of 'home' at TMoHP is not only symbolic but spatial, as it is staged through design to



emotionally involve the visitor. Flow, architecture, scenography, and narrative work together to trigger emotional recognition for first-time visitors as well as seasoned fan-tourists.

The promise of ‘coming home to Hogwarts’ is activated as a narrative loop throughout the attraction, even as staff remind visitors that filming took place all over the UK, making Hogwarts a collage of real and imagined geographies (Visit 1). Actors in the introductory videos describe Leavesden Studios as home, while a Rowling quote marks the tour exit before the exhibition space collides with the shop: “*Whether you come back by page or by the big screen, Hogwarts will always be there to welcome you home*” (Visit 6).

This spatial circularity closes the narrative loop and aligns affective belonging with a commercial rhythm, where souvenirs help extend the visit to people’s actual homes. Staff reinforce this through logistical guidance, mood-setting (sometimes in costume), and by acting as gatekeepers for “rituals” and “best practices.” Both the new (event-specific instructions) and the familiar (repeated jokes) are integrated, so “everyone” can feel at home. Spatial scripting not only evokes personal recognition but also routinises collective memory, which is activated in a particularly vivid way as a form of choreographed homecoming. For example, during moments of cinematic déjà vu, when visitors enter The Great Hall “in Harry’s footsteps” or arrive on Platform 9¾: “*It occurred to me that the room in the studios is arranged in such a way that you experience arriving at the Hogwarts Express in the same way that Harry does in the film. From exactly the same angle*” (Visit 5).

Here, *Heimat* becomes spatially embodied as the set mirrors the camera’s perspective, and the looping soundtrack enhances the déjà-vu feeling. This careful spatial scripting exemplifies emotional heritage as a performative negotiation of belonging (cf. Smith 2021, 57), where the experience feels personal even when it is affectively staged into a shared cultural memory.

The abundance of scenography can also be overwhelming, making almost everything resonate as ‘home.’ Warner’s publicly available [autism and visitor support guide](#) here supports my field observations as it prepares visitors for sensory surprises by describing all tour content and mapping sensory cues along the route. As an example of how these embodied responses might unfold, I observed a girl, possibly with Down’s syndrome, by the Hogwarts model: “*A little girl next to me [...] falls into a kind of trance and starts rocking gently from side to side. Her mother looks surprised but smiles and doesn’t interrupt. Maybe I’m not the only one whose behaviour shifts here. Is it the music?*” (Visit 1).

Pre-discursive responses like these are unlikely to surface in online reviews, and my autoethnographic presence helps trace affective entanglements like these inside the attraction. I cannot know whether the girl felt ‘at home,’ but the moment and Warner’s guide reveals how the design is far from neutral and how it might affect bodies differently. It shows how embodied reactions form part of the site’s affective infrastructure and help illuminate how TMOHP aims to choreograph both emotion and belonging.

Remembering What You Never Experienced

Imagined memories is a fruitful concept to understand *Harry Potter*’s intergenerational appeal and the ways visitors recall events or places they never actually experienced. Like *Heimat*, the idea of *imagined memories* extends beyond fandom into heritage tourism, where “those who were originally there become privileged witnesses, starting points for further commodities”, as an *imagined memory* is a “kind of fantasy which authenticates itself as a (desired) ‘memory’ [...] in the narrative of history and the media”

(Duffet 2013, 229). At TMoHP, this aligns with how architecture, soundtrack, objects, and practices together evoke recognition, nostalgia, and a sense of *déjà-vu*.

I use the concept to clarify how familiarity enables visitors to continuously relive a shared emotional past. The experience design reinforces memory-work when the soundtrack guides emotional transitions from the opening theme to the final score at the Hogwarts model. The Rowling-quote mentioned above serves to emphasize a promise of a lasting belonging not only to the stories but also to the studios. The value of my insider position became evident when I was able to notice these “memory-loops” and experience conversation, photography, and re-enactments that could help visitors (re)produce emotional realities that never occurred yet felt as if they might have. This was shaped communally, when I was able to re-enact a wand duel with my brother: “*My brother didn’t think we would have survived The Battle of Hogwarts because of my fighting skills*” (Visit 5).

