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Author(s): Mikita Brottman

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Dr. Warren Chapin (Vincent Price) experiments on his beautiful but unfaithful wife Isabelle (Patricia Cutts).

*Mikita Brottman*

## Ritual, Tension, and Relief

### The Terror of *The Tingler*

William Castle's *The Tingler*, released in 1959, features a suave Vincent Price as Dr. Warren Chapin, a research scientist deeply engaged in experimentation on the cause and often lethal effects of human fear. Chapin suspects that many people who have died from extreme fear were killed by a bizarre, lobsterlike parasite—the “tingler”—that takes shape within the vertebrae and can be prevented from materialising only by the victim's screams. However, if the victim is not able to release the tension caused by this fear by screaming, the tingler takes shape and cracks the human spine.

Chapin's lab assistant (and sister-in-law's fiancé) Dave Morris (Darryl Hickman) provides him with live dogs and cats to use in his experiments in the pathology of human fear, but Chapin is more interested in human subjects. His first victim is his spiteful and unfaithful wife Isabelle (Patricia Cutts), whom he frightens into unconsciousness at gunpoint. Studying X rays of her spine, he and Dave discover the bony shape of the tingler emerging from Isabelle's vertebrae. Later, Chapin attempts to experiment on himself by locking himself in his laboratory and injecting himself with 100 micro-milligrams of liquid LSD, recording his hallucinations, and trying desperately not to scream. Skulls and skeletons come to life; he has trouble breathing; the walls close in on him; and his tingler

emerges . . . but the doctor gives in to his tension and destroys it with a scream.

Eventually, Chapin finds the perfect subject for his experiment: a paranoid deaf-mute woman (Judith Evelyn) with a morbid terror of blood. With a little unexpected help from her avaricious husband Olly (Philip Coolidge), the deaf-mute is trapped in her apartment over a silent-movie theater and slowly frightened to death by a series of shocks: windows slam suddenly closed; a rocking chair rocks of its own accord; a hideously masked stranger pursues her with a hatchet; a beckoning hand emerges from the depths of a blood-filled bathtub (bright red technicolor in an otherwise black-and-white film); and the woman's death certificate appears pinned to the door of the bathroom closet—*Cause of Death: FRIGHT*.

Upon determining the reason for the woman's death—that she had indeed died of fear—Chapin is granted permission by the seemingly innocent Olly to perform an important experiment. In the laboratory in his home, the doctor manages to remove the tingler from the body's spine with a pair of forceps, and we are given our first glimpse of its spiny, powerful form—in silhouette only, however: Chapin is operating behind a strategically placed screen. Almost immediately the tingler attacks Chapin's arm, falling off only when he screams. The tingler (recaptured and picked up gingerly with a pair of for-

ceps) is then placed in a special locked box while Chapin and his wife toast his success. But Isabelle (who wants him dead so she can marry her lover) has drugged his wine, and he falls unconscious onto the couch while his vengeful wife goes to release the tinger, which then crawls onto the doctor's prone body, choking him around the neck with its spiny pincers until disempowered at the last moment by the screams of Isabelle's sister Lucy (Pamela Lincoln).

Finally convinced that he has "violated the laws of nature," Chapin takes the tinger over to Olly's house to place it back in the body of Olly's dead wife. However, during the process the tinger escapes, slips down under the floorboards, and makes its way into the silent-movie theater below. On the loose, it attacks a girl in the audience, causing widespread hysterics. Dr. Chapin's voice is heard from the darkened screen assuring the audience that the girl is being taken care of and that everything is under control. Moments later, a second tinger attack takes place, this time on the projectionist. The lights dim again, and the projected silhouette of the tinger crawls across the screen. Chapin addresses the audience once more, this time encouraging everyone to "scream for your lives!" until the tinger is thwarted, the danger has passed, and, claims Chapin, "We can now return to our picture."

