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## 'Time is wasting': con/sequence and s/pace in the *Saw* series

Dr. Steve Jones

*Saw IV* (Bousman, 2007) demanded too much of its audience, being too complex in terms of its uses of flashback and manipulations of time and space (see Russell 2007; Fox 2007; Ferraro 2007; Hartlaub 2007 for examples). However, such dissatisfactions neglect a number of important factors that I wish to address here. The *Saw* series has utilized an intricacy of spatial and temporal relations from the outset of the franchise, employing narrative structure and film sequence intelligently and intentionally. The original *Saw* (Wan, 2004) is founded on spatial horror – two victims being chained into the film's key set, the bathroom. This spatio-environmental horror is echoed throughout the series' imprisoning traps and rooms. This includes John and Hoffman warning Strahm that 'this room can either be your sanctuary or it can be your grave' in *Saw V* (Hackl, 2008), as well as Xavier's declaration that the entire Wilson Steel building 'is a trap' in *Saw II* (Bousman, 2005). Moreover, the viewer's conception of these environmental traps (via the film-text) is paralleled by the consistent use of CCTV monitoring by Jigsaw and his accomplices in every film. All of these traps are restricted by time as well as space (countdown timers limit the victims' options), making explicit the connection between spatial and temporal control. In *Saw II*, this interdependence is concretized by the victims' assumption that the link between them is that they have all previously served jail sentences – that is, they have all 'done time'.

I contend that the *Saw* series has been undersold in being labelled 'Torture Porn' (see Edelstein 2006 and Weitzman 2007), and is certainly more than a 'splatpack' film (a moniker that Whannell decries in his commentary accompanying *Saw III* (Bousman, 2006; see also Rowe, 2006b: 51).<sup>i</sup> Because of its spatio-temporal convolution, this series draws our attention to the ways in which Horror sequels (a much neglected field that I will continue to investigate in my forthcoming work) function more generally. Having established the premise and characters in the first film, the sequels – which are too often treated as inferior 'copies' of the original (see Berardinelli 2007; Rowe 2005: 33; Jess-Cooke 2009: 1; Lehman and Luhr 2003: 123–4) – do not need to directly orient the viewer, and instead tend to become playful in their employment of time and space. The *Saw* series is founded on writer Whannell's decree that the plot should not waste time pandering to people who have not seen the previous films.<sup>ii</sup> The sequence (currently on its fifth installment at the time of writing), makes use of its established spaces and temporal frame to rewrite and revise the material. This is not an arbitrary choice, instead adding to the narratological path (the whodunit/murder plot) as well as pushing thematic stress-points concerning morality and violence. Thus, the series, as I will demonstrate, creates an intimate relationship between form and theme.

Here I aim to unpack these correspondences, employing close reading of the films to expound the richness of time and space as it is depicted in the franchise. Answering Berardinelli's criticism that '[t]here are frequent jump cuts and occasional flash repeats of moments. It's all very showy but doesn't do much to enhance the overall experience' (Berardinelli 2007), I will begin by making a case for the necessity of spatio-temporal complexity in the films, not only because of their franchise/sequel status, but also because revision is integral to the thematic structure of the ongoing narrative. This is continued in my discussion of the central characters' motivations – particularly John's determination to create a legacy, and the will to force his 'subjects' to change. Formal disruptions de/reconstruct our understanding of the *Saw*-universe – the frequent uses of flashback, foreshadowing and the pre-empting of victims' responses are at the heart of the Jigsaw puzzle. Finally, I consider how these formal concerns lead us to question the moral agenda at play here, not in the sense of condemning John's actions (the 'moral statements' to which Bousman refers (cited in Rowe 2006b: 49)) so much as considering how the pre-destination and recording of violence interacts with, or is manifested via, the spatial and temporal disorientations on which the series is founded.

### **'Welcome to your rebirth': rewriting, revisiting, repeating**

Where the purpose of the sequel may appear to be to allow the viewer to repeat the experience of the first film (Lehman and Luhr 2003: 121; Wilkinson 2007: 10), here the function is somewhat different. The overarching text of the series is driven by reworking the original scenario. This is what has allowed the lifespan of the series to continue, despite the premise of the series being based on fighting time (much like one of the traps). John, whose homicidal philosophy motivates the continuing narrative, was established as dying from the outset; Tobin Bell's first scene took place in an oncology department, and his character expired in the third film. As John explains to Cecil in *Saw IV*, 'knowledge of the *exact date and time* of your death [...] in a *split second*' can 'shatter your world completely' (emphasis added). Elsewhere, in *Saw II*, he explains to Eric that awareness of this particular instant (the only one that truly matters) is something that 'most people have the luxury of not knowing'. John's traps aim to simulate (or if they fail, prematurely cause) this moment for the participant. The inextricability of time from the agenda of the game is manifested by the ticking clock that literally accompanies the vast majority of the traps. Yet it is through reassessment (not retraction) of previously 'known' events that John's legacy continues beyond his physical lifespan.

