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**“Oh yes. There will be blood.”: Sacrificial Power and Disability in
Saw and *Saw 2*.**

Abstract: *Saw* and *Saw 2* function as registers of cultural trauma in the post-9/11 world. The killer Jigsaw’s obsession with fostering “gratitude” in his victims through sadistic “games” mirrors cultural fears of living in a wartime culture where euphemistic language masks atrocities and individuals become “unreadable” and threatening. However, these films mitigate this profound sense of vulnerability by inviting audience belief and participation in a universe that operates according to ancient laws of sacrifice, where “sacred” violence directed against the “impure” body of a proper scapegoat—in this case, a disabled psychopath—can restore order and peace to the larger society.

[1] The horror film *Saw* begins in darkness. A lighted keychain floating in water illuminates portions of a submerged, white face that may be unconscious, or dead. The victim’s eyes suddenly open. As he thrashes about, struggling for air, we get a glimpse of a stopper and a drain: the man is drowning in a bathtub. He flings himself into a sitting position, gasping and choking. His struggles dislodge the plug, and as the water recedes, the lighted key disappears down the drain. Thus we are ushered into the world of the serial killer John Kramer (a.k.a. Jigsaw,) (Tobin Bell) a psychopath who kidnaps and tortures victims he deems “unworthy” of their lives. In each case, the victims must either escape Jigsaw’s gruesome traps within a time limit, or die horribly. These images not only introduce Jigsaw’s *modus operandi* but also crystallize strategies of uncanniness in the *Saw* oeuvre. The films continually demand the reading and re-reading of fragmentary and distorted details, like interpreting glimpses of a face underwater. The films achieve their primary psychological impact by introducing viewers to a world of paradox and uncertainty, where the true nature of people and events continually escapes us, like a key drawn inexorably down a drain.

[2] A typical analysis of these movies locates their power in the filmmakers’ ability to artfully re-present clichés from larger budgeted, more coherent horror films like *Seven* (1995) or *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Such readings ignore the special status of the *Saw* films as registers of cultural trauma in the post-9/11 world. What is most unsettling (but also potentially cathartic) about these

films is their acknowledgement of anxieties related to “unreadability”—fears intensified in a wartime culture by euphemistic, mass media rhetoric that hides or re-interprets the realities of violence.

[3] *Saw* and *Saw 2* allow audiences to work through fears of living in such an untrustworthy, possibly lethal environment through a two-pronged strategy of representation that first re-creates the threatening environment, and then localizes—which by extension diminishes—the threat of violence by tracing its origins to the obviously “disposable” body of a psychopath dying of brain cancer. Thus shifting the locus of destructive ideology to a disabled body allows viewers access to the most primitive—and therefore, according to Freud, the most uncanny—kind of catharsis available.

[4] The subtle power behind these Grand Guignol narratives has no doubt been overlooked mainly because of the films’ lurid images. These infamous scenes of mutilation would seem to be primarily responsible for the horrific emotional charge of the films, given their obvious connection to Freud’s idea that lost “organs” (140) and “severed limbs” are “highly uncanny” because of their “proximity to the castration complex” (150). And there is even more of the traditionally uncanny: the hawk-nosed, pallid doll with blood-red eyes that serves as Jigsaw’s spokesman no doubt preys on the ancient fear of whether “an apparently animate object is really alive and conversely, whether a lifeless object might not perhaps be animate” (Freud 135). Furthermore, making the wheelchair-bound Jigsaw seem at times to be omnipresent and virtually unstoppable surely provokes fears of what Freud calls an “animistic” universe, where the hateful thoughts of our enemies can be converted into power that destroys us (147).

