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## 'Scream for your lives!': the philosophy of horror in William Castle's *The Tingler* (1959)

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### ABSTRACT

The present article considers the underlying philosophical logic of William Castle's horror film *The Tingler*, demonstrating how the film mediates on the nature of horror. It notes the similarities with existential phenomenological theories of horror, particularly the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, who posited horror as an emotional response to phenomena apprehended in defiance of the rationalistic scaffolding used to make sense of things. Likewise, when the underlying logic of the film is considered, *The Tingler* presents the nature of horror to be an extreme emotive result of a subjective dislocation and perceptual alienation from the objective world. This is represented via the campy B-movie image of a rubber monster, as well as the film's preoccupation with hallucination. Additionally, the famous 'Percepto' gimmick puts the film's philosophy into affective practice. Considering *The Tingler* in this way presents a way of seeing American horror cinema as linked with existential ideas, presenting even 'low', disreputable exploitation horror as unique, alternative contemporary mediations on themes taken for granted in 'high' cultural media.

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*The Tingler* (1959a) is perhaps 1950s and 1960s horror director-producer William Castle's most famous and discussed film (Leeder 2019a; McKenna 2019; Kattelman 2019).<sup>1</sup> Fan discourses around films directed by Castle are often dominated by cult celebration, ironic reverence, and ridicule motivated by Castle's audience participation gimmicks and the 'so-bad-it's-good' qualities of his films. These qualities are also often emphasised in film studies, particularly cult readings, though there is an increasing interest in the thematic preoccupations of Castle's films. Psychoanalytic interpretations have proved to be popular in thematic readings of *The Tingler*. Mikita Brottman's paper marked a turn towards serious Castle consideration, arguing that '*The Tingler* lays bare a shared fascination with the physiology

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and the workings of the human body . . . The terror of the tingler relates to our own understanding of the ancient commonality of the human body, its failings, ruptures, and weaknesses' (Brottman 1997, 7). But their philosophical preoccupations often go overlooked, especially when considered against contemporary cultural and intellectual contexts. Given the recognition of the influence of the French film *Les Diaboliques* (*The Fiends*, Henri-Georges Clouzot 1955) on Castle's work, this is a considerable gap in Castle scholarship. *Les Diaboliques* had a series of links with contemporary existential phenomenological philosophy, associated with major thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, who both enjoyed a much-discussed presence in post-war American culture, especially youth culture (Hayward 2005). Castle was open about the influence of *Les Diaboliques* on his subsequent horror films. The first French film to be shown in drive-ins, *Les Diaboliques* was associated with both art and popular youth audiences; it was in many ways a commercial art film (Schwartz 2007, 130). *Les Diaboliques* was a major success with audiences, prompting exploitation producers like William Castle to attempt to replicate its blend of popular horror, surreal aesthetics, and philosophical sophistication. Given these contexts, it seems appropriate to read Castle's films as mediating philosophical ideas, in this case, the assumptions and preoccupations of existential phenomenological philosophy. Moreover, *The Tingler's* emphasis on fear and horror calls into question its philosophy of horror. Through textual analysis and a consideration of cultural and intellectual contexts that are mediated by the text, the present article will discuss the existential themes of *The Tingler*, focusing on how it participates within existential debates about horror and perception, proposing that *The Tingler* develops a popular alternative existentialism. Film texts mediate (sometimes conflicting) cultural trends: they produce and reproduce the world for audiences. Reality passes through the text as an active process as opposed to being passively reflected. The text mediates things existent within the world, shaping and changing their possible meanings for audiences. So, rather than merely reflecting the fully formed existential ideas of the period, in focusing on horror as a product of perception and in trying to replicate the themes of *Les Diaboliques*, *The Tingler* mediates existential ideas. Such ideas are being produced and reproduced in the text and intertexts, as well as in relation to socio-historical and reception contexts, especially through the strange, surreal language of 'bad' horror.

Part of what made *The Tingler* an alternative product was its association with low-budget exploitation cinema, which was at this point almost exclusively targeted at youth audiences and those with niche tastes. Though not as far removed from the mainstream as many cult viewers like to contend, *The Tingler's* genre and industrial contexts produced an inherent 'campiness' and low-budget strangeness that signalled its divergence from mainstream taste. Audiences had diversified in the wake of the rise of a baby boomer

generation who were less interested in stars and narrative coherence, gravitating towards products that resonated with their own anxieties and sense of being, films with which they could identify as part of a countercultural diet. Gimmickry and 'badness' are emphasised in cult discourses concerning William Castle (see Waters 2003). The 'exceptionality' of Castle's gimmicks is frequently overplayed in cult discourses which ignore a wider history of exploitation film distribution and ballyhoo, as is the 'badness' of *The Tingler*, which has led to a cult celebration that overstates the uniqueness of the film.<sup>2</sup> The rising significance of imported foreign films (which due to their foreignness were immediately collapsed into a wider art cinema) prompted producers on the margins to emphasise the surreal imagery and overt symbolism in order to have dual associations with art and trash. The strangeness and absurdity of *The Tingler*, which has led to it being called 'bad', can be seen as integral to its meaningful logic; that is, it is through such elements that the film mediates the central philosophical preoccupations of the day where the assumptions of contemporary French existential phenomenology occupied a prominent place as fashionable within American youth culture and intellectual discourse (see Fulton 1999; Cotkin 2005; Bakewell 2016). This analysis potentially offers a new way of seeing American low culture's relationship with so-called 'high culture', considering American horror cinema as thematically linked with broader contemporary philosophical ideas and presenting even 'low', disreputable exploitation horror as alternative contemporary mediations on themes that are taken for granted in high cultural media. The following sections will consider the intellectual contexts of *The Tingler*, before closely analysing the underlying philosophical logic of the text, looking specifically at the tingler monster, narrative emphasis on hallucination and gaslighting, and the Percepto gimmick.

