**Chapter 5 An Archaeology of Horror Film Promotion: Hoaxes, Happenings and Hearsay**

Keywords: Transmedia Promotion; Hoax; Gimmick; Ballyhoo; Humbug; Prankvertising; Audience Reaction Trailers; Social and Online Promotion; Film Merchandise.

**5.1 The Blair Witch Project Hoax**

Following a sell-out midnight screening at Sundance film festival at the end of January 1999, Artisan Entertainment brought the distribution rights to, not only the ground-breaking found-footage horror film *Blair Witch Project*, but its website too. Like many dial-up era film sites, the film’s online presence began as a subdomain on the writer-directors Dan Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez’ production company site, *Haxan.com,* to promote the film to potential investors and to cultivate a festival circuit audience. But the Haxan site was more than just a standard notice board and chat forum.

Clicking through to the site’s Blair Witch area, the viewer entered into the film’s fictional world which centred on the investigation into the disappearance of three film students in woodland near the town of Burkittsville, Maryland. Here the film makers had been creating and uploading ‘evidence’ for fans including pictures of the film makers, character biographies and film footage, together with a historical timeline of the Blair Witch legend dating back to 1785 (Meslow, 2015; London, 2023). In the site’s first iteration the film makers were quite open about the film and its fictional nature was never a secret. In an interview Eduardo Sanchez reflected ‘we never lied. It was not like we were trying to do a hoax’ (Meslow, 2015). While Dan Myrick added, ‘we have several ethical arguments amongst ourselves about how far to take the ruse, and not wanting to be accused of being hoaxsters’ (Ibid.). So evidently the filmmakers did not wish their relationship with the film’s early audience to be regarded as a deception.

However, following the film’s acquisition the independent distributor, Artisan, had no such qualms. From their perspective, hoaxing was not about deception it was about cultivating as wide an audience as possible and so the site was remodelled, with more visual content added to perpetuate a sense that the site was ‘real.’ In its second iteration the site became more like a hoax in two fundamental ways: the chatroom was removed and the site did not provide any indication that the site was fiction (London, 2023: 105). As well as this increased emphasis on verisimilitude, the mystery elements of the site were expanded. Surplus footage from the film was repurposed into nested narratives on the site. Interviews with the student’s friends and relatives were added, together with testimony from the law enforcement officers investigating the case, and a private investigator hired by the family of one of the students (Heather) dissatisfied with the lack of progress in the investigation . The professional expertise of a local historian, university academics and a college professor were included in an attempt to shed light on what happened in the woods and by the end the online investigation of the Blair Witch project grew to be populated with such a large cast that there were twice as many characters featured on the site as there were in the film itself.

It has been argued that in order to be effective hoaxes need to engender a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ on the part of the deceived (Hancock, 2015:69), and it was the emphasis on the materiality of the evidential artefacts on the film site that provided it with a sense of authenticity to underpin this. Family album snaps, forensic crime scene pictures of the abandoned car’ newspaper cuttings, missing posters and the pages of Heather’s hand-written and discoloured diary are scanned into the site with the text transcribed to provide insight into Heather’s deteriorating state of mind. Rusty 16 mm film cans discovered, DAT tapes, and video cassettes discovered by students from the University of Maryland Anthropology department feature on the site too. While the Blair Witch legend timeline creates a backstory conveyed through media: from a 18th century woodcut of Elly Kedward who was accused of witchery and banished into the woods, to contemporary network television news bulletins about the disappearances- all designed to cultivate the sense of a first-hand encounter with a real-life mystery where story details must be foraged and clues pieced together by the site visitor.

The website’s centrality to the film’s promotional campaign was signalled by the fact that other media elements referred to it as a core source of information: from the missing person notices advising readers to log on to www.blairwitch.com to see and hear further evidence; a pseudo-documentary that aired on the Sci-Fi channel before the film’s release titled *The Curse of the Blair Witch* which referred to website content and listed the website as a source for further information; to David Stern’s Blair Witch Project Dossier which provided more links and Heather’s complete diary; and lastly when the film’s trailers debuted, at the close of the promotion audiences were once more directed to the site (London, 2023).

In this way not only did the website become the focal point of the transmedial Blair Witch mystery rather than the film, but clearly its role had transformed from promotion to include plot extensions too (Walden, 2005). Under Artisan the expanded site adopted a more playful approach to the manufacture of this hoax as can be seen in characters’ musing on the film’s mystery. Professor Charles Moorhouse reflects, ‘I looked at the whole thing as possibly a hoax, but it was still strange;’ Private Investigator, Buck Buchanan states, I think its remote that it was a hoax;’ while Sheriff Ron Cravens who was leading the investigation admits, ‘I still thought it was a hoax.’ Artisan even managed to have the actors listed on IMDB as ‘Missing, presumed dead’ playfully traversing the boundary between fact and fiction (Meslow, 2015).

On the opening weekend of the film’s cinema release the commercial significance of the site was confirmed when Artisan took out a full-page advertisement in the film industry’s trade magazine, *Variety*. Whilst it is not unusual for studios to take out full-page advertisements to boast about a film’s opening weekend box office figures, this advertisement was different because it focused on visitors to the film’s web site and the figures spoke for themselves - ‘*BlairWitch.com* 21,222,589 hits to date’(Carvell, 1999). The site had actually attracted more than 75 million hits in the first week (Corliss , 1999) and 160 million hits in the first 3 months which was an impressive feat for a low budget horror film (Gray, 2019). Audience research into the film’s newsgroup discussion boards following its release indicated that whilst most discussants identified the film as fiction, at least 40% admitted to at least being uncertain about the film’s reality status, and acknowledged that they had been influenced by discussion board exchanges into believing the story was real, pointing to their particular capacity for contagion (Schreier,2004; Young, 2017:208). So, the site seems to bear many of the hallmarks of a hoax and illustrates their aptitude for promotion.

This chapter continues the investigation of the forms online promotion takes and considers how internet-borne forms of promotion have evolved along generic lines. In the previous chapter it became evident that there has been a strong tendency in Science Fiction/Fantasy film promotion towards the development of online fictional worlds that take the form of as- if-real evil corporation websites to provide a fictional world context to the action in the film’s plot. We will explore generic conventions that have emerged in online horror film promotion and in particular the use of hoaxes.. To lay the groundwork the chapter begins with a general consideration of hoaxes and observes how their features are so propitious for promotion. The chapter takes a genealogical overview of horror film promotion at three key moments, starting in the late 1950s when the film director/producer, William Castle devised ‘gimmicks’ to promote his horror films. It goes on to consider the phenomenon of ‘ballyhoo’ that became popular with film publicists in the first decades of the 20th Century. And lastly, the survey explores pre-cinematic hoaxes in the promotion of mid-century forms of ‘horror’ entertainments such as freakshows, which the American showman and swindler, P.T. Barnum termed ‘humbug.’

This genealogical overview suggests that the hoax is a recurring feature of horror promotion. To find out whether this continues to be the case and what it may represent, the chapter turns to contemporary horror promotion. A listicle survey is undertaken to establish which horror film promotional campaigns have captured the popular imagination in recent years. Three kinds of contemporary horror film promotion hoax are identified from the survey: prankvertising, audience reaction trailers, and social media hoaxes. In order to take stock of the many different forms that horror hoax promotions take, it will be germane to consider the concept of the media hoax to begin to understand why and how the hoax lends itself to the promotion of horror.

**5.2** **Hoaxes and the Promotion of Horror**

In etymological terms the word ‘hoax’ dates back to the late 17th or early 18th century depending on which dictionary you consult, and is thought to be a contraction of the term ‘hocus’ meaning to cheat or impose upon. Much has been written about hoaxes: from the 19th century American writer, Edgar Allen Poe’s musings about man’s capacity for hoaxing in ‘Diddling considered as one of the exact sciences’ (1843) where he reflects that ‘A crow thieves, a fox cheats; a weasel outwits; a man diddles. To diddle is his destiny’; to more recent concerns about hoaxes that circulated around Donald Trump’s presidency where it is argued that Trump changed the language of politics by using terms like hoax to discredit issues and hoodwink the public. Writing about Trump’s predilection for the term, CNN Broadcaster Brian Stelter reflects that while the term ‘hoax’ has a denotative meaning falsehood, it also has a connotative meaning that undermines the authority of a person, event, or organisation and this was one strategy that featured frequently in Trump’s political discourse (2020:204).

Synonyms for the word ‘hoax’ are illuminating too as they illustrate the spectrum of actions that can be regarded as a hoax: from illegal activities like fraud, swindle, and imposture, to deceptions that fall short of legal definitions of wrongdoing such as bluff, humbug, spoof, trick, hoodwink, gulling and hucksterism but are regarded as underhand behaviours. While at the other end of the spectrum there are more innocuous hoaxes primarily intended to be humorous or even entertainment such as a joke, jest, jape, or a prank. So, clearly hoaxes take many different forms and how they are framed is a matter of intention and degree.

It has been observed that hoaxes are designed, crafted, and situated so that they can be taken ‘as-if-real’ (Collins, 2012). It follows then that hoaxes must often involve some kind of ‘artful deception’ and are often quite aesthetically sophisticated, and their stagecraft bestows on the hoax the quality of an event too (Fleming and O’ Carroll, 2010: 49). However the specific nature of the hoax is defined by the intention of the deception. Writing about these practices, Chris Fleming, and John O’ Carroll make a distinction between ‘covert hoaxes’ that seek to never be discovered like fraud, and ‘didactic hoaxes’ that fully intend to be discovered in order to make a point, illustrate an idea, or to sell something. It is within the last category of ‘didactic hoaxes’ that most of the promotional strategies examined in this chapter can be understood (Fleming and O’ Carroll, 2010: 45).