It is the re-writing premise that divides *Saw IV* and *Saw V*. *Saw IV* uses a temporal trick to position the film simultaneously as prequel (detailing John's transformation into a killer via flashback), and sequel (opening and closing with John's autopsy, following from *Saw III*). *Saw V* attempts a similar feat with much less success, preceding the events of *Saw*, revisiting events from all of the previous films in the franchise, as well as driving forward beyond *Saw III/IV* in order to interweave Hoffman (John's successor) into the event-sequence. Strahm's rhetorical questions (such as 'when did [Hoffman] first meet Jigsaw?') in *Saw V* are answered by flashbacks portrayed as the present, and allows for a revision of events that ties Hoffman into the series' chronology – *Saw III* previously did the same to add Amanda into the stream of events (thus, she is shown to be involved in the abduction and killing of Adam from *Saw*). *Saw V* is hindered by a backward focus and an aesthetic inconsistency surrounding the flashback sequences – sometimes sepia-toned, elsewhere with blurred edges. Much more effective is *Saw IV*'s use of undifferentiated movement between spaces and times, the chronological succession of *Saw* to *Saw III*, and its status as a sequel to con the viewer who does not know that the ensuing events are running concurrent to those of *Saw III* until it is revealed in the final moments.

Yet the reworking of time is not exclusive to the latter entries in the series. Because of the enclosed location of *Saw*, the majority of the original film's plotting occurs via flashback and visualization of exterior events that Lawrence and Adam cannot have been privy to, such as Tapp's investigation into the Jigsaw murders. Lawrence's abduction is first conceived from Lawrence's perspective, but it is later revised with different connotations, revealing that Adam was (unbeknownst to us and Lawrence) present, taking photos. Adam asserts that his 'camera doesn't lie', and while this may be true, what we realize here is that we cannot be sure that we can adequately ascertain what the images captured (by Adam's camera, or the film's) mean without being aware of the contexts in which the image is situated. Similarly, the bathroom space itself is reappraised in the sequels – being part of the mock house of *Saw II* (containing the dead bodies of Lawrence and Adam), and being the location of Eric's imprisonment in *Saw III*. Here the space is subject to review through Eric's scrambling around in the dark – our familiarity with the room is frustrated by a point-of-view shot that is aligned with Eric's disorientation.

Renegotiation is the foundation of the series, as indicated by the sequences that close each film. These are founded on the repetition of footage that we have previously seen, but with alternative nuances (based on the revelation of factors that have adjusted our context). In *Saw III*, for example, the information that Lynn is Jeff's wife and that the test is as much Amanda's as Jeff's allows us to revisit scenes and dialogue from earlier in the film that first

appeared to be aimed at Lynn as actually directed towards Amanda, such as the line 'your will is being tested: your will to keep someone alive'. Again this is where *Saw V* fails, as the context does not adjust – it simply recaps the plot without the type of twist the series is famed for. The events of *Saw IV* demonstrate that context is everything in apprehending what has occurred, revealing how little we knew about what was happening in the time frame of *Saw III* because narrative focus excludes events that appear to be extraneous (such as those of *Saw IV* and potentially those of future sequels).

These reorientation motifs are matched by thematic concerns. In *Saw III*, Jeff's game is based around a kind of personal stasis – his inability to recover after his son's death. In order to 'win' the game, Jeff must revisit aspects of his past in the present, facing his 'obsession' and desire for revenge. Thus, he has a chance to forgive Dannica (a witness who did not testify), the judge who failed to sentence the killer adequately, and Timothy, the driver himself. The central trauma point (the death of Jeff's son) is a fractional instant of time that interlinks all of these individuals, and which is re-enacted in the present of the game. Dannica, Judge Halden and Timothy all made instantaneous mistakes – not coming forward, being too lenient and accidentally knocking down a child, respectively. Jeff is made to confront and re-evaluate the ever-present memory of his son's death, John asking him to see Timothy as a 'human being' instead of a 'symbol' of that instance of change. Jeff's inability to leave the past is manifested in *Saw IV*'s repetition of the *Saw III* time frame (our powerlessness to move forward in the overarching chronology). Furthermore, our first glimpses of Jill during John's operation in *Saw III* foreshadow the flashback sequences in *Saw IV* that demarcate the foundation of their relationship depicted in *Saw IV*. Elsewhere in the series, prior mistakes interrupt the present via the troubled pasts of Jigsaw's victims – Xavier's drug dealing and Eric's unethical police-work in *Saw II*, for instance. Moreover, the investigating officers echo one another via repeated incident – Rigg, Strahm and Tapp are all advised to take leave from the force following the loss of their partners during the Jigsaw investigation. Time is clearly not linear or constant here – it necessarily moves in cycles, allowing us to juxtapose past and present in various ways, and for divergent moral purposes.