His joking reference to the Battle of Hogwarts as an *imagined memory* shows how it became momentarily real for two adults who had not played together in years, revealing how a choreographed commercial setting can still foster genuine intimacy. By re-enacting fiction, we created a true memory of our visit to TMoHP, illustrating how attractions like these can also generate new stories about their visitors (cf. Baker 2018, 61). At TMoHP, *imagined memories* now span generations, as they turn into actual traditions and revisits. Fans who visited as young lovers return as parents, reliving magical rituals with their children. Newcomers form bonds through shared gestures when posing at Platform 9¾ or dueling with wands. TMoHP offers ways to (re)create both personal and fictional memory as double nostalgia for Hogwarts and perhaps for one’s younger self.

A Private Connection

The *punctum* triggered by minor details in a photograph (cf. Barthes 1981, 27) has been used as analytical tool in film and tourism photography (cf. Lovell/Bull 2017, 152). TMoHP can be described as a three-dimensional photo album existing both as staged exhibition and within the visitor. While *studium* refers to the overall, polished impression of a scene (full-scale displays at TMoHP), smaller *puncta* arise spontaneously through the interplay between visitor, space, and (imagined) memory. As fleeting moments of recognition, they complement *Heimat* by offering a more intimate and often unexpected affective resonance. Visitors may be affected by strategic curation like details of light falling on the Hogwarts model, a spongy forest floor, or perhaps the sound of a train whistle, but my experience in Dumbledore’s Office exemplifies a more private, unexpected *punctum*: “*I can sense that I feel really happy inside. But also a bit melancholic when I spot the Pensieve. I don’t know why*” (Visit 1).

The *punctum* here functions as a portal to a sensed, private connection. It demonstrates how emotional heritage also resides in the ephemeral and accidental, here in sensory details that not only pierce strategically but feel more personal. A tableau from the Yule ball not only recalled the film but evoked memories of my own teenage years and the excitement (and horror) of getting ready for a party (Visit 4). Faceless mannequins invite visitors to fill in the blanks. Many from Generation Y still recall shared cultural events like midnight premieres, but the most striking *puncta* often relate to *imagined memories*, when visitors place themselves inside the fiction as a Hogwarts student or a member of the Weasley family, leafing through TMoHP as a three-dimensional family album. When I describe TMoHP as affective infrastructure, it is precisely this interplay of real objects, atmospheres, and memory-work that I refer to, where memories become performative.



Performative Memory Through Language and Photography

Performative memory is not only individual but social and intergenerational, continuously negotiated through language and photography at TMoHP. Across different visitor constellations, narratives and memories are co-created through dialogue, play, and repetition, especially the taking and sharing of photographs. My fieldnotes indicate that bodies are not only guided by physical design but by structured, affectively potent performative moments, such as staff evoking a first day at school in The Great Hall: *“Walk in Harry’s footsteps. You can all imagine the long walk he had to take to put on the hat”* (Visit 1).

Such scripts exemplify what Smith (2021) calls affective heritage practice, where language, bodies, and emotions merge in a moment of performance (as memory and movement). Informal exchanges extend this into queues, and even the parking lot, where phrases like *“Take it away, Ernie”* become intertextual jokes blending the Knight Bus with the shuttle bus ride to Leavesden (Visit 4). A mother corrects herself: *“Hogswarts... no, Hogwarts! ... I know it like the back of my hand!”*, to match her adult daughter’s attention to detail (Visit 3). A triumphant child, wanting to be as *“clever as Hermione,”* lists character names to her father and grandfather, both nodding with approval (Visit 3). These playful, loose interactions show how ‘magical’ language creates intergenerational dialogue and contrasts with identity negotiations in more competitive online fandoms. Here, fan-vocabulary is less about expertise and more about producing inclusion, allowing non-expert companions to join a cultural experience. Correction by someone you love becomes an invitation to connect, ask, and learn. Combined with embodied engagement, fan references act as social glue across generations, revealing the franchise’s broader appeal.

Photography reinforces and extends this performative memory-work. Since the opening, it has been embedded in the design, underscoring fan culture’s participatory potential. Before arrival, visitors discuss getting “the right photos” (Visit 5) or recreating scenes from the films. Photography as a medium operates simultaneously as documentation and performance by visualizing and circulating emotional heritage practices. When a selfie captures an *imagined memory* and transforms it into a real one, it becomes more than a souvenir. In this way, both free and commercial photography function as symbolic or subcultural capital (cf. Thornton 1995), while the attraction encourages sharing through selfie stations, floor markers, and staff prompts (Visit 6). Paid zones, such as green-screen areas, introduce tensions around access by not being equally available to all. Still, anyone with a camera can take a selfie, so photography remains both private documentation and shared participation.