Critical to the effect of didactic hoaxes is the ‘reveal’ and in this sense hoaxes often follow the logic of a chronological narrative sequence that concludes with a revelation of the deception (Collins,2012). So a hoax is a proposition people are asked to believe is real until they are told it is a hoax (Ibid.). It follows then that in order to be believed, the hoax must resemble the real thing to which it refers, ideally in form as well as content (Ibid.), and the reward for an audience’s willing suspension of disbelief is the revelation (Hancock, 2015:69). In this way, therefore, Fleming and O’ Carroll suggest that a hoax will invariably contain a sense of ‘afterwardness,’ invoking the concept derived from Freud’s psychoanalytic writings which refers to a sense of belated comprehension or retrospective attribution of meaning to earlier events (Fleming and O’ Carroll, 2010:48). In sum, then, a didactic hoax is designed to deceive, but only for a time because it has a distinct and limited lifespan and comprehension in hindsight is part and parcel of the experience (Fleming and O’ Carroll, 2010:48).

The last feature of the hoax that is pertinent to this consideration described by psychologist Peter Hancock is how hoaxes depend on their audience for their operation (2015:8). Hancock models the operation of a hoax as a ‘trinity of deception’ requiring a ‘deception’(hoax) which depends on the interaction of the ‘deceiver’(hoaxer), who actively inculcates a belief in others and the ‘deceived’(hoaxed) (2015:6). By so doing, Hancock illustrates how hoaxes depend upon a process of interactive engagement and cultivate attention and it is this which makes them effective for film promotion. But the use of the hoax to promote film is not a new idea. In the next section the chapter surveys how hoaxes have recurringly featured in the promotion of horror film.

**5.3 A Genealogy of Horror Promotion**

In the 1950s the American film industry was restructuring in response to a number of factors. The decade had seen the rapid growth of television creating fierce competition for cinema (Sterling and Kitross, 1990: 633, 658). In 1946 there were just 6 television stations broadcasting to an estimated 8000 households across America. But 15 years later in 1961 there were 579 stations reaching 89% of the population (Ibid). Moreover, following the 1948 Paramount Decree to break up the monopolistic practices that had developed in the film industry, limitations placed on the major studios led to a reduction of B movie production and a dearth of films (Heffernan, 2004:91; McKenna in Leeder, 2018:61). While studios were reconfiguring their operations to become investors providing funds and renting out studio space to independents, as well as technical resources and legal contract services too. It was in this context that long standing ‘ movie director, William Castle established his production company, Susina Associates to make films relatively cheaply as it did not carry the overheads of the major studios (Heffernan, 2004:92).

Susina’s first five productions were a series of horror films, although Castle called them ‘shockers’ to distinguish them from less salubrious fare and convey the sense that the films were fun, rather than designed to induce fear (Clepper, 2016:59). To promote these shockers, Castle conceived promotional stunts to be used nationwide across all sites of exhibition which he came to call ‘gimmicks’ that bore many of the hallmarks of the hoax. For his first film, *Macabre* (1958), specially appointed stations were set up in cinema foyers, where audiences were invited to check in and sign ‘beneficiary agreements’ for a ‘death by fright’ insurance policy underwritten by the real-world insurance firm, Lloyds of London before watching the film (Castle, 1976: 155). The premise of the hoax was that, in the event of death caused by fright during the film the policy would pay out $1000 to the victim’s heirs (Ibid.). In his autobiography Castle recalls that a giant insurance policy hung over the cinema marquee, larger than the film’s title, indicating how in the 1950s a promotional hoax gimmick could transform a B movie film into an event (Kattleman in Leeder, 2019: 110 ;Castle, 1976:159).

Despite the playful name for these promotional campaign stunts they were cleverly designed to integrate film and promotion. For *Macabre* the ‘death by fright’ experience mirrored the fate of one of the characters in the film. But perhaps the most effective of Castle’s gimmicks was for *The Tingler*(1959). *The Tingler* tells the story of a medical doctor who is obsessed with the concept of dying of fear (again!) and undertakes experimental work to try to understand better how this might happen. Castle makes an announcement before the film starts warning ‘physical reactions the actors have on screen will also be experienced for the first time in motion picture history by certain members of the audience’ (IMDB, 2023). Despite this rather fanciful premise, what makes this film so effective is the final scene which is set in a cinema, much like the one the audience watching the film is sitting in, when the tingler (a cross between an alien and a woodlouse that lives in the spine) is set loose on the screen.

This most elaborate of all Castle’s gimmicks could only be staged in large participating theatres, because it required the installation of surround speakers at the back of the cinema, together with the rigging up of every tenth seat to vibrate on cue to simulate the attack of the tingler on the cinema audience (Heffernan, 2004: 100). The gimmick was named ‘Percepto!’(with an obligatory exclamation mark!). In an announcement over the auditorium’s speakers, Dr Chapin’s (Vincent Price) instructs audiences, ’Please don’t panic. But scream for your lives as there is a tingler loose in the theatre!.’ By so doing he brings the fictional and real-world audience into alignment as the screen blacks out and the theatre goes dark simultaneously. Screams and ‘sightings’ of the tingler are heard on the soundtrack to cultivate alarm in the pitch-black cinema. Projectionists were instructed in the exhibitor’s manual to press the button twice in quick succession to activate the vibrating seats and generate a visceral response in the audience so they experience first-hand what the characters feel (Heffernan, 2004:103). This hoax achieves what has been described as a ‘narrative symmetry’ of paratextual promotion and narrative plot, and proved to be one of Castle’s the most effective (but more importantly ) talked about japes (Clepper,2016:68).

For the later films, *Homicidal* (1961) and *Mr Sardonicus* (1961)*,* Castle finessed the strategy and his promotional hoaxes became so closely associated with films that screenings were ‘paused’ for the gimmick to play out. For *Homicidal,* two minutes before the end of the film there was a ‘fright break’ where audiences were offered the chance to leave and get their money back if they were too frightened to watch the end of the film (Castle, 1976: 172). In *Mr Sardonicus* the film was paused so a punishment poll could be conducted with the cinema audience to decide which fate the villain should meet (Castle, 1976:179). On arrival, audiences were given cards showing thumbs up (mercy) on one side and thumbs down (no mercy) on the other side, and these cards were ‘charged ‘ by an ‘activator’ to give a luminous glow in the dark (Ibid.). Castle’s head would appear on screen and he would start to count the votes, that in practice were counted by in-house theatre managers (Ibid.). But Castle’s gimmick-style hoaxes recognised that the promotional value lay not just in press attention but the word of mouth it can generate from its audiences.

In truth, Castle’s films themselves were unremarkable run-of-the-mill B movie fare but what made them notable were the gimmicks devised to promote them. These were based on the pleasures of the hoodwink and addressed their audiences paratextually and textually simultaneously, and reports in the trade press indicated the cost of the gimmick for *Macabre* matched, if not exceeded the film’s production costs (Variety, 1959).[[1]](#footnote-1) However, the integration of promotion into the film experience together with saturation booking and nationwide releases ensured the success of Castle’s horror films (Leeder, 2019: 61). Each of these gimmick-style hoaxes were unique and crafted around its film’s narrative. So, perhaps one of the reasons that the hoax seems to be so widely used for promotional purposes in the film industry is that as a form the hoax is inherently a vessel that can be filled with any narrative scenario and can effectively be put into the service of a promotion campaign (Huhtamo in eds. Huhtamo and Parikka, 2011:28).

By definition film promotion always presents itself as novel. But in practice, many of Castle’s gimmicks were based on promotional techniques developed earlier in the twentieth century (McKenna in Leeder, 2019:57:62; Kattleman in Leeder, 2019:99; Berenstein in Jancovich, 2001:142). Ambulances stationed outside cinemas with ‘nurses’ to administer to those overcome with fright by what they saw on the screen was a well-established stunt used by exploitation cinema and theatre magicians before them to set a tone of potential jeopardy around live theatrical shows (Sheafer, 1999:127-129; Kattleman 2019:107). Castle’s ploy of planting someone in the audience to scream at the key moment and lead the response to screenings of *The Tingler* recalled stunts used in the early decades of the 20th century. In his memoir, *Phantom fame: The Anatomy of Ballyhoo* (1932), film publicist, Harry Reichenbach recounts the ‘hypnotised woman’ stunt being effectively used to promote the silent drama *Trilby* (1915) starring Clara Kimball Young and Wilton Lackaye as the evil hypnotist, Svengali. While Castle’s gimmick of pausing a film screening so a ‘live’ jury ballot can decide the fate of the villain reprised the ‘live’ jury ballot used for the Universal Studios mystery, *The Last Warning* from 1929 (*The Film Daily*, 1929).[[2]](#footnote-2) It appears that promotional hoaxes for horror have topoic characteristics manifesting like ‘recurring elements that travel within and across cultural traditions’ and are activated, reactivated periodically (Huhtamo, 2018, 29).

In the early decades of the 20th century, promotional gimmicks were known as ‘ballyhoo’ - a term that derived from 19th century American fairgrounds where the ‘bally’ or promoter’s job was to stand on a platform above the passing crowd outside the main tent, and encourage passers-by to see the show (Bogdan, 1988: 102). Returning to Reichenbach’s recollections of the promotional campaign for *Trilby* in 1915, he recalls hiring an actor to pretend to be hypnotised by the Svengali character on screen screaming ‘Those eyes! Take them away,’ and remaining rigid in her seat until the audience had left the theatre, whereupon she was whisked away by ambulance to hospital to garner press interest (Reichenbach, 1932: 176). The publicist then engaged a psychologist and an academic to write expert opinion pieces about hypnotism for the local press to extend the life of the press coverage., Reichenbach candidly recalls his surprise that this hoax was not discovered as it had been written about in the *Chicago Tribune* five years before (Reichenbach, 1932: 177).