## Intellectual and cultural contexts

*The Tingler* mediates an understanding of horror that shares the similar preoccupations of contemporary existential phenomenological philosophy, particularly questions about perception, alienation, and horror as extreme states of emotive consciousness. According to *The Tingler*, horror is a subjective reaction to moments in which reality apparently ceases to conform to rational expectations, where objective phenomena no longer align with what was revealed to the subject in conscious perception. This frames the fundamental horror of subjectivity as disharmonious with the objective world. *The Tingler* follows Dr Warren Chapin (Vincent Price), a pathologist who discovers that human fear generates a lobster-like creature that grows along the spine. Unless the 'fear tensions' are released through screaming, the creature dubbed 'the tingler' will shatter the spine, killing the host. After an autopsy on the deaf-mute Martha (Judith Evelyn), who died of fright,

a tingler gets loose. *The Tingler*'s messy, sometimes incoherent conceptual logic presents the tingler as a structure of the human physical body and emotional consciousness – rousing specifically due to fear and moments of horror.

In the work of French existential phenomenologist Jean-Paul Sartre, horror occurs in moments when the world ‘reveals itself to consciousness as magical just where we expect it to be deterministic’ (Sartre ([1946] 1962) 1985, 84). For Sartre, the world was fundamentally horrible, nauseating, and disgusting; being-in-itself was considered ‘slimy’ and ‘viscous’, with horror resulting from a ‘failure of the power of language to control reality; to keep . . . objects in their place’ – to control a world that appears irrational (Haynes-Curtis 1995, 91, 104–105; Sartre ([1943] 1957) 2003, 264). Sartre theorised his own personal experience of horror in works such as *The Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* and fictionalised it in his novel *Nausea* as the feeling of disgust when the ‘absurd’ (dis-harmonious) quality of objects is apprehended by consciousness (Sartre ([1946] 1962) 1985, ([1938] 1965) 1973). In response to horror, the body may undergo a psychosomatic change, such as screaming, fainting, or flight (Sartre ([1946] 1962) 1985, 62, 65). Emotional consciousness changes the way in which we apprehend the world, with the intent of escaping from the difficulty that faces us – such as fainting to ‘annihilate’ fearful consciousness of ‘a ferocious beast coming towards me’ (Sartre ([1946] 1962) 1985, 63, 66). Similarly, in *The Tingler*, Martha’s fear of blood produces a ‘psychosomatic’ fainting response. Sartre’s term ‘magic’ refers to when consciousness apprehends phenomena as being in defiance of what one believes to be rational determinants; the superstructures that make our world appear to the subject as rational and meaningful become ‘ephemeral and unstable’ (Sartre ([1946] 1962) 1985, 85). ‘Magic’, to the horrified consciousness, is a way of explaining this apparently irrational world apprehended in horror – the world is apprehended as a horrific, magical place.

The films which prefigured *The Tingler* harboured similar preoccupations. Castle described feeling ‘a strange sensation – a reawakening of some sort’ upon viewing Clouzot (1955) with an audience of teenagers, an experience which inspired his aim to ‘scare the pants off America’ (Castle 1976, 133–134). Like many post-war French films, *Les Diaboliques* develops motifs in Hollywood and Weimar cinema. *Les Diaboliques* draws on crime thrillers and ‘gaslight’ melodramas (such as *Gaslight* [George Cukor, 1944] and *Shadow of a Doubt* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1943]), and classic German and Hollywood Gothic horror such as the work of F. W. Murnau, Robert Wiene, and James Whale. For Susan Hayward, *Les Diaboliques* can also be seen as a ‘transgressive and transcendent film noir’ (Hayward 2005: 41–42, 60). Film noir, for the French intellectual critics and film makers who

constructed the term from ‘roman noir’ (referring to both Gothic and crime literature), encompassed these traditions, as is argued by Surrealists Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton ([1955] 2002, 25–26). According to James Naremore, for ‘critics who were influenced by existentialism, film noir was especially attractive because it depicted a world of obsessive return, dark corners, and *huis clos*’ (Naremore 2019, 1. See also, Naremore 2000, 109). French noirs like *Les Diaboliques* were used as alternative ways to mediate on pervasive philosophical questions and central anxieties in post-war France, such as the insecurity of perception and consciousness, alienation, and the meaningless arbitrariness of an increasingly chaotic world.

The connection between existentialism and film noir is well established in film studies; however, it becomes helpful to re-consider it when positioning Clouzot’s *Les Diaboliques* as an important precursor to *The Tingler*. Clouzot was a friend of Sartre’s – the two even worked together on an unmade screenplay (Hayward 2005, 111). For Hayward, it becomes ‘quite helpful to think of *Les Diaboliques* in phenomenological terms’ (Hayward 2005, 112). This is appropriate, considering the focus on the protagonist’s fractured and corrupted perception, which leads her to apprehend the world around her as being in defiance of natural, deterministic rules – a place of horror. Though not a direct work of Sartrean phenomenology, the similarities between the two suggest *Les Diaboliques* as an alternative mediation on the same symbolically central issues taken up by Sartre’s own philosophical and fictional writings. Castle was inspired by *Les Diaboliques*, and in many ways his films tackle the same philosophical concerns about perception. *The Tingler* should be situated within a broader lineage of American film, French intellectual criticism, and the subsequent French films that emerged in response, thus connecting *The Tingler* with a pervasive set of contemporary philosophical preoccupations.

