

In 1961, a *New York Times* review of director-producer, William Castle's film *Homicidal* created a 'buzz' in the public when alluding to Castle's film as being an attempt to mimic and copy Alfred Hitchcock. The rhetoric for that particular article included an outright dismissal of the film as being a "dismal imitation of *Psycho*".¹ The film critic attacks continued with a reviewer at *Monthly Film Bulletin* positing their conclusions about William Castle as an 'auteur' - "A ham-fisted prologue in the form of a personal appearance by the producer-director, William Castle, indicates both his pretensions as a second Hitchcock and his inability to fulfill them."² In fact, the Hitchcock comparisons and personal attacks had a long history and were not specific to Castle's horror films. A *New York Times* reviewer in 1944 had made similar remarks about the radio-show adaptation, *The Whistler*, which Castle had directed. "Weary, illogical imitation of an Alfred Hitchcock film"³, was a labeling and lambasting which stuck to Castle throughout his extensive filmmaking career, especially with the haughtier publications. It is perhaps no wonder that Castle received this treatment as his films were always considered "B" status and were produced for double bills and second-run theatres. It becomes a precarious process to "write-off" William Castle as a hack director by virtue of his association with B-movies. Castle's films do not necessarily show a progression, evolution - or overall improvement - across his oeuvre, however, it is possible to identify a personal philosophy which he infused into his films at the level of direction, and later production. There is a marked element of sophistication beneath the carnivalesque guise of cinema's P.T. Barnum.

Castle, who became famous for his horror 'gimmick' films of the early 1960s, in fact had a tendency toward gimmicks from the outset of his career, using them as a promotional technique for sundering the spectator-to-film-text relationship of cinematic identification in the classical Hollywood stylistic system.⁴ Unlike 'counter-cinema' which challenges spectator identification through transforming or rejecting Hollywood decoupage classique continuity editing, Castle's gimmicks

operate less in breaking down the '4th Wall' as they do in breaking down the other three walls of the diegetic.⁵ A 'flattening' occurs through the use of the Castle gimmick and all pretense of the film text being a 'possible world' is removed. The spectator is interpellated, not into the film text, as much as into the theatre experience and the act of being a member of a cinematic audience.⁶ Perhaps, this project and technique which Castle honed throughout his career irked many film critics because the nature of their profession is to be distinguished from the rest of the audience. In other words, to understand William Castle through a review of his films alone becomes misleading. The most productive way to approach an appraisal of Castle's influence in the history of film is through first understanding the nature of his gimmicks and evaluating their varying effectiveness with audiences. The gimmicks which have most fidelity to both the film text and the experience of being a cinematic spectator are also the most effective - those gimmicks which render the screen of the cinematic experience a pure 'osmotic barrier' for the fiction of the storytelling. Gimmicks, by virtue of their highly identifiable nature and their typical implementation as promotional materials inevitably have the characteristic of being self-reflexive elements of the film text and self-reflexive techniques of cinematic identification. William Castle exploited the nature of gimmicks to foster an audience which would become dedicated to his 'brand'. The result for the history of film is that Castle helped in building a new reputation for the B-movie, allowing it to grow some legs at the box office and spread its wings in the creativity department. This was a long process within Castle's oeuvre, but the development is pervasive and provocative for proving that such an intent existed for this too often maligned director.

William Castle began his film directing career during World War II and later went on to direct more than sixty feature films. Castle had always fit in nicely with productions that had some element of novelty - radio-show adaptations, early Technicolor films, early 3-D films and then his

own brand of gimmick films. In the forties, Castle was directing some of the *Whistler* series, *Boston Blackie* series and *Crime Doctor* series films which were screen adaptations of popular radio-shows. Most films were under 70 minutes long, with short production schedules and were distributed through Columbia Pictures - marking them as 'B-movies'. Many of these films were mysteries and detective stories, with film noir aesthetics. Castle often ensured that controversial elements of the scripts were foregrounded through his direction. *The Chance of a Lifetime* (1943) met with some controversy for its portrayals of police as buffoonish stooges while *The Whistler* (1944) portrayed the police as brutal and indiscriminate. The novelty of the radio-show adaptations and the controversy of tight-rope walking the expectations of the PCA didn't often impress the critics in the areas of quality, but were recognized as having some element of marketability. In a *Variety* review on *The Whistler*, the reviewer noted that although the film has no pretense of being anything but a 'B-movie', "it will provide strong support" and ironically, the greatest criticism the reviewer had was the downplaying of the "primary thesis of the film... to kill a man with fear" (a theme that Castle played up for his first gimmick horror film outing in 1958's *Macabre*).⁷

