

Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Jones, Steve (2013) Twisted Pictures: morality, nihilism and symbolic suicide in the Saw series. In: To See the Saw Movies: Essays on Torture Porn and Post-9/11 Horror. McFarland, Jefferson, NC, pp. 105-122. ISBN 9781476603803, 9780786470891

Published by: McFarland

URL: <https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/to-see-the-saw-...>
<<https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/to-see-the-saw-movies/>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:
<https://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/13605/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

"Twisted Pictures: Morality, Nihilism and Symbolic Suicide in the *Saw* Series"

Steve Jones

Although numerous critics have complained that *Saw* is ethically confused,¹ little attention has actually been paid to how morality manifests in the series' rolling narrative. Rather than seeking to understand the films by exploring them in detail, critics have accused *Saw* of being potentially corrupting, making a leap in logic between the overt preaching of Jigsaw – *Saw*'s lead protagonist-cum-killer – and the films', filmmakers' or audience's moral intentions. This chapter seeks to redress that imbalance by examining Jigsaw's moral agenda in depth. To get to grips with *Saw*'s morality, I employ a theoretical model that has resurged in recent philosophy: Nietzschean nihilism (see Diken, 2009; Taskale, 2010; Pauley, 2011, for instance). This chapter is shaped by three interlinked nihilist paradigms, two found within Nietzsche's "European Nihilism" (*The Will to Power* (1967: 3 and 11)),² and a third related form coined by Hans Enzensberger (2005). I will apply each to the *Saw* series, testing whether Jigsaw is a Nietzschean passive nihilist, a Nietzschean radical nihilist, or an Enzensbergerian radical loser. My aim is not to categorise Jigsaw, but to better comprehend his moral mission. This is vital if we are to understand *Saw*, since Jigsaw's morality drives the series.

Nihilism illuminates how coherent Jigsaw's project is, and allows us to better grasp what critics have (vaguely and unspecifically) hinted at: that Jigsaw is a monster who reflects a problem with contemporary ethical attitudes. Jigsaw's commitment to his ideals – which he upholds by killing – contrasts starkly with the apathy he sees around him. In that sense, Jigsaw's genocidal campaign has been envisioned as uncannily mirroring the off-screen world contextualising the *Saw* franchise, which is both post-political (relativistic, passive) and haunted by the looming spectre of fundamentalist terrorism.³ Rather than literally reading Jigsaw as a terrorist (or as an allegorical Dick Cheney, as Kellner (2010: 6-8) does), I am more interested in the broader philosophical-political issues that undergird such a comparison. *Saw* does not need the War on Terror to make the series interesting: that is, *Saw* is not as "of the moment" as allegorical readings risk implying. The series articulates moral concerns that Nietzsche raised in 1887. Those moral issues may have become particularly urgent in the first decade of the 21st century, yet their significance is broader than critical discussion has yet accounted for.

When approached via nihilism, it becomes apparent that although Jigsaw's dialogue is hypocritical, the series' morality is not "confused" as its detractors have averred. Contra to Jigsaw's declarations, his quest is not to save others and become immortal via legacy. Such a quest would privilege creation and longevity. Rather, Jigsaw's mission is destructive, seeking

to inalterably change the world around him. The nihilist reading ultimately demonstrates that following the loss of his unborn son and a failed suicide attempt, Jigsaw seeks to eradicate himself, choosing victims that mirror his own obsessive traits. Illustrating that point will entail working through each type of nihilism, scrutinizing how they differ and how they interlink.

‘Conundrum of carnage’:⁴ Moral Confusion and Jigsaw’s Nihilistic Project

Even if lacking precision, critics’ accusations regarding *Saw*’s moral confusion are understandable. As a starting point then, it is vital to detail these sources of contention in order to elucidate *Saw*’s ethical foundations. Foremost, Jigsaw’s agenda is undermined by his poor phrasal choices. For example, in *Saw*, Jigsaw states that Amanda requires a key to escape from the reverse bear-trap, and that the key is located in the stomach of her ‘dead cellmate’. Jigsaw underscores his instruction with the assertion ‘know that I am not lying’. As it transpires, Amanda’s cellmate is drugged rather than dead. Jigsaw *was* lying. Similarly, in *Saw III*, Jigsaw proclaims to be ‘the only person who knows where [Jeff’s abducted] daughter is’. This again is untrue: Hoffman, Jigsaw’s co-conspirator, is also privy to that information. Jigsaw’s calm, precise tone connotes that every word he utters is measured. Resultantly, it is unclear whether these errors are simply scripting mistakes, or intentional untruths. Regardless, these slips mean Jigsaw appears to be incoherent. That feeling is amplified by his oxymoronic instructions. In *Saw IV*, for example, Jigsaw instructs Rigg to ‘*force [Ivan] into position...and let him*’ decide his own fate. The caveat that ‘in 60 seconds the choice will be made for’ Ivan further undercuts the test’s purpose: teaching Rigg that people must decide to save themselves. Such inconsistencies have been interpreted as hypocrisy since the stakes could not be higher – they are literally life or death choices – and because Jigsaw’s endeavours are coded as moralistic in intent.