### **'The games have just begun': legacy and the past becoming the future**

From the first mention of Jigsaw, we are presented with an interruption of the past into the present – Lawrence announces that he will 'start from the beginning' in explaining who Jigsaw is. Even though it is meant to be derogatory, Smith's pun 'Saw It Be-IV' (Smith, 2007) is surprisingly apt. The present of the series is continually haunted by the past. Powell notes that this is a trait of the genre more generally, stating that '[t]ime permeates the horror film in all its aspects, as insistent pasts undermine a linear map of time' (Powell 2005: 154). However, the *Saw* series' mode of revision undertakes a serious consideration of the nature of time. Hence, Bachelard's observation (following Bergson) that 'the words *before* and *after* are to be understood as reference points and nothing more' becomes a salient point of entry into comprehending the textual aims of the franchise. He continues, 'between past and future we pursue a process of development which by virtue of its general success appears continuous' (Bachelard 2000: 67, emphasis in the original). When Amanda appears in *Saw II*, her drug addicted past is secondary to her placement within the Jigsaw schema – the fact that she has 'played before'. Indeed in *Saw III*, the presence of the 'reverse bear-trap' she survived leads to a sequence of flashbacks delineating her allegiance to John. Yet, the causality of the narrative complicates John's assertion that 'the marks on [her] arms are from another life [...] there is no going back' by allowing us to frequently move backwards through the series' events. In this sense while Amanda is asked to 'think about tomorrow' before deciding whether to shoot Lynn (an act that means Amanda, Jeff, John and Lynn will not survive the game), we have to pay as much attention to 'yesterday' if we are to apprehend what is happening.

When temporal and spatial disruptions do occur, we naturalistically attempt to decode them in a logical sequence because the film retains a realist (rather than supernatural) mode (see

Currie 1995). That is to say that the narrative employs disruptions, but maintains realism elsewhere so that we acknowledge the linearity of the real-time that underpins such formal manipulation. While it is true then that causation is 'the cement of narrative' (Carroll 1996: 289), it is somewhat problematized by the constant shifting of our perspective – that 'time in a relativistic universe is branching, not linear [...] temporal order [...] branch[es] in various directions or can be circular, returning over and over again to its point of departure' (von Wright 1968: 7). It is this pluralistic rather than rigid path that *Saw* and its sequels follow, and upon which their internal logic hinges.

Legacy is made flesh in the *Saw* series: the plot is driven by John, yet he has unambiguously expired and is physically deconstructed by the start of *Saw IV*. The Jigsaw moniker itself intimates a fracturing of body-space because the killer's *modus operandi* entails removing a Jigsaw-shaped piece from the victim's body ('a symbol' that the victim is 'missing [...] the survival instinct'). John's aim in establishing a connection of future and past is to counter the cancer that signals his inevitable demise – it is via this mechanism that body-space is anchored into the temporal concerns that drive the series. According to Amanda, John wishes to 'creat[e] a legacy [...] [to] become immortal'. As *Saw IV* reveals, even before he loses his unborn son Gideon, John's work is concerned with temporal relations. Thus, Perez notes the irony that John 'owned a company called the urban renewal group' – his ambitions are later aimed at personal rather than architectural redevelopment. Much like his previous work, this rehabilitation frequently involves 'demolition', here of body spaces. This is not only outwardly focused – John himself has undergone a process of rebirth that we witness in *Saw IV* via flashbacks of his relationship with Jill, the accident that causes her to miscarry, and his contraction of cancer and failed suicide.

This trajectory does not escape the focus on the temporal, not only because we attend the events in flashback (they are written and inalterable, unlike the trap victims' present – a point to which we will return) – but also because his journey is metaphorically embodied in the clock that persuaded him to purchase the workshop space, which denotes both his civil engineering work and (more prominently for us) his criminal activity. '300 years old, still ticking', the clock 'stood the test of time' – unlike John himself, whose body-clock has expired before we reach this point in the series. This is made clear as Jill reveals that following the miscarriage 'our *time* was over [...] he was diagnosed with cancer soon after that' (emphasis added). As John admits in his will video in *Saw V*, he could not forgive himself for 'permitt[ing] [...] encourag[ing]' Jill's 'decisions'. While his statement 'you are my heart [...] you always will be' reeks of permanence, John's role as Jigsaw is founded on change. In response to his powerlessness to affect the past choices (mistakes) that led to the miscarriage, he begins a regime of forcing others to alter attitudes and lifestyle choices he finds 'distasteful'. To demarcate the forsaking of his previous persona and his desire to create a legacy that will usurp his fragile biology, he smashes the clock, thereby attempting to conquer time.