[5] But horrific as they are, these uncanny elements are only partially responsible for the psychological power of these movies because, as noted above, they are consistently recognized by critics as clichés from the “splatter film” genre. For instance, critic Roger Ebert sounded a familiar note when he said the film’s blend of “sadistic horrors” and “merciless choices” left him feeling “toyed with,” unlike similar elements in *Silence of the Lambs*. (Ebert, October 2004). The Los Angeles Times critic Carina Chocano had a similar reaction: the film’s “undeniably grisly elements” struck her as simply part of the film’s “[indiscriminate] and [obsessive]” quoting of works by Dario Argento, David Lynch and David Fincher. (Chocano, October 2004). Their status as clichés makes them analogous to elements from the genre of fairy tales, a branch of literature that, as Freud explains, contains horrific elements that do not truly unsettle readers because of their artificiality. Like the conventions of fairy tales, the clichés of the slasher film declare to viewers that a film has “abandon[ed] the basis of reality right from the start” (Freud 156). Thus, as critic Laura Wyrick has suggested, any film that simply re-creates the killing sprees of Freddy Krueger and Jason Voorhies risks seeming comedic to a modern audience rather than terrifying (123). To see how these movies go beyond their genre conventions and become conduits for cultural anxiety in the era of global terrorism, it is necessary to look beyond the trappings of the slasher film and examine how *Saw* and *Saw 2* create distinctive narratives of *militarization*, even though the wars of the 21st century are not explicitly mentioned in any of the films.

[6] My definitions of a militarized text draw from the studies of Cynthia Enloe and Marcia Kovitz on the cultural narratives within societies at war. At the most basic level, the *Saw* films are militarized texts because their plots explore how lethal violence is legitimized and perpetuated. Marcia Kovitz notes that a clear sense of *justification* or “mandate” is vital for military philosophies and organizations: the sense of fulfilling a larger, greater purpose justifies, in turn, inevitable attempts to construct the lives and identities of individuals within the sphere of militarization.

Kovitz's general description of military philosophy works equally well to describe Jigsaw's mindset: "Militaries are mandated to perfect the techniques of lethal violence, of killing; to fulfill this mandate they must construct different kinds of lives and deaths, and they must assign them meaning" (9).

[7] Cynthia Enloe notes that in the real world, the resistance that such glorification of violence might provoke is frequently muted or obscured altogether because of the ways in which militaristic ideals become attached to concepts, organizations, objects and people that seem to have no connection to ideologies of force.¹ In *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (2000), Enloe explains this process in the chapter "How Do They Militarize a Can of Soup?":

Militarization is a step-by-step process by which a person or thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military *or comes to depend for its well-being on militaristic ideas*. The more militarization transforms an individual or a society, the more that individual or society comes to imagine military needs and militaristic presumptions to be not only valuable but also normal. (Italics mine). (3)

[8] The *Saw* films reify this blending of the "normal" and the militaristic by presenting numerous examples of common technology that serve only to convey Jigsaw's monologic, authoritarian worldview, such as the ubiquitous tape recorders that declare the unworthiness of victims and prolong their anguish with riddles, a cell phone that can receive but not transmit messages (*Saw* 2004), computer monitors that distort time and space while recording Jigsaw's "games," and an answering machine he commandeers to announce the untimely disappearance of its owner (*Saw 2*, 2005.)

[9] Jigsaw is also adept at using the kind of empty rhetorical questions and pain-concealing language that Elaine Scarry notes is inevitably found in the speech of real-life torturers (41-44). For instance, he tells his victims in *Saw 2* that his "game" is designed for their "redemption;" he dismisses the ritualistic mutilation of his victims with a jigsaw as simply a tactic to symbolize that each corpse lacked "a vital piece of the human puzzle;" and he takes refuge in semantic wordplay like a Nuremberg defendant when he declares to the character Detective Mathews (Donnie Wahlberg) that he has "never killed anyone"—which is *technically* true since he causes his victims to kill *themselves* (*Saw 2*, 2005).

