# Introduction – First Encounters

If I had to say when my interest in film promotional sites began, it would be autumn, 2001. I remember returning home from the cinema one evening having watched Richard Kelly’s directorial debut, *Donnie Darko* (2001)*.* Typing the film’s title into the Yahoo! search engine on my IBM-compatible desk top computer, I sat back to wait for the site to upload, listening to the familiar electronic tones of Internet Explorer dialling up a connection to the world wide web. Slowly the site began to appear on the screen. In the bottom corner of the blank white monitor, black jagged triangles materialised. Then a bright red spot around which a circle formed to create a kind of bullseye-like target that flickered, although there were no instructions as to what to do. As I moved my mouse over the red spot, the cursor encountered a hyperlink and clicking on this target, a small Microsoft window frame took shape, out of which the black and white figure of the film’s main character, Donnie Darko, played by a young Jake Gyllenhaal, peered back at me. The image glitched nervously as if the site were malfunctioning but the caption read: ‘I can do anything I want.’ When Donnie Darko’s image glitched again, it had transformed into the ghostly form of Frank, the mysterious giant rabbit, and the text replied, ‘So can you.’ Then at last a command to guide the way - ‘Proceed’- together with an announcement that the tangent universe had collapsed 366 days, 8 hours, 34 minutes and 34 seconds ago. I was intrigued.

*Donnie Darko* has a complicated narrative structure in which the film’s events play out in two parallel universes over a period of 28 days. Events are viewed through Donnie Darko’s disturbed point of view so it is not always clear what is real and what is not but the site adopts a direct mode of address and the visitors is told, ‘Pay attention – you could miss something.’ The website is structured more like a game than a film with levels rather than scenes, and passwords are required to access them. As I stumbled my way through the site, I learnt that the level passwords were a character’s name and the name of the street where another character lived, which suggested you had to have seen the film in order to know what they were. So, what was becoming evident was that the site’s aim was not just to promote the theatrical release of the film, at least, not in ways we are used to seeing film promotion, but it was contributing to the film’s narrative.

Designed by Alexandra Jugović and Florian Schmitt of *Hi Res!* creative marketing agency, the *Donnie Darko* website re-presents scenes from the film, such as when Donnie’s psychosis finds him waking up on the golf course, and when he burns down Jim Cunningham’s house. By doing so, the site highlights these key moments, conjuring up an experience, quite unlike anything I had ever come across before. More interesting still was that the site contributed to the film’s narrative adding both prologue and epilogue detail to the story. Documents appeared that indicated what had happened before the events depicted in the film such as an affidavit from Clearview Detention Centre, Fairfax County, Virginia stating that Donnie Darko had been diagnosed with ‘a rare somnambulant sleep disorder.’ There were artefacts pointing to what took place after the end of the film too, such as a newspaper obituary from the Middlesex Gazette detailing what happened to Donnie’s teacher, Miss Pomeroy who was killed in a car accident. There were extracts from Roberta Sparrow’s (Grandma Death) book, *The Philosophy of Time Travel* which elevated the much talked about tome from plot device to a book with readable pages. All-in-all then, the site presented an enthralling combination of net art, narrative extensions, and game play that prompted as many questions, as it answered.

At the end of the site there was an official looking ‘restricted’ report from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) alluding to an explanation about the accident that led to the jet engine falling onto Donnie Darko’s home, together with an oblique, barely audible recording of a telephone conversation between officials from the UK and US governments. These story details were all presented in the form of in-world documents including dot matrix printing and the DOS-style text line requiring Yes/No answers, to be scrutinised by the site visitor for what they could reveal. At one point the site visitor is even invited to participate with classroom lessons. Rolling the cursor onto the blackboard, transforms it into a piece of chalk to write on the board, providing ‘inscription surfaces’ for the user to ‘write’ themselves into the film’s fictional world (Hayles, 2002:111). Indeed , the site user is addressed as if they inhabit the film’s diegetic world in a mode more akin to an ‘experience’ than film marketing (Beck, 2002:56).