Ballyhoo was not confined to the promotion of horror, of course, but it certainly lent itself to the characteristics of the genre and its predecessors because of the questions stunts provoked such as : What happened? is it real or not? Ballyhoo took all kinds of forms from telephone cold calling to much more elaborate stunts. In the *Exhibitors Herald and Motion Picture World* an account of the stunt used to promote the 1926 film, *The Bat* (Roland West) by Sidney Larscham of the Masserole Theatre in Brooklyn, New York, describes how Larscham initiated the ballyhoo with a complaint to the local police of sightings of a ghost appearing nightly on the roof of a house (Larscham, 1926). Plain clothed and uniformed police were deployed to apprehend the ghost and a crowd gathered at the scene. Cards were distributed to onlookers which read, ‘The ghost is invisible but the Bat is visible and he works in the dark at the Masserole Theatre’ with two matches attached to the back of each card (Ibid.). In essence, ballyhoos like this were performative, like street theatre, so very often the only traces left of these events are found in press reports or memoirs. [[3]](#footnote-3)

Accounts of successful stunts in the trade press were taken up by other exhibitors and repeated across the cinemas until they became stock strategies. One such stunt involved leaving a pile of clothes by the shores of a lake, river, or canal to cultivate coverage of the ‘mystery’ in the local press (Lyczba in Pesce and Noto, 2016:114; Gaines, 1990:36). Ballyhoo was at its most effective when fictional scenarios were inserted into everyday settings, blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality. But film historian, Fabrice Lyczba observed the effect of such stunts depended on the participation of the audience in the willing suspension of disbelief, followed by the revelation that they were witnessing a stunt (Lyczba, 2015: 69). Indeed he suggests that participation in the stunt is only really possible once the audience recognises the playful nature of the encounter proposed, that otherwise would not be pleasurable at all (Ibid.). For their effect, just like a hoax, stunts like this depend on the audience’s awareness of the nature of the stunt for it to do its job.

Film historian, Jane Gains suggests the value of ballyhoo was two-fold: first it may provide an introduction to a film’s fictional premise; and secondly, when the stunt is revealed to be a hoax , it stimulates ‘word of mouth’ (1990: 41). However, in truth this explanation underplays the complexity of some of these ballyhoo stunts. Many required the attention of some real-world figure of authority, whether it be law enforcement, cinema staff, hotel management or the fire services, and it is the insertion of a fictional premise into the real world and the consequences it creates that cultivate press coverage of the event. The value of the stunt was that it ‘laundered’ information of its commercial connotations, perpetuating an illusion that nothing is being sold at all (Gaines, 1990:36). In summary then, in the ‘quest for visibility’ ballyhoo stunts were designed ‘to hoax the media’(Lyczba,2016 :118). A point underlined by Harry Reichenbach’s recollection, ‘An idea that would seem at first flush extravagant and impossible became by proper projection into life, a big item commanding news value’ (1932:29). However Reichenbach reflects that he acquired his tools of the trade as a ‘spieler’ in turn of the century fairgrounds (1932:167). So, to trace the use of hoaxes in horror promotion back in time, this survey must now consider pre-cinematic iterations of the genre.

The antecedents to horror cinema can be found in the freak shows of travelling fairs, circuses, and museums in mid-19th century America. By the 1870s freak shows were so popular they were incorporated into all manner of different entertainments from ‘lectures’ to staged performances (Bogdan, 1988:25). Essentially these shows put men, women, children, and animals on display because they were considered to have visible physical anomalies outside the broadly accepted norms of the time. Shows were built around lurid biographical tales spun and promoted by the ‘spielers’ whose voluble sales pitch was, at best, an elaboration of the truth, but more often deceptive claims designed to attract passing crowds which rendered them a form of hoax. (Bogdan, 1988:107).

Well known in the mid-19th century were the notorious Phineas Taylor Barnum’s freak shows. Barnum’s travelling circus shows and dime museums presented all kinds of so-called ‘freaks’ including the ‘Siamese’ conjoined twin brothers, Chang and Eng Bunker and the ‘Aztec children’ whose microcephaly resulted in small heads and learning disabilities, so they were colloquially known as ‘pinheads’ (Harris, 1973:195, 177; Bogdan, 1988:139,.132). Two predominant modes of freak show have been identified: the ‘exotic’ and the ‘aggrandised’ (Bogdan, 1988:97). The exotic presentation mode was designed to appeal to those curious about the culturally strange such as Barnum’s ‘Feejee mermaid’ - the black and desiccated body of a fish stitched together with the head and hands of a monkey (Young, 2017:7). Whilst ‘aggrandised’ freaks often entailed narratives of elevated social position such as the midget, Charles Stratton who became known by the pseudonym General Tom Thumb (Harries, 1982:49). Or the elderly Black slave, Joice Heth who, at the time she was purchased by Barnum, was already blind and partially paralysed. But Barnum boasted that she was President George Washington’s nurse, which would have made her 161 years old (Young, 2017:10). Barnum’s abuse of Heth did not end with her death either, as he even created an entertainment around the autopsy to establish her age, charging admission to what became a sell-out event (Young, 2017:29).

These freak show hoaxes have been fulsomely documented, not least by Barnum himself, who was a consummate self-publicist. But whilst these fraudulent claims would clearly be regarded as exploitative now, what is of particular interest to this genealogy is the insight Barnum’s writings provide into the nature of the hoax as a form of promotion. In *Humbugs of the World* (1866), Barnum draws a distinction between hoaxes and humbugs, defining the latter as ‘imposition under fair pretences’ which, for him, should not be confused with the activities of a fraudster (Young, 2017:9). For Barnum, the issue is not whether the claims of the humbug were truthful but whether they were worth the commotion (Young, 2017:10). Harris suggests that what is in play here is an ‘operational aesthetic’ whereby the audience derive pleasure from evaluating the nature of the spectacle and its ‘truth’ claims. In other words, Barnum regarded spectator reactions as part of the hoax (Ibid.).

So, what this genealogical survey shows is that the forms of promotion encountered maybe described by different names whether it be gimmicks, ballyhoo, stunts, or humbug, but essentially they all bear the hallmarks of the hoax. The promotional texts, performances, or artefacts themselves could not be scrutinised first-hand so this diachronic survey had to rely on secondary sources like trade press reports, autobiographies, and biographies, as well as scholarly writings. But the language used to describe these forms of promotion can enable a discursive examination and allow for a genealogy of the promotional form to begin to come into focus.

Ballyhoo has been described as a ‘hyperbolic mode in which everything is intensified and enriched’ (Gains, 1990: 35). The mid-19th century ballyhoo described here has much in common with the media convention experiences today where attendees are served up with much touted film previews and high-octane trailer premieres and encouraged to post on social media. Both then and now the audiences who engage with such promotional stunts enter into a kind of transaction whereby the pleasure of the hoax is traded for word-of-mouth recommendations, social media likes, shares or retweets – all of which launders the hoax of its commercial intent (Gaines, 1990: 37). These ‘pseudo-events’ are ‘planned happenings primarily occur(ring) for the purpose of being reported’ and they illustrate how hoaxes have an inherently public dimension, designed to draw attention to themselves (Harris, 1973:124).

This genealogical survey indicates that the hoax has always served promotion well, and has proved to be particularly apt for horror film promotion in the first half of the 20th century. However, the next question this chapter must consider is whether this tendency persists today. To establish whether this pattern constitutes a topos that reoccurs in contemporary film promotion, a survey of contemporary horror film promotion is needed and the listicle approach introduced in the previous chapter was put into operation once again.

**5.4 A Survey of Listicles**

The challenge here was to discover which contemporary horror film marketing campaigns have resonated with audiences in recent years. Creative marketing agencies measure the impact of the film promotion they create in terms of media coverage, box office figures and social platform engagement. The promotion industries have their professional awards, honours and prizes which give an indication of resonance within the industry as was discussed in chapter 3. But none of these metrics can establish whether a generic approach to horror film promotion has emerged online. So here again it seemed that the listicle tool may be a valuable way to get a sense of trends in the field.

Google’s search returns for the term ‘horror film marketing’ ran to 20 pages with a total of 80 listicles identified. However, only 17 listicles focused specifically on horror film marketing campaigns and the rest had to be discounted from the survey. Listicles were discounted for several reasons. There were listicles that did not interpret the search term correctly such as ‘10 killer (in the sense of excellent) movie marketing campaigns’ (Rotten Tomatoes.com) [[4]](#footnote-4). There was a listicle on horror movies based on true stories which likewise was outside the established frame of reference (SyFy.com)[[5]](#footnote-5). There were several listicles about promotion from a professional perspective rather than an audience perspective such as ‘Six Digital Marketing campaigns as classic Horror movies’ and ‘Creative campaigns: 5 things you can learn about Horror Movies’ (Redefineyourmarketing.com: iconcept.com). Several listicles were about horror film, not marketing and promotion and some listicles were not genre specific. Some were discarded as they were not specific to film, although listicles containing film and TV horror were included here (but the TV horror examples were not counted in the corpus). Some listicles focussed on specific features of horror film promotion such as logos, posters, taglines, or trailers rather than campaigns and so were discounted. There were several listicles that focussed on seasonal promotional campaigns around Halloween which disqualified them. Some listicles focused on very particular styles of promotion – viral campaigns, experiential campaigns, social media, and guerrilla campaigns which seemed to narrow the field too much to provide a general survey of promotion.

