

# Cultural Daily

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## I Re-Watched The Entire Saw Series So You Don't Have To (Not That You Would)

Katherine Q. Stone · Thursday, October 29th, 2015

What do Westley from *The Princess Bride*, Lucy from *Seventh Heaven*, Luke from *Gilmore Girls*, Danny Glover, Donnie Wahlberg, and the guy who played Robert the Bruce in *Braveheart* all have in common? They've all had starring or supporting roles in the seven-film *Saw* franchise, all but the final two installments of which are currently streaming on Netflix. The first film, created by director James Wan and screenwriter/overly earnest actor Leigh Whannell, was shot over the course of eighteen days with a budget of only \$700,000. It grossed over a hundred million dollars, became an instant cult classic within the horror genre, and jumpstarted Wan and Whannell's careers (they're the team behind *Insidious*, and Wan directed *The Conjuring* and *Furious Seven*.)

Every Halloween for the next six years, a new *Saw* film was released, each one more impossible-to-follow, overstuffed with characters, and gorier than the last. But even as the series began its slow descent into mediocrity (with *Saw 3D: The Final Chapter* scoring a generous 9% on Rotten Tomatoes) it always remained a commercial success — and I always watched.



This past weekend, after finally succumbing to a cold and fueled by a train of thought that only makes sense to the seriously ill, I decided to re-watch the entire *Saw* series in two days. Would the original be as terrifying as I'd remembered it? Does anyone actually care about the convoluted “plot” and “character development” of the series, or are we all just using that as an excuse to watch people die in horrible ways? Is *Saw*, with its reliance on death traps and dismembered body parts, a part of the Eli Roth “torture-porn” genre of horror/slasher films? And, most importantly, why do I, and enough other people for the series to reach a total gross of around \$878 million, keep watching?

It's comforting to learn that the never-ending story of the *Saw* series wasn't intentional, and that Wan and Whannell (neither of whom were involved in anything past *Saw III*) were somewhat frustrated by the sequels' over-reliance on the gore of Jigsaw's traps. In fact, they have stressed the finality of the first film, claiming that they never saw the film as having even one sequel, let alone six.

Wan and Whannell first became friends because they were the only two marginally tolerable and unpretentious students in their film program at The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Australia. The idea for *Saw* came after graduation, a combination of Wan's idea for a film with two men trapped in a room with a body, a gun, and a tape player; and Whannell's anxiety over the

potential outcome of an MRI. After Whannell finished writing the script, they selected the now-infamous “reverse beartrap” scene to shoot as a short to submit to production companies. The short also served as Whannell’s acting audition, as he played the role that would later become Shawnee Smith’s Amanda Young. Twisted Pictures was the only studio that would allow the team to maintain creative control, letting Wan direct and Whannell star as Adam, across the room from Cary Elwes as Dr. Lawrence Gordon.

The basic premise of all of the *Saw* movies is as follows: the victims of Jigsaw/John Kramer, a civil engineer/property developer moonlighting as a misunderstood serial killer, wake up to find themselves physically bound in a trap that will kill them unless they can escape before their time runs out. To help them, Jigsaw plays a series of clues that have been previously recorded on a tape. The messages also reveal that the victims are flawed in ways that keep them from fully appreciating life: they might be drug addicts, exploitative businessmen, inattentive doctors, detectives so dedicated to solving the Jigsaw murders they’ve forgotten their own families, or career women whose only real crimes seem to be not fulfilling the role of stereotypical housewife (it’s safe to say that Jigsaw is decidedly not a feminist.) If the victims can correctly interpret the clues and make bloody sacrifices to stay alive, then Jigsaw’s bizarre brand of reparative therapy will “work” and they will no longer take life for granted. Throughout the series, John Kramer, who is revealed to have both lost a child and to have been diagnosed with terminal cancer *and* an inoperable brain tumor, adopts a series of apprentices to carry on his work after his death: but they too, must pass their own tests.

