

DOCTOR SMASH'S FILM CLUB, EPISODE FOUR: TORTURE THERAPY: THE *SAW* FRANCHISE (2004-2021)



saw quotes
@jigsaw_quotes

It takes more muscles to frown than to smile, and yet at every opportunity you have refused to turn that frown upside down. The choice is yours.

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**DOCTOR SMASH'S FILM CLUB #4
TORTURE THERAPY:
THE SAW FRANCHISE (2004-2021)**
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BY Alex Adams BROADCAST 19 March 2021 URL 1

URL 2 <https://www.mixcloud.com/RepeaterRadio/dr-smashes-film-club-2/>

Hello and welcome back to Dr Smash's Film Club, the Repeater Radio show where I, Alex Adams, discuss the representation of violence in popular culture. In this episode, *Torture Therapy*, I'm going to talk about the longest-running torture-based horror franchise, the *Saw* films.

Where other films that were described as part of the early 2000s torture porn trend tended to be standalone features, or at most had one or two sequels, there was a *Saw* film every year from 2004 to 2010, a reboot *Jigsaw* was released in 2017, and the ninth film *Spiral* is due to be released this year. Movies such as *Hostel* (2005-2011), *Martyrs* (2008), *Captivity* (2007) or *The Devil's Rejects* (2005) were more often discussed as auteur pieces, or at least were discussed in relation to their big-name directors such as Rob Zombie, Pascal Laugier, or Eli Roth. In contrast, the *Saw* franchise has had a number of different writers and directors over the lifespan of the series, and is chiefly discussed in terms of its major characters, ideas, themes, and, of course, its distinctive visuals. Where the ideas of *Hostel* and *The Human Centipede* (2009-2015) burned themselves out after a sequel or two, the conceptual heart of *Saw* has proven much more durable and much richer.

There are two things I want to talk about in this episode. Firstly, and for the majority of the episode, I'll discuss the movies' system of morality, responsibility, and judgement. Secondly, I want to talk about the franchise's famous spectacularization of torture.

First of all, though, I'm going to give you a quick contextualizing explainer.

The premise of *Saw* is fairly simple. A serial killer called John Kramer captures his victims and puts them in life-threatening torture traps where they are forced to do terrible things, typically self-mutilation or murder, in order to survive the traps. Kramer acquires his nickname Jigsaw because he cuts the shape of a jigsaw piece out of the skin of each of his victims, a symbolic gesture meant to make the moral point that each of his victims has a vital piece of the human puzzle missing. That is, the movies repeatedly pose one central question in increasingly gory ways. What will it take for you to recognize the value of your life?

In terms of genre, the franchise is a synthesis of body horror and police procedural thriller. At the same time as Jigsaw's various traps form a major part of the narrative, so too does the police investigation into them, focusing mainly on the various figures who continue Jigsaw's work after his death. Jigsaw dies at the end of *Saw 3* (2006), and the following five films refocus and complicate the narrative, adding layers of retrospective detail, recontextualising flashback, and triple-agent sophistication. So the series is propelled on the one hand by an increasingly elaborate, noir-esque thriller narrative, filled with subterfuge and conspiracy, and on the other hand by the gruesome body horror set pieces for which it is perhaps better known. The series uses a great deal of intertextual references to ideas-driven high-concept thrillers such as *Mad Max* (1979) and *Se7en* (1995) and to torture horror classics such as *Hellraiser* (1987) and Edgar Allen Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1842).¹ Given its focus on games, though, perhaps its best to describe it as a little like a very complicated game of Cluedo intercut with particularly gross tasks from the Crystal Maze.

The newspapers started calling him the Jigsaw killer. Actually, technically speaking, he's not really a murderer. He never killed anyone. He finds ways for his victims to kill themselves.

Most people are so ungrateful to be alive. But not you. Not anymore.

