



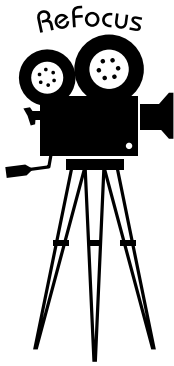
ReFocus

The Films of William Castle

EDITED BY
MURRAY LEEDER



ReFocus: The Films of William Castle



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Edited by Murray Leeder

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Introduction: The Many Castles

Murray Leeder

“I’M WILLIAM CASTLE . . .”

“The Graveyard Shift” was the 19th episode of NBC’s *Ghost Story/Circle of Fear* (1972–3), an anthology series that only lasted one season but somehow managed to have two titles. In this episode, John Astin¹ plays Fred Colby, a night watchman at the fictional Fillmore Studios in Hollywood. Colby was once an actor for the studio, appearing in its horror films. But now the studio is closing down and Colby, whose wife (Patty Duke, Astin’s real-life wife at the time) is late in her pregnancy, looks forward to changing professions. At first it seems that the biggest problems of his last shifts relate to a gang of teenagers sneaking onto the lot; however, it transpires that the monsters of the studio’s heyday have a spectral existence on the grounds and are scheming to reincarnate themselves through Colby’s unborn son. Colby foils them by breaking into the vault and setting the master prints of the horror films on fire, putting a stop to the cinematic monsters once and for all.

Except for making film preservationists weep, “The Graveyard Shift” is not an exceptional example of a largely forgotten show. It has a special interest, however, as the only episode of what was then called *Circle of Fear* to feature a cameo by the show’s executive producer—the legendary showman, producer, and director William Castle (Figure I.1). Castle plays the company’s founder, J. B. Fillmore. Fillmore briefly appears at his old studio, full of wistful nostalgia about what he has built on the edge of its destruction: “Forty years, and soon it will all be dust.”² Speaking to Colby, Fillmore reflects about their successful horror films: “Nobody did any better than we did, and do you know why? ’Cause I knew what the public wanted: to be scared out of their wits. That’s why I gave them the most terrifying characters ever created: the



Figure I.1 William Castle makes a cameo on a 1973 episode of *Circle of Fear*.

Claw, the Wolf Man, Scarface, the Mummy, and Dr. Death.” There is a particular twinkle in Fillmore’s eye at the last name, which Colby has forgotten. “He never caught on like the others,” says Fillmore. “An emissary of the Devil who specialized in the taking over of human bodies. Once he got bored with one, he’d move onto someone else. Men, women, even unborn children . . .” Fillmore laughs. “He probably was way, way ahead of his time.”

It is at this moment that Colby realizes the nature of the threat against his unborn son. But the moment provides a pleasure of another sort through the presence of Castle, reprising a version of the perverse carnival barker/film impresario persona from his first-person introductions to most of the films of his gimmick cycle of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Like Fillmore, Castle was unapologetic about delivering “what the public wanted,” no matter how direct, tasteless, and lowbrow. His cameo in “The Graveyard Shift” has the same kind of surplus quality associated with movie stardom; he makes no attempt to vanish into the character, but rather his appearance functions as an attraction unto itself. When relatively few directors were household names, Castle, like his sometime model Alfred Hitchcock, built himself into a presence, an icon, a brand.

Castle presents a potential a challenge for the auteur theory, both the strains promoted in France by the critics at *Cahiers du cinéma* and in the United States by Andrew Sarris,³ insofar as his authorial signatures are overt, at least where his most famous films are concerned. It does not fall to a critic to “discover” an

auteur in his case: he makes it abundantly clear, addressing his audience directly in advertising and the films themselves with the directness of a pitchman or a mountebank. It may be more useful to think of Castle as an early case of what Timothy Corrigan has called the “commerce of auteurism”: “the author as a *commercial* strategy . . . as a critical concept bound to distribution and marketing aims that identify and address the potential cult status of an auteur.”⁴ While Corrigan describes this strategy as emerging with the New Hollywood generation of directors like Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Stephen Spielberg, and George Lucas, packaged and marketed as *auteurs*, Castle seems like an ur-example, building himself into a larger-than-life attraction with whose name a film can be marketed, much like that of a movie star.⁵

In the last years of his life, with directing largely behind him, Castle maintained a sideline as an actor, playing, as in “The Graveyard Shift,” old Hollywood types: a producer in *Shampoo* (1975), a director in *Day of the Locust* (1975). Such roles fit him like a glove, and well they ought to have: he was a Hollywood insider with decades of history. And yet his most memorable screen appearance might be a brief and silent one: standing outside a phone booth in *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) near the end of a four-minute long take, stoking Rosemary Wodehouse’s (Mia Farrow) growing paranoia even as he looks benign and grandfatherly. To the audience, if not to Rosemary, he is highly recognizable: he even sports his signature cigar (Figure I.2). The words “A William Castle Production” appear in the opening seconds of *Rosemary’s Baby*, so the cameo is an entirely appropriate gesture toward his authorial persona.