I loved the first *Saw* because, unlike horror films that rely on jump-scares or ghosts crawling out of televisions, the events of *Saw*, or at least some variation on them, could conceivably happen. There are enough lunatics out there who enjoy kidnapping and torturing people over long periods of time that reading about a Jigsaw-esque killer and his bizarre brand of vigilantism doesn’t seem like a completely unfamiliar headline. That sense of reality made me, and other audience members, immediately consider what choices we would make if placed within the events of the film. Could we cut off our own feet? Find a key hidden in someone else’s stomach? Kill another person to stay alive? Even if some of the dialogue of the first film is almost adorably bad, (Take “This is the most fun I’ve had without lubricant!” or “I don’t care if you covered yourself in peanut butter and had a fifteen hooker gangbang!” as examples) watching the characters compete in a high-stakes episode of *Legends of the Hidden Temple* created the kind of slow burn, Arthur Miller-like tension that is difficult to watch but impossible to take your eyes off of.

Plus, we got to meet Billy The Puppet, the tricycle enthusiast with red-spiraled cheeks, a killer suit, and an enviable head of hair who delivers the rules of the tests to Jigsaw’s victims. Also making its inaugural appearance is the Pighead suit, the stunning ensemble comprised of the mask of a pig and a red and black floor-length coat that looks like it would have been worn by Justin Timberlake in 2001. Worn by those doing Jigsaw’s dirty work as they round up his unsuspecting victims from their homes, cars, or workplaces, the Pighead suit is second in fabulous costuming only to Jigsaw’s hooded cloak, which makes him look like he’s either about to head into the boxing ring or walk in a Rick Owens show. The film establishes other popular signatures revisited throughout the series, like ending with the words “Game Over,” employing hyper-speed still montages showing connecting events, and introducing the theme song “Hello Zepp.”



But throughout the sequels, the simplicity of the traps and the straightforward storyline are

eliminated in favor of focusing the narrative on increasingly gruesome and unrealistic traps. Watching the later installments of the *Saw* series feels like sticking with *The Office* after Steve Carell's departure. You know continuing to watch something that very obviously should have ended a long time ago will only lead to heartbreak and disappointment, yet there you are, every new season, tuning in and hoping that this time, things will be better. Spoiler alert: things get so bad that I thought the opening of *Saw 3D* was a meta-reenactment of one of Jigsaw's traps in some kind of *Saw*-themed performance art piece. It wasn't until the organs of an unfortunate victim were slung across my screen that I realized the director was actually trying to pass this off as legitimate filmmaking. The clues, too, start to sound like the motivational posters you see in either in kindergarten classrooms or career counseling offices, with quotes like "Verify Your Self-Worth Through Commitment," "Look Closer," or "Appreciate Your Life." The films work best if you immediately give up on trying to understand the complicated and unnecessary backstories of Jigsaw and the detectives on his trail and just start pulling for his victims. But still, the movies become so predictable that I found myself far more interested in the incredible realtor that was able to find Jigsaw his many spacious lofts and warehouses than how someone could escape from a haunted house filled with poison gas.

It doesn't help that Amanda, Jigsaw's protégé, sports the Kate Gosselin haircut and that the clues start to feel like an obnoxious bachelorette party scavenger hunt that you're fulfilling out of an obligation to a friend from forever ago. Besides, the writers make the fatal mistake of creating victims who nobody can muster up much sympathy for: everybody wants to see the rapist-murderer, the man who drove drunk and killed a child, the abusive husband and father, and a stand-in for Martin Shkreli die. If it's difficult to invest in the characters, you can always focus on speeding up your weight loss journey by overthinking the traps, the most disgusting of which is seen in *Saw III*. In a harrowing look at the meat industry, a man is strapped to the bottom of a butcher's vat and, one by one, dead pigs are dismembered on top of his body, with the end goal of drowning him in liquefied carcasses. It was at this point that I really began questioning my decision to continue to watch these movies. While nobody can argue that the traps aren't creative, I had to wonder, if this scene actually made it into the script, what other terrifying conversations had taken place in the writer's room? The films alternate between shots of gratuitous violence and even more unwatchable scenes depicting the thrills of police computer data entry and the assembly of three-ring binder case files. This, combined with the numerous jumps in chronology that are so complicated they make the plot of *Lost* seem plausible, the films start to feel lazy and surprisingly boring. Donnie Wahlberg's character says it best when he announces, "This is overkill."