The central organising principle of *Saw* is its repeated use of scenarios which are essentially cruel versions of 'would you rather' games. When I was a kitchen porter working quiet January lunchtime shifts with a bunch of bored chefs, we would ask one another revolting and stupid questions to pass the time, gross-out decisions like would you rather eat a solid poo or drink a liquid poo. In some ways, the questions that *Saw* asks are not so different. Would you rather cut your own eye out or have your head crushed? Would you rather starve to death in a dark room or cut your own foot off?

These visceral scenes, and the many others like them, are positioned as dark tests of their victim's humanity and their will to live. They draw on thought experiments drawn from utilitarian philosophy, like the trolley problem and the ticking bomb scenario, which are formal attempts to reckon with the moral problem of competing evils in an unjust world. Just as the trolley problem asks whether we should sacrifice one person to save the lives of many, or the ticking bomb scenario asks whether we should torture one person to save many others from certain death, the *Saw* films ask whether you would rather have your limbs ripped off or your eyes gouged out, or whether you would prefer to crush your hands or be sliced in half.

¹ Poe's short story was originally published in 1842, and was filmed in 1961, 1991, and 2009.

For me there is always something essentially ridiculous about these situations. Most of all they remind me of dumb bored boys trying to outgross each other in the middle of a quiet shift.

What gives these traps their force in *Saw*, though, is that these elaborate and deadly games are intended to demonstrate, or serve as examples of, a punitive system of morality. Jigsaw always claims that he doesn't want to kill anybody, that he would rather people survive his traps and learn from the experience of being placed in imminent mortal danger.

People should be grateful to be alive, Jigsaw thinks. He has learned the value of life from his cancer diagnosis and a botched suicide attempt, he says in *Saw 2* (2005), and this hard-won realization of the value of life itself has forced him to dedicate his life to sharing this insight with others through the medium of torture. His victims don't realize what a gift life is, he thinks, and have squandered their advantages. Jigsaw intends to teach his captives the value of their lives through the morally instructive process of torturing them to death.

In *Saw 2*, he describes his traps as a way of "testing the fabric of human nature". In *Saw 4* (2007), he wants to help people cherish their lives. *Saw 5* (2008) positions his traps as a form of rehabilitation or moral reform. *Jigsaw*, the eighth film, even shows the survival of Jigsaw's traps as a form of confessional self-help, even enlightenment, in which the victims are forced to accept responsibility for who they are as a form of self-improvement. This means that the films are characterized by quite jarring juxtapositions of extremely gory and sadistic cruelty with self-righteously sentimental moralizing.

Corey Robin, in his excellent and wide-ranging examination of conservatism *The Reactionary Mind* (2018), writes that this approach to violence as a revelation of the nature of the world has a long history in conservative philosophy and politics. Tracing this theory of violence as a form of enlightenment to Edmund Burke's writing on the sublime, Corey Robin argues that for conservatives "violence [...] is one of the experiences in life that makes us feel the most alive", that "if the self is to survive and flourish it must be aroused by an experience more vital and bracing than pleasure or enjoyment", that "pain and danger are generative experiences of the self," and finally that "the savage swing from being to nothingness makes for the most intense experience of selfhood."² From Burke, through Nietzsche, and on to Presidents Bush and Trump, Robin argues, conservative philosophers and thinkers have articulated this conception of violence as a means of galvanizing self-knowledge, as generative of a particular form of self-aware and morally virtuous subjectivity. We can add Jigsaw to this list of philosophers.

Jigsaw is a punitive patriarchal moral absolutist for whom the punishment should fit the crime. In [an interview with *Vulture*](#), Tobin Bell, the actor who plays Jigsaw, compares the serial killer character to King Lear and states that the character's motivation is "Basically, he thinks the world is going to hell in a handbasket, mainly because it used to be survival of the fittest and it's now become survival of the mediocre."³ *Saw* is organized around a conservative philosophical and political position in which violence is a way of weeding out those who deserve to live from the crowd of the unworthy. Centrally, torture in *Saw* is an effective form of moral pedagogy which

² Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*, second edition (Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 60-66.

³ Mark Graham, "*Saw* VI's Tobin Bell on Torture Porn and the Barren Frontier of the Jigsaw Killer", *Vulture* (10/22/2009): https://www.vulture.com/2009/10/tobin_bell.html

helps people realize that they are the one person who can solve their own problems through a deliberate act of will.