John's future legacy (as Jigsaw) is thus inextricable from his origins. *Saw IV*'s function is partially to outline the events from which his bestowal extends, but it also works to consolidate his legacy by allowing us (and Strahm) to understand his motivations. This is echoed elsewhere in the film by John's command that Rigg must 'go back to where it all began' so that Rigg may come to understand how John sees, feels and saves (his bequeathal in action). It is also crucial to note that in both of these cases, flashbacks are linked to geographic locations – the workshop and a school, again evoking the space-time parallel. Moreover, the causal effect of the past-future chain is emphasized by dialogue; for example, Art Blank prophesizes that Rigg and Hoffman's dishonesty will 'one day, someday [...] come back to' them. Just as John's will video aims to make permanent his love for Jill (as well as linking his now posthumous role as Jigsaw to his origins as John), his other post-death recording – the tape that announces to Hoffman both at the outset and end of *Saw IV* that 'the games have just begun' – attests to the continuation or re-seeding of his intent, despite his absence. John's death should be the ultimate state of change for the sequels, a cessation. Instead, it is a continuation. This is why we only see John's first victim (Cecil) in *Saw IV*, following the revelation that Cecil caused Jill's miscarriage. Cecil's status as the seminal 'subject' is apposite here given the return to origins at the heart of *Saw IV*'s agenda.

Time is a contingent factor in all of the games in the series. In *Saw II* Jonas aims to survive by requesting that they 'take [their] time and come up with a game plan', which is supplanted by Xavier's claustrophobic panic and rash reactions. In *Saw III*, it is Jeff's indecision that means he cannot 'win' the game – he takes too long and both Dannica and Timothy die while he is deciding whether he can forgive. The opposite is true for Eric in *Saw II*, who only has to wait instead of acting with the reactionary violence we see paralleled in Xavier. The same problem characterizes Rigg's situation in *Saw IV* – he ignores John's proclamation that 'time is on your side', and hurries to beat the clock, where in this case, the objective is to let the clock-time play out. John's warning 'remember who you are saving' refers to Eric – Rigg remains confused ('what the fuck does that mean?') while we ascertain that John is evoking the similarity between Eric and Rigg's tests.

In *Saw* it is made clear that the limits of the game are not only defined by space (their confinement), but also pace – Lawrence observes that there is a 'brand new' clock in the dirty, derelict environment, understanding that 'someone wanted us to know the time'. Lawrence thus begins fighting the clock (he has until six o'clock to kill Adam), and ends bleeding to death after removing his foot – thus fighting a physiological clock. Time is signified quite literally by the emphasis on clock imagery throughout the series. Unlike John's workshop clock, all the others in the series (even if counting forward) are travelling to an end destination – time is always 'running out' or 'wasting' (as John states to his victims in *Saw III* and *IV*, respectively). Moreover, as the countdown closes for the trap victims, kinetic camera movement and rapid cutting denotes urgency and formally fractures time. It is such formal concerns to which I now turn my attention.

### **'See as I see': spatial transitions and temporal trickery**

While the games are contingent on time limits, it is also worth noting that time becomes part of a 'game' for the viewer. Powell contends that '[a]ll film images [...] inherently destabilize time by their temporal modulations across past, present and future' (Powell 2005: 156), but, as we have already seen, the *Saw* series uses further modulations across time to meet its narrative and thematic ends. This playfulness leads to unexpected disruptions and/or connections in the present moment. Most saliently, Rigg's test is contingent on a 90-minute limit, which directly parallels the running time of *Saw IV*. However, while we may have desired the 90-minute countdown to run in real-time parallel to Rigg's game, it instead begins nearly 22 minutes into the film. This is perfectly in keeping with the narrative's aims: the 90-minute countdown is out of sync with the film length, formally matching our temporal misalignment within the narrative – we do not know that we are running concurrent to *Saw III*'s time frame. Moreover, as the frequent use of flashback is intrinsic to the film's temporal design, creating a linear 90-minute narrative/form parallel would contradict its playfulness.

The time frame of *Saw* is complicated by our inability to position all of *Saw*'s events in relation to each other. In flashback, Lawrence remembers the 'last thing [he] said' to his daughter, and it is clear that it is 10:50pm (she is supposed to be asleep). When we return to the bathroom, the clock reads 1:07, but it is only then that we realize that, it being a sealed room, we have no indexical sign to suggest whether it is afternoon, or the depths of night. Moreover, just because the game is set to end specifically when the clock reaches six, it is entirely unclear whether the clock-time presented in the bathroom matches that of the exterior world. Our temporal disorientation is exacerbated by Tapp's surveillance of Lawrence's home which is not revealed to be concurrent to the present events until 'six o'clock' is reached, and the game is over.

