

FLOATING SKELETONS, ELECTRIC SHOCKS AND INTERACTIVE PUNISHMENTS IN WILLIAM CASTLE'S HORROR FILMS

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INTRODUCTION

In his autobiography, American director and producer William Castle (1992) claimed to have been fascinated by horror gadgets since childhood. When his parents took him to Broadway to see a play called *The Monster*, the young William Schloss Jr. decided to become an actor (Cuevas, 2017). To do so, he changed his surname to its English meaning —Castle— and made his stage debut as a teenager (Leeder, 2018, pp. 3-4). However, Castle abruptly decided to change his career and started working behind the scenes. His chance came in 1929, when one of his idols, Béla Lugosi, pushed him to be the assistant stage manager for a theatrical tour based on *Dracula* (Browning, 1931). Later, in 1939, Harry Cohn, president of Columbia Pictures, took him to Hollywood to work as a dialogue rehearsal director (McCarty, 2022; Cabrejo Cobián, 2015, p. 66).

Castle quickly learned the techniques of film directing and made his debut with *The Chance of a Lifetime* (Castle, 1943). It was his foray into the well-known adventures of detective Boston Blackie. Although the film turned out to be a failure, the industry saw in Castle an efficient filmmaker, commissioning him to direct more films and gaining a reputation for being very competent at shooting quickly and on a low budget (Cuevas, 2017; Leeder, 2018, pp. 4-5). Thus, Castle directed Richard Dix in the first film of a new detective saga, *The Mark of the Whistler* (Castle, 1944); and in the following decade, Castle

directed more similar films, as well as film noir, westerns or melodramas for Columbia Pictures or Universal, among other production companies (McCarty, 2022), even directing the second unit of *The Lady From Shanghai* (Welles, 1947).

In 1954, Castle decided to work for himself with his production company, creating William Castle Productions. The impetus, however, came from the French film *Les Diaboliques* (Clouzot, 1955), which was enjoying an international box-office success (McCarty, 2022). Castle found a story that combined the macabre of Clouzot's film, along with unexpected plot twists, in Theo Durrant's novel *The Marble Forest* (1951).¹ After buying the rights to the book, Robert White adapted the novel and Castle mortgaged his house to finance the film with a budget of only 90,000 dollars (Cuevas, 2017; Cabrejo Cobián, 2015, p. 66), which he called with a title that also sounded French: *Macabre* (Castle, 1958). This milestone would be the starting point that would lead Castle to specialize in B horror films, but offering his own vision (Cantrell, 2011; Wong, 2021).

To persuade the audience that *Macabre* was going to be the most scariest film ever made, Castle convinced the company Lloyd's of London to insure each spectator for \$1,000 in case they died of fright or wanted to commit suicide while watching the film (McCarty, 2022). This *gimmick*² allowed *Macabre* to be a success, grossing close to two million dollars, despite the bad reviews received and the supposed horror that the audience could experience (Cabrejo Cobián, 2015, p. 66; Simón, 2021); and, likewise, it opened the door to other stranger *gimmicks*, even being compared to Hitchcock himself (Castle, 1992, p. 160). In fact, Castle was known as «the cheap Hitchcock» because the British filmmaker advertised himself and promoted his films in a similar way, appearing, for example, at the beginning of *The Wrong Man* (Hitchcock, 1956), or playing bird sounds at the premiere of *The Birds* (Hitchcock, 1963) (Wong, 2021), among other resources such as the numerous *hosted trailers* in which he himself presented his films (Lozano Delmar, 2015, pp. 128-129).

¹ Theo Durrant is the pseudonym of a group of authors who each one wrote a different chapter for the creation of the novel.

² A *gimmick* is a marketing trick designed to attract the public's attention through an element that by itself may be trivial, but which offers a special difference (Cantrell, 2011).

CASE STUDIES

Three examples of the *gimmicks* used by Castle, which appeared in films released during the following years, are found in *House on Haunted Hill* (1959), *The Tingler* (1959) and *Mr. Sardonicus* (1961). What each of these involved will be discussed in detail below. These are cases, therefore, in which it will be possible to see how Castle put his famous *gimmicks* into practice, with which the spectators were practically obliged to visit the cinema theatre in exchange for receiving a surprise that the filmmaker had prepared especially for them (Ruiz Liñán, 2020).

HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

House on Haunted Hill marked the first time Castle appeared in one of his films, introducing it and talking about the *gimmick* in question that the audience would experience. In its plot, the famous actor Vincent Price plays Frederick Loren, an eccentric millionaire, who invites five people to the mansion he has rented, offering them \$10,000 to spend the night there. All at the request of his wife, Annabelle, played by Carol Ohmart. These guests are the owner of the house whose brother was murdered there some time ago, a pilot, a secretary who works for Loren, a psychiatrist and a journalist. However, the guests must be cut off from each other, and the mansion has a murderous past, as well as rumors that it is haunted.

Castle's film plays with false appearances from the outset towards the audience, as it is not made explicit whether the characters are really dealing with paranormal phenomena, or whether it is all Loren's charade. In fact, Annabelle warns the guests that they are in danger because Loren, her husband, is suffering from some kind of psychosis. The situations that will occur are connected to the stories of Poe, Agatha Christie and the *whodunit* genre, and will be accompanied by the subplots belonging to each of the guests. One of the most memorable scenes, however, comes at the end of the film, when Loren uses a fake skeleton, manipulated with ropes, to chase Annabelle, his wife, until he throws her down a well.

Castle's *gimmick*, which he called the *Emergo* effect, consisted of installing a glow-in-the-dark inflatable skeleton that appeared to float above the audience (Leeder, 2018, p. 6). This trick, under a metanarrative effect, had its effect during the first screenings in 1959, as in later screenings, people who came to the cinema theatre had already been warned of the surprise, to the point that the most hooligan audience used the skeleton as a target to throw all kinds of objects (Cuevas, 2017). In fact, one spectator even pulled off the skeleton's leg, causing the person in charge of pulling the strings to start shouting, threatening to stop the screening (Cabrejo Cobián, 2015, p. 66).

Figure 1.

Scene from *House on Haunted Hill* (left) and audience during the screening (right).



Source: Castle (1959); and A. H. Fellig, International Center of Photography and Getty Images (1959).

As an added value to this *gimmick*, people had the possibility to leave the cinema theatre and get their money back if they did not feel able to watch the whole film; to do so, however, they first had to cross a kind of «coward's walk», thus exposing themselves to the rest of the audience (Ruiz Lián, 2020). Despite everything, the film was a box-office success, grossing two and a half million dollars from a budget of 200,000, which allowed Castle to continue filming (Stockman, 2014); furthermore, a remake was made in 1999, where filmmaker

William Malone adapted the same story as Castle. In the same way, Castle would once again feature Vincent Price as the main star, although this would be the second and last collaboration between them, which took place with *The Tingler*.

THE TINGLER

In 1959, following the success of *House on Haunted Hill*, Castle made *The Tingler*, also starring Vincent Price, in the same year. Along with the appearance of heads rising and screaming at the camera, the film starts with another introduction of Castle himself. In his speech, Castle addresses the audience in a wide shot: «I am William Castle, the director of the motion picture you're about to see», he says before an abrupt cut switches to a medium shot. As De Seife (2011) suggests, with this introduction, Castle warns us that the introduction and the film's narrative itself are two distinct entities, a separation that the film itself soon challenges. In its plot, which Wilson (2018) considers a misogynistic melodrama, Price plays Warren Chapin, a pathologist who discovers that when a person feels fear, a strange creature, called Tingler, appears in their spinal cord.

Chapin, in his role as *mad doctor*, holds the theory that the insect-like creature can only be extracted by compulsive screaming in fear. When the pathologist meets Martha Higgins, he has the chance to test whether his theory is correct. Higgins, played by Judith Evelyn, is deaf and dumb and therefore does not possess the ability to scream, so extreme fear should allow the creature to appear and grow inside her without any problems. To carry out his experiment, Chapin uses LSD to induce nightmares in the woman, thus enabling the creation of the creature. When Higgins literally dies of fright, Chapin performs an autopsy and discovers the creature, but because Higgins was unable to scream, it has grown rapidly and ends up escaping into a crowded cinema theater.