Problems of perception and consciousness were also central anxieties within American intellectual and critical culture during the transition towards a consumer society in the late 1950s. According to Mark Jancovich, ‘it became increasingly common for critics of contemporary society to claim that [the unconscious was] . . . increasingly organized and controlled through the new consumer culture’ (Jancovich 1996, 231).<sup>3</sup> Such concerns were exacerbated by Vance Packard’s bestselling expose of the advertising industry, which revealed how advertising companies were in allegiance with Freudian ‘depth manipulators’ to influence the human unconscious (Packard [1956] 1963, 27). This became a broader philosophical concern with alienation, where the individual had limited control over the increasingly unstable and unpredictable reality around them – a reality defined by the entrenched capitalist system. According to American existential cultural critic William Barrett: ‘capitalism is abstract and severs man from the earth’, and resulted in the ‘desolating sense of rootlessness, vacuity,

and the lack of concrete feeling that assails modern man in his moments of anxiety', establishing a 'technical control of life' (Barrett [1958] 1962, 30). Increasingly, many American writers and intellectuals were considering themselves as mere puppets with no reliable command over their perception of the world; they were becoming alienated from their perceptual capacities, from control over their own consciousness.

Because of these central cultural anxieties and preoccupations, existential philosophy came back into fashion in late 1950s consumer society – particularly among younger adherents to sub- and countercultural ideologies (see Cotkin 2005; Bakewell 2016). Existential preoccupations and assumptions contributed to critical reading strategies and ideologies in these years. Importantly for the present article, these same audiences would have been likely to attend films such as *The Tingler* and other low-budget horror fare, which were frequently associated with imported art-films as alternative, transgressive, and subversive media. Exploitation producers like William Castle were fully aware of this and specifically designed their films to target the direction of youth thought. Existentialism may have not necessarily inspired producers, but it can certainly be argued that they targeted underlying existential appetites that already existed. Existential preoccupations formed a part of the social and cultural reality of these audiences, and the intellectual contexts of films like *The Tingler*. This indicates a larger cultural and philosophical nexus within which *The Tingler* can be placed – not as a disreputable text that existed on the peripheries of culture as an exploitation film, but as one that mediates on the same symbolically central issues as more 'reputable' texts. *The Tingler* utilises its status as a lowbrow, off-beat horror film to make an alternative mediation on such issues.

### **'The walls . . . the waaaaaalls!': LSD, fear, and perception**

*The Tingler* is messy and often disjointed, a product of its motivations as a relatively low-budget exploitation horror film that emphasises horrific spectacle and shock at the expense of narrative coherence or sense. Additionally, the special effects that contribute to a legacy of 'badness' are likewise due to budgetary considerations as opposed to artistic intention, with the knowledge of what youth were prepared to put up with (and actively celebrate) being a central reason for playing into campy badness. Because of this, *The Tingler* effectively mediates recognisably existential phenomenological preoccupations and foregrounds an alternative 'absurd' style that conveys the internal, chaotic contradictions and problems of human perception and consciousness, whilst also presenting the apparent irrational disharmony between the human subject and the objective world.

*The Tingler* has the dubious distinction of being the first American film to represent an LSD trip on-screen (Hollings 2014, 240; Jordan 2014, 243). As



an exploitation film with particular motivations, *The Tingler* flirts with LSD's transgressive appeal, only to ultimately figure it negatively as a healthy warning to young audiences. (This warning additionally served as a means to avoid potential censorship.) However, these devices can also be seen as thematically central to *The Tingler's* philosophy of horror – the idea of a failure of accurate perception and, as a result, a failure to properly apprehend or control the objective world. LSD was commercially available in America during the 1950s, seeing CIA-subsidised experimental usage in hospitals and universities, before becoming a coveted artefact of 1960s counterculture (Marks [1979] 1991, 74). LSD profoundly alters conscious perception of phenomena. According to one MK-ULTRA agent, 'Something had turned loose in me, and all I had done was shift my attitude. Reality hadn't changed, but I had' (Marks [1979] 1991, 74–75). John Marks claims that 'a speck of LSD could take a strong-willed man and turn his most basic perception into willowy shadows' (Marks [1979] 1991).

LSD and hallucinogens also occupied a culturally significant status. Before going on to be the gateway drug to an alternative level of experience for countercultural hippies, youths in revolt, and bored suburbanites, LSD was the topic of academic, literary, and philosophical interest. A mescaline trip (a similar acid) was famously described in Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* (Huxley [1954] 1994). Huxley details his altered experience in which he was able to supposedly perceive the pure being of objects in the world: 'The other world to which mescaline [sic] admitted me was not the world of visions; it existed out there, in what I could see with my eyes open' (Huxley [1954] 1994, 14–15). Sartre also experimented with large doses of mescaline, described in Simone de Beauvoir's memoirs (Beauvoir 1965; Haynes-Curtis 1995). For these philosophers, mescaline induced a horrific experience of worldly phenomena. For Huxley: 'It was inexpressibly wonderful, wonderful to the point, almost of being terrifying . . . The fear . . . was of being overwhelmed, of disintegrating under the pressure of a reality greater than a mind, accustomed to living most of the time in a cosy world of symbols, could possibly bear' (Huxley [1954] 1994, 36–39). Drawn from both de Beauvoir's recollections and Sartre's own philosophy and fiction, Carole Haynes-Curtis writes that Sartre's fixation on predatory crustaceans originated from his mescaline experience (Haynes-Curtis 1995, 91). These lobster-like crustaceans became Sartre's means in his fictional and philosophical work of representing the absurd, nameless world that appeared as 'slimy' and 'viscous' (Haynes-Curtis 1995, 105; Sartre ([1938] 1965) 1973, 20, 116, 178). Perhaps coincidentally, *The Tingler* also features a lobster-like creature that emerges because of a horrific LSD trip. Castle himself used similar terms to describe the tingler in pre-production: 'Sort of like a lobster . . . instead of claws it has long, slimy feelers' (Castle 1976, 150). This similarity is very intriguing; though most likely coincidental, it points to



a comparable means of capturing and understanding the experience of horror.