These complications are admittedly subtle, but they should prepare us for the temporal trick that underscores Eric's game in *Saw II*. Here, Eric believes his son is in imminent jeopardy, and the transitions between CCTV footage in narrative present blurs with the action in the trap, which is depicted as present, but is later revealed to be past. Here, John taunts Eric by reiterating his question – 'where is [Dan]? That's a problem you're going to have to solve

before it's *too late*' (emphasis added). Of course, there is no 'too late' per se, despite the persistence of the countdown timer. In fact, he implies that Dan is in the vault, announcing '[y]ou'll find your son in a *safe place*' (emphasis added). Instead of being spatial, the question should be temporal – '*when* is he?' The same mistake hinders those in the house trap, as John proclaims to them 'I trust that you are all wondering where you are. I can assure you that your location is not important'. Yet location is clearly vital, if only because the victims are required to escape from the house (to avoid poisoning), and the SWAT team are led to the wrong building by the CCTV feed-transmission (even if they are also hours behind the real events). This recorded-time motif is reversed in *Saw III* where Kerry views a Jigsaw video-tape only to be confronted with live-feed footage of her watching the tape on-screen.

One of the reasons these temporal tricks work so well is because of the way we are visually oriented. Much like the transitions between CCTV and workshop in *Saw II*, the directors commonly make use of spatial movements that also shift the time frame throughout the series. Thus, in *Saw*, Wan utilizes an unbroken pan to drift down through Amanda's police interview, seamlessly descending through the ceiling of the bathroom – the two locations being separated by a number of months. Hackl uses the swinging pendulum in *Saw V* to alternate between Hoffman's and Strahm's (that is, perpetrator's and investigator's) perspectives of Seth's death (separated across time). Bousman uses the technique to transcend space and time throughout his entries in the franchise, most impressively panning across Jill's injured body in a hospital bed, via John, to Jill in police interview with Strahm (after John's death) in a single take.

This transition is coupled with a turning point that founds John's regime and ties it into temporal confusion: he relinquishes Jill's hand, throws his watch and declares 'they have to help themselves'. This cannot be achieved by allowing the victims more time; as John avers to Cecil – 'I can't give you time, no one can' (though Lynn is required to prolong John's life in *Saw III* to prevent ending her own). Instead he rehabilitates by threatening to take time from the victims' lives, requiring the 'subjects' to rescue themselves from the peril under which he places them. When John also smashes the clock in *Saw IV* then, it signifies an unhinging of space and time in the series – this founding moment only enters the narrative present mid-series, despite occurring prior to the events of *Saw*. It is most apposite that John pronounces 'things are not sequential' here, especially as *Saw IV* opens and closes with his autopsy, delineating that the beginning equals the end, but the cessation is also the same as the outset.

Despite these games, the series' greatest illusion is maintaining an overall temporal continuity on which to base these other tricks. The linear path is established via Amanda and Dan finding Adam and Lawrence's dead bodies in the bathroom of *Saw II*; *Saw III* beginning moments after the cessation of *Saw II* (that is, with Eric trapped in the bathroom); and Rigg's discovery of Kerry's body in *Saw IV*. This drive builds to the aforementioned deceit that despite apparent forward motion, the events of *Saw III* and *IV* run concurrently. Again, the dialogue is our clue here, Jill announcing that 'John's life defies chronology, linear description', while Hoffman suggests 'so, why don't we start at the end and work our way back?', which is exactly what the narrative does on a wider scale. As the adage has it, 'the games have only just begun', but we cannot be sure where the start-point is.

### **'There will be blood': the games and their repercussions**

The key motives of John's games are simple – he states that '67.5 per cent of criminals' are repeat offenders; his methodology is one of 'redemption and rehabilitation'. The games ask the participants to make 'a choice' – giving them a chance to start again, an opportunity for change. This is matched by the continuity of the series, which implies that re-writing the past (for example, Amanda then Hoffman's integration into past events) is more than possible – it is integral to the narrative motivation. As we have seen, the game-premise implicates space and time, so while John states 'your life has just begun' this may indicate a more literal,

temporal 'rebirth' than we might have anticipated. Here then, we may begin to delineate how the formal space/time disruptions mirror the content, or the textual aims.