Other ethical problems stem from Jigsaw’s demands, which coerce his victims into committing immoral actions. In *Saw*, for example, Zepp is told to murder a mother and child in order to ‘save [him]self’. Endorsing a self-orientated, sacrificial mind-set does not sit well with Jigsaw’s proclaimed desire to force people into valuing life. Jigsaw’s victim-selection process is equally perturbing. *Saw IV*’s Ivan and Brenda are both guilty of criminal wrongdoing (being a rapist and prostitute, respectively). However, the two crimes are punished in the same way (by death), despite being unequal and incomparable criminal offenses.

Moreover, these victims are little more than pawns in Rigg’s game. Rigg is not given instructions on how to save Brenda. The test’s aim is that Rigg should *not* save her, meaning she is meant to die. Similarly, Adam (*Saw*) is never given a game to play. He is only a

sacrifice in Lawrence's game, and is also condemned. Pawn sacrifice occurs throughout the series. Unlike *Saw V*'s Mallick, who recognises that he has done wrong and 'deserve[s] to be' punished, Joyce (*Saw 3D*) is entirely innocent, and is burned alive only to punish her fiancé Bobby. Bobby explicitly points out that Joyce does not 'deserve to be here'. *Saw 3D* is notable for its ill-selected victim-base more broadly. There is little indication why numerous victims such as Dina or the racist gang are selected from the populace's sinners. The script offers no answer when the investigating officer (Mike) asks himself 'Why them? Why now?', leaving the audience to ponder those very questions.

Ultimately, these flaws undermine Jigsaw's proposed aim: to make people value their lives. Being unrighteous – selecting victims whimsically or using them as sacrifices – is unconvincing as a position from which to preach about justice. Moreover, many of the victims are not guilty of failing to value their own lives. *Saw IV*'s Rigg distinctly prizes and seeks to preserve life. There is no evidence that Ivan in *Saw IV*, the five victims in *Saw V*, or William in *Saw VI* do not value their own lives. They flagrantly do not value *other people's* lives, but that is an entirely different issue. Bobby in *Saw 3D* does not even fall into that category: he simply lies about having undergone a Jigsaw test. While that may be disrespectful to genuine survivors, it does not evince that he does not value life.

Thus, confusion arises from the disparities between Jigsaw's desire to 'save' people and his willingness to murder. Kerry proclaims that Troy's trap (*Saw III*) does not fit Jigsaw's modus operandi because Troy was welded into a room, and so could never escape. Kerry thereby confirms Jigsaw's repeated assertion that he allows victims to decide their fate ('Live or die. Make your choice'). However, the idea of choice is undermined in various ways throughout the series. The exchange between Hoffman and Jigsaw in *Saw V* negotiates that tension explicitly. Although Jigsaw declares that he 'assume[s] nothing...anticipat[ing] the possibilities and...let[ting] the game play out', he requires Amanda's presence in the game to restrict the victim's choices ('to make sure the rules are followed'). His announcement that 'if you're good at anticipating the human mind it leaves nothing to chance' undercuts the idea that victims can affect their fate. As Lawrence declares in *Saw*, the victims are given the impression that 'every possible angle has been pre-thought out' (*Saw*). That is, resistance is impossible. The game-scenarios are so limited that they are likely to result in death before any change in world-view can occur.

Consequently, Jigsaw comes across as a murderer rather than an emancipator. Jigsaw's project amounts to selecting, then eliminating people. While he openly avers that he wants the subjects to change, he is far less vocal about their failure. This may be because he sees death as a by-product rather than the point. From the police perspective, the opposite is true. The viewer is offered both stances, and may read that balance as narrative ambivalence. This does not mean the narrative attitude to murder is pluralistic. The binary tension between these two parties illuminates Jigsaw's project, evoking several overlooked,

yet vital questions that form the basis of my investigation here. What exactly is the aim of Jigsaw's mission? Is it to change or to terminate people? Are the two outcomes significantly different? Is change only possible via destruction?