Interestingly, Jigsaw repeatedly claims that he is not a murderer, that he has never killed anybody, and that all he does is give people a choice, or an opportunity to live a better life. That is, *Saw* is organized around the conservative doctrine of individual choice. If Jigsaw's victims simply choose to survive, choose to save themselves, if they want it enough, then they will be able to triumph. This is a narrative literalization, of course, of a nasty conservative commonplace: if we just choose to get better, we will no longer be subject to our problems. Why don't drug users simply choose not to be addicted to drugs? Why don't people in failing marriages just work harder to love one another? Why don't criminals just get a proper job? There's an excellent satirical twitter account called Saw Quotes which pokes fun at *Saw*, and one of their tweets is particularly funny about this aspect of *Saw*. "[It takes more muscles to frown than to smile, yet at every opportunity you have refused to turn that frown upside down.](#)"⁴ I think the reason that this tweet made me laugh so much is that it actually gets to the heart of what *Saw* really says. If everyone would just live, laugh, and love, then Jigsaw would not have to put anybody in a trap.



To speak more seriously, in *Saw* the individual in the trap is responsible for and defined by the personal moral failing that Jigsaw has identified, even if they have paid for it through jail time or some other penalty, and the only way they can truly absolve themselves of their sins is to be violently converted by one of Jigsaw's malicious traps. People with problems are described as having not simply invited their difficulties but in fact having chosen them deliberately; they can only be reformed through sustained, extreme, and abject suffering. In this way, victims are shown as not only deserving of but in fact responsible for their own torture, and killing in the most gruesome and sadistic ways imaginable has a moral rationale.

Jigsaw works to realize a sort of callous, narcissistic, ultra-conservative, individualist, vigilante justice. And yet Jigsaw never works alone. By the end of *Saw 4* we know that Jigsaw had at least two major accomplices, to say nothing of the many people he forcibly involved in the execution of other people's traps. He recruits his many collaborators through torture and uses them to further realize his violent philosophical project. Jigsaw's punitive moral instruction about the value of individual responsibility is, then, simultaneously an ultra-organized, collectivized project, a kind of

⁴ @jigsaw_quotes, posted 17/1/2021. https://twitter.com/jigsaw_quotes/status/1350841694355288064

parallel criminal justice system which indicts people for moral failings and which sentences them to extraordinarily extreme punishments. This is a clip from a documentary about *Saw 2*, where the production team share their insights into Jigsaw's motives.⁵

It was eight characters in the house and we decided there needed to be eight traps where each character had their own individual trap, referencing their crime that they had basically committed against humanity, or the thing which made them not appreciate their life.

It's very much like *Saw* one where there is a morality that Jigsaw feels.

Salvation if you earn it.

And he feels that they have crossed his border of morality.

He's killing these people that don't appreciate how good they have it in life, as most people in America don't realize.

How much pain, how much blood will you spill in order to save yourself?

If they're really smart and clever and they want to live there is a way out.

He's testing us, he wants us to survive this.

By being in a situation where they have to fight for their survival, then they might appreciate their life. And that's where Jigsaw's kind of coming from.

Of course, if we look at the political and historical conditions in which these films are made, this gleeful punitivity feels fairly easy to explain. The United States is after all the biggest incarcerator in human history, with a prison system that routinely brutalizes prisoners, and in the years after 9/11 the Bush Administration instituted an international archipelago of torture dungeons as part of its global forever war. Mainstream American culture has long been saturated with carcerality and coercion, and the trend for increased extremity in post-9/11 horror has been associated with these real-world political developments by many scholars and writers.