[10] The films' allegories of militarization work in tandem with a semiotic field tailored for viewers in a post-9/11 environment: the films take for granted that their target audience has been conditioned to think of militarized violence as something abstract, "foreign," and physically distant, and the films consistently refuse to present violence in ways that that can be read in such comforting terms. Jigsaw, for instance, shatters audience complacency by embodying and compulsively re-creating paradoxes of "foreign-ness". Rather than being a ranting caricature of the "Middle-Eastern" terrorist, he is a soft-spoken, white male. He is marked as "American," both linguistically and physically: he survives to battle his cancer—and conduct his reign of terror—because he enjoys the unacknowledged benefits of being both educated and obviously wealthy in a capitalist society. But rather than being grateful himself for the benefits he enjoys in a Western democracy, this obsessive advocate of "gratitude" is inexplicably driven to create scenarios in which he and others are forced to "depend for [their] well being on militaristic ideas" (Enloe 3).

[11] Jigsaw reifies the militaristic impulse to “construct different kinds of lives and deaths and...assign them meaning” (Kovitz 9)—even applying these principles to his own body when he declares war on the “unworthy” after surviving a suicide attempt (*Saw 2*, 2005). A superficial sense of his mania to “construct” and control bodies is suggested through the seemingly endless number of mutilated mannequins and dolls we see in his warehouse lairs. The fullest expression of his *idée fixe* comes through the destruction of an equally large number of victims, killed or horribly maimed by his monstrous booby traps.

[12] Jigsaw’s traps deserve a moment of special attention, since they create the strongest affinities between the horrors in the film and the recognizable threat of terrorism from the real world, especially since the Iraq conflict was generally recognized by 2005 to be a war dominated by improvised killing devices. (By 2006, the *Asia Times* went so far as to say that the explosive booby trap was “The Iraq war’s defining weapon”²) (Ramachandran, February 2006). It does not matter that Jigsaw disdains the use of explosives. He exists at the center of a constellation of images and concepts that inevitably remind 21st-century audiences of terrorists and terrorism from the evening news.

[13] His lethal toys, for instance, reflect the guerrilla fighter’s penchant for using everyday objects to trap and destroy one’s enemies. *Saw 2* underscores the effectiveness of such tactics in a large-scale conflict, through scenes that look at global violence through the miniaturizing end of the telescope, so to speak, creating what Adam Lowenstein calls “allegorical” cinema (12-16). In *Saw 2*, the protagonist’s battle with Jigsaw is framed by scenes of abortive military action that transcend their small scale to reflect the essence of the nightmare in Iraq, where an overwhelming military response fails to defeat a numerically weaker opposing force. Early in the film, Detective Mathews successfully identifies the location of Jigsaw’s hideout, and a SWAT team storms the building. Jigsaw anticipates this move and renders the attack useless by converting the staircase to his lair into an enormous trap that first amputates the legs of his attackers and then electrocutes them.

[14] Equally evocative as the booby traps, Jigsaw’s workshops are strategically placed in decrepit, predominantly industrial buildings—an abandoned mannequin factory in the first film, an old steel works in the second. These sites do not merely create modern revisions of the traditional ruined abbeys and haunted houses from Gothic melodrama: they provide mirror images of rubble from modern war, cluttered and rusting re-figurations of bunkers and factories from war-torn nations that remain conveniently cable-ready to facilitate the “reality TV” fantasies of any intrepid journalist or ingenious serial killer.

[15] If we agree with Norman Holland and Frederic Jameson that “intolerable” and frightening commercial art succeeds by inevitably containing and defusing the grim fantasies it provokes (Jameson 25), then the question arises: how are such containment structures incorporated into the *Saw* films, and toward what kind of cathartic idea do they gesture? A psychic “safety vent” seems especially hard to find in the first episode, which ends on a relentlessly downbeat note. We are confronted with the absolute unreadability of Jigsaw’s world, as we discover that even the camera linking us to this universe is complicit in the killer’s games: an armed kidnapper bludgeoned to death during a fight with two of Jigsaw’s “players” is revealed to be just another victim, forced to commit atrocities to survive.

[16] The real Jigsaw seems to literally rise from the dead to confront the half-drowned victim from the opening scenes. The montage of flashbacks exposing the trick degenerates into a flurry of jump

cuts, symbolizing the way reality and trust have become unmoored, for both Jigsaw's victims and the audience. Our final view of the triumphant Jigsaw is, appropriately, from the victim's perspective: silhouetted in the entrance to the darkened room that will entomb his last player, Jigsaw declares, "Game over," and slams the door, leaving his victim screaming in darkness (*Saw* 2004).