These questions belong to the terrain of nihilism. Nietzsche, the founder of contemporary nihilist philosophy, envisages the nihilist as someone 'who judges of the world as it is that it ought not to be and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist' (1967: 318). That is, because teleological meaning is unknowable, the nihilist is unable to accept the world as it is. For Nietzsche, there are two intertwined forms of nihilism – radical and passive – that differ depending on the nihilist's response, or what exactly the nihilist apprehends as being the source of their dissatisfaction. Passive nihilists seek to change prevailing value-systems while preserving the world. The passive nihilist is disorientated because values have eroded, and sees potential for the world to become ideal if values change. Radical nihilists, on the other hand, live in despair. The radical nihilist adheres to supreme values that cannot exist in the world-as-it-is. On this view, this world cannot be ideal, and so must ultimately be destroyed. The passive nihilist thus lives in a 'world without values' (Deleuze 1983: 148), while the radical nihilist has 'values without a world' (Diken, 2009: 29; see also Heidegger 1977: 61, Pauley, 2011: 109, and Reginster 2006: 34). Both stances aim to incite change by moderating the present. As such, they are not opposed, even if they differ.

Working though those differences will help to elucidate Jigsaw's intentions, despite the disparities between his actions and his pronouncements. Jigsaw is clearly dissatisfied with the world, but it is not immediately apparent whether his aim is to change or to destroy the world since the former is suggested by his speech and the latter by his actions. Assessing Jigsaw's aims thus amounts to asking whether Jigsaw is a passive or radical nihilist. Verbally, he appears to be passive, angered by and seeking to change others' values (centrally, their attitudes towards life). In action, he seems to be radical inasmuch as his values are staid, and his obsessive attachment to principle leads him to destroy others that do not fit his standards (that is, everyone). The two might seem incompatible at first, but the following sections will demonstrate that these positions lead to the conclusion that Jigsaw's agenda is coherent. Although the double-standards outlined in this section remain, the nihilist approach permits an interpretation of *Saw* that encompasses and works with narrative and character motivations rather than dismissing the films – as numerous critics have – because they are ethically difficult.

Rebirth/Rhetoric: Passive Nihilism

Jigsaw may be considered a passive nihilist insofar as he is angered by the populace's attitude to fundamental values: their apathy towards their own existence. Nietzsche's term

'passive' thus also appositely evokes the indifference Jigsaw perceives in his test-subjects. Jigsaw's anger stems from his belief that appreciating one's existence is what gives life purpose. To 'take life for granted' is to be goalless. The games aim to force subjects into recognizing that survival is the only pertinent objective, and that endurance is always-already life's telos. The games render that goal present and possible in this world, resolving Jigsaw's nihilistic crisis.

The narratives validate Jigsaw's agenda by bearing out his assumptions about the test-subjects. The victims evince their apathy of their own accord. Alison, Lawrence's wife, complains that Lawrence pretends to be happy while actually being passionless, for example. Lawrence is thus characterised as 'sleepwalking' rather than living. Lawrence's ordeal is juxtaposed with other trap-victims as *Saw* unfolds, implying that his lifestyle is comparable to Amanda's reality-evading drug-addiction, or even Paul's suicide attempt (that is, relinquishing life altogether). The same is true of Adam's desire to smoke a potentially poisoned cigarette during his incarceration. Adam declares that he wants 'that sweet cancer. I don't care. I really don't'. His passivity is evoked in the latter clauses. More poignantly however, Adam's statement is imbued with dramatic irony. Jigsaw himself is dying of the very disease Adam so carelessly brings upon himself. Adam's flippant remark therefore underlines Jigsaw's motivation.

Jigsaw's dissatisfaction with others arises from such disparities: that people have choices, but fail to choose; that people who have 'every advantage in life...refus[e] to advance' (*Saw III*); that people are 'angry yet apathetic. But mostly just pathetic' (*Saw*). His test-subjects perceive themselves as unable to change the world that they inhabit. The victims thus corroborate Jigsaw's outlook that the world-state is unsatisfactory. Rigg is frustrated that he (as a cop) cannot save everyone, despite his compulsion to try. Jeff (*Saw III*) obsesses over the inadequate punishment bestowed on the man who killed his son. Both perceive the world as flawed, although they act as if they cannot change their conditions. *Saw's* populace thus demonstrate that the dissatisfactions underpinning passive nihilism are normative and prevalent. For Taskale (2010: 82) such a state verifies Nietzsche's vision of passive nihilism, since it 'impl[ies] that the experience of the loss of truth, value, and meaning no longer generates a crisis but is now accepted as matter of fact' (Taskale, 2010: 82).