Castle continued churning out mystery melodramas during the forties with a mix of warm praise and outright scorn from the film critics. The *Film Daily* reviewer for *The Whistler* hailed the film as a "first-class melodramatic thriller" which "grips the audience and forces it to look on with bated breath" and that "straightforward direction of William Castle is praiseworthy indeed".⁸ The box office success of *The Whistler* spurred Columbia Pictures into making seven more films in the series, of which Castle directed four in total. Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* reviewed one of the *Whistler* sequels labeling the plot as being, "claptrap of cheap melodrama... and bluntly presented that way".⁹ The tagline in the *Film Daily* review for the fifth sequel in the series read, "Castle's Direction is Godsend to Pic" and included high recommendation and praise of Castle in the

article.¹⁰ Castle surely felt motivated toward finding consistent success within the B-movie fare. The *Variety* review for 1948's *Texas, Brooklyn & Heaven* seemed to note that the "B-mellers" were simply trying to exploit a popular genre.¹¹ The rhetoric of reviews began to focus on evaluating the films on the basis of whether they would have box office impact or whether the production value was good sooner than commenting on the story or directing. What could Castle bring to the directing that might effect change in the consistency of box office success? A formal analysis of some of the films helps to glean facts and details in answering this important question.

1943's *The Chance of a Lifetime*, constructs diegetic space through static camera setups and frontality as the dominant. Staging and blocking of actors have a symmetrical arrangement rendering the frames tableaux. This kind of "non-directing" inevitably requires the story to pull the weight and if the story can't keep up with spectator expectations, then the film will have little chance for making an impact at the box office. Castle on occasion alternated this "non-directing" style, with mobile framing and angular counterpoint directorial selection (Ohmart in the Emergo scene in *House on Haunted Hill* is captured in a multitude of angular shots). The sounder stylistic system also incorporated oblique staging and blocking, rendering the construction of the space both more dynamic and less obtrusive. Through this sounder stylistic model, Castle's films create subject-position effects for the spectator which isolate the milieu of the diegetic into a concrete 'whole' allowing for direct juxtaposition with the milieu of the spectator once the gimmick is introduced (Castle's unobtrusive stylistic system).¹² Despite its effectiveness for building the brand, Castle was inconsistent with his use of the unobtrusive stylistic system.

In 1944, Castle found a moment of enlightenment with *When Strangers Marry* as he implemented all the sound techniques of the unobtrusive camera style while also crafting some of his early gimmicks into the film experience. The opening scene demonstrates creative staging/blocking

(mysterious man at bar is rendered ominous) while mobile framing is used dynamically to support the pace of plot progression. Depth of field is great and links disparate moments into a dynamic whole within a single scene (Renoirian shot through apartment window). Castle also introduces some spectacle and sensation in the concept of the “Silk Stocking Murderer” that would help reinforce the positive feedback such themes would have in making a film successful. Castle introduces one of his most steady gimmicks - himself! Castle appears in a framed photo which later becomes an integral part of the plot (and not merely there for decorative function). By placing himself as a flat image within the film text, Castle creates an interplay of interiority and exteriority for the screen-spectator identification process. This interplay runs throughout the film as Castle includes a great montage sequence at Coney Island with carnival barker host which acts to encourage self-reflexive recognition of the film text and later reinforced when the couple go to an actual movie theatre. The film received high critical praise, with the reviewer at *Variety* commenting that *When Strangers Marry* was, “a taut psychological thriller” and “a superior sort of whodunit”. The reviewer went on to address Castle’s directing - “smart, fresh” directing throughout with “neat little quirks” that give the film character.¹³ The “quirks” that were mentioned are likely a misnomer for gimmicks which become an early recognition of Castle’s brand. Clearly, Castle had discovered some of the techniques that help in producing a successful B-movie. In 1949, he discovered another piece of the puzzle when directing, *Johnny Stool Pigeon*. There was nothing outstanding about the film except in the fact that the critics wrote less scathing or indifferent reviews primarily in lieu of the ‘marquee’ potential the film had in its casting of Shelley Winters into one of the principal roles. Both the reviews in *Variety* and *Film Daily* glossed over the details of the story and direction to praise Winters, the cast in general and thus the “production value” of the film.¹⁴ With these ‘attractions’ in mind, Castle went onto the next phase of his directing career.