[17] The cathartic element in these grim films comes not from the notion that the guilty will be punished, but rather from the idea that a more just and orderly world will manage to re-assert itself after a period of conflict and suffering. The plot device of Jigsaw's terminal brain cancer establishes the foundation for this idea, by allowing viewers to shift attention away from the world-altering, destructive effects of militarizing ideologies—forces which, as Enloe notes, are frequently invisible. Bringing illness into the mix creates what Frederic Jameson calls a "Utopian dimension" to the film (27), because it allows viewers to dismiss as psychotic rambling what may be Jigsaw's most acute interrogation of militaristic ideology: "Will you kill a mother and child to save yourself?" and "How much blood will you shed to stay alive?" (*Saw* 2004). The troubling implications of such questions for a wartime audience are conveniently sublimated for later consideration as the plot asks more insistently that we see the carnage here as simply the result of unchecked personal violence.

[18] This shift of focus occurs more smoothly because of Jigsaw's status as both a proponent of militarism and as a stereotypical figure of the kind that disability researcher Leonard Kriegel calls the "demonic cripple." Kriegel's study of disability stereotypes defines demonic cripples as characters who suffer catastrophic disabilities and are unable to cope with the trauma. Overwhelmed by pathological envy of the able-bodied people around them, these victims become obsessed with the idea of taking vengeance on the world, and they typically seek "poetic justice,"—attempting to harm others in ways that create injuries similar to their own (33-36). This worldview emerges most clearly in the first film, when Jigsaw declares to Detective Tapp (Danny Glover) that he is indeed "sick:" "Sick from the disease eating away at me inside. Sick of people who don't appreciate their blessings. Sick of those who scoff at the suffering of others. I'm sick of it all" (*Saw* 2004). Making this figure central to the *Saw* films brings a small measure of stability into an otherwise chaotic environment: From the perspective of able-bodied viewers, this monstrous world makes a bit more sense, because it seems only "natural" that severely disabled people might be driven insane by their handicaps. Thus, despite his destructiveness, Jigsaw becomes a paradoxically comforting figure insofar as he is a recognizable stereotype that reaffirms the viewers' capacity to "read" and understand the world around them, even when the rest of the universe seems incomprehensible.

[19] There is, however, more at work here than melodramatic stereotyping. Jigsaw's rant about "sickness," for instance, scrambles the chain of cause-and-effect between physical illness and evil ideas, and it blurs boundaries between victims and victimizers. Thus the audience is invited to see violence as a kind of mental and physical corruption that spreads from Jigsaw's body. This notion of a monstrous and contaminating body resurrects, in turn, ancient religious linkages between physical disability and evil (Fiedler 230-231; Keith 17-22) and helps to create what René Girard has called a "sacrificial crisis," which ideally provides access to an almost religious kind of cathartic experience for the audience. To understand how these older, religious concepts intersect with elements in the film, it is helpful to briefly examine Girard's theories of violence and religion.

[20] In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard declares that the fear of violence is so universal that virtually all religious laws are designed to prevent its spread: "Violence," he explains, "is the heart and secret

soul of the sacred” (32). Violence inspires this ultimate level of dread because, in Girard’s words, it is “eminently communicable,” spreading as quickly as a fire, flood or plague (30).

[21] Girard explains that violence can become at times so intense (for instance, during a war) that even the religious rituals designed to stop it fail. At such moments, sacrificial acts typically backfire, killing unintended victims. This disruption of universal order provokes, in turn, a “sacrificial crisis,” as violence begins to spread unchecked, like a disease, and distinctions between innocent and guilty victims disappear (41-46). Girard describes such a world with images that parallel the universe of the *Saw* films: “When violence is unloosed...blood appears everywhere—on the ground, underfoot, forming great pools. Its very fluidity gives form to the contagious nature of violence. Its presence proclaims murder and announces new upheavals to come” (35). According to Girard, the only salvation for a world in the grip of such chaos is to let the violence increase, until the victims of such agony reach a state of “violent unanimity” wherein a majority of people can identify a suitable scapegoat for “proper” sacrifice and agree to direct their violence against that individual (88).