Although Jigsaw's value-dissatisfactions are shared by the diegetic populace, the characters are more accurately passive resentmentists rather than passive nihilists, because they remain inactive (see Deleuze 1983: 111 and Diken, 2009: 16). Indeed, the test-subjects are so inured in their powerlessness that they behave as if they have a priori submitted to their impotence and the resultant frustration. Rigg complains 'how the hell are we supposed to [cherish our lives] when this [i.e. murder] is our life?' in *Saw IV*, articulating his exasperation regarding his inability to change the world. Hoffman's response – 'we chose this' (*Saw IV*) – is equally telling, conveying their responsibility for entering into and constituting that world.

This is a rare instance of self-recognition in *Saw*'s diegetic universe. The vast majority of the characters' statements blame external forces for immediate pressures, thereby negating responsibility for or their capacity to respond to their situation.

Jigsaw's games indicate that he, in contrast, purposefully takes nihilistic action. However, as is typical of his character, his dialogue is less consistent. His verbal rationalisations swing between nihilistic intentionality and ressentimentist liability-denial. When Cecil automatically projects responsibility for his suffering in *Saw IV* ('you did this to me') – thereby confirming the prevailing outlook – Jigsaw directly challenges him ('you did this to yourself'). However, in doing so, Jigsaw refutes his accountability, and thus denies his role as nihilistic agent. This renunciation does not sit well with statements of ownership he makes to his subjects elsewhere in the series, which include the proclamation that he has 'given [their] life a purpose' (*Saw III*). Although Jigsaw avidly denies being a murderer throughout the series, other characters continually assert that Jigsaw is a (nihilistic) agent. Matthews (*Saw II*) reminds the audience that '[p]utting a gun to someone's head and forcing them to pull the trigger is still murder', for example. Such assertions flag that Jigsaw's actions mark the difference between passive nihilism and his victim's passive resentment. Indeed, Jigsaw evades answering Matthews' accusation by turning the focus back on Matthews' own faults, and explaining his philosophy. In doing so, Jigsaw retains agency in the conversation, driving it forward to his preferred ends and forcing Matthews to retreat, dialogically. Jigsaw continues to force change, despite being confronted with his hypocrisy. Jigsaw's evasion underscores how apt Matthews' accusation is.

Yet the conflicts between Jigsaw's words and his actions reveal much about how Jigsaw envisages his position. Jigsaw only claims responsibility for any positive (as he sees it) effect his traps have – giving lives purpose – and seeks to evade the messy violence that his method entails. The distinction Strahm makes between being 'saved' (dictated to) and given 'freedom' (choice) is thus pertinent. If the apathy Jigsaw critiques is defined by subjects' inability to see their choices as power to change the world, it is unclear how undermining victims' power to choose can result in overarching change. Jigsaw posits that the participants' goal is to survive, yet that does not tally with the games themselves. Not only are they a somewhat arbitrary valuation-gauge, they also only endanger the subjects' survival. Despite Jigsaw's rhetoric about being 'reborn' (*Saw II*), which suggests that he seeks to make his idealist values exist in the world, Jigsaw denies that his method is destructive. In practice, Jigsaw's aim may be to change the world, but his method is genocidal, not rehabilitative. Jigsaw's failure to recognize this fracture undermines his "salvation" discourse. He desires the conceptual outcome (change), but repudiates the physical consequence (murder). This disturbs his role as nihilist. Jigsaw perceives himself as different to the apathetic masses because they do not take action and refute responsibility for their circumstances. Yet he cannot have it both ways. Either he too is not accountable

for contributing to the dissatisfactory world-state, or he is a violent agent of change set apart from his subjects. The latter means taking ownership of the ensuing destruction.

The discrepancies inherent to Jigsaw's viewpoint problematise his method's foundation: his complaint over the subjects' attitudes. The films offer scant evidence to explain why Jigsaw is so self-assured that his values are correct while his victims' mind-sets are not. The disparity between Jigsaw's intentions (active) and his behaviour (passive) thus renders his evaluation of the world-as-it-is questionable. The passive nihilist assesses that the values held in the world-as-it-is are erroneous. On their view, transformation is necessary, and the passive nihilist seeks to instigate that change to make the world ideal. They seek to modify prevailing value-systems while preserving the world. In Jigsaw's case, his desire for change is flawed because he does not perceive that his subjects share his evaluation that the world-as-it-is is unsatisfactory. If the victim's world-view needs to change, so does Jigsaw's, because they are founded on the same groundwork.