Over the years since then, I revisited the site from time to time and discovered I was not alone in finding this site so compelling. It was conferred with awards by the *Flash* Film Festival and *Prix Ars Electronica* in Austria, as well as the 2002 people’s voice award at the *Webbys.* Whilst a few years later it was exhibited in a show titled *Communicate: British Independent Graphic Design Since the Sixties/ The Emergence of British Graphic Design* at the Barbican Art Gallery (2004-5). Originally the site’s time clock was designed to count down to the theatrical release of the film on October 26th 2001 in the United States but when I looked in on the site, more than a decade later, I found that it was still counting backwards recording that the tangent universe collapsed 4840 days, 12 hours, 42 minutes, 23, 24, 25.... seconds ago on 27th January 2015. Whilst the film which it was designed to accompany is available to view on streaming services, as well as physical formats, but has long since left the cinema screen. It was this that made me wonder what happens to film sites that no longer fulfil the promotional role for which they were designed, but still exist materially on the internet? Are they just left out there like (cyber) space debris?

The site has been taken down now but it had sown the seed for this enquiry and this book sets out to investigate the development of this form of online promotion - film websites designed as part of the film experience that emerged with the advent of the internet.

The first film web sites came online in the autumn of 1994. *Stargate*’s site (www.digiplanet.com/stargate) coincided with the film’s opening in cinemas (London, 2023). While *Star Trek: Generations* site (http://generations.viacom.com) went live with a longer lead time in advance of the film’s theatre release, even though there was not even internet access in Paramount at the time (Geirland and Sonesh-Kedar, 1999: 53). At this time there were marked changes taking place in the industrial media landscape in response to the shifting economic and technological circumstances resulting from media mergers and conglomerations, digitalisation, and the arrival of the world wide web. These changes were characterised as ‘media convergence’ by Graham Meikle and Sherman Young in their eponymous book, and described as ‘the coming together of things that were previously separate’ (2012:2).

Whilst the term media convergence has been widely adopted since then, there is less consensus about its implications. One of the problems with the concept of media convergence is that much of the discussion circulating around it focused on technological convergence as could be seen in the cultural preoccupation with the evolution of the smartphone which came to incorporate the camera, clock, calculator, video camera and much else besides and this perspective narrowed its focus (Jenkins, 2006:15). What Henry Jenkins succinctly refers to as the ‘black box fallacy’ imagines a future where all media content will be accessed through a single unit (Jenkins, 2006:14-5). But in the event, this turns out not to be the case, as different media continue to be produced and consumed as separate and distinct media platforms (Ibid.). It would be perhaps more accurate to say that media convergence has changed the relationships between different media platforms and the way content for these platforms is produced and consumed (Jenkins, 2006:15-16; Meikle and Young, 2012:81). For example, it is clear convergent media technologies have increased the scope and the scale of transmedia practices. Meikle and Young go on to suggest that the development of transmedia storytelling and marketing has resulted in ‘the blurring of content types [and] what might once have been identifiably advertising is now part of a *more complex presence*.’ (2012:96) My italics.

It is in this ‘*more complex presence*’ – content designed for marketing, and marketing that takes the form of content - where this book’s interests reside, in a particular manifestation of transmedia that undertakes both storytelling and marketing i.e. The film website. Whilst transmedia content like film novelisations or games based on films predate the internet, the film website is a digital-born hybrid of content and promotion, storytelling, and audience participation, and exemplifies contemporary promotional transmediations online. Moreover, while at first glance it may seem counter-intuitive to choose to examine one component separately from the rest of the interrelated matrix of a transmedia set of artefacts, there is value in taking this approach.

The historical nature of this investigation aiming to trace the development of film websites since the mid-1990s entails looking at promotional materials in retrospect, long after their job is done. But the advantage of hindsight is that once film websites were freed from their promotional duties and uncoupled from the film’s journey through its screening windows, they can be considered in their own right. So, in this book promotional artefacts will become the focus of attention rather than films they promote. And although, the peril of this approach is that focussing solely on film websites risks isolating them from other components of promotional campaigns and stripping them of meaning derived from their relation to these other media artefacts, there are tangible benefits. It enables closer scrutiny of this new artefact’s distinctive qualities – its aesthetics, styles, and narrative forms. Furthermore, the development of this promotional artefact over time becomes clearer, and allows the researcher to identify specifically what the web platform contributes to transmedia artefacts. In this sense, the study aligns with the approach advocated by Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato – editors of *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies* - who argue that to fully comprehend the affordances of a new platform, we need to understand what it can *do* (2019:6).

A few years after I first came across the Donnie Darko website, I presented a paper about this ground-breaking website at the *Cinema and Technology* conference at the University of Lancaster (2005). The paper was titled ‘Have you seen the film? No, but I’ve been to the website’ borrowing a line from Jugović and Schmitt’s talk about their work at an event in Valencia, Spain the previous year, where they looked forward to a time when a conversation may run along similar lines and film sites like theirs would get due recognition as art. A little over-excited, I concluded my paper by speculating that what we were seeing here were how film promotional sites may become integral to the film experience and this kind of cross platform storytelling augured the beginning of a ‘new media ecology’ (Walden, 2005).