The scientist replaces the lethal organism in the body of its host and leaves for the police station. Olly, left alone, finds himself sealed in the apartment with the corpse. But the dead woman, in a perfectly timed post-mortem muscular spasm, sits up and directs an icy stare at her husband. In the film's final ironic twist, Olly falls dead to the floor. *Cause of death: FRIGHT.*

## The Abominable Showman

Born in New York City in 1914, Castle broke into show business at the age of 15, getting a small part in a Broadway show by falsely representing himself as a nephew of Samuel Goldwyn. He went through a wide spectrum of acting, producing, and writing jobs before moving to Hollywood as an actor at the age of 23. After a transitional period as a dialogue director, he began directing on his own. His first picture was *The Chance of a Lifetime*, which, when it appeared in 1942, was hailed by *Variety* as "probably the worst directed picture in the his-



A condemned prisoner is carried screaming to his death in the electric chair.

tory of motion pictures." But Harry Cohn, at Columbia, gave the 29-year-old Castle another chance to direct. *The Whistler*, a thriller, was a commercial success, and the respect Castle earned as the film's director enabled him to pursue a successful career. He directed dozens of low-budget films, showing some minor flair for crime and action situations.

It was not until the late 1950s, however, that Castle really came into his own by setting himself up as an independent producer, director, and—most importantly—showman. He specialized in chillers and schlock-horror films, most of which were panned by critics for "poor taste" but still fared handsomely at the box office. His most ambitious and best-known film was his 1968 adaptation of Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby*, which he produced but wisely left Roman Polanski to direct. Later in his career, Castle produced a number of television shows, portrayed a producer in Hal Ashby's *Shampoo* and a director in Schlesinger's *Day of the Locust* (both 1975); he finally died of a heart attack in 1977, on the set of a film he was producing for M-G-M.

But the Abominable or Showman, or the King of the Bs—as Castle came to be known at Columbia—is probably best remembered for the series of low-budget horror films he made between 1958 and 1962, for it was in these successful but exploitative

chillers that the director formed a personal bond with his audience through a wide series of feisty, carnival-style gimmicks and hokum gimcracks. Early experiments with wide-screen 3-D features and on-camera appearances (to introduce himself and to prepare the audience for the forthcoming cinematic experience) encouraged Castle to play around with various promotional ploys and exploitation devices that guaranteed his films their box-office success. “I’ve modelled my career on P.T. Barnum,” he once boasted, and his influence on the subsequent history of exploitation cinema is undeniable. John Waters, himself the proud inventor of Odorama, has referred to Castle as King of the Gimmicks, confessing that “William Castle was my idol. His films made me want to make films. I’m even jealous of his work. In fact, I wish I were William Castle.”<sup>1</sup>

The earliest of Castle’s experiments came with the 1958 release of *Macabre*, for which he took out a notorious policy with Lloyds of London insuring every ticket buyer for \$1000 in case they “died from fright” during the movie. Mock insurance policies appeared in all the newspaper ads. Giant replicas of the actual policy hung over the marquees. Hearses were parked outside the theaters, fake nurses in uniform were paid to stand around the lobbies, and Castle himself arrived in a hearse at some of the film’s presentations and made his entrance emerging from a coffin. A great commercial success, *Macabre* was followed in the autumn of the same year by *The House on Haunted Hill*, featuring an intriguing new slant on the recently deceased 3-D process which Castle named Emergo. Selected theaters showcasing *The House on Haunted Hill* were wired from screen to balcony with a pair of cables and a pulley. At a climactic moment during the film, the screen momentarily blackened, cueing the projectionist to set in motion a 12-foot illuminated plastic skeleton which, in the words of the *New York Times* movie reviewer, “slid straight forward to the balcony, blankly eyed the first-row customers, and slid back.” The luminous skeleton upstaged even Vincent Price, Castle’s first real star, especially—as often seems to have happened—if it got stuck half way down its cables or managed to jump its wires completely and fall into the audience, causing hysterical frenzy.<sup>2</sup>