On this occasion, the *gimmick* designed by Castle, which he called *Percepto*, consisted of the installation, in the cinema seats, of vibrating motors normally used in the wings of airplanes to de-ice them (Simón, 2021), which generated a small vibration and a slight electric shock that surprised some³ spectators.

³ Heffernan (2004, p. 100) points out that this is because Columbia Pictures paid for the wiring of only one tenth of the seats in the cinema theaters where the film was screened.

This moment occurred when the creature crawled across the projector lens, just before the screen went completely black (Stockman, 2014). The lights in the cinema theater were also switched off (Leeder, 2011, p. 773; Simón, 2021) and those spectators would jump out of their seats and scream, while Vincent Price's voice could be heard, asking them to scream for their lives, as the monster was on the loose in the cinema theater (Cabrejo Cobián, 2015, p. 67).⁴ It is also worth noting that, although the film was shot in black and white, there is a scene where a bathtub and a sink are shown in glowing red blood. To achieve the effect, Castle used colored film in this scene, but painted the set in white, black and grey, and applied grey make-up on the actress (Heffernan, 2004).

Figure 2.

Scene from *The Tingler* (left) and the film poster (right).



Source: Castle (1959); and Ronald Grant Archive and Alamy Stock Photo (1959).

Raising over two million dollars from a budget of \$400,000, *The Tingler* was expected to emerge as another major source of revenue for Castle

⁴ This *gimmick* was adapted to the plot of the film *Matinée* (Dante, 1993), in which John Goodman plays the filmmaker Lawrence Woolsey, a transcript of William Castle. Under this ironic gaze, in the film a boy who works in a petrol station asks Woolsey for his autograph when he mistakes him for Hitchcock. Likewise, the film's director, Joe Dante, belonged to William Castle's fan club, which the latter promoted, reaching 250,000 members (Cabrejo Cobián, 2015, p. 67). With *Matinée*, Dante managed to give new visibility to the figure of Castle, in the same way that Tim Burton did with Ed Wood a year later—both, in turn, influenced by Castle himself—.

(Wilson, 2018). Likewise, thanks to the experience provoked by the *Percepto* sensation, at that point in his life Castle was already considered the Barnum of Hollywood (Stockman, 2014), making people look forward to his next quip. Ultimately, *The Tingler* was supposedly the first time in the history of cinema in which some people were able to feel part of the characters' feelings (Wilson, 2018), although it was a limited and controlled experience that did not involve them, but rather the filmic experience was partially applied to them at a certain point in the film. The participation of the spectators, or at least the sensation of being part of the story, would come later, with the film *Mr. Sardonicus*.

MR. SARDONICUS

Two years later, in 1961, Castle released *Mr. Sardonicus*. The plot was set in the fictional town of Gorslava in 1880. The face of Baron Mr. Sardonicus, played by Guy Rolfe, has taken on a ghastly contraction after desecrating his father's grave, the latter having been buried with a winning lottery ticket. Because of his appearance, the aristocrat manages to convince Sir Robert Cargrave, a famous neurosurgeon, to help him recover his former face, unaware that the neurosurgeon is the lover of his wife, Baroness Maude Sardonicus. After Sir Robert Cargrave's unsuccessful attempts, the Baron threatens him and demands that he try other treatments.

Finally, the neurosurgeon injects the Baron with a plant extract and then recreates the trauma that caused his face to contract. The operation is successful and his face is restored. The neurosurgeon advises the Baron not to speak until the muscles in his face have fully adapted. The Baron, who is now aware of the relationship between the neurosurgeon and his wife, then writes a note to the latter, releasing her from her marriage, and another to Sir Robert Cargrave asking for his fee, which the latter refuses. When the lovers are ready to leave on a train, the Baron loses the ability to speak, unable to move his lips or jaw. At that moment, the neurosurgeon reveals that the injection contained only water, being a placebo, as he considered the Baron's affliction to be purely psychosomatic.