The remaining listicles were aggregated to produce a list of 55 horror promotional film campaigns. These listicles originated from a mix of online publications and marketing and promotion sites. Several of the listicles were produced by promotion companies – advertising agencies, PR companies, digital marketing consultants adopting the listicle form to provide ‘content’ for their web presence. Lastly, interestingly, one of the listicles featuring in the corpus derived from a company that generate opinion data for use by film makers and fans, online news, and magazines sites, indicating the currency placed on listicles (or ranked lists) as barometers of opinion from the internet (Ranker.com).

The survey’s corpus contained a range of examples including campaigns for *The Mummy* (1933), William Castle films *Macabre* (1958) and *House on Haunted Hill*( 1959) discussed in the first half of the chapter, as well as the promotional campaign for Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960)*.* There were campaigns that predated the internet for films like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Halloween* (1978) and *The Shining* (1980). Campaigns for horror franchises like *Alien*, *The Ring*, *Cloverfield* and *Nightmare on Elm* Street were represented in the listicles as well as the campaigns for the Steven King book adaptation*, IT*, notable for its immersive campaigns, and the remake of *The Mummy* (2017) for its VR experience*.* The campaign for *The* *Blair Witch Project* was the most frequently featured campaign in the listicles by a considerable margin indicating its continued significance. But, apart from these singular examples, the three main types of contemporary horror promotion campaign that featured most frequently in the listicles were: ‘prankverts’ (a conflation of the words prank and advertisement), audience reaction trailers, and social media-driven campaigns. What became evident from this listicle survey was that as the online environment matures, film promotion is no longer confined to ‘official’ destination websites but with the expansion of online platforms has diversified into a myriad of new forms of online promotion and it is to these campaigns that the chapter now turns.

**5.5 Prankvertising, Carrie and the Telekinesis Coffee Shop Surprise**

The first of the horror promotional campaign trends identified by the survey was ‘prankvertising’ which typically takes the form of short videos viewed on a video sharing site and features a practical joke or prank involving a surprise element, and the recording of people’s reactions to the prank, to draw attention to what it promotes (Chang, 2020:247). In this way, much like the ballyhoo stunts of the 1920s, pranks aim to become what Daniel Boorstin terms ‘pseudo-events’ designed to generate attention, except that here the ballyhoo takes place online (1961:226). A central feature of a prank is the sense of ambiguity that surrounds them, as to whether what they document is real or not, and this has meant that prankverts are regarded as a form of ‘a playful deceit’ bearing many of the hallmarks of a hoax once again (Chang, 2020:248). Unlike many encounters with advertising, characteristically prankverts create a set of encounters: in the first encounter the viewer views the illusion of the prank first hand and experiences it as if it were real. The second encounter is the ‘reveal’ when the staging of the prank is divulged, its intention declared and the prank is reflected upon for what it is – an advertisement designed to draw attention to a forthcoming film release. The third encounter delivers the post-script pleasure of being aware of the prank’s provenance and in the light of this watching the reactions of others to the prank, and the last encounter is that the experience can be shared with the viewer’s own social network and be deployed to contribute to the individual’s self-presentation on social media (Chang, 2020:266) . It is through this series of linked encounters in which the viewer accrues understanding of the prank’s narrative incrementally that establishes a relationship with the prank, and the film it promotes.

Pranks have long been a staple of screen entertainment in their own right, often taking the form of candid camera-style programmes in the US with the long-running *Candid Microphone* which started on radio in 1947, and then migrated to television and became a perennial of television schedules as *Candid Camera* (1948-2014) and more recently, *Punk’d* (2003-2012) (Karpińska -Krakowiak and Modliński, 2014:32). However with the advent of the video sharing platform *YouTube* in2005, a new platform for pranks emerged. According to the Pew Research Center, between 2006 and 2011 the number of people using video sharing sites more than doubled, and by 2021 *YouTube* had become the dominant video sharing site with 81% Americans saying they use the site (2021). These levels of engagement have propelled the development of various kinds of short form promotion from trailer releases, unboxing videos, mash ups, ‘making ofs’ and reactions videos (more on this later) but in particular the prank format has been co-opted for the development of increasingly elaborate forms of branded entertainment (Chang, 2021; Pew Research,2021).

Several instances of this kind of promotional hoax appeared in the listicle corpus of horror film promotion including the multi award winning prankvert for found footage horror *The Last Exorcism* (Daniel Stamm, 2010). Originally sited on *Chatroulette,* a social website that pairs participants for web-based encounters at random, the prankvert designed by TVGLa Agency opens with a young women shown smiling flirtatiously and on the other side of the split screen, young men paired for the online meet-up. However when she starts to undress, her eyes rolls back in her head revealing she is possessed by a demon and teeth bared, she lunges directly at the camera and we witness the viewers’ reactions to this transformation. Another prankvert that features in the list is *Devil Baby Attack* for a film called *Devil’s Due* (Matt Bettinelli-Olpin & Tyler Gillett, 2014) about a woman who is pregnant with the devil. Designed by the now defunct guerilla campaigns and events company Thinkmodo, this prankvert features an animatronic baby in a remote-controlled pram sited on the streets of New York and the filmed reactions of well-meaning passers-by who check the unattended pram and are shocked at what they find. The prank itself generated national press coverage on TV news programmes and chat shows. Including Fox News and Ellen which elicit reactions from telecasters like ‘ it is really creepy, but I can’t wait to see the movie’ (Thinkmodo.com ,2023). Pranks like these seem to be particularly conducive to horror promotion because they use humour to engender a particular state of mind in the viewer– to prepare for the unexpected and to gird themselves for shocks providing a foretaste of the genre’s key features (Karpińska -Krakowiak and Modliński, 2014:33).

The most often cited prankvert in the listicle survey was created to promote the remake of the 1976 film *Carrie* (2013), based on the Stephen King novel about a high school girl with psychic powers. Another creation of the agency, Thinkmodo, *Telekinesis Coffee Shop* *Surprise* is set in a coffee shop in New York’s West Village. The prankvert opens with a customer passing through the café and accidentally nudging a table which causes coffee to spill over a student’s laptop. This results in the furious student springing up from her chair and drawing on her telekinetic powers to propel the man up the wall and scatter the tables and chairs. She lets out an ear-piercing scream that prompts pictures to fall from the walls and books to spontaneously eject themselves from shelves, causing consternation and alarm amongst the coffee shop’s customers. But critical to the efficacy of the prank as a form of promotion is its final image that features the film’s title and its titular character. Providing the information needed for the audience to interpret the prank as humorous rather than something potentially alarming or threatening as Collins explains, ‘A hoax isn’t a hoax unless you know you’ve been hoaxed’ (2012).

Mindful of the fact that audiences need to understand the prank as a form of promotion, a behind-the-scenes video revealing how the stunt was staged replaced the prankverts on *YouTube*. The focus of this video is the prank’s highly elaborate staging, the fake wall; remotely controlled tables and chairs; spring-loaded books on the shelves, and a mechanism to hoist the man up the wall. This explicatory ‘reveal’ film frames the film as a promotional prank and signals how the prank should be understood with embedded cues to guide audience responses (Chang, 2020: 266 ). In the prank reveal video, the stunt is replayed repeatedly from different angles and there are shots of the actors congratulating each other with a high five after a ‘take’ to confirm the prank is just for ‘fun.’ Prank-style hoaxes like this one often feature a humorous reflexivity in the form of a ‘making of‘ explanation and this is critical to the operation of the hoax as a prank because the more the viewer learns about the contrivance, the more enjoyment the viewer derives from the explanation (as well as justifying the viewer’s own gullibility).

The prankvert received numerous industry awards and according to *YouTube*’s statistics, over the last decade the ‘reveal’ version of the prankvert has garnered 79 million views and nearly 40,000 comments, indicating its ability to generate an ad hoc audience and the extent of its virality on social media ((Karpińska -Krakowiak and Modliński, 2014:33). But the reveal version of the prankvert illustrates another key feature of hoaxes –their limited lifespan. *Thinkmodo* manage the public response to the prank briskly by issuing a statement confirming details of the prank’s production, confirming members of the public witnessed the event in the coffee shop, and the authenticity of their reactions; they then confirm all those involved (actors, crew, those pranked) have signed release forms and non-disclosure forms (NDA) to keep the pseudo-event under wraps until the launch day (Schillaci, 2013). However since the prank’s reveal, the ‘making of ‘ video stands in for the prank and continues to be viewed, maintaining its shelf-life far beyond that of the film it was made to promote.

While this video is free to view on *YouTube*, it is not really free entertainment at all. Having viewed the prankvert, viewers are encouraged by *YouTube* affordances to ‘share’ this video with their social networks and it is through this mechanism that the video recruits audiences to spread the word about the prank (and on the back of it, the film). This illustrates how prank-style hoaxes like this are by nature inherently generative, generating attention and inviting their audiences to actively participate in either their discovery or elucidation. So, this form of online promotion is fundamentally an interactive process that depends for its effect on the transactions between the ‘deceiver,’ ‘the deception’ and the ‘deceived’ (2015: 6). In this way the prank cultivates an ad hoc audience community who are mobilised to become actors in the campaign, capitalising on the architectures of networked media encouraging liking, sharing, and commenting (Handcock, 2015: 181; (Karpińska -Krakowiak and Modliński, 2014:34)). While in turn this gives rise to ‘trending’ event on social media which can generate attention in its own right too.