Huxley directed his friend Robb White, screenwriter of *The Tingler*, to LSD in the late 1950s; he later incorporated it into the film (Eisner 2013, 89). For Sartre and Huxley, hallucinogenic drugs granted access to the horrific, overwhelming real – being-in-itself – suggesting that LSD corrected a distorted vision. Hallucination is figured differently in White’s script, however, though the underlying preoccupation with distorted perception remains similar. LSD does not correct perception but distorts it. The world is not revealed in its essence; the characters who take LSD are alienated from the real. LSD transforms the world into something irrational, uncontrollable, and as a result, horrific; it becomes something that cannot be controlled via ordinary language and means. As in Sartre, horror is induced when the rational world collapses around the individual; horror is an extreme response to perceptual alienation from the world.

Dr Chapin believes that ‘nothing scares’ him. As a scientist, he perceives the world as ordered and rational; nothing can scare him that is not ‘real’. As indicated by his reading of a report entitled ‘FRIGHT EFFECTS INDUCED BY INJECTION OF LYSERGIC ACID LSD25 – A PRELIMINARY REPORT’, Chapin wants to use LSD to invoke true fear. For Chapin, LSD breaks down those ordered, rational barriers by altering his perception. His distorted perception replaces the real with unreal things over which he, in his mind, has no control. This is shown in his extreme terror – presented well through Price’s high-camp overacting (meaningful cinematic ‘badness’) – when he takes the LSD. Chapin’s assistant, David (Darryl Hickman), describes the experience of LSD as akin to being ‘wide awake but having nightmares’. While tripping, Chapin describes the walls of his laboratory as closing in and bemoans his failure to open a window – despite having just opened it – indicating his failure, in his mind, to properly influence the world. As David says, ‘He’s only suffering in his mind’; the world remains the same, but Chapin’s apprehension of it is radically altered. Through the trip sequence, *The Tingler* mediates fear and horror as responses to a world that defies our expectations and habitual assumptions, a world in which previously secure concepts become insecure and no longer meaningful. In distorting his perception through LSD, Chapin’s world is rendered horrific, stripped of its secure meanings and rational expectations. As Chapin’s perception becomes distorted, he fails to control the world around him. The horror that follows is a result of alienation anxiety – a disharmony between distorted subjective consciousness and the objective world that becomes no longer meaningful. ‘Reality’ is revealed as merely individual, as only that which subjective consciousness creates – subjectivity is dislocated from objective reality. Because the tingler is a monster of consciousness, it is perhaps a manifestation of this, of the horrific subjective reality created by

distorted horrified consciousness. Increasingly constricted by the monstrous tinger, Chapin is compelled to scream – an admission of rational failure and a descent into the irrational.

This logic is strongly invoked when Martha, the owner of a silent movie theatre, is implied to have been slipped LSD and scared to death. As Leeder notes, ‘it is unclear whether she is hallucinating from an injection of LSD (as we initially think) or is being driven to hysteria by Ollie (as later events confirm)’ (Leeder 2019a, 89). It is most likely a bit of both. On the present reading, considering the broader theme of hallucination (the centrality of LSD in the film) and consciousness at work in *The Tinger*, it makes sense for Martha to have been drugged. Regardless of whether or not she was drugged, she undergoes a distortion of her perception by an external force, either LSD or gaslighting (or both). Martha, who faints at the sight of blood, is a miserly character anxious about the security of her money. Chapin says: ‘Because she has no vocal cords, she can’t release her fear tensions vocally as we can, so they continue to mount until at last she can’t endure it’ – in other words, Martha cannot scream. In her trip, she is confronted by various ‘monsters’ – which really turn out to be the machinations of her husband, Ollie. Like the model skeleton which hangs in Chapin’s laboratory and seems to come alive during his acid trip, these otherwise fake creatures terrify the tripping Martha because her fear is exaggerated by distorted perception. According to Sartre, in such a state of horror, we have conferred properties upon an object in the world which ‘infinitely transcends it’, that is, we apprehend the object as beyond that which it actually is, existent in reality (Sartre ([1946] 1962) 1985, 81). Likewise, in a state of fear, Martha transforms the banal, ordinary objects around her into transgressive, supernatural things. The most significant scene occurs in the bathroom (referencing the bathroom climax in *Les Diaboliques*), when the taps spew out vivid red blood, in an otherwise black-and-white film. This is a rare moment in the film when the distorted subjectivity is screened; we see the horrifying immediacy of the bloodbath for Martha. Huxley’s description of his trip describes how a hallucinogen ‘raises all colours to a higher power and makes the percipient aware of innumerable fine shades of difference, to which, at ordinary times, he is completely blind’ – our perception of colour is made more immediate and striking (Huxley [1954] 1994, 23). But *The Tinger*, in deviating from black-and-white, does not screen ‘real’ colour – only Martha’s subjective distortion of the black-and-white diegetic world. Martha, as stated, is terrified by the more immediate sight of blood, which transgresses the ordinary black-and-white diegetic world and which sends her into ‘psychosomatic shock’. The contrast between colour and black-and-white signifies Martha’s dislocation from the world – the sense in which her distorted perception alienates her from the real, rendering impossible her perception of a secure, objective world.