It is not simply extreme horror, though, that exhibits this turn towards the torturous. Lots of popular cultural forms became self-consciously tougher, harder, in the wake of 9/11, from the grimdark fantasy of *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), through the multiple gritty reimaginings of previously light-hearted comic book franchises like *Batman*, and to the muscular torture-happy counterterrorism soap opera *24*. Even the James Bond team swapped out the hyper-camp Cool Britannia swashbuckling of the Pierce Brosnan era in favour of the sleeker, meaner aesthetic of the Daniel Craig movies. Horror scholar Aaron Michael Kerner observes that this period gave rise to a distinctive kind of dark hero. No longer simply anti-heroes, the central figures of many of these cultural productions are what Kerner calls 'pro(an)tagonists', figures like Jack Bauer, Jigsaw or the serial cop Dexter, who are violent murderers and torturers but who also occupy a slippery position

⁵ "Jigsaw's Game", a DVD special feature on *Saw 2*.

in their respective narratives, at once ferociously and intimidatingly lethal *and* figures of sympathetic identification.⁶

I don't have much to add here, as this materialist argument seems to me to be basically persuasive. What is particularly notable about this escalation in post-9/11 punitive ideology is that it needs to argue, as a foundational pillar of its philosophy, that the existing US justice system is too lenient. Any justice system that lets murderers back out on the streets – that doesn't serve justice once and for all with a terrible and irreversible finality – cannot be fit for purpose. According to the logic of *Saw*, the innocent can only be protected with the infliction of spectacular violence upon anyone who transgresses in even the most minor manner.

In her landmark study of gender in contemporary horror films *Men, Women and Chain Saws* (2015 [1993]), Carol J. Clover argues that the 1980s slasher genre articulates cautionary conservative narratives about the punishment in store for young people who undermine traditional family values by taking drugs and having pre-marital sex. "Postcoital death, above all when the circumstances are illicit, is a staple of the genre",⁷ she writes. Naturally, these films also titillate the audience with the vices they warn against, particularly with relation to female nudity.

Saw has a very similar moral approach, yet broader in scope and meaner in execution. It is no longer partying teenagers who get slaughtered as a punishment for fingering and spliffs – in *Saw* it is self-harmers who get encased in razor wire for attention-seeking, or welfare cheats who get burned to death for exploiting the system, or doctors who are forced to conduct amateur brain surgery because they don't get on with their spouse. In the first film, protagonist Adam's crime is that he doesn't see his family, and many of Jigsaw's other victims are drug addicts, people with mental health problems, adulterers, and petty criminals. Part of Jigsaw's plan, therefore, is less about punishing obvious sexual transgressions than it is about a wholesale enforcement of traditional conservative values. Rather than punishing naughty teenagers for their hanky-panky, Jigsaw tortures his victims into respecting an entire moral code structured around heterosexual matrimony, traditional family structures, and sobriety. Despite being represented as motivated by a restorative morality, the philosophy of Jigsaw's traps is transparently, unforgivingly cruel, underpinned by the idiotic and ignorant idea that bullying, coercion, and maintaining traditional values can be effective means of solving the complex problems associated with mental illness or interpersonal relationships.

In his *Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), David Harvey writes that "neoliberal theory conveniently holds that unemployment is always voluntary."⁸ For neoliberal economists, he writes, unemployment is solely the responsibility of the individual labourer, who if released from employment by their boss is always free to simply choose to work in another place, under different conditions, and at any time or place of their own preference.

Likewise, in true Tory style, Jigsaw's glib and anti-compassionate one-size-fits-all solution to systematic social problems is the embrace of personal responsibility. His philosophical diagnosis is that the world is a sewer full of the damned, and his solution is that the way to live a good life is

⁶ Aaron Michael Kerner, *Torture Porn in the Wake of 9/11: Horror, Exploitation, and the Cinema of Sensation* (Rutgers University Press, 2015), p. 77.

⁷ Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton University Press, 2015 [1993]), p. 33.

⁸ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 53.

for us as individuals to accept responsibility for our failings and, despite his driving insight into the total corruption of humanity and the fundamental darkness of human nature, we are expected to fully recognize how beautiful life is and how unnecessary our suffering is should we only make the choice to feel better. If his victims were only to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, Jigsaw would have no work to do.

Experience is a harsh teacher. First comes the test, second comes the lesson.