[22] If we follow Freud’s theory that the most uncanny narratives are those that incorporate ancient, superstitious ideas into a modern setting (154), then Girard’s religious concepts of violence help to create a clearer outline of the cathartic narrative in the first two *Saw* films: Viewers are initially plunged into a universe that seems on the brink of collapse because a solitary individual has uncritically accepted the militaristic values of his culture and divided up the world into “grateful” people who “deserve” to live, and weaklings with no “survival instinct,” who deserve to die. The overwhelming sense of vulnerability created in such a world is mitigated, however, because the audience is allowed a greater understanding of the forces that control this realm—forces that, by extension, have the potential to stop Jigsaw’s violence.

[23] Specifically, viewers are invited to see that this apparently modern world operates under the rules of an older system based on the efficacy of sacrifice. Jigsaw affirms the power of this primordial mindset through his obsessive attempts to create moral and physical transcendence through endless blood sacrifices. But for once, the vision of the audience is superior to that of Jigsaw: because his human sacrifices fail to create the desired results, we intuitively recognize that he is an “impure” agent of sacrificial law and so his efforts to improve the world are doomed to failure. His “impurity” is made manifest through his physical disability, and through his speech. Despite his moral posturing about “gratitude” and the “worth” of his victims, Jigsaw lives off of what Girard calls the “impure” blood of violence (38), revealed through the gleeful way in which he tells Detective Mathews in *Saw 2*: “Oh yes. There will be blood.”

[24] By emphasizing the ease with which otherwise normal people can become killers *and* victims, the first two episodes of the *Saw* cycle confirm the ancient idea that violence is as “contaminating” as a disease, as well as confirming Girard’s observation that improper sacrifices breed more violence at the same time they erode distinctions between proper and improper sacrificial victims. However, in *Saw 2*, there is a ray of hope on the horizon. By this point, the audience knows the identity of the killer, and so we are allowed to do what the endless parade of victims cannot: we can experience the sense of “violent unanimity” that—based on the “rules” of this universe—may be sufficient to end the cycle of violence. We can recognize that the most suitable victim for sacrifice is Jigsaw himself, and we begin to follow the narrative in the hopes that what Girard calls “good,” restorative violence (38) may finally be dealt out to destroy this destroyer.

[25] In *Saw 2*, such hopes are not in vain. The beginning of Jigsaw's defeat is initiated by his own hubris and by a gamble on his part: to teach a "lesson" to Detective Mathews, Jigsaw must create a scenario that breaks his usual pattern of remotely controlled terror: he must confront Mathews face to face. Thus he comes literally within arm's reach of an agent of "good," curative violence. And it is ultimately the combination of retaliatory force by Mathews and Jigsaw's own disability that leads to his downfall.

[26] Unlike his slasher film counterparts Freddy Krueger or Jason Voorhies, Jigsaw is never allowed the luxury of unexplained supernatural powers that allow him to cheat death. His cancer retains its debilitating effects in all of the *Saw* films. Thus, even though Jigsaw is alive at the end of *Saw 2*, the beating he takes from Detective Mathews weakens him to such an extent that in *Saw 3*, he survives only through the constant care of his protégé Amanda and a kidnapped doctor. After *Saw 2*, there are signs that a restoration of sanity may be possible. As Jigsaw's cancer begins to triumph over his body, he gradually begins to lose control over his own "games" and the people who play them.