Yet, aside from the blood, the objects of which Martha is afraid are not subjective manifestations; the monsters, the thrown axe, and the closing doors all exist objectively in the diegetic world. The fact that these images are evidently fake (the strings are visible) is quite appropriate, pointing to the alternative language made available by low-budget contexts. For Leeder, this puzzling sequence further distorts the boundaries between what is real and what is unreal (Leeder 2019a). This confusion and fragility (a product of the film's incoherent logic) mediates on the fragility of such a relationship – there is a clear tension between the world as viewed subjectively and objectively. *The Tingler's* horror emphasises the difficulty individuals have in adopting an objective view of the world. Even the rational scientist, Chapin, has his perception distorted. For individuals, according to the film's logic, horror results from this disharmonious tension. How can one be sure that one sees what is actually there? Or is it the result of some manipulation, some contamination of our subjective consciousness by emotions, drugs, or an external conspiracy? Is this a world of our making, as suggested with Chapin's LSD trip?

In presenting these problems, *The Tingler* situates itself within the 'gaslight melodrama' tradition that was evoked in *Les Diaboliques* – a tradition pre-occupied with perceptual alienation and psychological manipulation. Prior to *The Tingler*, Vincent Price and Judith Evelyn co-starred in *Angel Street*, Price's Broadway adaptation of Patrick Hamilton's *Gas Light* production (1938), in which an abusive husband attempts to drive his wife insane. Price played the lead role of the gaslighting husband alongside Evelyn as the manipulated wife. Evelyn adopts a similar role as Martha in *The Tingler* – a woman abused and gaslit into a mental breakdown – with the abusive husband role filled by Ollie. Ollie wants to frighten Martha to death so that he can acquire her money. For Michael Petitti, the dysfunctional marriages of Ollie and Martha, and Chapin and Isabelle (Patricia Cutts), are indicative of Castle's wider preoccupation with destabilising the institution of the American marriage and undermining central cultural concepts (Petitti 2019, 201–202). Chapin also represents a criticism of institutions. Chapin is a man of the medical and scientific profession who manipulates and controls women. We see Chapin threaten to kill his wife then make it look like she had committed suicide – all as part of his experiments to prove the existence of the tingler – and it is heavily implied in the scene following his own trip, in which he goes to visit Martha and Ollie, that Chapin slips Martha some LSD ('I'm going to give you a shot, to relax you'). To quote Chapin, 'sometimes science can be frighteningly impersonal'. Agents of professional society are framed as untrustworthy forces of control and manipulation, engaged in a conspiracy to gaslight ordinary people (especially women). This framing links *The Tingler* to broader preoccupations with threats to subjectivity, which motivated many cultural critics and dissidents in the late 1950s consumer society. Mass society and its institutions are engaged

in a plot to control the reality that appears to the individual – creating a sense of alienation where the subjective realm is manipulated and disempowered; the only reality to be known is that which is sold to the individual. Additionally, much of this can be seen as anticipating some of the poststructuralist and postmodernist discourses (both an outgrowth of and reaction to existential phenomenology), such as those of Michel Foucault on power-knowledge, where the individual subject is moulded by control of the knowable and the ‘truth’.

### **‘Don’t let it get control of you ...’: self-control and alienation**

The preoccupation with hallucination clarifies the tingler creature’s potential meanings. Like hallucination, the tingler is the result of distorted perception. Notably, both prominent tingler attacks (Chapin and Martha) are brought on by either an LSD trip or severe gaslighting. The tingler is, in a sense, a hallucination made immediate and real – a world rendered horrific because of distorted perception.

The tingler mediates the nature of horror. The tingler is a creature of conscious perception that exists in every human being, manifesting when one is afraid. The tingler objectifies human fear, which according to Sartre’s phenomenology, can induce uncontrollable bodily changes such as an upset stomach, fainting, and screaming. When Chapin uncovers the tingler and calls it an ‘ugly and dangerous thing – ugly because it’s the creation of man’s fear’, this indicates the film’s understanding of fear and horror as existing within a transformative relationship with the human body – literally turning the body monstrous. It also indicates human oneness and disconnectedness from the world. In *The Tingler*, an absurd, disharmonious tension is created between the individual (self) and the world by a tingler which is at once subjective (as a structure of consciousness) and objective (as a creature that can survive outside of consciousness). As the tingler is a structure of consciousness, it manifests because consciousness has apprehended something in the world that it grasps as horrific. The tingler is invoked by the horrific quality of phenomena. For instance, Chapin’s tingler manifests during a bad trip in which the world ceases to conform to rational expectations. Sartre considered moments of horror to seem like the world has transformed into a ‘magical’ place unbound by deterministic rules and expectations. Similarly, in *The Tingler*, in moments of horror the body is transformed into something horrific – a host for a crustaceous monster. *The Tingler* mediates this sense of distorted perception by transforming the objective world into something alien, irrational, slimy, and horrific. The objective body is made horrific by terrified consciousness, which creates a monster.

For Brottman, the terror of the tingler lies within repressed anxieties about control over the body. In her psychoanalytic reading, the tingler

signifies the perverse repulsiveness of the body, representing ‘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 ...’ (Brottman 1997, 9). Brottman hits appropriately on how the tingler relates to concerns with self-control. *The Tingler* is preoccupied with a loss of control over oneself – namely, our anxieties and fears, emotions which literally take over our bodies. The lobby jingle for theatrical screenings by ‘The Tingleers’ and Thurl Ravenscroft rather brilliantly alludes to this narrative theme:

Don’t let it get control of you,  
Own the heart and soul of you.  
Once it takes its toll of you,  
It strangles your will.