If Castle’s sole contribution to film history were as a producer (of Orson Welles’ *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947) and *Rosemary’s Baby*, among less remembered films), that alone would make for a remarkable career. Yet his reputation truly rests on his status as “the Master” or “King of the Gimmicks,” “the Abominable Showman,” or “the Living Trailer,” alluded to in “The Graveyard Shift”: a larger-than-life figure whose authorial persona blurs with his films in fascinating ways. And yet that identification obscures much of the full sweep of his career.

“. . . THE DIRECTOR OF THE MOTION PICTURE
YOU’RE ABOUT TO SEE . . .”

So who was William Castle? He was born William Schloss Jr. in New York City in 1914; his father was a German Jew. Schloss was orphaned by the age of twelve and would later adopt the literally translated surname “Castle.” He soon became a man of the theatre, operating as an assistant to Béla Lugosi during a stage revival of *Dracula* and later staging a successful series of summer stock plays at the Stony Creek Theatre in Connecticut in 1939. There he



Figure I.2 Castle's cameo in *Rosemary's Baby* (1968).

drew the attention of Columbia Pictures' Samuel Marks, who recruited him to Hollywood. Certain details of Castle's biography are clouded by his own penchant for self-aggrandizing confabulation. His memoir, *Step Right Up! I'm Gonna Scare the Pants Off America* (1976), is full of entertaining but somewhat suspect episodes. Early on, he describes bluffing his way into Orson Welles' good graces to get access to the Stony Creek Theatre, where the Mercury Theatre Company had held summer tryouts. With Welles and his company relocating to Hollywood to take up an invitation from R.K.O., Stony Creek was available, and Castle smelled an opportunity. Around the same time, Castle met German actress Ellen Schwanneke, "the star of *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931), a very successful film."⁶ Schwanneke was in fact a supporting player in *Mädchen in Uniform*, and had since relocated to the United States. When she flouted a request to return to Nazi Germany, she was publicized as "The Girl Who Turned Down Hitler": an advertising ploy from which Castle surely benefited (though he did not instigate it, as his memoirs imply). Castle describes conceiving of *Das ist Nicht für Kinder* as the title of a non-existent German play (to justify the casting of Schwanneke against Equity regulations)—translated to English as *Not for Children*. He describes writing the play in two days and bribing the son of his German-Jewish tailor to translate it into German. He attributed the German version to "Ludwig von Herschfeld"—"the name sounded as good as any. A new German playwright was born."⁷

However, contemporary press for *Not for Children* lists it as adapted from a script by "Ludwig Herschfeld," a real Austrian playwright who died in 1945 (his play *Geschäft mit Amerika* was adapted in Britain as *Yes, Mr. Brown* (1933), a popular musical comedy). Further, consistently listed as the writer of

Not for Children was playwright Wesley Towner, a name that does not appear in *Step Right Up!*⁸ In fact, *Not for Children* was adapted in Hollywood as *The Mad Martindales* (1942) a few years later, crediting Towner, Herschfeld, and Edmund Wolf as authors of the source play. If Castle were in fact, as he indicates, the author of this play, that would be notable information, yet *Step Right Up!* makes no reference to it. Are these inconsistencies attributable to Castle's faulty memory as he wrote decades later? Perhaps.

However, the baldest claim follows. Castle claims that the controversy around casting Schwanneke inspired death threats from the pro-Nazi German American Bundists. At four a.m. the night before *Not for Children* opened, he went to the theatre and, "With some lumber from backstage, I smashed windows in the theatre and overturned the box office. Then, with red paint, I drew swastikas on the walls."⁹ Castle goes on to describe insisting that the play will open as scheduled, and even calling the governor of Connecticut (while posing as Orson Welles!) to demand protection from the national guard: "On the opening night soldiers with helmets and guns surrounded the theatre. Klieg lights flashed everywhere. Members of the audience arriving in formal attire were carefully inspected. It was one hell of an opening."¹⁰ But if this were the case, the press seems to have overlooked it.

I raise these points not in the spirit of damning Castle's tendency toward self-serving deception (or even the understandable "print the legend" tendency of so much writing on Castle), but rather to explore the authorial persona Castle established for himself. Despite Castle's profile as "a sort of minor-league Alfred Hitchcock,"¹¹ in certain respects he also parallels Welles; the careers of the two men of theatre-turned-film entwined on a number of occasions, and both carefully constructed and managed larger-than-life public personas. Jonathan Rosenbaum writes that, "For a figure with the theatricality and imagination of Welles, exaggeration, hyperbole and flights of invention often took the place of solid facts . . . Welles often told lies as a raconteur in order to entertain."¹² Something similar can be said of Castle, who continually frames himself in *Step Right Up!* as a benign trickster, again and again getting ahead through his wits and his willingness to stretch the truth, while retaining a core of decency. From the beginning of his "gimmick" period in 1958, his films were not just pictures that happened to be directed by William Castle: they were *Castle films*, replete with his directorial persona.