**5.6 Paranormal Activity: Audience Reaction Trailers & Social Media Campaigns**

Accounts of *Paranormal Activity*’s production have become part of its mythology. The film was shot in six days and nights by video games designer Oren Peli, who had no formal film training, on a micro-budget of just $15,000. Yet the film went on to become the most profitable film ever made (Frankel, 2009)[[6]](#footnote-6). However it did not have an auspicious start. Following its *Screamfest Horror Film Festival* screening, the film came to the attention of Jason Blum, then in the role of co-head of Miramax acquisitions, and he saw its potential. Famously Blum had declined *The Blair Witch Project* and eager not to make the same mistake twice, so it is said, he collaborated with the director and spent the next two years pursuing a distribution deal for the film (Platts, McCollum and Clasen, 2020:2) In interview Blum recalls, ‘I would not have kept hammering away if it weren’t for *Blair Witch*’ (Ibid.).

Eventually the film came to the attention of Steven Spielberg who took the film home to view, so the story goes (Masters, 2009). But this is where accounts start to diverge. Some say Spielberg watched the film and discovered his bedroom door had become inexplicably locked from the inside (Horn, 2009). Another account says it was his bathroom (Gleiberman, 2009), and some do not specify which door or which room (Raphael, 2009). Some accounts report that a locksmith was called but the door could not be opened and so a saw had to be used to break down the door (Masters, 2009). However, all accounts concur that when Spielberg returned to the Dreamwork’*s* offices, he was convinced the film was haunted but he loved it (Horn, 2009: Shone, 2009). Which version of this story is true is not really the issue because what is clear is that it has morphed into something of a ‘tall tale.’ In other words, a story containing unbelievable elements in the tradition of the American writer Edgar Allen Poe. Poe has suggested that the key to a successful tall tale is its quality of ‘vraisemblance’ (Young, 2017:23). That is to say, a story that ‘speaks not of truth exactly, but a resemblance to a kind of believability’ (Ibid.). In point of fact this tall tale is another kind of hoax that has been relayed repeatedly in press junkets and interviews, until, in effect, it too has been incorporated into the film’s promotional campaign.

The promotional online trailer featured frequently in horror campaigns listicles. It opens with the shot of a long snaking queue of people waiting to see the film and the trailer’s opening exposition is clearly evocative of its predecessor *Blair Witch Project* which began with the words ‘In October of 1994, 3 student film makers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland while shooting a documentary.’ Similarly *Paranormal Activity’* s trailer begins, ‘In September 2009, a screening was held in Hollywood, California. Followed by the announcement ‘This audience was among the first to experience the movie, Paranormal Activity; and ‘This is what they saw,’ striking much the same tone.

What makes the trailer so effective is its mimicry of the film’s aesthetics (Hart, 2020:20). Once seated in the cinema, the lights go down and the night vision camera used in the film, transforms the cinema audience into ghostly monotone figures gazing at the screen, as if they have somehow been imported into the film’s story world. Cameras are placed at the rear of the theatre providing a proscenium view of the audience, and at the front side to provide close ups of individuals, as well as frontal shots. From the outset, the trailer illustrates the effect on its audience, rather than the film’s plot, cast or effects. An aesthetic, Adam Charles Hart terms, horror’s ‘sensational address’ (2020:22). It begins with Micha (Micah Sloat) pointing a video camera at his girlfriend, Katie (Katie Featherston) as he sets up to record unexplained night disturbances. When she says to him ‘you believe me, right?,’ she looks directly into the camera and it is as if she is directly asking the audience, eliding the distance between the screen and the cinema (Benson-Allott, 2013:188). Space is collapsed as the trailer’s edits splice together events taking place on screen with audience reactions. On screen a door slams shut, cut to a person in the audience jump, startled out of their seat; a shot of an injury on the women’s arm, cut to a viewer averting her face - together these edits cultivate a sense that the characters and the audience now inhabit the same space. This creates a sense of immediacy because the theatrical ‘fourth wall’ which conventionally separates the audience from what takes place on stage has disappeared.

While in the last chapter science fiction and fantasy genre promotion sought to draw the viewer into the diegetic world of the film, here horror promotion seems to reach out into the viewer’s world. But the end result is the same. The paratext becomes part of the film. So, this form of promotion can be described as a ruse - a specific kind of hoax in which the stratagem is basically one of subterfuge. Not as explicit as a deception, so much as an illusion designed to achieve an outcome.

Both the prankverts and audience trailers are forms of ‘reaction’ videos which became popular with fan groups of particular pop music genres with the advent of *YouTube* and other video sharing platforms, and came to wider prominence in a 2011 *New York Times Magazine* article titled ‘Watching people watching people watching’ written by Sam Anderson. In general terms reaction videos are ‘a vernacular form of visual production where people use a webcam to record themselves while watching certain media content’(Kim, 2015:333). But, in fact, this approach has become so ubiquitous that more recent applications like *Tik Tok* have a built-in ‘reaction’ feature allowing users to record themselves reacting to any content (McDaniel, 2021: 1629). What characterises reaction video aesthetics is a sense of the ordinary, genuineness and immersion (Kim, 2015:336). Reaction videos are invariably situated in people’s ordinary everyday lives, in domestic settings, and authentic reactions to content are what is typically depicted in these videos, as well as the immersion of the viewer in what they are watching and reacting too.

The reaction video strategy has now been taken up more broadly encompassing the reactions of players of computer games and has spawned a new reality TV format in Channel 4’s *Gogglebox* (2013-). It has been conjectured that the reason for its success as a format is that reaction videos are more immediately relatable than written modes of communication like reviews (McDaniel, 2021: 1633). But reaction videos have proved to be particularly apposite to the marketing of horror, as this chapter has demonstrated, because horror has long been promoted through the way it feels to watch the film rather than its plot, cast or other production features. As Anderson observes, reaction videos enable the viewer ‘to experience its dangerous thrill without having to encounter it directly – like Perseus looking at Medusa in the reflection of his shield’ (2011).

In this sense, trailers do not just recommend films, but inform audiences how to watch them too (Hart, 2020:21). Reaction trailers model audience reaction to the film, and enable prospective audiences to rehearse the experience, without directly experiencing the film for themselves. Moreover the technological affordances of the host video sharing platform, *YouTube,* enable audiences who have these proxy encounters to like, share, or comment on the trailer in their social networks which potentially generates further engagement. Reaction videos have since become an established promotional convention widely adopted in the campaigns for *The Woman in Black* (James Watkins, 2012), *World War Z* (Marc Forster, 2013) as well as Blumhouse Horror film franchises *The Purge* (Gerard McMurray, James DeMonaco, Everado Valerio Gout, 2013-2021) and *Insidious* (Patrick Wilson, Leigh Whannell, Adam Robitel, James Wan, 2010-2023).

As well as the performative notion of audience reaction, Horror promotion often operates metatextually, as can be seen in the *Paranormal Activity* trailer where the *YouTube* audience watch the cinema audience watching a film, as well as watching the film in search of authentic reactions, creating a somewhat self-conscious media experience that draws attention to the experience of theatrical spectatorship as much as the film it promotes (Swanson, 2015; Thilk, 2009). But while audience reactions are framed as authentic, this is not necessarily the case. While the trailer’s night vision scenes of audiences in the cinema give the impression of ostensibly documenting the real, audience reactions in the trailer actually look somewhat fake. Caetlin Benson-Allott notes how the trailer audiences’ reactions are ’so patently at odds with the minimalist action on screen of sheet billowing, doors spontaneously closing on their own and off-screen thuds and thumps.’ She concludes ‘the ‘reactions’ filmed here are not actually authentic at all, but exaggerated responses, designed to enhance the mystery of the film’ (2013:189). In this regard, Paramount’s trailer for Paranormal Activity reprise the in-theatre stunts of the 1930s that aimed to induce what has been described as ‘the performance of fear’(Berenstein,2001:143).

On closer examination, it is clear that there is a certain performativity about the reactions selected for inclusion in the edit of this trailer. The trailer’s narrative structure begins with an establishing shot of audiences enjoying a film: smiling faces focussed on the screen, a man’s arm casually slung around a shoulder of his girlfriend in the foreground. However, in a juxtaposed ‘before’ and ‘after’ edit, the next reaction shot shows this same couple’s stance change. He now hugs his partner close to him, while she cradles his face in her hand. In the next shot, a thud prompts screams. People rear back in their seats and a woman puts her hands over her ears this time. In the next shot a woman pulls a t-shirt over her face and another is open-mouthed at what she sees on the screen. The reactions are histrionic and disproportionate to what is actually visible on screen. The bruised arm (no blood, no broken skin) prompts the spectator to turn away her face and cover her eyes. A thud causes people to rear up in their seats. People stare open mouthed, hold their hands to their faces, raise their arms, or with hands clenched, give out a full throttle scream. In short, the audience are theatricalised into what has been described as ‘living screaming props’ (Swanson 2015).

So, on reflection, it could be argued that what we see in this trailer is more about ‘reactivity’ rather than reactions, and reception is transformed into a form of histrionic performance that, in turn can be shared, liked and so forth via social media (McDaniel, 2021). To return to the chapter’s argument, once again we see this audience reaction trailer turn out to be a hoax presented ‘as if’ they are real; designed and crafted through editing, then staged on *YouTube*. In short, the trailer’s ruse is a proposition audiences are invited to believe for a limited period of time but it is didactic rather than just deceptive, as it is designed to sell the experience of watching the film in a cinema with an audience, to maximise the horror experience.