In 1950, Castle directed *It's a Small World* which was distributed through Pathe. The story concerned disgruntled little people (midgets) and was perhaps an ironic, self-reflexive directing choice for Castle (Castle also wrote the script for the film). Although, the film wasn't recognized as an informal 'confession' nor as a quality film, the critics did remark that it would "prove a good attraction".¹⁵ Although, some of Castle's more creative and successful films had been distributed outside of Columbia, he returned to the company for a long string of thin yarn with his Technicolor collaborations with producer, Sam Katzman. *Fort Ti* (1953) and *Drums of Tahiti* (1954) were released in Natural Vision 3-D. The reviews were not positive on these gimmicky historical costume melodramas. The *Variety* review for *Fort Ti* remarked that the 3-D gimmicks were not utilized in a novel manner and thus foregrounded the production as budget.¹⁶ The *New York Times* review went one step further in pointing out the failed implementation of the 3-D gimmick - "the film keeps well in a two-dimensional rut... (the 3-D) is immeasurably dwarfed in and by an ideal frame".¹⁷ What is clear is that despite the gimmicks of 'color' and early 3-D processes, these Castle films were preoccupied with presenting drab, uncreative storylines which did little for spectator engagement. When Katzman and Castle broke away from the historical sub-epic- 'sub-genre', the pair seemed to simply confuse the critics (*New Orleans Uncensored* in 1955 and *The Houston Story* in 1956). A disenchanted William Castle moved into the television market and began producing shows, including his own series, *Annapolis*. The Katzman-Castle productions had rendered Castle's authorial voice mute while the 4th Wall stood strong throughout. The historical melodrama subgenre vanquished any attempt at engaging the spectator through self-reflexive techniques by virtue of its emulation of the epic dramas of the major studios and their tableau mise-en-scene and decoupage classique which creates the interpellated transcendental subject - a subject subjugated to identification with the authorial voice and 'stars' of the films.¹⁸ Castle must have been looking back forlornly on his

successes with films like *When Strangers Marry*. Some historical events were going to provide Castle with new opportunities.

The Paramount Decree of 1948 had boosted the power of the minor studios (willing producers of B-movies)¹⁹ while the influence of the Gallup Polls (starting in 1940) had shown that “audience research” would help form the “future development of the motion picture industry”.²⁰ George Gallup’s early research had revealed “marquee value” (which Castle would have personally noted as influential with Winters in *Johnny Stool Pigeon*) and through the figure of Orson Welles that an eccentric director (“queer egg”) could lead to the idea of the director also being a genius.²¹ Gallup also concluded, “advertising can make a good picture even more successful. And it can make a bad picture less of a failure” while noting the power of “pre-release penetration” and that failed advertising campaigns suffered from the issue of “too little, too late and too stereotyped”.²² Finally, the Gallup research concluded that double features were supported by lower income and younger audiences and that the cost of advertising and marketing sequels or serials was most cost-effective.²³ Castle was now primed for his gimmick horror films. It is impossible to know what influence the Gallup research had on Castle, however, it is compelling to examine how much of the research results he adhered to when moving onto his gimmick horror films. Castle prized his marquee stars (Crawford, Stanwyck, Taylor and writer Bloch) and exploited them maximally (Crawford did public appearance tours in promotion of *Strait-Jacket*).²⁴ Castle placed himself into many of his gimmick horror films through the prologue or narrative frame thus creating an eccentric persona for spectator identification. His gimmicks had a dynamic effect on audiences who came to recognize the Castle ‘brand’ while the gimmicks and films themselves certainly had greater appeal for younger audiences (the Punishment Poll in *Sardonicus* and Coward’s Corner in *Homicidal* had a juvenile appeal). The critics responded in kind to these adept production value choices. It was Castle’s directing which

would then have to compliment the production value by emphasizing the marketability of the gimmicks through breaking down the 4th Wall and rendering a new kind of spectator engagement and identification process with the film texts. Castle commented on this counter-exploitation of the traditional Hollywood model as having been discovered during a search for “virgin territory”.²⁵