Castle's reputation is so dominated by his gimmick films that we might think of his career as roughly divided into three phases: pregimmick, gimmick, and postgimmick. Of the three, the first is by far the most productive: between *The Chance of a Lifetime* (1943) and *Uranium Boom* (1956), Castle made more than three dozen B-movies, predominantly for Columbia. They included Westerns, war films, and crime films, as well as a few historical adventure movies and the like. He found work in the innumerable low-budget film series of the 1940s,

directing not only *The Chance of a Lifetime* (in the Boston Blackie series) but also *The Whistler* (1944), the first feature based on the popular mystery radio serial (1942–55), and three others of that series; plus four of the *Crime Doctor* series, and *The Return of Rusty* (1946), the second of the children’s series starring Ace the Wonder Dog. He would also work as a television director, including on ten episodes of *Men of Annapolis* (1957), where he became acquainted with screenwriter Robb White. The best remembered of Castle’s pregimmick features is the crime thriller *When Strangers Marry* (1944), also released as *Betrayed*. Welles himself praised it in his column in the *New York Post*, “Orson Welles’s Almanac”: “Making allowances for its bargain-price budget, I think you’ll agree with me that it’s one of the most gripping and effective pictures of the year.”¹³

So Castle was already an experienced director, a Hollywood insider who even received a smattering of critical acclaim, when he reconceived himself as the “King of the Gimmicks.” It is also when he fostered the identification as a horror auteur. The gimmick cycle consists of six horror films, each of which has a unique and highly marketable feature that altered the cinematic experience either directly or indirectly.¹⁴ The first was *Macabre* (1958), in which Castle claimed to have insured the audience against death by fright. He followed it in 1959 with two films starring Vincent Price: *House on Haunted Hill*¹⁵ and *The Tingler*. In both cases, Price’s finely honed “male diva”¹⁶ persona, balancing camp humor and credible menace, perfectly matched Castle’s productions and gimmicks. *House on Haunted Hill* featured “Emergo,” a pop-out skeleton that flew over the audience during the climax, while the latter had maybe the most famous Castle gimmick, “Percepto,” where theatre seats were rigged to vibrate at key moments. Next came *13 Ghosts* (1960), with the color process “Illusion-O” and its “ghost viewer”; the “fright break” in *Homicidal* (1961), which allowed audience members the option of leaving if they were too scared to see the ending and its shocking twist; and the “Punishment Poll” in *Mr. Sardonicus* (1961), where the audience putatively decides the fate of the villain. All but the last film had screenplays by Robb White, a prolific novelist as well as a screenwriter, who did not recall their association fondly.¹⁷ White was also Castle’s producing collaborator in Susina Associates, their independent production company, which would ultimately be purchased by Columbia.

Part of Castle’s strategy was to elide the need for name-brand actors by remaking himself into a name brand: “My name was now above the title in every marquee.”¹⁸ Castle made himself into a “Living Trailer,” a larger-than-life public persona who took charge of the marketing of his own films with an unusual directness. His first-person trailers were lower-rent analogs of Hitchcock’s celebrated trailers. Replacing Hitchcock’s dry British archness with an American carnival barker’s naked perversity, they promised the unprecedented scares his pictures would deliver and warned off the faint of heart. From *The Tingler* onwards, Castle did first-person introductions to his

films from “inside” them, both building his authorial cult of personality and blurring the line between diegetic and audience space in a way that paralleled many of his gimmicks. The on-screen “William Castle” is uncontained by diegetic coherence, casually breaks the fourth wall, and appears in various locations: in front of a white cinema screen in *The Tingler*, in an office setting that blends corporate banality and mad-scientist kitsch in *13 Ghosts*, in a family living room in *Homicidal*, on a foggy Victorian London street in *Mr. Sardonicus*. The appearances become more reflexive over time—he shares the screen with an animated skeleton in *13 Ghosts*, and the opening to *Homicidal* is a litany of self-referentiality: “The more adventurous among you remember our previous excursions into the macabre, our visits to haunted hills and through tinglers and to ghosts.” Likewise, in the opening of *Mr. Sardonicus* Castle greets the audience as “My homicidal friends.” This “William Castle” is the same figure who appeared outside theatres interviewing shocked patrons in the trailer for *Strait-Jacket* (1964); and it was his distinctive silhouette, sitting a director’s chair with a cigar between his teeth, that circulated in advertisements.

Rather like the skeleton in *House on Haunted Hill*, the “William Castle” persona was by no means confined to the screen. At his frequent public promotions, where he often arrived in a hearse or coffin, he made statements like, “Ladies and gentlemen, please do not reveal the ending of *Homicidal* to your friends, because if you do they will kill you, and if they don’t, I will.”¹⁹ His films are laughed at now, as they were when first released, by design, much in the manner of a carnival funhouse that combines giggles and screams. On the commentary track for the documentary *Spine Tingler! The William Castle Story* (2007), Castle’s daughter Terry Castle indicates that her father “didn’t take these things seriously . . . The whole thing was done in a campy way and he knew it was campy and he was having fun with it.”²⁰ Castle recalls touring Europe to promote *Homicidal* and spontaneously crying, “Jesus, I speak German!” upon seeing his appearance in a dubbed version, to great laughter. “My surprise was so spontaneous that we kept it in every performance throughout Europe. I hadn’t realized my voice had been dubbed in many languages—French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch.”²¹ As usual, Castle positions himself as both an authentic man having genuine reactions and as an entertainer who dissembles and exaggerates for effect.²²