Another reason *Paranormal Activity* figured so prominently in the listicles survey is that the campaign was one of the first to leverage social media to cultivate an audience (Platts, McCollum and Clasen, 2020:2). In the top right-hand corner of the original film’s Paramount Studio website is a yellow box, labelled ‘Demand it!’ . Clicking on the button takes you to the internet service used by music fans who want bands to play in their area called *Eventful.com*, where visitors can register and vote for the film to be screened in their city. Designed by Shaun Johnson and Taniesah Evans at Citro Studios, a crowd-based approach was devised here (Hollywood in Pixels, 2023). To encourage voting, the top ten scoring metropolitan areas are ranked and the site implies that if the number of voters reaches 100,000, crowd-sourced demand will drive a nationwide release of the film. Josh Lawson, Digital Marketing Manager at Paramount Pictures described the campaign within the campaign as a ‘call to action’ (Hollywood in Pixels, 2023). It was saying, I want you to be part of something’ (Hollywood in Pixels 2023). The site seeks to elicit other action by prompting the site visitor to ‘tweet your scream,’ and provides a downloadable widget for the Demand it! campaign so audiences can add it to their own blogs and social media. Now whether the nationwide distribution was a performative ruse or not, nudging viewers to make these small commitments transforms promotion by integrating it into everyday online behaviour (O’Carroll in Leyda, 2016). In other words, through a series of participations, individuals are recruited to become first agents, then audiences, and finally advocates of the film. What is particularly notable about this campaign is how the guerrilla approach is executed in such a short space of time. It is operational for less than 3 weeks indicating that the campaign is designed for social media and its trend cycles concertinaed the time needed to cultivate the campaign, in contrast to the lengthy franchise campaigns that can extend over a two-year period as we shall see in the next chapter for *TRON: Legacy* (2010).

So, in the management of the film’s social media promotion, two seemingly contradictory approaches are mobilised to cultivate audiences. On the one hand crowdsourcing an open call to self-selecting participants to add their ‘voice’ to the collective goal of getting the film screened in their locality. Whilst on the other hand, audiences are offered a sense of ‘exclusivity’ to their encounter with the film, by being among the first to see the film. What we see here is the distributor expanding and contracting its engagement with its audience to optimise the currency of the film and how increasingly audiences feature as part of the promotional paratext (Hanna, 2020:95).

Following the success of the film, a reward was offered to participants in the form of a film credit. To mark its release on DVD, Paramount gave ‘demanders’ just 24 hours to reply and 170,000 members of the audience did so (Hampp, 2022). Although the resulting credits rolled at the rate of 10 names every 1/10th second so were hardly legible in real time (Ibid). In an interview, when the director Oren Peli was asked whether he was concerned that the promotion of *Paranormal Activity* might become more important than the film itself he replied that ‘the two are interlinked… without word of mouth the film would have done nothing’ (Raphael, 2009). It seems that contemporary horror’s promotion is shaped by the media technologies through which it is staged. But what we see here is a discernible shift from early online hoaxes that preyed on their audience’s unfamiliarity with the internet that enabled a ‘deception’ to be played on them for the *Blair Witch Project* campaign, to more recent hoaxes in which promotion is increasingly co-created with the film’s audience like a shared joke.

**5.7 A24’s Prestige Horror Promotion: The Witch and Hereditary**

Promotional campaigns for Richard Eggers’ *The Witch* (2015), Trey Edward Shults*’ It Comes at Night* (2017), and Ari Aster’s *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* (2019) were conceived by the independent production and distribution company, *A24* and all feature in the listicles. Generally distributors are only known by the announcement logos that preface the film, but *A24* has developed a reputation for innovative promotion and been hailed as an ‘auteur-distributor’ (Erlich, 2015). Since it was founded in 2012 *A24* has promoted an assortment of difficult to generically categorise independent films but has come to champion horror films that have been variously described as ‘elevated horror’, post-horror’ and ‘prestige horror’ that are characterised by psychological-driven narratives and a focus on cerebral dread rather than existential monster scares (Church, 2020:16.) From the perspective of this book’s interests, what makes the campaigns for these films so distinctive is that *A24* has done away with the standard ‘official’ studio film site template for online promotion, and neither do they confine online marketing efforts to the conventional trinity of social media – Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Instead, each campaign is designed to be bespoke to the film it promotes by ‘surgically’ inserting it into the zeitgeist (Erlich, 2015).

What the campaigns for these films have in common is that they are all imbued with a particular kind of humour. A case in point being the use of the established strategy of fictional characters’ being given a presence on social media to promote the film: For AMC’s television drama series about the 1960s advertising agency, *Madmen* (2007-2015)*,* Don Draper (Jon Hamm), Joan Holloway (Christina Hendricks), Roger Sterling (John Slattery) and Pete Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser) each had their own character Twitter accounts (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2012:31)[[7]](#footnote-7); For Neil Blomkamp’s *District 9* (2009) boththe hero, Wikus van de Merwe (Sharlto Copley) and main alien character, Christopher (Jason Cope) had their own *Facebook* pages; and for Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina* (2014)theAI character, Ava (Alicia Vikander) had a profile on the *Tinder* dating app. For those using the app, swiping the screen to the left enables them to strike up a messaging conversation with Ava who invites them to consider existential questions like ‘what makes you human?,’ before sending responders a link to the film’s Instagram page which reveals the nature of the ruse (Lee, 2015). However, the character that really seemed to capture audiences’ imagination featured in the *A24* 16th century supernatural tale *The Witch* set in Puritan New England featuring a goat called Black Phillip who helmed a *Twitter* handle during the film’s promotional campaign.

Black Phillip’s *Twitter* account was active during the period when the film was screening at festivals and its general release in February and March 2016 in the US and the UK. Thereafter tweets fell off sharply illustrating the brief life span of the hoax. In terms of effort, the account is a very modest endeavour consisting of just 122 tweets in total.[[8]](#footnote-8) But it garnered 9700 followers which adds up to a sizable return on a low-cost promotion strategy and the reason for this is that Black Phillip’s tweets are laced with a sardonic humour that seemed to embody the spirit of the time in a number of ways (Twitter (now X), 2023).

Written in the first person from the goat’s perspective, Black Phillip responds to unfavourable reviews by declaring ‘who shall I impale first?’ and replying to the tweeting of cute animal pictures to his account,’ I am not related to your pets,’ and ‘I’ve never seen this goat in my life.’ Black Phillip’s *Twitter* account is generative too, inviting textual as well as image-based contributions which are contributed to the *Twitter* account and take a multitude of forms from goat-related news stories, videos about disabled goats, cute baby goat gifs and films, to goat meat recipes, song lyrics and goat’s milk cheese. Black Phillip’s account went on to curate and share goat-related new stories, images, and art as well as goat-related video clips from other platforms like *Vine*, *Mashable* and *YouTube* until its promotional origins are submerged beneath this assemblage of goat-related materials and the joke seems to take on a life of its own. So, the question is, what function does the social media presence of this film character fulfil? This campaign is not directed at prospective box office audience as they will have to have seen the film to know who this character is. So, in many ways this ‘hoax’ has the features of a ruse that is more akin to a shared joke than a deception.

At the start of the chapter it was established that one of the characteristics of hoaxing is the staging of a fictional event within a real-world everyday setting (2015) and this is evident in this form of promotion as Black Phillip’s comments suture the character into the *Twitte*r zeitgeist. During the awards season, Black Phillip observes there are no Oscars for animals with the hashtag, #*Oscarssohuman.* While making a joke out of the Donald Trump’s presidential campaign slogan ‘Make America great again’ (MAGA) by posting an image of a goat wearing a baseball cap sporting the words, ‘Make America G.O.A.T. again.’ But perhaps the biggest promotional coup of all was synchronicity when the campaign chimed with *New York Magazine*’s declaration that goats are the new dogs, and the *Wall Street Journal*’s declaration that 2015 was the year of the goat meme. In response Black Phillip tweets, ‘my species is trending.’ It has been observed that ‘Good *A24* films anticipate the zeitgeist, and the best ones galvanise it’ (Erlich,2015).

What is intriguing about this hoax promotion is the unusual juxtaposition between the film’s horrific violence and the sardonic humour of Black Phillip’s *Twitter* account. Considering the seemingly paradoxical combination of horror and humour in the film’s promotional campaign, it is illuminating to draw on Noel Carroll’s reflections on the mix. Carroll suggests that horror and humour have more in common than might be expected (1999). As a genre, typically horror features incongruous and monstrous entities ‘whose existence science denies’ and it is this condition that provokes a reaction of horror in both the characters and the audience (Carroll, 1999:148). Carroll suggests that feelings are states of mind directed at specific objects, either real or imagined, rather than implicit in the object themselves and therefore can change (Carroll, 1999: 156). If horror is derived from the transgression of cultural categories in which Black Phillip, a domestic farm animal, turns into demonic killer, then parallels are evident with comedy which is similarly bound up with the transgressive play with categories and the juxtaposition of contrasting objects such as a goat with a twitter account. Carroll suggests these parallels enable the commonalities between horror and humour to emerge because both involve an object that transgresses categorical norms and commonplace expectations and this explains how what appears to be horrific in the context of a film, may be humorous in the context of *Twitter* (Carroll, 1999: 157). In short, removed from the diegesis of 16th century New England, the anomalous goat becomes an object of humour on *Twitter* and, to paraphrase Carroll, the creature remains the same but a change of context enables us to laugh, where we would otherwise scream (Carroll, 1999: 158).