Torture in *Saw* also has a relationship with 'truth'. Torture and other extreme situations show us who we really are – they allow the truth to come out. Selfhood is born, for conservatives, of triumph over adversity, and so it is in *Saw*. When Jigsaw's test subjects endure one of his traps, they experience a radical reconfiguration of being, such that their old sinful self is destroyed and a new, virtuous, and grateful self is born of the struggle.

The serial nature of the films is also interesting in this respect. For the *Saw* films are extraordinarily faithful to their formula, to the rules of their game, to the extent that the many, many, microscopically innovative variations on the one central idea recall Adorno and Horkheimer's claim, in their classic 1944 work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that mass-produced cultural products are "like Yale locks, whose only difference can be measured in fractions of millimetres."⁹

Like other long-running horror franchises, such as *Friday the 13th* (1980-2009), *Halloween* (1978-2022) and *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984-2010), one of the presuppositions underlying *Saw* is that 'evil never dies'. Like Jason Vorhees, Michael Myers or Freddy Krueger, Jigsaw lives forever. This is more, however, than just a franchise boosting convenience. It is an ontological claim about the nature of reality, the permanence of evil and the continuous necessity of violent justice. If evil is permanent, if, that is, the world is irretrievably fallen, then human nature will always make Jigsaw's interventions necessary. The political and philosophical position articulated by the movies, if permanent, is natural and real – and is thereby given a sort of truth value.

Hello and welcome. From birth you've all been given the advantages of few others. Yet through poor moral decisions, you've used these advantages to selfishly further only yourselves at the expense of others. Well today, this singular way of thinking will be put to the test.

In my first episode of *Doctor Smash's Film Club* which was about *Hostel*, I used the debate around the work of the Marquis de Sade to think about what political work is being done by some extreme horror films. To summarize and recap, Sade's work fuses extreme pornography and indefensible philosophy, with many of his libertine characters delivering extended, furious, haranguing speeches crammed with blasphemy, misogyny, and enthusiastic justifications for rape, torture, murder, and child abuse. Sade's novels have attracted a scholarly debate which often engages the question of whether Sade really means it, and is, thereby, endorsing the scandalous things that his characters say and do, or whether he is in fact a moralist, critiquing his aristocratic contemporaries by showing the icons of the establishment as perverts wallowing in filth.

⁹ Theodor W. Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (Verso, 1997 [1944]), p. 154.

This debate can shed some light on the torture porn films. Perhaps, if Sade is criticizing power by showing authority figures as depraved, then it is possible to read *Saw* as a critique of the powerful, showing them getting what they deserve. *Saw 6* (2009) in particular could attract a reading like this, because in it the employees of Jigsaw's health insurance company who failed to authorize potentially life-saving treatment are the ones who are subjected to the torture traps. We could see this movie as an attempt to hold the powerful to account and to make an argument for socialized healthcare. But on closer examination, Jigsaw does not hold the system to account, only the individuals who work within it. He does not condemn the system, merely the people who worked within its confines. More broadly, too, the victims in *Saw* tend not to be powerful people, and more often are vulnerable people, such as addicts, sex workers, and the mentally unwell. What's more, they are shown as morally deficient sinners whose suffering is a result of their own moral failures and who deserve the horrific ends they meet.

A different reading of Sade's work is that his pornographic screeds are a particularly subtle engagement with Enlightenment philosophy. Though he had a coherent philosophical programme, Sade is perhaps most constructively understood not as a philosopher but rather as a provocateur who pushed the materialist metaphysics and rationalist principles of the eighteenth-century philosophical revolution in France to their most scandalous – yet logical – extremes, problematizing them indelibly in the process.