[27] In the third film, it is Amanda who actually captures and kills the new players in the "game;" she manages to replicate the gruesome ingenuity of Jigsaw's traps, but she breaks the "rules" by murdering for the sake of murder; thus, she is goaded into a fight by Jigsaw that ends in her death. *Saw 4* begins with Jigsaw dead on a slab in the morgue; he terrorizes his victims in absentia, with the help of a corrupt detective. Even though Jigsaw's final recording proclaims a new beginning for his terror, his last disciple lacks Amanda's quasi-religious devotion to Jigsaw and his philosophy. One is left with the feeling that this last follower is playing the "game" as much to camouflage his own corruption within the police force as to punish the "unworthy," and there is a sense that finally, Jigsaw's threats may become little more than fearsome noises from some dark and faraway place.

[28] A disturbing question lingers after Jigsaw's apparently incontrovertible death in *Saw 4*—a question applicable to all the films in the *Saw* franchise. What, specifically, is the audience being asked to take away from these scenarios of sacrificial power that point so insistently to the destruction of a disabled body as the cure for a society in the grip of chaos? Girard's discussion of disability suggests a troubling answer to the question: He notes that the disabled have been traditionally cast as perfect victims for sacrifice because "between these victims and the community a crucial social link is missing, so they can be exposed to violence without fear of reprisal. Their death does not automatically entail an act of vengeance" (13).

[29] Disability scholar Henri-Jacques Stiker confirms even more explicitly that people in modern, "civilized" societies still harbor genocidal impulses toward individuals with disabilities. In *A History of Disability*, Stiker declares that "disease, death and monstrosity certainly come together in one point: in the desire to kill. We should not hide from the fact that major disability, especially mental, generates such an urge to make it disappear that it must be called by its name" (8).

[30] These historical perspectives would seem to suggest, then, that the *Saw* films remain popular because they simplify the causes of evil in the modern world and give audiences license to vent primitive impulses against disabled people—urges that remain unacceptable in a "politically correct" society. On this point, however, I agree with John C. Lyden's interpretation of horror films that examines their communal, quasi-religious appeal for viewers. In *Film as Religion*, Lyden admits that part of the attraction behind violent films like *Silence of the Lambs* is their ability to create a controlled, "liminal" environment where audience members can assume "forbidden roles" and

indulge in violent fantasies (240). Lyden argues, however, that to conclude horror films are simply outlets for repressed sadism is too reductive.

[31] Lyden finds that horror films endure because they create a broader sense of freedom for an audience: Initially, they allow viewers to confront universal fears—namely, that evil will always exist in the world and that evil is an innate part of human nature. After confirming the fallen nature of the world, horror films go on to provide a sense of "surviving" chaos after the film ends. Thus audience members are allowed to "reflect" on their anxieties and "gain cathartic release" from them (Lyden 240).

[32] In the *Saw* films, Jigsaw's disabled body triggers this cathartic process of audience reflection by serving as a symbolic nexus for the paradoxes of impurity and "worthiness" that energize the narratives. On one level, the audience is seduced by Jigsaw's militaristic worldview once they recognize in him the specter of the demonic cripple who is unambiguously "marked" as evil and who therefore "deserves" to die. On the other hand, the films foreground the unstable, highly constructed nature of this murderous philosophy by showing how Jigsaw taints the minds of his followers *and* his victims, spreading chaos and disability indiscriminately, like a disease, among the innocent. By thus blurring the lines between victims and killers, the *Saw* films force viewers to "read" their world more carefully, and they expose the Faustian bargain behind militaristic worldviews that promise to create utopias through the endless spilling of blood.

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¹ In what is perhaps her most dramatic example of the militaristic appropriation of non-military organizations, Enloe discusses how the debate in America over banning gays from service had the unforeseen effect of reinforcing the military stereotype that only the best and most committed citizens serve in the armed forces (14-32).

² Asia Times reporter Sudha Ramachandran describes an unsettling variety of ways these lethal devices are constructed and employed through the use of everyday objects. They are "remotely detonated using readily available doorbells, cellular phones, pagers, car alarms, garage door openers, toy-car remotes and so on. They are hidden alongside roads in potholes, rubbish heaps, discarded cartons and animal carcasses." ("The Iraq War's Defining Weapon" www.atimes.com).