Before the film began, people who had entered the cinema theater had been given a cardboard thumbs-up/thumbs-down glow-in-the-dark; and

in the third act of the story, Castle himself appears punctually for a moment in the film itself, addressing the audience in the cinema theater to ask them whether the protagonist should be punished or not. He called this new *gimmick* the *Punishment Poll* (Leeder, 2018, p. 6). Castle would then begin to tally the number of cardboards raised by the audience itself.⁵ Although a sense of audience participation was created, the result of the tally was always the same; that is, there was only a single ending, where the protagonist was punished, resulting in the audience finally realizing the trick (Cabrejo Cobián, 2015, p. 67).

Figure 3.

Scene from *Mr. Sardonicus* (left) and the film pressbook (right).



Source: Castle (1961); and Columbia Pictures (1961).

Castle is considered the inventor of interactive horror cinema (Lozano Delmar, 2015, p. 129). However, in relation to the innovative *gimmick* of this film, and applying, for example, Murray's (1997) aesthetic principles of interactivity, i.e. immersion, performance and transformation,⁶ the

⁵ When the film was released in drive-in theatres, this voting system was replaced by the lights in the spectators' cars (Cuevas, 2017).

⁶ For Murray (1997), immersion focuses on the pleasurable experience of being transported into a highly elaborate and plausible fictional space, regardless of what the fantasy is like; performance is about being able to perform meaningful actions and see the results of our choices; and transformation is understood as the ability to modify the environment and the characters, being able to shape the play.

interactivity of *Mr. Sardonicus* is unreal, since, for all practical purposes, the spectators had no decision-making power, always triggering the same outcome. That is, if the film had been screened in a completely empty cinema theater, it would have ended in the same way. Moreover, the supposed moment of interactivity occurs punctually during an instant of the film, without any major transcendence. Nevertheless, and despite the lack of verifiable data regarding the film's budget and box office, today it has become a B-movie classic. In this sense, although Castle would continue to present new *gimmicks* throughout its career, the examples given above are some of the most outstanding cases of this particular type of film promotion.

CONCLUSIONS

Castle was a pioneer in the study of advertising strategies to promote his films through ingenious *gimmicks*, all in a context prior to the arrival of the Internet. His films are framed in low-budget cinema, but he had numerous successes thanks to his promotional approaches with the added value of trying to interact with the audience, which is why, today, he is part of the history of cinema. Regarded as «the other Hitchcock», Castle was a contemporary of the master of suspense and, although a friendship developed between them, there was always the inevitable comparison in the way they both promoted their films. For this reason, and for all his legacy, Castle's figure, sometimes more unknown than Hitchcock's to the general public, should be made more visible.

Similarly, Castle's influence reached other directors such as John Waters,⁷ Frank Henenlotter⁸ and the master of horror Wes Craven, whose debut film *The Last House on the Left* (1972) —produced by Sean S. Cunningham, another of the genre's key figures— was promoted under the tagline: «To avoid fainting,

⁷ In addition to playing Castle himself in the TV series *Feud* (Murphy et al., 2017), John Waters created a card called *Odorama*, which contained different smells and was given to spectators when they entered the cinema theater to watch his film *Polyester* (1981), having to smell it at certain points during the screening (Cuevas, 2017).

⁸ In his film *Basket Case* (1982), spectators entering the cinema theater were given a mask to supposedly avoid being splashed with blood from the film (Cabrejo Cobián, 2015, p. 67).

keep repeating, It's only a movie... Only a movie... Only a movie...», taken from the film *Strait-Jacket* (Castle, 1964), starring Joan Crawford. Another well-known influence is that carried out by Robert Zemeckis, Joel Silver and Gilbert Adler, who at the turn of the last century created the production company Dark Castle Entertainment, with the intention, in part, of producing several remakes of Castle's legacy.

We find ourselves, therefore, with a figure whose influence continues to be felt in contemporary horror cinema, both within the independent circuit and the more mainstream —Anna Biller, Christian Mielmann, Jason Blum, Mike Flanagan, James Wan, etc.—. Beyond his talent as a filmmaker, debatable on certain occasions, it is also undeniable that Castle was a master of *gimmick*, which led him to enjoy a prolific and lengthy film career. Likewise, his visionary nature allowed him to approach in greater detail —and much more than most directors of that time— the relationships that could be established between the spectators and the films that were going to be screened, turning B horror into an experience to be enjoyed, necessarily, collectively in a cinema theater.

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