In the event these ideas did not take root until several years later when I began to research the history of film websites in earnest. However investigating the emergence of the film promotion sites turned out to be more of a challenge than I had first imagined. Preliminary searches online revealed that most studio campaigns were taken down and disappeared from public view once their job was done. Only a handful of independent film promotional sites remained online to provide the film with a web ‘presence’[[1]](#footnote-1) as the films journeyed through their release windows in cinemas, home viewing formats, and onto streaming services. The focus of the research had to shift at this point. Before questions concerning film site aesthetics and narrative styles could be addressed, the issue of how to undertake a historical study of these ephemeral artefacts and what strategies could be used to undertake research on the internet had to be considered first. So, here’s the issue: because film sites are ephemeral there has been little critical examination of them in film studies . To address this I identified three key questions: where can historical film sites be found? what different forms do they take? And how do audiences engage with and experience them?

So where to begin? Magazines like *Entertainment Weekly*, film industry sources such as *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*, together with marketing and promotion trade publications such as *Advertising Age,* *Brand Week, Campaign, ClickZ* and *iMedia Connection* provided an obvious starting point. Furthermore now that these sources are published online, many of them have archives that may provide contemporary commentary on trends and developments and could be used to piece together an understanding of the development of film websites. But the problem with this approach was that its reliance on such accounts distances the investigation from the artefacts themselves. When investigating something new and emerging, the first task must be to look closely at the artefact themselves. In other words, my interest lay in what Vivian Sobchack calls ‘the thinginess of things’ (Huhtamo and Parikka, 2011: 327). I wanted to scrutinise the things themselves rather than just commentary and interpretation of them (Ibid.). In short, I wanted to examine these digital artefacts first-hand and my investigation was starting to resemble a kind of internet-based archaeology.

To start, a clearer understanding of the nature of object under consideration was required. Film promotional sites contain a combination of promotion and narrative content but, for the most part, they refer to the films they promote, so they can be regarded as a form of transmedia marketing promotion. So, chapter 1 considers the concept of transmedia that sits at the core of these media artefacts’ design. To do this, a search of the term ‘transmedia’ was undertaken using Google’s NGram tool to track the uses and applications of the concept in published sources over the last two decades. What this survey revealed is that the word ‘transmedia’ is rarely used on its own, but more often appended to a secondary term which frames the way it is understood in different contexts and with different practices. This observation is supported by Henry Jenkins’ reflection of the nature of the term, ‘Transmedia is an adjective, not a noun. Transmedia needs to modify something ’(In Derhy & Bourdaa (eds), 2016:220). Terms found with Ngram included transmedia genres, transmedia poetics, transmedia oligopolies, and transmedia intertextuality. Following on from this I discovered the term transmedia appended in books and articles to transmedia storytelling; transmedia practices, audiences; marketing and promotion; paratextuality; history and transmedia archaeology. With this in mind the first chapter proposes that the development of the concept can be mapped through these appended terms to generate the archaeology of a concept. Then by using these terms as a road map, the evolution of a transmedia strategy for film promotion can be understood.

Promotional websites are now so commonplace they are frequently overlooked as can be seen in the case of *The Grand Budapest Hotel: Akademie Zubrowka* (2015) site designed for Wes Anderson’s film by Watson Design Group. Drawing on the FIAF (International Federation of Film Archives) database, a survey revealed how little consideration the site had received from film journalism and scholarship, despite winning numerous awards for its contribution to the film experience. In the light of instances like this, Chapter 2 contends that film sites are, more often than not, deleted before they have been critically appraised. Furthermore low status, ephemerality and digital degeneration indicate that conventional approaches to media history may not be productive and an alternative strategy may be needed. With its interest in the deleted, discarded, and disregarded, media archaeological writings offer a way forward. Chapter 2 considers how the writings by Michel Foucault, Friedrich Kittler, Wolfgang Ernst, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, and others, that in recent years have been yoked together under the banner title of media archaeology, may inform this investigation. These writings provide the principles that underpin the development of a series of practical strategies to undertake the research covered in subsequent chapters. In short, these theoretical principles are turned into practical research tools.