But as much as Castle clearly enjoyed his own celebrity, uneasy lay the head that wore the crown of King of the Gimmicks. He lamented that “[h]aving to create a new, fresh gimmick for each picture was becoming tiresome. Critics were now starting to attack, claiming the only reason my films were successful was the gimmicks, and I was unable to make an important thriller without one.”²³ All the same, there is not a clear dividing line between his gimmick and postgimmick films. His next two features were children’s films of a more straightforward kind:²⁴ *Zotz!* (1962) and then *13 Frightened*

Girls (1963). Both had a gimmick of sorts: in the case of *Zotz!* moviegoers received replicas of the magical amulet from the film, and *13 Frightened Girls*, also released as *The Candy Web*, featured actresses from different countries so that each could be the focus of a local advertising campaign. Yet these gimmicks are relatively extrinsic to the films themselves, and *Zotz!* and *13 Frightened Girls* tend to be excluded from the “official” bounds of Castle’s gimmick cycle, perhaps unjustly, for reasons of genre.²⁵

Neither of the children’s films was particularly successful, and the key film for transitioning away from gimmicks was *Strait-Jacket*. In fact, *Step Right Up!* implies that it preceded the two children’s films.²⁶ It was certainly advertised with familiar exploitation film techniques, with “WARNING! ‘STRAIT-JACKET’ VIVIDLY DEPICTS AX MURDERS!” as its tagline, but more than anything it was a star vehicle for Joan Crawford, newly aligned with horror in the wake of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962). Despite the lack of gimmicks (give or take some cardboard axes distributed to patrons, a nostalgic lark on Castle’s part), it feels like a Castle film through and through, with Crawford’s over-the-top histrionics standing in for the sensational attractions of the earlier films. In a sense, however, the partial position of *Strait-Jacket* within the Castle gimmick cycle speaks to the commensurability of Castle’s style of gimmickry with Hollywood’s general production logic, with a more traditional form of “stunt casting” substituting for the earlier gimmicks.

The late Castle is rather an odd beast. *Strait-Jacket* led to other, more serious thrillers like *I Saw What You Did* (1965), also with Crawford in a small part, and *The Night Walker* (1964). Castle later made broad comedies like *Let’s Kill Uncle* (1966), *The Spirit Is Willing* (1967), and *The Busy Body* (1967), the minor but interesting science fiction film *Project X* (1968), and what may be the least classifiable film in his filmography, *Shanks* (1974). Some months after the release of *Macabre*, it had been reported that Castle was planning a theatrical adaptation of Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*;²⁷ this production was obviously (and unfortunately) not to be, but *Shanks* may give us the clearest indication of what an “artistic” Castle project would look like. This collaboration with Marcel Marceau, a silent film pastiche with aspects of a pre-*Night of the Living Dead* (1968) zombie film that also seems to be a children’s film, received a DVD release in 2013 by Olive Films, but remains extremely obscure. Castle was open about his disappointment with the project in *Step Right Up!* As conceptually fascinating as it might be, *Shanks* plays more as a clumsy proto-Guy Maddinesque curio than a forgotten classic, with Castle and Marceau’s sensibilities stubbornly refusing to gel.²⁸

Some years earlier Castle had purchased the rights to Ira Levin’s 1967 novel of New York maternity and witchcraft, *Rosemary’s Baby*, with the intention of directing it himself. Robert Evans at Paramount overruled him and insisted on recruiting Roman Polanski to Hollywood to direct. Here again

there exists another *Rashomon* (1950) of different tellings: Castle claims that he met with Polanski and became convinced that Evans's judgment was correct,²⁹ while Evans describes silencing Castle by refusing to go forward with him as a director and doubling his fee to act as producer, well before Castle ever met Polanski personally.³⁰ Where Castle depicts himself as a principled artist willing to sacrifice his desires when he understood that the project was in good creative hands, Evans frames him as a blusterer who was easily bought off. But no matter; it is a fascinating irony that Castle's greatest success as a producer helped usher in the new golden age of American horror related to the New Hollywood, a trend that more or less wiped away the kind of films he was making scant years earlier (as alluded to in "The Graveyard Shift"). His declining health and dwindling enthusiasm for directing led him to focus more on producing in his last years. His last film as a producer, the killer cockroach movie *Bug* (1975), had the misfortune to be released the same week as a much more successful "revenge of nature" picture called *Jaws* (1975)—so often spoken of as representing the moment when the exploitation marketing and distribution techniques associated with independents like Castle and Roger Corman were embraced by Hollywood as the "blockbuster mentality." Castle died of a heart attack in 1977 at the age of sixty-three.