So, what is the promotional value of this kind of hoax? Jonathan Gray makes a distinction between ‘entryway paratexts’ that we consume on our way to see a film, and ‘in media res’ paratexts where understanding the paratext depends on the audience having seen the film (Gray, 2010: 35). In this regard, Gray suggests ‘in media res’ paratexts are best understood, not as single texts set in stone but by focusing on how audiences respond to paratexts as part of a ‘temporal flow’ of encounters with a particular film (Iser and Fish in Gray, 2010: 41). Gray suggests that ‘just as paratexts can inflect our interpretation of texts as we enter them, so they can inflect our re-entry’ when we reflect on what we have seen (2010, 35). So, what was horrifying in the context of the film’s narrative, is inflected as a comedic figure on *Twitter* as part of the film’s promotional campaign. In this sense Black Phillip’s *Twitter* account hoax is less a deception and more akin to a shared on-going joke generating a pop-up audience community. Moreover what is discernible about the threads of expression in the *Twitter* account is how little reference is made to Eggers’ film itself as the shtick develops momentum of its own.

Another *A24* online campaign that features in the listicles is the promotion for the debut film from Ari Aster, *Hereditary* (2018) which in many ways is the quintessential ‘prestige’ horror film concerned with psychological inheritance over the generations of a family. At the film’s centre is a terrible accident and the film traces what the director describes as ‘a family tragedy that curdles into a nightmare’ depicting the corrosive effects of trauma, loss and grief on a mother’s psyche and the disintegration of the rest of family which led the film to be acclaimed as this generation’s ‘Exorcist’ (RothKopf, 2018).

Central to the film’s promotional campaign was the family’s daughter, Charlie (Milly Shapiro) whose disconcerting presence and morbid habits evoked a long tradition of horror associated with children, from Regan in *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973), the Grady twins in *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980), to Gage in *Pet Sematary* (Lambert 1989). It was these generic expectations that the campaign toys with in its online promotional strategy. Charlie has a shop on *Etsy* – the web-based marketplace where independent makers can sell, buy, and collect hand-crafted items. Aping her mother’s craft practice of making miniature worlds, Charlie makes dolls out of cotton reels, kitchen utensils, buttons, beads and feathers and gives them sinister names like ‘Creepy Grower,’ ‘Screaming Crawler’ and ‘The Biter.’ The film’s narrative conceit is maintained throughout the site. In the maker’s section, there are images from the film of Charlie at her desk making the dolls. The shop window banner decorated with Charlie’s stickers is more than just a shop front as it references narrative details that are central to the plot, like Charlie’s nut allergy; or a sketch of a pigeon referencing a macabre moment when Charlie cuts off a dead bird’s head with a pair of scissors. Another panel contains a snapshot of the whole family including the unsmiling Charlie and in the last panel there is a child’s drawing of the family’s treehouse where the film’s grotesque finale takes place. These references would also be meaningless unless one had seen the film but make a spot-the-reference style of ‘reading’ for viewers familiar with the film.

This hoax *Etsy* site is staged in meticulous detail and it is here that the promotion inverts the generic expectations of the classic possessed-girl narrative suggested in the film’s trailer and poster indicating that Charlie is the victim not the antagonist of her family’s disintegration (Foreman, 2018). In the welcome section, Charlie’s asthma is the focus and the film’s fictional secondary world is connected with the primary world with a statement that all proceeds from the site will be donated to two real-world charities: KFA (Kidswithfoodallergies.org) and the AAFA (Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America). While in the shop’s favourite items area, site visitors find Charlie’s distinctive bright orange hoodie, together with a necklace bearing the words ‘the love between a grandmother and her granddaughter is forever,’ provoking questions about the relation between the generations of women in this family. The *Etsy* site’s architecture and functionality is fully mobilized in this hoax too as the site is linked to alternative ‘real world’ *Etsy* sites selling homemade vampire bat dolls and green man spirit dolls which seem stranger than the fictional world of the film, and by transmedially inserting the film’s narrative into the wider world of *Etsy*, the sense of unease that surrounds this strange little girl persists long after the film’s release.

Another distinctive component of the film’s promotion is the merchandise featured in the *A24 films.com* shop. Conventional merchandise items like t-shirts, calendars, and lapel pins are reinvented with sardonic humour here. *A24* commissioned limited edition ‘Evil Grandmas’ wall calendar, depicting 13 Satan-worshipping grandmas, bearing the tagline, ‘evil never grows old’ inspired by the figure at the root of *Hereditary*’s horrors. There is a metallic Toni (Collette) scream lapel pin; a T-shirt sporting a large image of the treehouse in the dark on one side and a line of dialogue ‘Don’t you swear at me you little shit. Don’t you ever raise your voice at me!’ as well as a 135-piece puzzle of Charlie’s decapitated head covered in ants in a metal tin for just $26. For audiences that have grown up with licensed toys and games, wearing logoed apparel, and consuming film related comestibles, *A24* has taken the hackneyed notion of film merchandise and reinvented it as a satirical joke to share with its audience.

To understanding how a shared joke can work as film promotion, Ted Cohen’s typology of jokes provides a useful starting point (1999). Cohen suggests jokes fall into one of two categories: affective jokes and hermetic jokes (1999: 12-21). To participate in affective jokes, he suggests, background knowledge is not a prerequisite, but attitude is, and this applies to some of the humour mobilised such as the posting and responding to baby goat gifs on Black Phillip’s *Twitter* handle (Cohen, 2017:461). However, the second kind are hermetic jokes that only make sense to those with knowledge of the film’s narrative, and this definition applies to much of *A24*’s promotional merchandise such as the Charlie’s ant-covered head puzzle(Cohen, 201:460). Cohen explains that if the point of a joke is the generation of a sense of common feeling or community, then hermetic jokes make the recipient aware that they have the wherewithal to ‘get’ it, with the proviso that not everybody can, and this bestows a sense of exclusivity to the encounter (Ibid.). Writing about media audiences, Graham Miekle and Sherman Young suggests that a community built around in-jokes is a community built around the notion of exclusion’ and from this perspective these forms of promotion are not designed to just sell the film but cultivate pleasures of belonging to an exclusive audience community (2012:117). Indeed in-jokes can often be used to actively cohere a sense of belonging to an online audience community (Baym, 2010:621).

Cohen suggests the relationship between the joker and the audience is an inherently transactional one and so jokes can be understood as a form of film promotion because they can cultivate a ‘community of amusement.’ In other words the cultural capital of feeling ‘in the know’ is exchanged for engagement with the *A24* film (1999:29). But there is a further layer of promotion in operation here with the *A24* brand, as well as *A24* films. Writing about contemporary brand management, Melissa Aronczyk suggests that as well as recognising promotional paratexts as an entryway to a media experience, they may be understood as operating in the service of a brand (2017:113). From the distributors perspective, the selection of film for distribution can be regarded as a form of promotion for the *A24* brand (2017). In this regards it is not the individual films that matter, as films and their paratexts are switched out once they have run their course and replaced by new films and new promotional paratexts (Ibid). But by reading paratextual activity from the point of view of brand management, Aronczyk suggests the hierarchical relationship between the text and the paratext becomes inverted and ‘the text itself becomes subordinate to the paratext’ (Ibid). Promotional paratexts like the ones described here articulate an assembly of cultural elements into temporary relation to each other and the resulting buzz adds value to and legitimises the brand, as well as the film (Ibid). So, while the forms of online promotions evolve (an ersatz Etsy shopfront, a goat’s *Twitter* account, and *Hereditary* themed merchandise at *A24.com*)*,* and operate under the same logic as an official film website, the promotional campaign seeks to harnesses the viewer to the brand but complicates distinctions between the film text and its paratext.

**5.8 Conclusions**

This chapter set out to investigate what shape horror film promotional sites take online. Its starting point was the phenomenally successful marketing campaign for *The Blair Witch Project* that is credited with bringing the new promotional platform of the internet to the attention of the film industry in 1999. To find out whether *The Blair Witch Project* hoax was unique or whether it constituted the beginnings of a generic promotional trend, a genealogical survey of past horror promotion was undertaken. The survey identified three key periods when this appeared to be the case: the ‘gimmick’ campaigns of the 1950s, the ‘ballyhoo’ of the 1920s and mid-19th century pre-cinematic horror entertainments. What the survey indicated was that although the terms by which promotion is known change over the period from gimmick to ballyhoo to humbug, each of them exhibit the underlying features of the hoax and the form is remarkably persistent. This genealogy seems to suggest that the hoax model provides a schema for interpellating horror audiences because, as a short narrative form, it is inherently malleable and can assume the guise of any fictional scenario it is required to promote (Williamson, 1978: 50).

To establish whether this trope persists in contemporary horror cinema promotion was a more challenging question. To comprehensively survey recent horror film promotion campaigns would be a colossal undertaking but would not have confirmed which campaigns resonated with their audiences. So, the listicle survey approach introduced in the last chapter was adopted again here to explore contemporary horror promotion campaigns. The campaigns identified by the survey illustrated some trends in horror promotion that had resonated with audiences including prankvertisements, audience reaction trailers and social media-based campaigns. The significance of these promotional modes was corroborated by the fact that each of these trends had attracted academic attention,[[9]](#footnote-9) as well as recognition by the promotion industries. [[10]](#footnote-10) In fact, the *Telekinetic Coffee Shop* promotion was so popular it featured in *YouTube*’s year-end video rankings in 2013 (Khatchatourian, 2013).

Analysis revealed that these promotional trends all feature hoax traits too, although the nature of the hoax seemed to change. During the period surveyed the hoax promotions shift from fraudulent deception in the case of mid-19th century’ freak’ shows, to ballyhoo stunts designed to cultivate attention by hoaxing the media in the early decades of the 20th century. Castle’s gimmicks in the late 1950s and early 1960s encouraged audiences to leave their recently acquired TV sets and see films in cinemas , in much in the same way that fifty years later, audience reaction trailers promote *Paranormal Activity* as an experience best enjoyed in the cinema. Film promotion is always framed as novel but the evident parallels here suggest a shift in promotional address in response to changes in media consumption which posed competition for cinema from the advent of TV in the fifties and the development of personal media and the internet at the start of the twenty first century.