Castle teamed up with screenwriter Robb White and formed Susina Productions which found its distribution contract with the beefed-up post-Paramount Decree Monogram, renamed Allied Artists. The Castle-White productions would all contain an exploitation feature of the distribution of the film - ie. a gimmick. For 1958's *Macabre*, Castle (the producer as well now) provided each patron with a beneficiary agreement (\$1000 life insurance policy) which they were to fill out in the event of “death by fright” during the performance of *Macabre*.²⁶ The gimmick was introduced within the film text through voice-over prologue with ticking clock visual accompaniment. The clock reappears at intervals during the film and is part of the diegetic (hangs over the funeral parlour like a theatre marquee). The insurance policy is a gimmick which has complete fidelity with the film text as the plot of the story involves an attempt to scare an old man (father-in-law of protagonist) to death in order to secure an inheritance. Castle directs using the better parts of his unobtrusive stylistic system - oblique framing, naturally-spaced blocking/staging and canted shadows through novel lighting setups. The unobtrusive camera allows for the paranoid mood of the diegetic to translate unimpinged to the spectator through cinematic identification processes. The audience is interpellated into the diegetic through the self-reflexive gimmick, the prologue and the repetitive visual (the clock) featured during that prologue. The rhetoric of the critics made a one-eighty degree turn. The reviewer at *Variety* marked the insurance policy as a “surefire exploitable gimmick” while Castle was deemed “unwavering in his work”.²⁷ The success of *Macabre* ensured that Castle and White would be able to produce more films and define their palpable horror brand.

Castle brought in some horror marquee talent for the next two films, 1959's *House on Haunted Hill* and *The Tingler*. Vincent Price played the lead character in both films - a nefarious, conniving innovator and ruthless exploiter of sorts. For *House*, the gimmick was dubbed "Emergo" and was a plastic skeleton rigged to fly over the audience at the point in the film where Price's character unleashes his own Emergo against his wife for the diegetic climax.²⁸ For *Tingler*, the gimmick was dubbed "Percepto" and was vibrating motors attached to the undersides of random seats in the movie theatre.²⁹ The *Variety* review of *House* recognized the film as a "top exploitation grosser for its class... expertly put together" and that the film was building on the success of *Macabre*.³⁰ Howard Thompson of the *New York Times* was less of an adulator when referring to the film as a "load of junk" and remarking that audiences mocked the gimmick, Emergo.³¹ Hutchings notes that the gimmick plays on a paradox of spectatorship where passivity marks victimization while resistance elicits mocking, however, both work in concert to foster engagement.³² With *Tingler*, the shocking of the seats (to emulate the *Tingler* creature) was accompanied by a raising of the theatre lights while ushers (hired for the task) rushed down with stretcher in-hand and would carry off a woman who had fainted (also hired actor).³³ Although, Castle had switched his distribution to Columbia for *The Tingler*, the critics remarked that he had successfully created his brand. The *Variety* reviewer praised Castle as, "an imaginative, often ingenious showman" and that the gimmick put the spectator "in the midst of the horror".³⁴ Despite Howard Thompson once again not being moved by Percepto or the film, the reviewer at the *Pittsburgh Courier* hailed the film as "an entertainment triumph".³⁵ Clearly, Castle was able to reach much of his target audience. Castle filmed both entries to his brand with many of the elements of the unobtrusive stylistic system (oblique staging/blocking helps with spooks being unpredictable, mobile framing for seamless construction of space), however, the gimmicks have a more tenuous relationship with the spectator and film text.

Emergo within the film is controlled by the Price character's contraption, although it is not a feasible arrangement by any stretch while the prologue is a direct address providing too much information for the spectator and severing smooth identification with the unlocking of mysteries and building of suspense. The prologue for *Tingler* is most appropriate as Castle himself appears on screen interpellating the audience into his brand. The modus operandi of the film is that to scream is also to release the fear that otherwise would give rise to the *Tingler* creature. There are highly self-reflexive moments as Pathe color process brings crimson red to the black-and-white mise-en-scene and when the *Tingler* creature is let loose in a movie theatre of the diegetic (interior) to match-on-action with a voice-over entr'acte when the gimmick is turned on in the movie theatre of the spectator (exterior). The fidelity is effective, with the low point being that few units were actually set up in the theatre.³⁶ A spectator may not have fully valued the experience, rendering the commotion somewhat confusing and possibly perceived as contrived. Another crutch is that the *Tingler* creature in the film is less viable as a potential 'real' threat through the budget special effects. Despite these drawbacks, the films retained artistic merit in form and artisan merit in their business models, thus allowing Castle to continue building his brand.