The Enlightenment, a philosophical moment which in many ways remains with us, was a moment in which religious, political and social certainties were critiqued as historically contingent rather than timelessly universal. This had far-reaching consequences for all aspects of life: economics, politics, power, metaphysics, and, for Sade, sexuality. Sade's distinction, philosophically speaking, is to take this line of materialist argument to its extreme, or as Sade scholar David Coward writes, Sade's "originality lies rather in pushing the ethical implications of materialism to their logical conclusion."¹⁰ By drawing out – repeatedly and explicitly – the logical end point of a universe stripped of the fallible moral guidance of Christianity, Sade shows us the nihilistic and murderous potentialities that were enabled by the intellectual, moral and political upheavals of the Enlightenment, in particular those represented by rationalism, materialism, and free-thinking. For Sade, all moral authority is man-made, and thereby illegitimate by nature. From here, it follows that nothing is wrong, not even cannibalism, murder, or sexual slavery.

Perhaps, like Sade, Jigsaw's creators are showing the perverse potentialities inherent in neoliberal reasoning. If individual choice really is the sole source of agency in the world, and if violence really is the best way to achieve self-consciousness, then doesn't it make sense for us all to torture one another into moral awareness? If it can help someone, shouldn't we torture them?

But while this is a plausible, if generous, reading of Sade, it is a ridiculous reading of *Saw*. Jigsaw is represented as cold and harsh, but ultimately he's represented as sympathetic, as right, and as vindicated by his actions. He is the protagonist, but he is not the villain, and his use of torture as rehabilitative political therapy is repeatedly shown as effective.

¹⁰ David Coward, "Introduction". In: Marquis de Sade, *The Misfortunes of Virtue and Other Early Tales* (Oxford University press, 1992), p. xxxiii. See also David Coward, "Down With Sade?", *Paragraph* 23: 1 (2000), pp. 8-9.

In *Splatter Capital* (2017), Mark Steven writes that Jigsaw’s philosophy “hinges on a libertarian commitment to personal accountability, a punitive logic of individual will against any and all adversity.” The Jigsaw murders are “the application of neoliberal ideology to a society now gutted by finance.”¹¹ Steven here positions the *Saw* films as anti-capitalist interventions, films which show how soulless and mercenary the decades of neoliberal austerity have made Western societies. But I think this is too generous to *Saw*. Rather than a critique of the extremes to which financialized capital will drive individuals, *Saw* is a naked exposition of the dominant neoliberal thinking that undergirds the contemporary capitalist organization of life.

Those who don’t appreciate life do not deserve life.

These people have no respect for the lives that they’re destroying. Once you see death up close, then you know what the value of life is.

One of the interesting things about *Saw* is, of course, its spectacular use of gory visual effects. In this final section of the episode, I want to talk briefly about the ways that this spectacularization of torture is also, perhaps counterintuitively, part of torture’s disappearance.

Jigsaw repeatedly claims not to be a murderer. In *Saw 2*, detective Matthews corrects him, saying that putting a gun to someone’s head and forcing them to pull the trigger is still murder. But Tobin Bell, the actor who portrays Jigsaw, seems convinced that Jigsaw is not a murderer or torturer either. In an interview, he claims that *Saw* shouldn’t be called torture porn not because the label is stupid but simply because there’s no torture in any of the films apart from one mock execution in *Saw 5*.

What are we to make of this? How are we to understand the sincere articulation of the position that the *Saw* films are not torture films? For as we have seen, their central spectacle elements are the extended and graphic scenes of torture, scenes in which the body is crudely and cruelly damaged and opened and destroyed in detail. But Tobin Bell doesn’t consider – or at least he didn’t at the time of the interview – the traps, the central torture element of the franchise, to be torture. What Tobin Bell is saying here is that something is not torture unless it is the use of duress to achieve an aim, like the scene in *Saw 5* in which Jigsaw coerces his captive into becoming an accomplice. What we see here is, again, the conflation of torture with useful activities, whether interrogation or coercion, which feeds into the justification of torture as a practice.

So, this concludes episode four of Doctor Smash’s Film Club. Once again, I’d like to recommend that you visit my website atadamswriting.com for more information about me and my work – and for previous episodes of Doctor Smash’s Film Club too – and if you’ve enjoyed the theme music or my musical interludes, do check out milkandmedicine.bandcamp.com. Thank you for listening, and I will see you next time!

¹¹ Mark Steven, *Splatter Capital: The Political Economy of Gore Films* (Repeater Books, 2017), p. 147.