CASTLE AFTER CASTLE

It is perhaps appropriate that Castle's authorial persona, always somewhat unpinned from his personal identity, should have gone through a set of permutations after his death. It should be noted that his were not the only gimmick films; rather, his efforts revealed a new marketing strategy that would be eagerly exploited by others. A notable example was *The Hypnotic Eye* (1960), which purported to hypnotize its audience using "HypnoMagic." Certain of Castle's gimmicks were appropriated early on: *Macabre's* gimmick was egregiously borrowed by *The Screaming Skull* (1958), which promised a free casket and burial for anyone who died of fright. Later, the UK werewolf film *The Beast Must Die* (1974) blatantly borrowed *Homicidal's* Fright Break with a "Werewolf Break," where the film pauses for the viewers to contemplate which character is the lycanthrope. Probably the second most famous "gimmick filmmaker" was Ray Dennis Steckler, best known for *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies!!!* (1964). If Castle had been described as a poor man's Hitchcock, Steckler was a poor man's Castle, a "zero budget" auteur who acted in his films as "Cash Flagg" and reputedly lived out of his car to cut down on production costs. The gimmick for *The Incredibly Strange Creatures* was the bizarre "Hallucinogenic Hypnovision," in which people in masks would occasionally run through the theatre.

Yet Castle's larger legacy was less immediate. For within those crowds of kids experiencing the bacchanal of the gimmick films were a host of future directors who would later credit Castle as an important influence, like Robert Zemeckis, John Landis, Sam Raimi, Joe Dante and John Waters.³¹ Waters has spoken about the influence of Castle numerous times (see Kate J. Russell's essay in this volume) and more recently cameoed as Castle on the television show *Feud* (2017–). Dante, a lifelong horror buff who in his youth served as the reviews editor for the fan magazine *Castle of Dracula*, paid tribute to Castle in *Matinee* (1993), in which Lawrence Woolsey (John Goodman) is an amalgam of Castle and other independent horror/science fiction directors of the 1950s and 60s. A cuddly emblem of American capitalism's most benign aspects, Woolsey is a sort of huckster saint whose monsters and gimmicks provide a paradoxical stability during the chaos of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Another, more official Castle legacy is managed by his daughter Terry. Terry Castle had co-producer credits on remakes of *House on Haunted Hill* (1999) and *Thirteen Ghosts* (2001; the title was stylized as *Thir13en Ghosts*), produced through Dark Castle Pictures. Though these films are fairly generic horror films of their era with only a smattering of Castle's style, they serve as evidence of a millennial Castle revival. Other remakes, as yet unrealized, were announced (including *Macabre*, slated to be directed by Robert Zemeckis,³² and *The Tingler*³³). Terry Castle has also arranged a reprint of her father's long-unavailable autobiography and a published screenplay of *House on Haunted Hill* with his notes intact;³⁴ and she has established a website intended to preserve his legacy (williamcastle.com), offering new fiction inspired by her father's works, including her loosely autobiographical novel *Fearmaker: Family Matters* (2011).³⁵ For a time, the williamcastle.com site even hosted a blog written as if by Castle himself. Terry Castle participated in Jeffrey Schwarz's celebratory documentary *Spine Tingler! The William Castle Story*, later to be included with Columbia's five-disc *The William Castle Film Collection* in 2010.

The Castle revival has penetrated the spaces of film art. La Cinémathèque Française in Paris ran a Castle retrospective from June 19 to August 2, 2009, as did New York's Film Forum between August 27 and September 6 of that year. A broader cultural appreciation for Castle developed at roughly the same time. In 2013, the humor website Cracked.com declared him "the World's Craziest Filmmaker" in an article written by Chris Sims:

When you think about the filmmakers who have given us the greatest spectacles of all time, you probably think of people like Steven Spielberg or James Cameron. Hell, if you've recently been clocked upside the head with a two-by-four, you might even think about Michael Bay. When it

comes to pure, unadulterated, attention-grabbing stunts, though, there's one man who stands above all others: William Castle.³⁶

Castle's rising posthumous star is evidenced in the way his name is casually cited in discussions of vibrating theatre chairs,³⁷ and bloggers endorse him as "a fucking visionary."³⁸ The aforementioned *Cracked* article opines, with reference to *The Tingler*, "I don't think anybody actually thought a crazy fear monster was crushing their spine, but you can't tell me that's not a thousand times more fun than, say, anything that happened in *Avatar*."³⁹ This new adulation often positions Castle as a visionary auteur from a purer time, before a jaded audience faced an endless slate of new cinematic advances that fail to shake up the format as ostentatiously as something like *The Tingler*, leaving it yearning for good old-fashioned low-tech gimmickry with a hint of danger and transgression. As "kettlechips," a commenter on the *Cracked* article, states: "the 'Tingler' shtick sounds WAYY too fun for something that could exist today . . . one complaint [about the physical buzzing] would ruin it for everyone else."⁴⁰ The recent veneration of Castle stands in stark contrast to the bemused dismissal his gimmicks received, for instance, in Michael and Harry Medved's *The Golden Turkey Awards* (1980).⁴¹