Castle’s *13 Ghosts*, released by Columbia in 1960, offered its enthusiastic audience the experimental device of Illusion-O, where each spectator was presented with a “ghost viewer” (an obscure



Chapin records his hallucinations on an LSD trip as part of his experiment in the pathology of human fear.

twist on 3-D glasses). The ghost viewer extended Castle’s promotional fascination with audience participation—one half of the ghost viewer allowed the spectator to see the 13 ghosts, the other half didn’t, leaving the film somewhat blurred and rather surreal. Waters remembers that, although audiences seemed “bewildered” by this rather imperfect technical breakthrough, “they still bought the gimmick.”<sup>3</sup> *Thirteen Ghosts* was followed up by the transvestite-themed shocker *Homicidal* (1961). Blatantly influenced by Hitchcock’s recently released *Psycho* (1960), during whose screening cinemas refused admission after the film had already begun, *Homicidal* featured a “fright break” two minutes before the end of the film, during which time the screen would go blank and Castle’s voice, backed by the sound of a heartbeat, would announce that anyone too frightened to watch the end of the film could leave the theater and get a full refund. In a number of theaters, those taking advantage of this offer had to follow yellow footsteps up the aisle, bathed in a yellow spotlight, past yellow lines with the stencilled message “Cowards Keep Walking,” past a nurse who would offer a blood pressure test, to a yellow cardboard booth in the lobby called Coward’s Corner, where—to the accompaniment of a record blaring “Watch the chicken! Watch him shiver in Coward’s Corner!”—

he or she would be forced to sign a yellow card stating, "I am a *bona fide* coward."

*Homicidal* was followed up in the same year with *Mr. Sardonicus*, a grotesque adaptation of Victor Hugo's story "The Man Who Laughed," featuring the Punishment Poll. On entering the theater, each spectator was issued with a DayGlow card containing a thumbs up/thumbs down design similar to a playing card. Before the last reel of the film, an usher conducted the Punishment Poll and the audience was allowed to determine the fate of *Mr. Sardonicus* by holding up their Mercy/No Mercy verdicts. Although Castle supplied every print of the film with two different endings, Waters claims that "not *once* did an audience grant mercy, so this one particular part of the film has *never* been seen."<sup>4</sup> And Castle had a slew of zany ideas that guaranteed his films promotional success. *Zotz!* (1962), aimed at a younger audience, was accompanied by the creation of millions of magic Zotz coins, distributed weeks in advance of the film's release; *13 Frightened Girls* (1963) was promoted with the gimmick of a worldwide talent hunt for the prettiest girl in each of 13 countries. *Straitjacket* (1963) included free gifts of small cardboard axes streaked with simulated blood; in Castle's final gimmick, the back three rows of the theater for all showings of *I Saw What You Did* (1965) were advertised as the "shock section" and fitted out with seatbelts on each chair to prevent the spectator being "jolted" out of their seat from fear.

The most bizarre and ambitious experiment in audience participation, however, was without a doubt Castle's device of Percepto. During all first release screenings of *The Tingler*, Castle instructed movie theater managers to wire up small electric motors, similar to handshake buzzers, to a certain number of seats. When the tingler breaks loose in the silent-movie theater and kills the projectionist, the real movie-theater screen goes blank and an anonymous voice (supposedly that of the theater manager) announces "Attention! The tingler is loose in this theater. Please scream for your life." At this point, a specially planted female stooge in the real audience would burst into hysterics and have to be carried out by a (fake) nurse in uniform. Moments later, during the third tingler attack in the movie, the (real) projectionist would push a button activating the electrical charges on the wired-up seats, allowing certain unfortunate movie spectators to be hit at the base of the spine by a brief electrical jolt. Then the silent movie-the-

ater screen dims again, and the same anonymous voice encourages the real audience to "scream for your lives", echoed by the frenzied on-screen cinema audience screaming lines like "It's over here! Help! It's over here!" Ideally, the *real* audience was literally swept into the film's action by the buzzing of the Percepto activators, until Chapin assures the silent-movie audience (and the real one) that the tingler has been paralysed and the danger has passed.