Of course, these movies are not meant to be taken as the horror genre's answer to Sergei Eisenstein; but it's so rare to see a genuinely good horror film, like *The Ring* or the first *Saw*, that the complete idiocy of the later sequels is a real disappointment. While the first film made some interesting commentaries on vigilantism and the survival instinct (and left us with an exciting twist ending), the last few chapters of *Saw* descend into the kind of torture-porn I've never been able to stomach. For me, there's no joy in watching a characters in a horror movie meet their gruesome ends, a la *Hostel* or *The Human Centipede*. But do the clunky, under-developed backstories of the characters really distance even the first few films from the torture-porn genre, or am I, and other fans, just looking for an excuse?

Wan and Whannell even expressed initial frustration with the label, saying that they "didn't set out to make a torture movie" and that they "don't see ourselves to be a part of the scene." Still, they

admitted that while the later films, which they had very little to do with, went in a different direction than they'd originally intended, they "don't feel any sort of malice" in being labeled as a part of the torture-porn genre.

The label is a complicated, controversial one, suggesting that any level of violence, whether in a horror film or another genre, is excusable as long as it's justified by a decent plot and character development — but that "torture-porn" movies just exist to serve our disturbing desires to watch people die. So, does the fact that the characters in *Saw* are flawed or "deserving" of their punishment in some way make us more willing to watch? And even if so-called "good" characters are on the other end of an axe, does that make our apparent eagerness to watch any less uncomfortable? In 2007, the Austrian director Michael Haneke made a shot-for-shot remake of his 1997 film *Funny Games*, which depicted an idyllic family's torture and brutal murders at the hands of home invaders. To me, *Funny Games* will always be the scariest film of all time, not only because, like *Saw*, it could conceivably happen, but because it actually forced audiences to confront our obsession with violence and gore.

In his essay "[Bourgeois Nightmare](#)," the late film scholar Gilberto Perez wrote "Haneke does want to teach us a lesson...to call us to task for our complicity with villains and our enjoyment of screen violence." [Brady Corbet, who acted in the \*Funny Games\* remake, said of the films](#) in a Sundance interview: "The first version asked the question, 'Why are you watching this?' And the new film asks, 'Why are you watching this *again*?' While nobody sits through a *Saw* film to have some sort of transformative experience, it is worth considering what our attraction to such films says about us, and how these films could comment on ideas that were in the collective unconscious of audience members way before they sat down to watch the movie.

What makes the *Saw* films disturbing and different from a film like *Funny Games*, which aims to make a cultural commentary, is that, as the series progresses, the "justification" for the increasingly-complex and more violent nature of the traps is stretched too thin. New characters are introduced not because they further the plot, but because the directors and writers know that they need to deliver fresh blood in order to keep audiences entertained. What would Haneke say about people, like me, who continue to watch?

Wan offered his own explanation for the darker side of horror and slasher films in [an A.V. Club interview, saying](#), "Maybe people subconsciously vent about things they can't bear to think about, and maybe horror films do reflect that." It seems overly ambitious, or maybe outright stupid; to credit the *Saw* films and torture-porn as a whole with fulfilling our apparent need to indulge in violence onscreen so that off-screen, in our daily lives, we don't suddenly start re-enacting *The Purge*. I don't think the majority of people, myself included, have the need, or the desire, to be violent; (though Haneke would disagree) nor do I think such films in any way encourage or promote violent behavior. Still though, with seven *Saw* films and rumors of an eighth on the way, our cinematic attraction to violence is getting difficult to ignore — and as the continued mass shootings in America seem to illustrate, making a cultural impact that's worth examining.

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