Likewise, anxiety constricts and controls the will, depriving the anxious individual of a sense of freedom and power in the world. What happens when one loses control of fear, when human fear becomes manifested as a real and immediate threat, signifies the constrictive power altered perception may hold over the individual. *The Tingler* presents a variation on this popular ‘monster from within’ theme that dominated low-budget horror in the late 1950s, this concern about the monsters within us, those created, unconsciously or consciously, by us.<sup>4</sup> The tingler is a creature of consciousness, a monster developed by subjective emotional structures – evoking anxieties, as many of these films do, of losing control of those structures. Moreover, in the context of the preoccupation with gaslighting, *The Tingler* presents fear as something that can be manipulated to control the individual.

*The Tingler* conceptualises anxiety as the dislocation, depersonalisation, and alienation of the individual from the world. Castle’s films (especially in his previous film, *House on Haunted Hill* [1959b]) were preoccupied with the feeling of being trapped with no exit in a world of horror, dislocated from conventional reality. Chapin becomes anxious when the world ceases to conform to rational and deterministic laws, while Martha is literally killed by the surrealistic sense of perception while tripping on acid and/or being gaslighted. This sense of dislocation is furthered by the tingler creature itself. Anxiety was characterised by contemporary existentialists such as Rollo May and Paul Tillich as a concern with selfhood and individuality, with the threats posed to the securities and meanings of the self (May [1950] 2015, 188–192; Tillich [1952] 2000, 32–39). In anxiety, the sufferer is threatened by a loss of connection with themselves and with reality, becoming increasingly alienated from the world. For May, anxiety contributes to the ‘dissolution of the self’:

anxiety reduces self-awareness ... the awareness of one’s self as a subject related to objects in the external world is obscured. Awareness of one’s self is simply a correlate of awareness of objects in the external world. It is precisely

this differentiation between subjectivity and objectivity which breaks down in proportion to the severity of the anxiety experienced (May [1950] 2015, 191).

Many 1950s anxieties related to broader concerns with conformity, the loss of an individual subjective sense of self within a wider society of institutions and social conventions (be it communism or capitalism), a theme popular in science-fiction and horror films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel 1956).<sup>5</sup> While *The Tingler* does not address conformity so much, it is preoccupied with this alienation as dissolution of the self and as disharmony with the world; the tingler manifests itself as a part of our body, yet not a part of it, as both an internal and external thing, both self and not-self. The boundaries between subject and object break down in the wake of the tingler as the psychic and physical entities of the individual are fractured and divided; the security of subjectivity is shattered in the loss of control of both. The scenes in which the extracted tingler gets loose in the external world reflect this anxiety about the loss of self, as the marauding independent tingler represents the loss of control and destruction of the security of both the body and the mind.

*The Tingler* also mediates on an absurd tension between individuals and the knowable objective world, the sense of alienation that occurs between humankind's need for a secure, knowable, and controllable truth versus the inability to effectively assert and master the things that strike us in the world. *The Tingler* can be considered a science-fiction film that raises questions about the knowability of the natural order of things. The tingler is framed as a scientific discovery, part of a previously unknown natural order that can be studied and understood by the scientific establishment. Conventionally, in science fiction and horror, the scientific establishment aims to master this new order, to understand and utilise (space travel or new technologies), or to destroy and repress (as in *The Thing from Another World* [Hawks and Nyby 1951]). However, the new order in *The Tingler*, while explainable in terms of the film's own scientific logic, itself is absurd because it is uncontrollable and irrational. The truth, like the tingler creature itself, is slimy, horrific, and surreal. Once the tingler is discovered and unleashed, no rational means can control or master it (fire does not hurt it, a cage cannot contain it), precisely because as a structure of fearful consciousness, the tingler is an irrational being. The only means of controlling the tingler is likewise irrational – an outburst of terror, a scream. The protagonists undergo a sense of alienation, whereby they fail to adequately master the world around them via rational means.

*The Tingler's* low-budget badness mediates this. The obvious unreality of the tingler as a prop frames the creature as a conceptualisation of anxiety and horror as forms of dislocation and alienation, indicating the sort of hidden (often unintentional) richness of the B-movie style of American horror films.

Additionally, an element of absurdism is generated through the fact that the strings manipulating the tingler are barely concealed, further revealing the theme of perception being manipulated like a puppet on a string. *The Tingler* is a disharmonious, incoherent text that blurs the lines between camp horror picture and serious reflection on the nature of perception and terror. The sense of ambiguity generated by the text's incoherent and competing stylistic form – a result of the film's mode of production – mediates the absurdity and disharmony of a world perceived in horror. The film appears to invite an ironic and comic viewing considering its clear absurdity and heavy dosage of camp. Likewise, in existential philosophy, the absurd character of the world – its horrific essence – demands an ironic stance lest these things overwhelm the individual, plunging her into nihilism. In the work of Albert Camus – popular with contemporary teens and young adults – an absurdist worldview is an ironic position that considers this disharmony and makes use of it, creating a distance between an individual meaningful life and the horrific absurdity of the world. Theories of 'black comedy' may help clarify this. Black comedy acts as a vent for our anxieties, according to Benjamin La Farge, who argues that black comedy is marked by anxieties and is to some extent ambivalent and hopeless towards the world (La Farge 2011, 294). Bruce F. Kawin agrees: 'Comedies often confront chaos or some other radical upset, and sometimes absorb it into their worlds by the conclusion. In the same way, they can integrate the monsters and disturbances of horror into a world that is and remains fundamentally comic' (Kawin 2012, 199). In being comically absurd, *The Tingler* likewise addresses the chaotic, uncertain, and unpredictable world from a comic distance – making such horrors palatable to young viewers.