Like Emergo, Percepto did not always function as the director might have anticipated. The most common anecdote, recounted by Castle in his autobiography *Step Right Up!*, involved a cinema whose management, having dutifully installed the Percepto equipment the night before *The Tingler* was supposed to be shown, decided to test the device on a group of older women who were watching *The Nun's Story* on the last night of its run, with predictably hysterical results.<sup>5</sup> Waters tells an anecdote about a showing in Philadelphia where one beefy truck driver was so incensed by the Percepto buzzer underneath his chair that he ripped his entire seat from the floor and had to be subdued by five ushers.<sup>6</sup> Other Castle fans remember their suspense being broken by a broadcast announcement that "The tingler is wanted in the lobby." John Waters describes his experience of *The Tingler* as being "the fondest movie-going memory of my youth":

I went to see it every day. Since, by the time it came to my neighbourhood, only about ten random seats were wired, I would run through the theater searching for the magic buzzers. As I sat there experiencing the miracle of Percepto, I realised there could be such a thing as Art in the cinema.<sup>7</sup>

## Traumatization and the Limits of Psychodrama

Although Castle's deployment of experimental audience-participation devices was obviously intended as no more than a bravura commercial ploy, *The Tingler* is in fact a deeply complex and interesting film, and in wiring up his cinema seats with electrical cables, Castle was in fact—albeit unknowingly—extending the principles of experimentation with theatre, audience, and spectacle initiated by Marinetti and the Italian Futurist movement in the late 1920s. A reading that

attends to these complexities, however, tends to meet a great deal of resistance from the many loyal and nostalgic fans of exploitation cinema, most of whom would argue that *The Tingler* is a piece of fun-house trickery whose sheer brazen effrontery is enjoyable in itself; that Castle's sole priority was to entertain; and that, as critic John Brunas comments in *Midnight Marquee*, "to search deeper into [Castle's] productions for obscure messages is critical pretentiousness of the first order."<sup>8</sup> Most fans of exploitation cinema appreciate and relish Castle's work as gleeful fairground bravado, relying on a surface facetiousness and tongue-in-cheek aplomb enlivened by moments of sudden, shrill shock.

These are certainly all characteristics of Castle's films, of which *The Tingler* is the most tricky and hokum-laden example. But surely one of the most important aims of film criticism is to concretize and vivify the symbolic nature of these half-thoughts and semi-awarenesses that the plot of the film hints at, suggests, or makes manifest, however superficial, sporadic, or facetious they may be. Ironically, in an interview with *Cinefantastique* less than two years before his death, Castle remarked on his fascination with contemporary theoretical analysis of his 50s and 60s horror films, which, as Castle points out with some pleasure, "are being treated with increasing respect, and taken very seriously today at the universities where they study them."<sup>9</sup> He goes on to make some other observations:

It's a very strange thing. I definitely feel that possibly in my unconscious I was trying to say something. . . . I never expected that they would put under a microscope pictures that I made in the fifties and sixties and look for hidden meanings. Nevertheless, that is what is happening. . . . And I think about inner meaning, truly, it is possible that deeply buried within my unconscious was the feeling of trying to say something. . . . And I get this from *The Tingler*.<sup>10</sup>

The tendency to take Castle's films seriously is clearly not widespread enough for John Waters, whose retrospective of Castle's work in *American Film* is in part an attack on critics for being slow to elevate "this ultimate eccentric director-producer" to cult status.<sup>11</sup> But in fact, Waters was behind the times. *Cahiers du Cinéma* had published a brief but serious article about Castle's work by way of obituary in 1977, remarking on some of the ways



As part of his experiment, Chapin renders his wife Isabelle unconscious from fear.