This investigation sits at the intersection of a whole raft of different fields of scholarship including film and media, digital culture, archival studies, computer games, literature, media archaeology, social psychology and advertising theory and practice and so is inherently interdisciplinary. However, these hybrids of storytelling and promotion can also be understood as being a part of a new area of film studies which have been called ‘off-screen studies’(Gray, 2010) or ‘extended cinema’ (Atkinson, 2014). Whilst the chapter draws on approaches from all of these fields, it also advocates for novel approaches to interrogate newly emerging cultural phenomena. The chapter makes the case for the bringing together of transmedia and media archaeology. Its starting point is the need to redefine what the study of film is today as the nature of the film experience changes. With the development of transmedia production, expanding budgets for marketing and promotion, and the burgeoning number of online platforms and tools, these features of the 21st century film experience need to be better understood. The chapter concludes by staking out the ground for a distinct kind of transmedia archaeology, concerned with the very recent past since the advent of the internet.

Most promotional materials have a short shelf life. Once a film has journeyed through its exhibition windows, they become redundant and their existence precarious. Creative agencies who design these artefacts may feature film promotion sites online as ‘shop window displays’ to advertise their services, and sites may appear on platforms like *Behance* showcasing work to the design community. However, for the most part, campaign sites are just unceremoniously taken down to make way for forthcoming releases and disappear. Since 1994 when the first film sites appeared online, generations of film sites have effectively disappeared and the consequence is that their contribution to the film experience is largely unacknowledged, the development undocumented and their history untold. Chapter 3 considers whether film websites are collected, recorded, and archived anywhere. The chapter begins with a consideration of the writings that discuss how archives function to shape knowledge formation, as well as putting into question historiographical narratives and hierarchies.

Four archival settings housing extant film websites are identified for consideration. These include the *Internet Archive* that sees itself as a digital equivalent of a global library; The, now defunct, *Digitalcraft.org* which consisted of an online extension of a building-based craft museum in Frankfurt, Germany; *The Webby Awards* that honours achievements on the internet with its gallery archive of winners and nominees; and the *Movie Marketing Madness* (now *Cinematic Slant*) blog which illustrates how archiving has become an everyday practice. This chapter examines the capacity of these digital archives to collect, record, and preserve, and unpacks what they can tell us about film websites. In the second half of the chapter, a transmedia archaeological ‘dig’ is undertaken online for Neill Blomkamp’s award-winning *District 9* site, *D-9.com* designed by *Trigger* across each of these four archives for comparison to discover whether the film’s promotional site has been preserved. It concludes with a reflection on the challenges of researching digital film promotional ephemera and considers what is at stake here in the broader sense for the cultural memory.

Having identified some of the archival locations that feature film sites, the investigation was now in a position to focus its attention on the film sites first hand and find out what forms they take? As film sites have become a familiar feature of online film promotion, studios developed ‘official’ sites which have standardised into widely adopted format including a plot synopsis, cast list with a gallery of images, video clips and featurettes, as well as information on where the film can be seen locally. Chapter 4 focuses on one particularly prominent strategy in the world of film promotion– film sites that depict the fictional world of the film’s narrative as-if-it-is-real. Initial observations suggested that fictional worlds for science fiction often take the form of an in-movie (often evil) corporate web site- a recurrent trope in 20th and 21st century popular culture - which is reflective of concerns about the consequences of developments in capitalism in the post-industrial age – in short, a topoi.

To establish whether these film sites did, in fact, represent a new iteration of this long-running topoi, a survey method was developed harnessing one of the web’s most popular forms of journalism – the listicle. This listicle survey yielded a corpus of nearly 100 examples and adopting Mark J.P. Wolf’s imaginary world creation framework, together with Neils Brugger’s strategy for web site analysis, and Errki Huhtamo’s concept of the topoi, a longitudinal study of the development of this film promotional website convention is devised. Case studies selected from the corpus include the *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* site, *Lacunainc.com*; *District 9*’s *MNU.com*, and *Prometheus*’s *WeylandIndustries.com* site. The survey suggests these fictional worlds are becoming increasingly dense and complex and this form of film promotion is establishing generically specific ways of communicating with prospective audiences. It seems to be the case that the ‘evil corporation’ online promotional trope is not just an advertising technique but a discursive topos which embodies a critique about real world cultural and economic circumstances.