The diachronic survey revealed that the nature of the hoax is dependent on the wider context of the media landscape. In 1999, *The Blair Witch Project* promotional hoax responds on to shifts in the media landscape with the advent of the internet. Whilst prankvertising centred campaigns like the *Telekinetic Coffee Shop Surprise* capitalise on the growth in short form video consumption designed with the facility for virality. Then there is a change of tone in the case of *A24* whose campaigns driven by online and social media are more akin to shared jokes and their appeal to audiences is framed through a productive tension between the all-join-in nature of social media and a sense of exclusivity inherent in their shared jokes.

So, what can we conclude from the evidence of this chapter: Firstly, the hoax is a recurring feature of horror promotion but the nature of the hoax evolves over the course of the chapter from humbug and ballyhoo to gimmick; tall-tale, prank, and ruse, to shared joke. This cannot be just a matter of semantics. To account for its persistence as well as its evolution, this chapter concludes that the hoax formula can productively be viewed as a discursive topos, and its evolving terminology articulates the changing relations between media producers and consumers over time. Secondly, this survey indicates relates to the fact that there is a generic tendency for hoaxes to be adopted in the promotion of horror film. It is possible that the reason for this is because the hoax structure provides a convenient entryway paratext for a horror film because it delivers a visceral sensation as a foretaste of the film it promotes. The wider implication of the surveys in both this chapter on horror and the previous one on science fiction and fantasy, is that the genre operates within a range of paratextual promotional settings. The generic mode of promotion is tailored to the generic features of the horror genre. But as a narrative device , the hoax lends itself to horror film promotion as it can provoke alarm, shocks and scares that prefigure the film whilst at the same time, framing the encounter as entertainment - quite distinct from the horrors of the real world.

However not all horror hoax promotions are effective and some have been known to backfire. One horror promotion listicle thrown up by the survey focused on failed promotion and included the campaign for Gore Verbinski’s Horror mystery *A Cure for Wellness* (2017), which illustrates the precarity of the hoax topoi as a promotional strategy. New Regency Productions campaign for 20th Century Fox took the form of a series of hoax websites including *Healthcuregov.com* which was designed to look very similar to its real-world counterpart, *Healthcaregov.com*, the US government health insurance scheme colloquially known as ‘Obamacare’ with matching colour scheme and type font (Dessem,2017). The film’s campaign also featured a series of fake local newspaper websites with names evocative of print media that have migrated online like *Houstonleader.com*; *Sacramentodispatch.com*; *Newyorkmorningpost.com*; *Indianapolisgazette.com* and *Saltlakecityguardian.*com (Ibid.).

In these ‘news’ sites, key phrases from the film were inserted into fake news articles with tongue-in-cheek headlines such as ‘Psychological Thriller screening leaves Salt Lake City man in catatonic state’ in the style of what is known as ‘native’ advertising whereby the promotion is disguised to look like content from news organisations (Amazeen in West and McAllister (eds), 2023:248). However, the fake news stories turned out to be problematic because the issues to which they referred were too controversial. One news story reported that Lady Gaga’s half time performance at the Superbowl that year was to feature a tribute to Muslim communities, claiming Islamophobia is a ‘sickness inside us,’ and that Lady Gaga’s music is the cure (Kamen,2017). Another story featured a Utah state legislature bill to publicly shame and jail women who had abortions. There were also several stories related to the incumbent President of the United States of America, Donald Trump, recounting that the president met up with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin at a Swiss resort prior to the 2016 election.

While the hoax was effective as a form of promotion on one level in that it generated attention, the attention was not on the film it was designed to promote. As well as the controversial nature of the stories, the issue was that these news stories were regarded by some viewers as authentic and shared as if they were real news stories on sites like *USA Supreme* by an audience who likely didn’t click through the links to the film’s marketing and were unaware of the story’s provenance as a form of film promotion (Kamen, 2017). Surveys of native advertising support this hypothesis as there is a widespread lack of recognition of this advertising technique, let alone the double bluff of film promotion in the guise of native advertising. US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) guidelines on the requirement for clear disclosures to enable viewers to distinguish promotion from editorial content, research has repeatedly indicated that such disclosures are not understood or simply overlooked (Amazeen and Muddiman 2018; Tataj and van Reijmersdal, 2012; Wojdynski and Evans, 2026, 2020 in Amazeen, 2023).

What studio marketeers had not taken into consideration was how the hoax spread across online platforms - people do not necessarily read articles they encounter on social media before they share them (Bright, 2016: Gabielkov et al. 2016 in in Amazeen, 2023) and so may spread commercial content they presumed was news content (Amazeen and Vargo, 2021). Moreover audiences viewing news sites on mobile devices are less likely to see small disclosures than on larger screen so the risk from over half the cases analysed dimensions of screens (especially mobile phone screens encourages fleeting encounters with stories as well as precipitous responses in the form of shares, likes, reblogs, retweets- all at the click of a button (Amazeen, 2023\_. Studies of native advertising have also established that even though the appropriate disclosures may appear on the origin site, once content leaves the site disclosures often disappear on social media sites (Amazeen and Vargo, 2021 in Amazeen, 2023). As a result, the origin of these hoax news stories became lost and so these hoax news stories were believed, and worse still, taken seriously.

When revealed to be a hoax, the film’s campaign unravelled for a number of reasons (Rainey 2017). Firstly, the hoax commercially exploited individual’s identities which is itself a legal violation of the right of publicity (Ng, 2017). Secondly, the staging of the hoax meant it could not be understood as an entertainment promotion then audiences would not be able to recognise the content as commercial in nature rather than legitimate news articles, then the hoax is a deception of them, rather than a joke shared with them. But thirdly, the hoax was considered problematic because in a cultural climate anxious about the rise of fake news, the hoax only served to fuel anxiety. Following the bitter American presidential campaign of 2016, the previous year, the fabrication of news stories known as ‘fake news’ became a subject of consternation and there was a real concern that people may not be able to discern the real from the fake and what the consequences of this might be for society.

Unlike their 19th century promotional predecessor, P. T Barnum, whose antics, when revealed to be a hoax, subscribed to the adage that no publicity is bad publicity and went on to capitalise on the controversy by garnering even more publicity, 20th Century Fox had to acknowledge that it had lost control of the story and issue a full apology (Ng, 2017). But what this failed horror promotional hoax does confirm however is the inherent topoic discursivity of the hoax which both reflects and comments on the state of things . As the cultural historian, Kevin Young observes:

‘Of hoaxes, there is never a shortage – but it is also true that the weather of a particular time and place can influence what grows during a drought of facts. *It is the weather the hoax measures*.’(2017:25) My italics.

1. The cost of the promotional gimmick for *Macabre* raised costs from $400 to $1 million according to an article in Variety published in July 1959, ‘Goosepimple saga with seats to suit’ Available from: https://archive.org/details/variety215-1959-08/page/n18/mode/1up?view=theater accessed 24 March 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . Scholars agree that before the 1930s, the genre title horror was used to describe novels and plays but concertedly avoided in the film industry. The reason for this was that the term was often used critically by censors, as well as groups calling for censorship to identify what they regarded as disreputable. Kendall Phillips, as well as Mark Jancovich and Brown observe alternatives in play such as melodrama as well as mystery to describe films concerned with the eerie, the mysterious and the strange. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In ‘From Elephants to Lux Soap: The Programming and ‘Flow’ of early Motion Picture Exploitation’ Jane Gaines raises questions about using memoires of publicists, given the trade’s inherent predilection for self-aggrandisement and embellished trade press reports as historical record. Gains sidesteps the issue, stating that she does not have time to deal with this in her study. However the fact remains that these ballyhoo events were ephemeral, so little trace of them remains, and the secondary record needs to be understood in the light of this (1990:30) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 10 killer ( in the sense of excellent) movie marketing campaigns’ Available at: www.editorial.rottentomoatoes.com accessed 30 September 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ‘ 17 Scary Horror Movies based on True Stories’ Available at www.syfy.com accessed 30 September 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This statement is based on *Paranormal Activity’*s global box office takings of $65.1 million (as of 28 October 2009) minus $15,000 production costs, divided by $15,000, times 100 giving a result of 433,900 percent. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This promotional strategy is thought to be derived from a fan practice of assuming character personas on social media. In *The Art of Immersion* Frank Rose describes how in August 2008, a handful of fans assumed roles from the TV Drama series *Madmen*. Paul Isak-son, a brand planner from a small advertising agency began tweeting as Don Draper. Then a few days later Carri Bugbee from Portland Oregon began tweeting as Peggy Olson and her friend Michael Bissel tweeted as Roger Sterling, all from Madmen. (pp.78-79) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Twitter account was tabulated using NVIVO for analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Benson-Allott (2013); Chang, 2020; Karpińska-Krakowiak and Modlinski, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Telekinetic Coffee Shop* won a number of industry awards: Two Clios –a Branded Entertainment and Content award and a ‘Direct’ award for generating a specific reaction/response from the target audience. The prankverts also won a viral video award and Webby nominations in the viral marketing and (unscripted) Branded categories. Paramount’s team won *The Hollywood Reporter Key Arts* award in the ‘theatrical New Media category’ - special recognition for the most ‘Buzz Worthy’ award as well as a Silver Pixel award for their promotion of *Paranormal Activity* (2007) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)