This set-up poses numerous problems (as we will encounter throughout this section), the first of which is the difficulty of revising the overarching storyline. Parmenides theorized that 'what is, is *one and continuous*, all together and all at once. A further implication of this deduction is that what is, is now, and has no past or future'. While this logic led Parmenides to 'reject the reality of time' (Durie 2000: 3, emphasis in the original), his approach may be sympathetically applied to cinematic narratives, because films have (de)finite beginnings and endings, unlike Time itself. As Pearson observes, '[o]ur natural or instinctive bent is always to construe this indetermination in terms of a *completion* of pre-existent possibilities' (Pearson 2000: 154, emphasis in the original). Paradoxically, sequels and remakes proffer that the original film world is renegotiable, cyclic, continuous and paralleled, contravening the will of the original narrative's apparent closure, or each sequel's discernible conclusions. Here we may wish to remove 'how' from the tag-line accompanying *Saw V* that boasts 'You won't believe how it ends'.

Where renegotiation may appear to offer us the potential for changing perspectives by undermining what we previously thought of as concrete, the implication of its re-writing suggests that it has been *twice* inscribed from our outlook. For example, during *Saw III*, it appears that Amanda has been verified as John's successor. However, as is revealed in *Saw V*, that perspective is recast so that we see Hoffman as the true heir, and present without Amanda's explicit knowledge. This is not a retraction of the past so much as an acknowledgement that what we considered factual was always-already underpinned by a second tier of events to which we were not privy, another part of the plan that was already in motion. Moreover, victims from the previous films interrupt the flashbacks of *Saw IV*, permeating the narrative logic, and adding to the sense of predestination – that they are 'doomed'.

Jacques' commentary on Faulkner is worth taking note of in this sense. He states that it is the nature of time that

past and present flow back and forth into each other, all seemingly contemporaneous, so that the present chronology takes on a sense of predestined future [...] everything seems ominously fated -- the future being tied to the accumulating active past. (Jacques 1982: 6)

Perhaps we should expect this movement of Horror in particular. As Telotte proclaims, '[n]ormally, an action is presented and then commented upon by reaction shots [...] The horror film, however, tends to reverse the process [...] upset[ting] our ordinary cause-effect orientation' (Telotte 2004: 24). One question worth asking in the context of *Saw* is whether we can adequately measure whether one has 'won' or 'lost' their game since causal chains are disrupted by divergent chronologies, and are undermined by successive events.

Indeed, in the cases of Seth (trapped by Hoffman), Troy and Kerry (trapped by Amanda) there is no prospect of escape (and therefore rehabilitation). While John does not condone their actions, since the path is so intricately planned, we need to examine John's regime more closely to ascertain whether it really does offer possibilities for change. In John's first trap, Cecil survives, but does not learn and has to be disposed of. Adam is never really given a game to play – he is a pawn in Lawrence's game (Adam's role is to be killed before six o'clock). Mike appears to be little more than a means of gaining Eric's attention. Similarly, those trapped in the house in *Saw II* are arguably more pawns in Eric's game than they are meant to survive, while in *Saw III* Lynn is central to the Jeff/Amanda/John triangle, but is not destined for transformation as such. Timothy, Judge Halden and Dannica are set up not to survive, but to facilitate Jeff's learning curve. Trevor is similarly textual fodder in the opening of *Saw IV*, while Art is then made to play another game, supervising Hoffman and Matthews, and is killed in the process. In this sense, Art (the survivor) is no different than Eric (who failed his test), and as Strahm realizes in *Saw V*, the finale in which both are killed was designed



that way – only Hoffman was meant to survive. Smith announces that by *Saw IV* '[t]he moral element has gotten pretty fuzzy; Rigg's only character flaw is that he's "obsessed" with saving victims' (Smith 2007). While critics may complain about audiences enjoying prolonged torture (see, for instance, Berardinelli 2007 and Alexander 2007: 39), it is this expendability of 'bit-part' characters that I find morally problematic.

If the aim of the game is to recuperate, the fact that Amanda has to be re-tested in *Saw III* suggests that the possibility of change is just an illusion – that people are not modified and that John's social experiment is flawed. If *this* is the case, the defect is to continue via Hoffman after John's death. Choice then is problematized by the victim's static nature. Moreover, he does not give the subjects much of an option – John's regime is 'be what I say or die', and there is little justification offered as to why his stance is correct (and much that suggests he is wrong). Eric's game hinges on this very problem. Because of the temporal illusion of *Saw II*, Eric believes he has the opportunity to affect change in his son's circumstances, but does not see that the game is asking him to shift his perspective (that is, to change himself). Rigg fails his game for the same reason – like Amanda, neither man changes. Jeff may declare that he forgives Timothy (however late he is in doing so), but John's artificial confrontation (under duress) problematizes the nature of forgiveness, which ought to be founded on free will (see Weaver 2001: 77, and Vetlesen 2005: 276).<sup>iii</sup> Moreover, Rigg is asked to play a game of saving others (supposedly as Jigsaw does) by refusing to interfere. Rigg's nature is to rescue (and thus prolong) other people's lives. In asking him to change (to hand them 'the tools' of their 'salvation') the opposite is implied: that he is to shorten or endanger lives as John does. While the films use temporality as an inextricable element of the form and game structures, the characters refuse these pressures by not altering – change, it is crucial to observe, is our marker of time's passage (Jacques 1982: 41).