in which films like *The Tingler* stand as realizations of the spectacular "happening-cinema" conceived by the Futurist movement: a system of traumatization, "where the spectacle unfolds not only on the screen, but also in the room, with special effects that allowed the audience to be played with like puppets."<sup>12</sup> Comparing Castle's work to that of Italian horror auteur Dario Argento, *Cahiers du Cinéma* praised *The Tingler* for its radical use of color in an otherwise black-and-white film, describing the film as "unfolding at the limits of psychodrama" and "in the popular psychoanalytic style of Tennessee Williams." For Castle, *Cahiers* rightly concludes, "only the spectacle counted."<sup>13</sup>

It is also significant that a whole spectrum of established film critics have recalled a childhood experience of *The Tingler* as their archetypal horror movie-going experience, and it has long been a commonplace of horror film criticism—ever since the publication of Robin Wood's *An Introduction to the American Horror Film* in 1979—that such experiences can be far more profound than those available to spectators of more "serious" cinema.<sup>14</sup>

In *The Michigan Quarterly Review*, John Fraser catalogues some of the more marvellous elements of horror movies which help to realize this complexity of emotional experience. Firstly,

according to Fraser, there is the marvelousness of the supernatural, or of things and events so exotic as to border on the supernatural, such as the notion of a crustacean parasite existing along the human spine, a creature that is energized and given strength by the power of human fear, which brings it to life as a concrete, living thing. Secondly, there are the surrealistic creations of the imaginations of non-supernatural characters, such as Dr. Chapin's baroque laboratory, with its skulls and skeletons, its cats and dogs in cages, or Olly's shady home located above a silent-movie theater. Thirdly, normal-seeming people reveal horrendous qualities. The dedicated research scientist, not unlike the movie director himself, is revealed as an ingenious loon, willing to threaten his wife with a gun and frighten a deaf-mute woman to death in a deluded attempt to infringe the essential principles of nature, just as the mild and lowly Olly is unmasked as an avaricious wife killer. Everyday objects become charged with great menace, such as the teacup Chapin smashes and uses as a weapon with which to draw his own blood, questioning the extent of Olly's wife's obsessive-compulsive affliction.

Environments intended to be nurturing become very much the opposite in *The Tingler*, like Chapin's Regency mansion or the silent-movie theater where the tingler is accidentally let loose. In the same way, seemingly immutable social or vocational occasions are fearsomely desanctified, such as the suave and sophisticated Dr. Chapin's home visit to his patient Martha Higgins (Olly's wife), or Chapin and his wife's toast to celebrate the success of his latest scientific discovery ("Here's to the tingler!"). Most fundamental to the horror movie gestalt, however, is *The Tingler's* classic narrative projection of a progressive entry into a forbidden center. This center is Chapin's laboratory, with its skeletons, corpses, caged animals, and hallucinogenic potions—the nexus of Chapin's desperate quest for knowledge and the terrifying dangers of discovery. Dave's stolen dogs and cats are rejected by Chapin in favor of self-experimentation. "I want to personally sense the power of the tingler in a controlled fear situation," he claims, "but nothing scares me." And yet, as Warren later says to Dave, "to break the laws of nature is a dangerous thing, and we've not only broken its laws, we've violated its basic principles. We had to, and now we've got to stop." Or, in the words of that old horror movie motif, "There are some things man was not meant to know."

## Animal Body Doubles

*The Tingler* lays bare a shared fascination with the physiology and the workings of the human body—both the on-screen bodies and the participating bodies of the cinema audience—and it is this fascination that allows the critic to access the film's conscious and unconscious implications. The terror of the tingler relates to our own understanding of the ancient commonality of the human body, its failings, ruptures, and weaknesses.