As mentioned, when describing the wand duel, I realized after my first visits how the experience was staged as something to be shared. I changed my role from observer to co-participant, which led to new findings. When my technically minded partner showed me how recent developments in the zoom-function allow camera phones to become a kind of prosthesis, new scenographic details were suddenly revealed to me in the dim lights of Dumbledore’s office during my final visit. This underscores how technological development mediates both research and remembrance as documentation, but it also points to how experience is not only about strategic design. For visitors and researchers alike, it is also about the ability to always take on different roles and move fluidly between registers of engagement within the same attraction. As linguistic and visual practices often unfold in waiting areas and other ‘unscripted’ passages, they too form a performative counterpart to the spatially designed homecoming and act as affective infrastructure, connecting people across roles and generations. Recognising this variety of engagement is necessary to understand how emotional heritage is produced not only through design, but also the social and mediated interactions that fill the spaces in-between fandom, tourism and research.

Part 3: Upscaled Magic

From Niche Pilgrimage Site to Family Mass Attraction

While *Heimat*-strategies, *punctum* effects, and *imagined memories* might seem inherently positive on the surface, my data also show how overstimulation, noise, fatigue, queuing systems, and flow interruptions shape experience. When commercial rhythm collides with individual preferences (perhaps as non-identification), friction also belongs to the site's affective economy. In this final analytical section, I will show how 'ruptures' observed over time can be analytically significant, also for future studies within the field.

Between 2016-2024, TMoHP transformed from a niche fan pilgrimage site into one of UK's most visited cultural attractions (cf. Visit Britain 2023). Once a more intimate fan-museum, it now operates fully within the logic of the experience economy, while still selling homecoming as both product and promise (cf. Waysdorf/Reijnders 2019). New expansions, an enlarged security area, and a redesigned foyer reflect a steady upscaling toward mass-tourism infrastructure. Rising prices (GBP 37.- at Visit 1 to GBP 56.- at Visit 6) and revenue (Fig. 1) help document this commercial growth based on exclusive events and merchandise, expanded shopping areas, etc. Although not officially confirmed by Warner, my observation of shortened intro films, increased barrier uses, and a conversation with staff about visitor flows also indicates larger visitor numbers in 2024 (Visit 6).

Whereas my early visits were dominated by adult fans in their 20s and 30s and teenagers on school trips, the attraction was filled with families and strollers in 2024: "...a lot of people from the original *Harry Potter* generation now had kids who were old enough to come along to the studios" (Visit 6).

It reflects both a family-oriented marketing focus, evident in staff interactions, and the natural ageing of the first fanbase, which is redefining *Harry Potter*'s emotional heritage as shared, intergenerational practices rather than only subcultural ones.

A tilted affective rhythm and new thresholds have emerged, which is evident when small children respond with overstimulation. For example, I saw one child burst into tears before the dragon animation in Gringotts and another refuse to enter the Forbidden Forest (Visit 6). Even if shortcuts nowadays allow



Fig. 1: Overview of revenue since opening (2012-2023)



visitors with special needs to avoid bottlenecks, the forest's darkness acts as psychological threshold, perhaps purposefully, if it is to remain magically 'forbidden'—and yet accessible. This development towards intergenerational accessibility shows an increased need for differentiation and flexibility in the design, so that casual tourists and committed fans all feel welcome. Visits demand patience and navigation skills from visitors, particularly as fatigue and excitement intensify (Visit 6). While introductory videos and staff guidance help parents translate fan rituals for younger audiences, the experience ultimately shows that affective participation increasingly functions as a discipline; one that both institution and visitors must continually learn to manage.

The 2.0 exhibition design in the full-scale expansions with spectacular special effects and built-in selfie stations has also transformed the rhythm and sensory quality of the experience. The analogue, contemplative atmosphere that defined Halls J and K initially, was likewise dominated by noise from more screens and other digital demonstrations in 2024 (Visit 6). Selfie stations can help democratize participation for anyone with a camera, but there is perhaps also a risk of eroding the tactile materiality and free movement that underscored the authenticity of the attraction as fan pilgrimage site. Subcultural rituals like wand duels and broomstick flights risk appearing as standardized modules and might lose their symbolic depth and value as subcultural capital when they are for anyone who can afford a trip to Leavesden.

When emotional heritage becomes scalable through the experience economy, the cost of inclusivity might be a softening of fan intensities. While photography and playful engagement have always been a trademark-experience at TMoHP, the slow, tactile encounters and contemplative museal objecthood that distinguished it from other franchise attractions may now become harder to sustain. As the coexistence of different registers of engagement becomes more evident, divergent expectations of visitor pace and intimacy collide. These different logics of participation echo the distinction Rebecca Williams (2018) made between fan pilgrimage and mass-cultural mobility, and comparable tensions also appear in other franchises like *Game of Thrones*, where sustainability of fan tourism sites is challenged (cf. Waysdorf 2021).