Even more dubious is John's ability to remain one step ahead of both his victims, and the viewer is just as ethically dubious. John's intricate planning parallels (and predicts) his victims' unchanging world-view. As Lawrence puts so appositely, 'every possible *angle* has been *pre-thought out*' – as emphasis added makes clear, space and time are implicated in these concerns. Instructions for the 'subjects' are recorded and therefore inflexible. This habit of pre-recording is raised by Hoffman, who queries 'you're assuming this'll play out the way you want it'. John's reply may imply the potential for change ('I assume nothing. I anticipate the possibilities') but is hardly optimistic: 'If you're good at anticipating the human mind, it leaves nothing to chance'. Thus, John's games are founded not on rehabilitation per se, but on punishing people for not transforming. If forced, there is no hope for true redemption, just survival and continuation. Pre-recording and allowing for replay of the 'rules' perhaps even foresees the need for 'subjects' to replay the game.

Despite the necessity of subjective decoding, recordings lend an air of exteriority and absolute knowledge to the proceedings (which is arguably personified by Jigsaw himself, as we shall see). The empirical nature of the CCTV footage and photographic motifs problematize Poincaré's assurance that '[s]o long as we do not go outside the domain of human consciousness, the notion of time is relatively clear' (Poincaré 2000: 25). Because the narrative relies on shifts between levels of assumed knowledge in order to undermine our perspective, we can only 'know' what is revealed to us. Furthermore, the emphasis on photographs and video throughout the series (recorded moments of time) underscores the permanence that both the games and the revisionism of the series seek to undermine. Photographs are thematically determined as signs of memory – hinting towards the legacy that will succeed John (however flawed). As Alia (2004: 102) contends, 'photographs kill their subjects by freezing them in time', and the death of the incident reflects John's inevitable demise, as well as those of the failed participants. These thematic concerns are indicated by the manner in which deceased victims are depicted as static (ceased) – they are formally rendered as crime-scene photographs both via visual flashes and camera sound effects. Importantly, this aesthetic habit positions us on side with the police perspective, which invariably frames John as a 'murderer', despite the underlying corruption that Hoffman designates (not least since he has been part of John's plan 'from the start').

Balancing this is the potential of chance that *does* affect the rigidity of John's project. While John seems to be able to pre-figure the actions of his victims, it is an accident that causes Jill's miscarriage, overturning how 'carefully planned' the pregnancy was in alignment with the 'Chinese zodiac'. He contracted cancer by chance and survived suicide (his choice) by fluke. These are the factors that shape John's existence, just as the accidental death of Jeff's son has ramifications for all of those involved in *Saw III's* game. Despite the assuredness of his anticipation, John admits that 'there's no accounting' for the fact that some 'steal, don't get caught, live the good life', while 'others lie, cheat and get elected'. Chance is implicated in the overarching shape of the narrative, even if we are distracted by the violence of John's inflexible games.

This is manifested via the achronology of the narrative – because sequence is frequently disturbed, cause and effect cannot be readily paired. John's 'method' is based on his assertion 'first comes the test. Second comes the lesson', but because sequence is unstable, the series offers its characters little opportunity to become part of John's linear schema. For instance, in *Saw III* Eric continues to enact violence (here unto Amanda) to find his son – because he did not discover Dan was being held in the safe, he did not gain enough contextual knowledge to learn his lesson (this is revealed to *us* in the climax of *Saw II*). John's move from 'urban redevelopment' to human renovation fails because buildings are concrete and can be amended, while people move in cycles (and so do not ultimately change). Thus, Amanda adjusts, only to revert to her original outlook (echoed via the focus on origins in *Saw IV*). John's system is paradoxical inasmuch as his lesson for Rigg is fundamentally based on chance. Rigg is meant to learn to save a life by not interfering with fate. Here John's plea to Amanda that closes *Saw III* takes on different connotations as it is repeated in *Saw IV* – 'think about tomorrow'. Tomorrow is the unknown – it is whatever lies behind the door for Rigg, even if John has coordinated what is present there (and indeed pre-destined that opening the door to the unknown will lead Strahm to 'take the life of an innocent man' (Jeff)).