Recognition of Castle in academia has grown steadily as well. While he was not paid much attention during the formative phase of horror studies, he is now a canonical figure. Scholarship on individual Castle films like *The Tingler*,⁴² *Strait-Jacket*,⁴³ and *I Know What You Did*⁴⁴ coexist with broader examinations of aspects of his career;⁴⁵ outside of the academic publishing establishment, two career-spanning books on Castle have appeared as well.⁴⁶ Catherine Clepper notes that Castle's relevance to the phenomenological turn in film theory resides in the way his gimmick films are "indicative of what cinematic embodiment can mean in a material, proximate, and shocking sense, rather than as a mode of affective sympathy or reflexive mirroring."⁴⁷ Indeed, scholarship on film phenomenology and affect has referenced Castle and his gimmicks with some regularity.⁴⁸ Industrial and cultural treatments of the horror film centering on the 1950s and 60s have examined Castle's career as well.⁴⁹ On another register, the inclusion of a first-person trailer for Castle's *Homicidal* in the DVD collection *Experiments in Terror* (2005) reflects an interesting attempt to draw him into the constellation of experimental cinema. It sits alongside the trailers for *The Nanny* (1965), *Cannibal Girls* (1973), *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* (1971), and *Blacula* (1972), unpinned from their commercial function so that their unbridled strangeness is reconfigured as avant-garde.

Castle has received references and homages in other places. Joe R. Lansdale, the accomplished horror novelist best known to moviegoers for *Bubba Ho-Tep* (2002), wrote a story called "Belly Laugh, or, The Joker's Trick or Treat" for

the 1990 print anthology *The Further Adventures of the Joker*, featuring the Joker rigging a movie theatre with deadly traps for Batman inspired by *House on Haunted Hill*, *The Tingler*, and *Mr. Sardonicus*.⁵⁰ Appropriately enough, the Joker says that he was among those few voting against Sardonicus's dark fate as a boy. Another homage to Castle appeared in a 1978 episode of the great Canadian sketch comedy show *SCTV* (1976–1984), imagining a Castle-directed adaptation of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* called *Death Takes No Holiday*. Portrayed by Dave Thomas, Castle interrupts the film to stage a *Sardonicus*-style poll on the film's ending, only to be overruled by Hercule Poirot (John Candy) and Agatha Christie (Andrea Martin) herself, the latter writing the story from within it, who accost him in the non-diegetic space of Castle's first-person audience address and strangle him. What other director could you simultaneously raise and refute the authorship of, while depicting him on screen and "killing" him a mere year after his actual death, and have this play as a gesture in relatively good taste?

“ . . . I FEEL OBLIGATED TO WARN YOU . . . ”

The word “unique” is often abused, and yet it seems rather unavoidable where William Castle is concerned. Indeed, his *Britannica* entry declares, “A master showman, he made a unique, if minor, contribution to American motion pictures.”⁵¹ This collection hopes to show that, in the aggregate at least, his contribution has been something more than minor. It is perhaps inevitable that the essays collected here spend the most time on the gimmick films, but they also excavate Castle's earlier and later work, and contextualize the gimmick films within his long career.

The first part of *ReFocus: The Films of William Castle* is entitled “The Early Castle” and deals with his pregimmick days. Hugh S. Manon's “*When Strangers Marry: Film Noir as Mediated Gothic*” is a sustained analysis of Castle's early classic and how it uses generic noir tropes to transform the Gothic tradition. Zack Rearick's “Gender in William Castle's Westerns” focuses on an especially neglected facet of Castle's career, his Westerns.

The following part, “The Gimmick Cycle,” deals with Castle's most famous films, most broadly and narratively. The first entry is Anthony Thomas McKenna's “He Earned Our Forgiveness: William Castle and American Movie Showmanship,” which explores the industrial conditions of the 1950s and 60s American film industry that allowed Castle's brand of showmanship to flourish. It is followed by a reprint of Murray Leeder's “Collective Screams: William Castle and the Gimmick Film,” which particularly examines *House on Haunted Hill* and *The Tingler* as profoundly reflexive texts that not only reflect but are about Castle's own authority and showmanship. It describes the

gimmick films as revivals of sorts of the mode of authorship associated with early cinema's trick films.

The next three chapters provide case studies of gimmick films. Beth Kattelman offers a probing treatment of *Macabre* and its relationship to the theatrical tradition of ballyhoo, also offering an exploration of the potential for real-life "death by fright." Eliot Bessette follows with an examination of *13 Ghosts* and its themes of belief and disbelief, its links with *Psycho* (1960) and elements of its reception. Alexandra Heller-Nicholas discusses *Mr. Sardonicus* through the film's central image of the mask.