### **'For the first time in motion picture history ...': Percepto!**

Before the film begins, Castle emerges from off-screen to deliver his carnival ballyhoo act, warning of the affective material of the images on screen:

I feel obligated to warn you that some of the sensations, some of the physical reactions, which the actors on the screen will feel will also be experienced for the first time in motion picture history by certain members of this audience ... These unfortunate, sensitive people will at times feel a strange tingling sensation ... . But don't be alarmed. You could protect yourself. At any time you are conscious of a tingling sensation, you may obtain immediate relief by screaming. Don't be embarrassed about opening your mouth and letting rip with all you've got, because the person in the seat right next to you will probably be screaming too. And remember this: a scream at the right time may save your life.

The gimmick of the film was appropriately dubbed 'Percepto' by associate producer Dona Holloway (Castle 1976, 167). In select theatres screening *The*



*Tingler*, seats would be wired up to an electronic buzzing device that was activated during the third act of the film. Upon activation, certain audience members would feel a buzzing sensation. As Castle advertised, the aim of *Percepto* was to put members of the audience in the picture, facilitating a more direct affective experience, or perception, of the events happening on screen. *Percepto* is more involved with the film's narrative than Castle's previous gimmicks. The gimmick commences when the tingler escapes into a silent movie theatre. The tingler crawls across the projector, breaking the films that the diegetic and real-world audiences are watching (for the latter, *The Tingler*). The diegetic barrier created by the screen collapses; the tingler gets loose in the real-world theatre. *Percepto* annihilated the distance between the events of the film and members of the audience, more directly engaging them with the preoccupations of the film. For *The Tingler*, the threat on screen becomes a threat immediately perceived by the audience. These are the 'physical reactions' and 'sensations' that Castle speaks of in his warning – the audience shares the physical experience of the 'fear tensions' induced by the tingler, followed by the desired reaction to scream (often with laughter).

To describe the experience of horror as an apprehension of the world as magical, Sartre used the famous example of when 'a grimacing face suddenly appears pressed against the outside of the window' (Sartre ([1946] 1962) 1985, 84). The face, catching one by surprise, is apprehended in a state of horror. The face is not apprehended rationally, but as something magical (supernatural), because terrified consciousness has granted it transcendent properties. The face is not a rational thing, but a magical, horrible phenomenon that is not bound by deterministic expectations. Like Sartre's example of the face at the window, the audience, through *Percepto*, does not perceive the events of the film as separated from them by being images screened onto a blank surface. Catherine Clepper argues that Castle's gimmicks 'challenged viewers to rethink the spatial, semiotic, and diegetic relationships that traditionally define filmgoing and filmmaking practices' (Clepper 2016, 55). The screen is no longer a separating barrier between the real and unreal, and the theatre is no longer a safe space or refuge. For Leeder, in *The Tingler*, 'Castle gives us an unforgettable reminder of cinema's fragility' (Leeder 2019a, 88). The film expands out into the auditorium – or, conversely, sucks the auditorium into it. Through *Percepto*, the tingler can annihilate the distance between the audience and the film, coming, as Sartre said of the grimacing face, into 'an immediate relationship with our body' – the film compels a bodily alteration in the form of screaming and laughing (Sartre ([1946] 1962) 1985, 87). Clepper agrees, claiming that 'Castle's films physically or materially *touched* his audiences' (Clepper 2016, 55).

This is almost literally the case in *The Tingler*, as some members of the audience are given direct physical experience of 'the tingler'. When the

buzzing begins, and the silhouette of the tingler crawls across the screen as though it were in the projectionist booth, Percepto drags the audience into the world of *The Tingler* by letting the tingler loose on the theatre to be directly and physically experienced. Castle's gimmicks allowed the audience to transform the innocent buzzing and distanced events on screen into an immediate or 'real' phenomenon. As *The Tingler's* theatrical poster states: 'GUARANTEED. "The Tingler will break loose in the theatre while you are in the audience"'. Even more immediate is the voice of Vincent Price (*not* Chapin), compelling the audience to scream for their lives over the loud-speaker, as if he were in the auditorium with them. The audience has learnt from the film (through Dr Warren Chapin) that only by screaming may the tingler be annihilated. When the screen goes black in the 'scream-break' sequence near the end of the film, one is encouraged by Price to do just that. Price and Castle invite the audience to participate in a collective ritual of screaming and pandemonium to vanquish the tingler. Like LSD, Percepto alters perception of the film, making the tingler 'real' – replicating the 'tingling' sensation, a bodily transformation – leading to a physical response in screaming (often with laughter). Understood phenomenologically, as Clepper believes they can be, Castle's gimmicks transcend the standard abilities of cinema and grant his audience a direct and immediate involvement with the film, which generates actual physical reactions (Clepper 2016, 79–80).

According to Brottman:

To view *The Tingler* as it was originally screened is . . . 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' (Brottman 1997, 9).