The pattern that starts to emerge from a close analysis of *The Tingler* is one that bodies forth the close relationship between the symbolic order and the bodily order, disclosing how each gives form to the other in a dynamic intermingling of meanings that constitutes the basis for the history of human cultures and the symbolic importance of their narratives. To chart analogues between the symbol structure of contemporary narratives and the belief systems of earlier societies is not, as it may seem at first, an attempt to cast a net further and wider for random connections, but rather an effort to look more deeply at the history of the human body, with its secret and disguised level of conscious understanding. A number of primitive cultures also tell stories like that of *The Tingler*, involving versions of the animal double motif. Some societies accept it as a matter of certainty that many people have secret animals like the tingler inside their bodies. These are either people with the power to temporarily assume the form of an animal, or animals that can assume a human form.

The traditional animal double, according to anthropology, inhabits ambiguous areas of the social structure domain, habitually presiding at funerals and ghost sacrifices. It has been suggested that the animal double presides over areas of social and cultural life which are by nature ambiguous, unpredictable, and dangerous. In the same way, Castle's tingler is associated with murders, autopsies, and funerals, as well as the nether worlds of neurosis, paranoia, and mistrust, and the ambiguous domains of death and sex. As the narrative unfolds, we come to learn that the tingler presides over a night-world of psychosis, adultery, theft, bribery, corruption, broken promises, broken marriages, and wife murder.

One final point on this theme: The *animal* double does not always take the form of an animal (in the zoological sense); it may equally take the form

of an insect, fish, or bird. The tingler is a kind of hybrid parasite—a cross between a worm, a lobster, and a centipede. Castle describes it in his autobiography as “sort of like a lobster, but flat, and instead of claws it has long, slimy feelers.”<sup>15</sup> Whilst there are plenty of examples of animal doubles that take the form of shellfish or insects, it is worth examining the fact that these categories of creatures are in themselves ambiguous and liminal. Shellfish, reptiles, and insects are the equivocal residue of the animal world, not quite animals and not quite fish, considered by some cultures to be the animal enemies of human beings.<sup>16</sup> Some anthropologists have suggested that insects are considered abject and interstitial because they are not rated as food (in most countries at least), whereas reptiles and shellfish are determined to be freakish and ambiguous because their cold-bloodedness distances them from our far greater affective closeness to warm-blooded animals and birds. In this light, it is somewhat ironic that insects, reptiles, and shellfish are referenced metaphorically in many societies to describe the kind of witchcraft accusations that occur within a domestic situation, where people all live closely together, as in the Kwahu proverb, “Only the insect in your own cloth will bite you.”<sup>17</sup>

## Defecation and the Power of the Scream

Interestingly, a number of primitive and tribal cultures conceive of the animal double as faecal in both form and consistency. If the province of this creature is to negotiate those ambiguous areas of culture, society, and the body, it is wholly befitting that the animal double should emerge from the indistinct boundaries of the human body. In direct opposition to everything we consider human, the animal is a category inhabiting all those dark, shadowy cracks and crevices of human culture and the human body: not inside but outside, not the womb but the anus, not birth but defecation—and sometimes neither here nor there but *in between*, which inevitably connects it to the interstitial nature of the horror genre itself.<sup>18</sup> It is surely not stretching the imagination too much to acknowledge that there is obviously something rather faecal about the tingler. After all, it is a worm-like protruberance that gradually emerges from the anal inner space, and its arrival is heralded by a range of physical per-

ceptions and sensations both pleasant and disturbing. The emergence of the tingler involves awkward writhings, expressions of pain and relief, and groans and wrenching sounds, followed by the gradual expulsion of a solid object from the space at the bottom of the spine.

Yet in this story, the ability to produce a human scream prevents the emergence of this faecal creature from the anal space. The faecal animal, “the force that makes your spine tingle when you’re scared,” has somehow transformed itself into a human voice. The metapsychology of the inner space of the human body image is so complex and multifaceted that it allows for plenty of cathexis, both concrete and symbolic, between different bodily openings, inner spaces, and the contents hidden behind these openings. In fact, the entire structural foundation for the inner body image is created by the cathexis of various sensations and actual functions of the body simultaneously with phase-specific images and figures of speech that are connected with the body.<sup>19</sup> So, for instance, the sound of the human voice can easily be imaginatively experienced as faeces, flatus, or urination—especially in cases of psychosis where the image of the body, especially its inner space, is disturbed. In relation to the top half of the inner body image, the lungs, larynx, and ears compose an inner space entity, the “excrement” or product of which is the human voice, words, and sounds—we react to important experiences by taking a deep breath, as though to internalise the auditory experience better, and our reaction to experiences we dislike or despise often involves expiration. Thus, in relation to the metapsychology of the human body image, it seems quite natural that a faecal image from the anus should be cathected into the inner space of the human voice.