Moving partly beyond the gimmick film, the part entitled "Castle, Authorship, and Genre" assembles a series of chapters beginning with Steffen Hantke's "A Sick Mind in Search of a Monstrous Body: William Castle and the Emergence of Psychological Horror in the 1960s." Hantke examines both gimmick and postgimmick to locate Castle within the emerging paradigm of the psychological horror film, while also noting that Castle's insistence on gruesome imagery and embodied reactions somewhat distinguishes himself from other figures such as Hitchcock. Michael Brodski and Caroline Langhorst's "'What a Wicked Game to Play?': Playfulness, Generic Hybridity, and Cult Appeal in Castle's 1960s Films" also sees continuities between Castle's gimmick and postgimmick films, finding engagement with postwar social issues precisely through his playful approach to genre. Michael Petitti's "'Where Did Our Love Go?': The Case of William Castle's Disintegration of the American Marriage in *The Night Walker*," takes one of Castle's most satisfying and fascinating films as a case study while connecting it with his gimmick and postgimmick canons.

The final part chronicles dimensions of Castle's influences. First, Peter Marra traces the influence of Castle on the slasher film cycle of the late 1970s and early 1980s. His "Homo/cidal: William Castle's 1960s Killer Queers" finds an intriguing presence of queerness in some of Castle's films through their very incoherence. The last chapter, Kate J. Russell's "The Cinematic Pandemonium of William Castle and John Waters," explores Castle's relationship to perhaps his most vocal disciple, the iconic American independent director John Waters. It chronicles the influence of Castle on Waters and the relationship of shock, disgust, and gimmickry.

“ . . . BUT DON’ T BE ALARMED . . . ”

Michael Petitti has kindly provided us with a photograph of Castle's tombstone in Glendale, California (Figure I.3).

When I first saw it, it was a clear disappointment: I had imagined it festooned with skeletons or axes or tinglers or severed heads, or maybe a Zotz



Figure I.3 Castle's tombstone in Glendale, CA.

amulet or two. Yet it is a reminder that there was so much more to him than just the showman, both personally and professionally. And there is surely something resonant in the simple inscription: "Forever." This collection does not and cannot cover all of Castle's many facets, but it hopes to increase our understanding of such a dynamic, provocative and, yes, unique filmmaker.

NOTES

1. Astin previously acted in Castle's film *The Spirit is Willing* (1967).
2. "The Graveyard Shift" echoes the collapse of the Hollywood studio system's production model in the 1960s, which led to much traditional studio space falling into disuse.
3. For useful overviews on critical and academic approaches to film authorship, see Stephen Crofts, "Authorship and Hollywood," in John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (eds), *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 310–24; Paul Sellors, "Film Directors and Auteurs," in *Film Authorship: Auteurs and Other Myths* (London: Wallflower, 2010), pp. 6–32.
4. Timothy Corrigan, *Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 103 (original emphasis).
5. For a discussion of Castle and the auteur theory, see Ethan de Seife, "The Branding of an Author: William Castle and the *Auteur* Theory," *16:9 42* (2011): n.p.
6. William Castle, *Step Right Up! I'm Gonna Scare the Pants Off America: Memoirs of a B-Movie Mogul* (New York: Pharos, 1992), p. 17.
7. *Ibid.* p. 21.
8. My thanks to Jane Bouley for sharing with me her history of the Stony Creek Theatre.
9. Castle, *Step Right Up!*, p. 27.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Robert Bloch, *Once Around the Bloch: An Unauthorized Autobiography* (New York: Tor, 1993), p. 294.
12. Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Discovering Orson Welles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 94.
13. Quoted in Castle, *Step Right Up!*, p. 95.
14. The costs of the gimmicks belonged to the theatres, so the more elaborate, like Emergeo, Percepto and Illusion-O, would frequently go unrealized.
15. While the film was advertised as *The House on Haunted Hill* and is referred to as such in many other sources, including *Step Right Up!*, the title sequence within the film lacks a definite article.
16. See Harry M. Benshoff, "Vincent Price and Me: Imagining the Queer Male Diva," *Camera Obscura* 23.1 (2008): 146–50.
17. Robb White interviewed by Tom Weaver, "An Outspoken Conversation with Robb White," *Film Fax* 18 (1990): 60–5, 94–5.
18. Castle, *Step Right Up!*, p. 159.
19. Quoted in *Spine Tingler! The William Castle Story*, dir. Jeffrey Schwarz (U.S.A.: Automat Pictures, 2007).
20. Quoted in *ibid.*
21. Castle, *Step Right Up!*, p. 160.
22. For a discussion of the interplay of comedy and horror in Castle's films, see Murray Leeder, "The Humor of William Castle's Gimmick Films," in Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper (eds), *The Laughing Dead: The Horror-Comedy Film from Bride of Frankenstein to Zombieland* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), pp. 87–101.
23. Castle, *Step Right Up!*, p. 165.
24. The gimmick cycle was clearly targeted at young audiences, making the recurring themes of adultery, disintegrating marriages, and spouse-murder all the more baffling.
25. More fully a postgimmick Castle film was *The Old Dark House* (1963), a reworking of the 1932 James Whale classic that anticipates Castle's weak comedies of the later 1960s.