To confirm that these new forms of online promotion have evolved generic characteristics, further genres had to be examined so Chapter 5 undertakes a media archaeological investigation of horror films and their online promotion. The site credited with bringing this new form of promotion to the attention of the Hollywood film industry was *BlairWitch.com* for Eduardo Sanchez and Daniel Myrick’s found footage horror, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999)*.* This website’s success has often been attributed to the emergence of fast developing internet technologies at the end of the 1990s but what made it compelling was its presentation as a hoax. To explore whether the hoax is a persistent feature of horror promotion, this chapter provides a genealogy of the hoax, tracing it back from the gimmick campaigns for William Castle’s ‘shockers’ in the late 1950s and early 1960s; through the ballyhoo stunts of 1920s America; back to what the American producer and swindler, P.T Barnum termed ‘humbug’ in mid -19th century fairground freak shows. What this overview reveals is that the technologies and the terms by which horror promotions is known changes over time, but their narrative schema are remarkably similar. It seems likely that the reasons for this is that a hoax makes an ideal vehicle for promoting horrors, because hoaxes can be filled with any fictional scenario, and provide a taster experience of the film for its potential audiences.

To discover whether the hoax persists in contemporary horror film promotion was more challenging. Here again, the listicle survey method proved helpful as it provided a tool for identifying campaigns that have captured the contemporary cultural imagination. A corpus of online horror promotion campaigns was assembled which illustrated how online campaigns were no longer confined to official websites but were capitalising on the diversity of online platforms now available. The most frequently cited campaigns included the audience reaction trailer on *YouTube* for *Paranormal Activity* (2007); ‘Telekinesis Coffee Shop Surprise’, the ‘prankvert’ for the remake of *Carrie* (2013) and, most recently, social media in campaigns for *A24’s* *The Witch* (2015) and *Hereditary* (2018) and its ersatz *Etsy* site and *A24* merchandise shop (2018). However despite the increasing number of online platforms used, what these campaigns continue to share in common is that they are all designed around hoaxes of one kind or another. Moreover, these online film promotional campaigns follow generic lines and though the concept of genre cannot straightforwardly be mapped onto promotional materials as they must assume forms that interpellates potential audiences to engage with them (Williamson,1978 :50). Science fiction and fantasy films often have in-world corporate websites. While Horror promotion often deploys hoaxes to interpellate its prospective audience.

Chapter 6 pivots away from considerations of narrative styles and aesthetics to investigate how audiences experience promotional film websites. To do this, it focuses on the Disney science fiction adventure, *TRON* (1982) and how nostalgia was cultivated and harnessed to propel its promotional campaign, for *TRON: Legacy* (2010) thirty years later. Consideration is given of its lengthy web-based campaign including its ARGs (Alternative Reality Games), scavenger hunts and social media activity and its cultivation of nostalgia. But what is of particular interest to this chapter are its ‘discussion boards.’ These social media spaces provide an online forum for TRON fans and contain the ‘conversations’ taking place in the lead up to the cinema release of the film which can be regarded as an ‘archive’ of audiences’ contemporaneous responses. More than 500 posts from the discussion boards are examined using qualitative analysis providing insight as to how people engage with, and contribute to the film’s promotional campaign.

The chapter concludes with a reflection on how the campaign’s cultivation of nostalgia was not possible alone but is indicative of a widely expressed experience in games culture where technologies are constantly upgrading, and games are frequently updated and superseded. It considers how media memory cultures shape this nostalgia but also how it has been propelled by a shift in the cultural standing of games from the margins to the mainstream over the time between the release of the original film in 1982 and the sequel in 2010. In the light of this, the chapter argues that the promotional campaign was effective because it celebrated the prescience of this Disney film for children, and frames its fans as pioneers who played the games that were forerunners of digital culture today.

This book examines the development of film promotional sites over the last thirty years since the advent of the Internet. The aim is not just to consider these promotional materials from the perspective of advertising or through the prism of branding, although this is not to deny the commercial functions of these artefacts. My intention has been to seek to understand these emerging forms of promotion as filmic artefacts, the genres that have emerged, narrative styles that have developed, and the aesthetics that have taken root. I venture that part of the reason why film sites resonate with their audiences is down to the fact that these cultural artefacts embody cultural meanings too. At a time when promotional budgets for the biggest Hollywood films can equal (or even exceed) the production budget, campaigns have inevitably become increasingly prominent and this book suggests any study of film production will be incomplete without taking contemporary promotional campaigns into account. In sum, this book makes the case that such artefacts are worthy subjects of enquiry on their own terms.

So, the book has three essential aims: to provide a *rationale* for the investigation of on-line film promotion; to develop *a set of tools* to undertake this investigation in the context of the internet; and to *advocate* for the value of these overlooked cultural artifacts.

1. The words ‘web presence’ were frequently used in the first few years of the world wide web as it had no prior forms and no one knew what a website could be. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)