According to Dr. Chapin, the tingler is a parasite that feeds off the stress and tension experienced in the spinal column at moments of intense fear. This tension can be released only by screaming, which, in turn, cuts off the tingler from its source of strength and renders it powerless. Scream, and you are safe. Fail to scream, and your body is lost to the tingler. When Dr. Chapin exhorts the on-screen audience to “scream for your lives!” to disempower the escaped tingler, he is also encouraging the screams of the by now hysterical *actual* cinema audience, whose panic-stricken reaction to random jolts of electrical energy should ideally, at least according to Castle’s plan, serve as a promotional



Chapin prepares to extract his first living tingler.



device to excite and encourage the crowds waiting in the lobby for the next showing.

The escaped tingler embodies not only the link between oral and anal expulsiveness, but also the basic notion that there are anal feelings at the movies, and that these feelings are specifically activated by this film. Put in its most simple terms, the human fear of losing control of one's defecatory functions—embodied by the sight of an enormous, swollen faecal animal, alive and on the loose—is cathected into the socially legitimate chaos of mass ritual screaming (itself inspired by the screams of the on-screen cinema audience). As I suggested earlier, uncontrolled defecation and an ungovernable vocal spasm are essentially different manifestations of the same bodily impulse, the significant difference being that chaotic defecation is considered horrific and polluting, whereas ungovernable screaming—especially when participating in the public viewing of a horror movie—fits into a legitimate social category and has a communally accepted social function. To view *The Tingler* as it was originally screened is therefore to take part in a socially endorsed ritual of mass cathexis, where the threat of contamination is faced head on, displaced, and, at least temporarily, “overcome.” And for those audience members fortunate enough to select seats rigged up with Percepto buzzers directing an electrical jolt at the base of the spine, just at the top of the buttocks, the experience can only have been doubly exciting and doubly hysterical. Perhaps the dynamics of this socialisation procedure make it

easy to understand why watching *The Tingler* is recalled by so many film writers and critics as the most intense and exhilarating movie-going experience of their youth.

## Film and Faeces

*The Tingler* is a tale of warning. It is a story of assault by a faecal animal double which comes to life inside the body at the peak of terror, extending “from the coccyx to the sternum,” and which, when released outside the body, takes on a life of its own and crawls around frantically, causing a violent anal jolt when it attacks. This faecal creation is the product of massive unreleased tension, and can be calmed only by the cathexis of this defecatory neurosis into the vocal release of the scream. On one level then, this is a film about what Philip Rieff has described as “the triumph of the therapeutic,” a trait of which is the widely held belief—almost a commonplace by 1959—that emotions we fail to get “out” somehow remain repressed “within” us until they find their own way “out,” possibly of their own accord, and possibly in a rather frightening and dangerous way. The popular secularisation of Freudian psychoanalysis allows for the expression of certain kinds of so-called repressed desires and urges to become increasingly acceptable in the name of a process of psychic cleansing. As it has become increasingly common over the last 30 years to attribute such

repressed complexes to triggering childhood events (usually sexually or emotionally abusive parenting), the disclosure and display of such drives has met with increasing approval.