In 1960, Castle produced *13 Ghosts* whose gimmick attraction was "Illusion-O". Some critics felt that the gimmick was both superfluous and not exploitable in its execution.³⁷ Castle adds some clumsy directing which relies heavily on 3-pt lighting setups (not ideal for horror genre) and tableau static framing. 1961's *Sardonicus* and *Homicidal* had some strong points, none of which were related to the gimmicks employed. *Sardonicus* introduced the "Punishment Poll" and a narrative frame prologue with Castle. The problem is that the options provided to the audience through the poll were illusory and thus subsequent to simply finishing the story. The "poll" had little to no basis from within the film text (except maybe on the most abstracted and poetic level). *Homicidal* ran

amok when Castle felt like he had to outdo his idol, Alfred Hitchcock. Hitchcock had engineered his own gimmick with *Psycho*, whereby the audience was not allowed to enter the movie theatre once the film had begun (thus negating the possibility of spoilers). Castle turned the trick and created “Coward’s Corner” - a location outside the theatre where those spectators who were ‘too scared’ to watch the end of the film could go after being prompted through the film’s entr’acte voice-over narration.³⁸ These gimmicks became spectacles for all the wrong reasons and primarily because they had no real basis in the film text. The gimmick thus foregrounded the spectator back into the real world and severed any identification with the story world of the film. Future productions fared no better. The horror took a turn toward straight-up parodic comedy with gimmicks becoming nothing more than trinkets and souvenirs of the film experience. Castle had been warned by distributors to drop the gimmicks and so he decided to re-brand through casting former marquee stars past their prime (Crawford in *Strait-Jacket* and Stanwyck & Taylor in *The Night Walker*, both released in 1964). Castle’s directing was able in *Strait-Jacket* but then began to plough the fertile ground of his Katzman days. The spectator-film-text identification now formed through more traditionally-driven and unconsciously-minded techniques of decoupage classique. The gimmicks were abandoned and Castle’s final two films reflected none of the Castle brand - 1968’s *Rosemary’s Baby* was taken over by Polanski, reducing Castle to producer and 1974’s *Shanks* was a pastiche artistic film not clearly fitting in anywhere with any particular audience.

Heffernan notes that Castle’s success with gimmicks lay in his opposition to Gunning’s concept of the cinema of narrative integration.³⁹ This ‘new’ cinema of attractions acted to restore the “real or imagined” experience of the early cinema spectator.⁴⁰ Leeder points out that the threat of television in the early 1950s made the gimmick film part of the movement in cinema toward more “expansive presentational models”.⁴¹ This concept of expansion plays well with understanding the

gimmick bridging the experience of the diegetic with that of the spectator's self-reflexive experience of themselves as spectators - a formal challenge to the closure of the cinema of narrative integration. Leeder refers to the experience of the gimmick film as creating "certain fluidity between screen and audience", but that the spectacle cannot be wholly extra-diegetic and that the narrative placement of gimmicks is key.⁴² Cahill, in rethinking the outward energy of the image, goes further to explaining the gimmick as a "return of the repressed" in the nature of the cinematic image to capture the accidental and its death-defying effects, and element of film that early promoters had promised to abolish.⁴³ For Cahill, the gimmick film is best understood through the Hegelian concept of 'enframing' which posits a relationship for the physical filmstrip, the profilmic and the perceiver of the frame. Castle utilized the enframing techniques to flatten the 4th Wall into an osmotic barrier by which the spectator is physically, as well as consciously interpellated into the cinematic experience and the film text. The Emergo and Percepto moments act to disintegrate the insulation of the profilmic from the exterior of the frame in the most direct manner - by connecting the diegetic space with the space of the cinema theatre. The containment and separation of enframing most effectively broken down by the Castle gimmick (whether they be subtle like *Macabre* or overt like *The Tingler*) were then also the films which received higher critical praise and were overall the most effective films stylistically (unobtrusive system).

After all the critical scorn Castle had received throughout his career, the gimmick became an effective "weapon" as a *New York Times* article's title implied in 1959 - "Gimmicks Pay off in Box-Office War".⁴⁴ The *New York Times* also reported, in a subsequent article, that Castle's first four gimmick horror films had cumulative returns of seven million dollars (about three times their combined sunk costs).⁴⁵ Famed cult director, John Waters, noted that the gimmicks slowly became more contrived until distributors forced an end when exhibitors refused bookings for Castle's new

films. It remains to be seen, however whether Castle could have taken the B-movie even further through the use of gimmicks had he always developed them to properly form within the film text and the spectator theatrical experience in such a way that the 4th Wall (screen of theatre, aperture of diegetic) became an ideal medium for self-reflexively and transparently connecting the real world with the story world of the film. The gimmick's interplay of interiority and exteriority renders it an ideal device for promoting the medium and thus marks Castle as one of cinema's great ambassadors in the history of film.

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Creative Exhibition Management - William Castle's Gimmicks and the B-Movie

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