Percepto functioned as a mass ritual, primarily for children, in which they regained control over their bodies through screaming. On the present reading, the ritual function of Brottman's interpretation is maintained; however, rather than simply regaining control over the body, the act of screaming becomes an admission of failure to control perception by rational means. One must resort to irrational ritual (some may say '*magical*') means to regain control of perception, to vanquish the imaginary tingler made manifest in the theatre. Of course, no one would have taken this seriously in the slightest, but in many ways that was the point. As discussed earlier, Castle's films made light of symbolically central anxieties; *The Tingler* is unashamedly fun, self-conscious, and ironic. David J. Skal wrote that 'in a decade marked by suburban isolation and personal alienation . . . horror gimmicks provided audiences with a needed sense of contact, engagement, and recognition' (Skal 1993, 259). They addressed and mediated on pervasive anxieties in ways that were fun, communicative, and engaging. *The Tingler* allowed the audience to feel and experience its philosophical logic, which mediated on pressing,

horrific concerns immediately relevant in a broadly conformist world of stolen subjectivities and alienation. *The Tingler* offered frights, but it also presented an opportunity for control.

### 'Try not to scream ...'

It should come as no surprise that *The Tingler* ends on a note of incoherence. Chapin leaves alone after returning the tingler to Martha's corpse. Suddenly, the door and window close as if compelled by some supernatural force, and Martha rises to attack Ollie. Joe Jordan speculates that 'Martha [is] resurrected by the force of the tingler ... to exact revenge' (Jordan 2014, 234). In moving to the overtly supernatural, the film contradicts its own messy logic. However, it seems appropriate that in its final moments *The Tingler* descends into irrational and supernatural horror (something Castle previously avoided in his horror films), presenting images that defy reasonable explanation. Moreover, the ending denies the audience clarity and thus a sense of security. This can be seen as another Sartrean 'grimacing face at the window' moment in which the world appears to defy expected rational rules, and as a result the individual is left 'frozen with terror' (Sartre ([1946] 1962) 1985: 84). Ollie likewise freezes as Martha approaches him – he is literally and metaphorically trapped in a world of horror as exits disappear. If anything, this moment of utter contradiction confirms the film's preoccupation with the absurd disharmony between the subjective and objective world and with horror as a moment of dislocation from the rational world. In defying its own logic, and audience expectations, *The Tingler* ensures that one can do little more than what Ollie does in his final moments: freeze in horror.

*The Tingler* closes on broader questions about the possibility of security, reliable perception, and resistance to manipulation, pressing anxieties in late 1950s consumer society. It is here that *The Tingler* also prefigures much of the 'paranoid-psychological' horror film genre, defined by films like *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock 1960) and *Hush ... Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (Robert Aldrich 1964) which emphasised gaslighting, insecure identities, and terrifying subjectivity.<sup>6</sup> The present article suggests that *The Tingler* is not so much concerned with psychoanalytical concepts of abjection and repression as it is with existential phenomenological notions of consciousness, alienation, and absurdity. *The Tingler* problematises the security of subjectivity and the reliability of perception – it figures subjectivity as an essentially horrific thing both through its dislocation from the objective world and in the manifestation of the tingler monster.

Considering *The Tingler* along the lines presented here offers a broader reading of American low-culture's relationship with philosophy. Castle's film shows existential phenomenology and low-budget exploitation horror cinema as two ultimately similar and inter-related responses to anxieties

about perception and alienation in the post-war era. *The Tingler* functions in a very similar sense to existential phenomenology of horror because it is so preoccupied with subjectivity and individuality, as such philosophies are. As paranoid-psychological horror cinema would go on to establish, *The Tingler* proceeds from assumptions about individuality and subjectivity and situates the source of horror in relation to those assumptions, as opposed to representing horror as an external, objective threat. This philosophy is alternative because it does not merely replicate but mediates on similar preoccupations through the specific ‘language’ of low-budget exploitation horror cinema. Given that these films were marketed to a young audience that flocked to horror and avant-garde philosophies like existentialism as ways of coming to terms with or displacing their own anxieties, it could even be argued that *The Tingler* actively courts such ideas, presenting an alternative, easily digestible, and recognisable version of popular discourses.

An examination of *The Tingler* in relation to contemporary philosophical discourses can lead one to see a broader interplay between lowbrow American horror cinema and culturally central and pervasive philosophical preoccupations – in this case, those of existential phenomenology. It suggests that the interesting logic of *The Tingler* is a result of the text mediating – either consciously or accidentally – on these central fixations. *The Tingler* aligns especially well with anxieties about distorted and manipulated perception in post-war consumer culture, which not only proved significant and resonant within mainstream American critical culture, but also with the budding countercultural sensibilities of the intended youth audiences. In this respect, lowbrow American horror films of the mid-to-late 1950s are interesting as points of coalescence between cultural levels, by offering an alternative language (because of their mode of production) that mediated on fashionable and pervasive ideas in American culture. Further research could be valuable in constructing a broader, more informative intellectual history of American culture that encompasses under-discussed and often ridiculed lowbrow products like *The Tingler*.

## Notes

1. As producer, that distinction goes to *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968).
2. For distribution gimmicks, see Schaefer (1999); for the ‘Cult of Castle’, see Leeder (2019b), 10–11.
3. For contemporary literature on these issues, see the following: Mills ([1956] 1959; Mills ([1951] 1967; Packard ([1956] 1963; Macdonald (1957); Macdonald (1963); Fromm ([1949] 1975); Fromm (1955); Fromm (1961); Marcuse ([1964] 2002).
4. Such as in *The She-Creature* (Edward L. Cahn 1956), *The Werewolf* (Fred F. Sears, 1956), *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (Fowler, Jr., G. 1957), and the A-picture, *Forbidden Planet* (Fred M. Wilcox 1956).

5. See also: Riesman et al. ([1951] 2000); Mills ([1956] 1959); Mills ([1951] 1967); Whyte ([1956] 1963).
6. See Hantke (2019) for important work on this.

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