It shows how important it is to consider what emotional fan heritage becomes when it is shared by many rather than cultivated by a subculture. As the experience begins to resemble standard tourist routines, the tension between enchantment and regulation becomes more visible. For some visitors, this scaling up might feel like an inevitable feature of contemporary cultural tourism, but for others, it becomes a source of fatigue, a loss of spontaneity, and a reminder that even 'magic' in a disenchanted world (cf. Landy/Saler 2009) is ultimately produced and managed. As TMoHP remains in-between museum and theme park, it also epitomizes the duality from the experience economy, where emotion acts as both commodity and a claim to authenticity. It reveals how affective infrastructure is not always designed top-down, when the balance between renewal and continuity, authenticity and commercialization, fan culture and mass consumption is continually negotiated between visitors and institution. Since 2012, TMoHP has remained in 'the making,' not just as an attraction, but also as a workshop for the affective politics of contemporary heritage.

Conclusion: When Magic Becomes Heritage

I have shown how TMoHP has evolved from a niche fan pilgrimage site into a large-scale cultural attraction, where institutional choreography and visitor practices together produce emotional heritage as affective infrastructure. Through a longitudinal, design-centered approach, I have analyzed the site as a

curated object-environment, commercial brand space, and intergenerational platform for performance and memory-work. I have extended emotional heritage theory into a franchise-controlled commercial domain, where object-based authenticity, embodiment, and institutional policy collide. By combining *Heimat*, *imagined memories*, and *punctum*, I have shown how affect operates as practice and why revisits and documentation remain important when investigating living popular imagination within a privately owned tourist enclave.

Wernecke and Massignan (2023) followed a related institutional path by describing *Harry Potter* theme parks as “constructed places of memory” (231), where identity and resistance can be negotiated over time. Studies on institutionalized aspects of fan culture are relevant because they can show us how heritage may be less about what we keep and more about what we feel allowed to keep through ongoing negotiation. The ambivalent position of J. K. Rowling within current fan discourses remains relevant here. In 2016, before global travel patterns changed, I arrived curious to see whether the attraction remained a short-lived phenomenon, wondering whether Rowling’s magical universe held the potential to achieve the lasting cultural value of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales from my own country. Researching TMoHP meant engaging in a living franchise, where the author remained politically active and the franchise as an institution was both omnipresent and opaque. Still, despite author-controversies and a pandemic, TMoHP has survived this far.

However, events since 2016 have affected the *Harry Potter* brand and, potentially, the affective dynamics of its tourist sites. As an attraction, which is specifically branding itself as a ‘home’ for fans, TMoHP remains central to this discussion (cf. Williams 2025). It offers a particularly vivid example of how emotional heritage is actively managed, scaled, and redefined over time. While my study has documented aspects of the development so far, new questions still appear regarding how belonging is cultivated and contested within the fandom and its many cultural institutions. As the attraction continues to scale, the notion of a singular ‘fan homecoming’ may become much harder to sustain. However, the most important question is perhaps not whether homecoming can be preserved, but how each visitor (including researchers) can continue to negotiate authenticity, memory, and belonging with every return.

Furthermore, as an art historian, I am used to both loving and critiquing institutions simultaneously, and fan studies has taught me how these positions can coexist, despite methodological challenges. The dual position between critical distance and affective attachment has guided my approach. Periods of absence made the more subtle shifts in institutional tone visible upon return, displaying how affect operates as both practice and infrastructure. I have learned to read my own frustrations and imperfections as productive, revealing how research, just like the attraction, is shaped by needs of adjustment and varying affective investment. Autoethnography has become not only a research tool but a way of experiencing an evolution—in the attraction, the fandom, and in myself.

Not aiming at universality, I recognize that the experience design may work differently for different bodies, also the ones who no longer feel ‘at home.’ However, this study has shown how combined fan- and arts-based perspectives on heritage might allow for an engagement in institutions that are simultaneously loved and critiqued, and it serves as a reminder of how researchers and practitioners must always carefully navigate within that field.

As Michel de Certeau (1984) reminds us, “space is a practiced place” (117). In this sense, the fan space of TMoHP not only demonstrates how emotional heritage is continually produced but also how methodological practice must increasingly interweave with its affective infrastructures.



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