26. In his own autobiography, Robert Bloch, screenwriter for *Strait-Jacket*, politely says of Castle's account of their first meeting with Crawford, "Actually, that's not quite how it really happened" (*Once Around the Bloch*, p. 298) and goes on to give a notably different version.
27. Philip K. Scheuer, "Roland, Costars Have Cuban Date," *Los Angeles Times*, August 29, 1958, p. 7.
28. *Shanks* is ironically the only film directed by Castle to have been nominated for an Academy Award—for Alex North's original score.
29. Castle, *Step Right Up!*, pp. 192–4.
30. Robert Evans, *The Kid Stays in the Picture* (Beverly Hills, CA: Phoenix, 2002), p. 142. For another account, see Jason Zinoman, *Shock Value: How a Few Eccentric Outsiders Gave Us Nightmares, Conquered Hollywood, and Invented Modern Horror* (New York: Penguin, 2011), pp. 11–17.
31. Stephen King recalls watching *The Tingler* in his non-fiction book *Danse Macabre* (New York: Gallery, 1981), pp. 196–7. It was clearly a unifying event for a generation of future horror specialists.
32. Dana Harris, "Silver, Zemeckis go Dark in Castle 'Macabre' Redo," *Variety*, May 10, 2000, <<http://variety.com/2000/film/news/silver-zemeckis-go-dark-in-castle-macabre-redo-1117781468/>> (accessed June 1, 2017).
33. Brad Beveret, "'Tingler' to Scare Again," *Comingsoon.net*, November 15, 2004, <http://www.comingsoon.net/movies/news/502891-tingler_to_scare_again> (accessed June 1, 2017).
34. William Castle and Robb White, *House on Haunted Hill: A William Castle Annotated Screampplay* (William Castle Productions, 2011).
35. Terry Castle, *Fearmaker: Family Matters* (William Castle Productions, 2011).
36. Chris Sims, "5 Great Moments from the World's Craziest Filmmaker," *Cracked*, January 27, 2013, <http://www.cracked.com/blog/5-great-moments-from-worlds-craziest-filmmaker_p2/> (accessed November 26, 2013).
37. Mike Bracken, "Will These Home-Theater Chairs Change the Way You Watch Movies in Your Living Room?" *www.movies.com*, October 2, 2013, <<http://www.movies.com/movie-news/tremor-fx-home-theater-chairs-vibrate-to-onscreen-action/13701>> (accessed November 8, 2013).
38. Will Millar, "William Castle, Part One," *In Advent of the Zombie Holocaust*, June 24, 2012, <<http://www.movies.com/movie-news/tremor-fx-home-theater-chairs-vibrate-to-onscreen-action/13701>> (accessed February 26, 2013).
39. Sims, "5 Great Moments."
40. *Ibid.*
41. The Medveds grant Percepto the prize of "Most Inane and Unwelcome 'Technical Advance' in Hollywood History," with Emergo one of the runners up. Strikingly, the Medveds find little to say about these gimmicks and what makes them so "inane" beyond simply describing them. Harry Medved and Michael Medved, *The Golden Turkey Awards: Nominees and Winners—The Worst Achievements in Hollywood History* (New York: Perigee, 1980), pp. 161–6.
42. Mikita Brottman, "Ritual, Tension and Relief: The Terror of 'The Tingler,'" *Film Quarterly* 50.4 (Summer 1997): 2–10; Kjetil Rødje, *Images of Blood in American Cinema: The Tingler to The Wild Bunch* (New York: Routledge, 2016), esp. pp. 52–5.
43. David Sanjek, "The Doll and the Whip: Pathos and Ballyhoo in William Castle's *Homicidal*," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 20:4 (2003): 247–63.
44. Marc Olivier, "Gidget Goes Noir: William Castle and the Teenage Phone Fatale," *The Journal of Popular Film and Television* 41.2 (2013): 41–52.

45. Including my essay “Collective Screams: William Castle and the Gimmick Film” (*Journal of Popular Culture* 44.4 (2011): 774–96), reprinted here, and Catherine Clepper’s “‘Death by Fright’: Risk, Consent, and Evidentiary Objects in William Castle’s Rigged Houses,” *Film History* 28.3 (2016): 54–84.
46. John W. Law, *Scare Tactic: The Life and Films of William Castle* (Lincoln, NE: Writer’s Club, 2000), Joe Jordan, *Showmanship: The Cinema of William Castle* (Albany, GA: BearManor Media, 2014).
47. Clepper, “Death by Fright,” p. 55.
48. For example, Angela Ndalians, *The Horror Sensorium: Media and the Senses* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), pp. 166–7; Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Horror Film and Affect: Towards a Corporeal Model of Viewership* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 104.
49. Kevin J. Heffernan, *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953–1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), esp. pp. 96–104; Blair Davis, *Battle for the Bs: 1950s Hollywood and the Rebirth of Low-Budget Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), esp. pp. 63–5, 77–82.
50. Joe R. Lansdale, “Belly Laugh, or, The Joker’s Trick or Treat,” in Martin H. Greenberg (ed.), *The Further Adventures of the Joker* (Bantam Books: New York, 1990), pp. 1–30.
51. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v., “William Castle,” by Michael Barson, <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Castle>> (accessed May 25, 2017).