But *The Tingler* is a more involved film than a reading based on this very simplified therapeutic model might suggest. This is not a film about the expression of repressed fears in a tension-breaking psychic catharsis. Because it cannot be “attributed” to a single triggering event, because it will never become socially acceptable and because its effect is universal, the defecatory obsession is not really a neurosis we can “get in touch” with or “come to terms” with, as many other unconscious urges have come to be characterized. Horror at the perverseness of our bodily emissions is not just a repressed impulse waiting to return, but part of the neurological disease of being human. *The Tingler* is a bodily nightmare in which a faecal animal, swollen to frightening proportions, is given a life of its own and let loose upon the unsuspecting world of consciousness. The plight of an unfortunate neurotic deaf-mute whose unreleased tensions grow so great that they overcome her is simply the signal impelling the process of cathexis in the cinema audience from anal neurosis to oral expulsion and back again. Contrary to therapeutic fashion, however, this cathexis neither alleviates nor endures. The relief expressed in the scream of the spectator is nothing more than a socially admissible ritual of momentary release. In Castle’s fantasy, the scream destroys the neurosis. But in the waking reality of our bodily lives, this crapulous preoccupation, like all the best monsters, like the faecal process itself, is totally indestructable.

■ Mikita Brottman is a lecturer in Communications Studies at the University of East London whose interests include horror films, cult movies, and true crime. Her first book, *Offensive Films*, is forthcoming from Greenwood Press.

## Notes

1. John Waters, “Whatever Happened to Showmanship?,” in *American Film* 9 (1983), pp. 55-58.
2. See Waters, p. 56, and Bill Burgess, “William Castle,” *Classic Images* 111 (September 1984), pp. 42-44.

3. Waters, p. 57.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
5. William Castle, *Step Right Up! I’m Gonna Scare the Pants off America* (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1976).
6. Waters, p. 57.
7. *Ibid.*
8. John Brunas, “William Castle: Five Portraits in Black (1958-61),” in *Midnight Marquee* 29 (September 1979), pp. 4-12.
9. Burgess, p. 42
10. *Ibid.*
11. “Isn’t it time for a retrospective? A documentary on his life? Some highfalutin critique in *Cahiers du Cinéma*? . . . Forget Ed Wood. Forget George Romero. William Castle was best. William Castle was God.” (Waters, p. 57)
12. “Even the spectator who remains glued to his seat is nevertheless involved. The effects stopped at nothing.” (Alain Garel, “William Castle: Obituary,” *Cahiers du Cinéma* 21[1977], pp. 70-71.)
13. *Ibid.*
14. See Robin Wood, “An Introduction to the American Horror Film,” in Andrew Britton et al., eds., *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* (Toronto, Festival of Festivals, 1979. Reprinted in Bill Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods* Vol. 2 [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989]).
15. In fact, the idea of the tingler was fashioned not by Castle but by his screenwriter, Robb White, who very quickly came to be embarrassed by it. “I hated them,” says White of the series of films he made with Castle. “I mean, they’re so dumb! God, there’s not a worm in your backbone when you get scared!” (cit. in Bryan Senn and John Johnson, *Fantastic Cinema Guide* [London: McFarland, 1992]).
16. See, for example, John Halverson, “Animal Categories and Terms of Abuse,” in *Man*, vol. 1, no. 4 (December 1976).
17. See Wolf Bleek, “Witchcraft, Gossip and Death: A Social Drama,” in *Man*, vol. 11, no. 4 (December 1976).
18. Noel Carroll, in his book *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), describes the horror genre as interstitial in nature. Its monsters are frequently neither man nor beast, neither living nor dead, or else a result of such other-worldly processes as magnification (*King Kong*, *Night of the Lepus*) or reduction (*The Fly*, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*). Others belong to the category of the psychologically or morally interstitial (such as the psychopath, serial killer, or child murderer), sharing the category of those frightening bodily products (blood, excrement, tissue fluid) which, when appearing outside the bodily confines, are by necessity interstitial, and thereby out of place, corrupt, and taboo.
19. See Tor-Björn Hägglund and Heikki Piha, “The Inner Space of the Body Image,” in *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 49 (1980), pp. 256-83.

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