More than John's origins are revealed in *Saw IV*. As he asserts, 'Time's an illusion [...] Good doesn't lead to good nor bad to bad'. This is the manifesto of the series: because its events defy chronology, moral consequence cannot function in a straightforward manner. The films' lack of cohesive linearity defies the causal logic Poincaré relies on – 'when two facts appear to us bound by a constant relation, how do we recognize which is the cause and which the effect? We assume that the anterior fact, the antecedent, is the cause of the other, of the consequent. It is then by time that we define cause' (Poincaré 2000: 31). It is simultaneous movement and stasis, beginning yet ending, where the past and future are both pre-destined yet embody a state of potential change that proves central to the *Saw* series' aesthetic and narrative design, and provides the franchise with its complex moral structure.

#### **'You must meet death in order to be reborn'<sup>iv</sup>: a conclusion**

The moral problems posed within and by the *Saw* series are manifested as the temporal and spatial violence undergone by the rolling narrative, which is further duplicated by the physical violence of John's traps (that drive the narrative). Furthermore, the emotive frenzied camerawork that designates the victim's panic signifies a sense of formal temporal resistance that is inextricable from John's regime.

The *Saw* franchise rotates upon a form of retribution that incarcerates (and is inescapable). The victims discover that they cannot run from their actions and past decisions. In *Saw V*, when Mallick declares that 'nobody knows' about the shared crime that inspires their entrapment, Brit corrects, 'somebody does', pointing to one of John's surveillance cameras. While Whannell 'dismisses the notion that he wrote any of the *Saw* films as a reflection of today's paranoid, terrorism-plagued times' (Rowe 2006a: 34), John nevertheless embodies just that – he is the 'somebody' that will observe and force everyone to atone for their wrongdoings. This is consolidated by the emphasis placed on surveillance cameras throughout the series, and of crimes being made permanent by means of recording (such as

Ivan's hoarding of videos and photos of his rape victims). Most frequently though, it is John's victims that we perceive via a crime-scene photo aesthetic, making the aftermath of his designs concrete.

Violence is dwelt upon during the trap sequences because they so regularly punctuate the narrative (acting as set-pieces) and drive the motions of the plot, even if the portrayal of these moments consistently use rapid editing to fragment space and time. The consequences are also dwelt upon via the crime-scene photo aesthetic, associating police investigation with John's own regime. Both are moral crusades, artificially imposed, and this alignment is made clear by Hoffman's designation as John's successor, having been (unbeknownst to us) making use of the legal system all along to enact John's personal brand of justice. This is only plausible because Hoffman himself employed the Jigsaw modus operandi to murder Seth (the legal system having failed to adequately punish Seth in Hoffman's view) prior to meeting John. The connection between the two moral systems is further solidified in the autopsy that opens and closes *Saw IV* – John using the post-mortem (part of the criminal investigation) to pass on instructions to Hoffman, thus advancing their murderous conspiracy. Here the crime-scene aesthetic is played out in full as the autopsy deconstructs John's body in graphic detail. Body-space is thus reconstructed in such a way that it is centrally tied into the overarching temporal disorientation.

Even if the narrative structure depends on reorganization, appearing to signify that meaning is not fixed, the recording of violence is our stable point of orientation. This is why parts *I*, *III* and *V* open directly with people disoriented in traps (parts *II* and *IV* offer us the same in their second scenes), meaning that we as viewers are met with the same incapacity to position ourselves. Violence is therefore equated with our inability to allocate meaning. In *Saw IV*'s first trap, this is made explicit as the two victims cannot communicate – Trevor's eyes are sewn shut while Art's mouth seal means he is not able to coordinate their escape, having to murder Trevor to survive. Violence is thus inextricable from the franchise's establishment and problematization of space and time, in turn asking us to re-examine the moral agenda underpinning that violence.

The puzzle motif is apt inasmuch as we have to piece together the whole picture via the information we receive from the individual chapters of the franchise. The answers and people involved are not always what they at first appear to be, so part of the game is working out what people are (as well as when and where they are). The title – *Saw* – is apposite to imply the violence with which the pieces are torn asunder (as well as the resistance to reorganization we face throughout). Ultimately though, as the past tense of 'see', the title hints towards the series' request to at every step recombine, reconsider and question what we think we *Saw*.

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i Leigh Whannel, *Saw III: Director's Cut DVD commentary*, 2008 Lion's Gate release.

ii Leigh Whannel, *Saw III: Director's Cut DVD commentary*, 2008 Lion's Gate release.

iii I will leave it to another critic to unpack the moral dilemma posed by Jigsaw's regime - suffice it to say that I am interested in how the moral dilemma (for which I offer no solution) is manifested formally.

iv As an aside, this line almost directly parallels Bachelard's assertion that 'while time can doubtless be reborn, it must first die' (Bachelard 2000: 64).