Hence, Jigsaw's inconsistencies expose a problem with passive nihilism more broadly. In order to distinguish between the nihilist's ideal values and the existent unsatisfactory values that plague the world-as-it-is, a stable axis must be maintained. The passive nihilist seeks change, yet contradictorily requires that their values be retained in order to instigate transformation, or to apprehend that change has occurred. The problem is that in order to be successful, the passive nihilist must completely alter all existent values, including their own. Jigsaw cannot alter his subjects' values without first modifying his. Consequently, they all must die. Jigsaw's agenda is problematized by the unyielding nature of the world he inhabits. Rather than modifying existent dominant values as he proclaims, Jigsaw's actions mean he actually alters the world itself. His actions are thus closer to radical nihilism.

Death/Action: Radical Nihilism

The central difference between Jigsaw and his subjects is that he seeks change (he is a nihilist), while they remain inactive (they are resentmentists). Fundamentally then, Jigsaw cannot both repudiate responsibility and also be the agent of change. Radical nihilism embraces the kind of world-changing that results from Jigsaw's actions, while also permitting that he might cling to his ideal values. Since the radical nihilist's dissatisfaction arises from their recognition that their ideal values cannot exist in the world-as-it-is, the radical nihilist seeks to negate and ultimately destroy the world (see Diken, 2009: 3). Applying this paradigm to *Saw* involves examining Jigsaw's values, asking whether his ideal standards can exist in the world-as-it-is, and if his aim is to change others' values, or to alter the world by annihilating others.

Much of the apparent hypocrisy arising from Jigsaw's actions is overcome if he is understood as a radical nihilist. For instance, there is an apparent disparity in Jeff's game (*Saw III*): Jigsaw asks Jeff to see Danica and ultimately Timothy as people that made mistakes rather than 'cipher[s]' responsible for Jeff's son's death. Jeff does not pass his test as he fails to rescue either Danica or Timothy. However, his failure is written into the game. When Danica pleads 'I made a mistake...I'm human', the test's premise is exposed. Jeff is only human too, and will a priori also make mistakes that lead to deaths. In fact, Jeff's choices entail almost everyone involved in the game – including Jigsaw and his protégé Amanda – being killed. Jeff is not Jigsaw's test-subject: *humanity* is. There was never any hope that Jeff's values would change, because he, like Jigsaw, is inherently flawed by belonging to the world-as-it-is.

Amanda herself further evidences that Jigsaw cannot sway others' values. As the first 'survivor', Jigsaw declares that Amanda is the 'proof that [his method] works' (*Saw VI*). As the plot continues however, it is clear that Amanda is not converted. Jigsaw retests her in *Saw III*, demonstrating the inadequacy of his method. She concurs, declaring that 'nobody is reborn'. Her assessment is consolidated by Jeff's willingness to kill Jigsaw moments later, in response to Jigsaw's question 'you haven't learned anything tonight have you?' Survivor retesting is commonplace in the series, and is a continuing reminder that Jigsaw cannot change others' values. Art survives his mausoleum trap only to become the head of another game (where he is killed) in *Saw IV*. Eric fails his test in *Saw II*, but proves his willingness to live by escaping. Yet he is then used as bait in the same trap that kills Art. These events verify Amanda's claim that '[n]obody changes' (*Saw III*). In fact, nobody is permitted to survive, Jigsaw included. As he confesses in *Saw II*, Jigsaw too is 'unfixable'.

Jigsaw's admittance is indicative of the radical nihilist's despair. When Tapp accuses Jigsaw of being 'sick' (*Saw*), Jigsaw's response – that he is 'sick of' those who 'don't appreciate their blessings' and 'scoff at the suffering of others' – culminates in the declaration that he is 'sick of it all' (that is, the world and/or existence). This utterance is transferred into a murderous will to destroy because Jigsaw slits Tapp's throat on making the final statement. Nihilistic despair resonates in the word 'sick', since Jigsaw is also physically, terminally ill. Jigsaw's destructive nature is intertwined with his bodily decline. The only change Jigsaw issues is devastation. His actions are not capable of changing values, and instead aim to destroy the world itself.

Reading Jigsaw as a radical nihilist explains why Jigsaw adheres to his belief that 'if the subject survives my method, he or she is instantly rehabilitated' (*Saw IV*), despite evidence to the contrary. Jigsaw's values remain staid despite the impossibility of those ideal values becoming existent in the world. It also explains Jigsaw's willingness to forsake the victims who survive. Obliteration is inherent to every game. William's first trap necessitates one of the participants dying since 'the only escape is in the other's failure' according to Jigsaw's

instructions. Similarly, Jigsaw blames Amanda for making Kerry's game impossible to win, but his instructions to Kerry imply that she is pre-condemned: 'you have spent your life among the dead...you, like them, are also dead'. His method thrives on eradication, despite his frequent verbal proclamations to the contrary.

However, radical nihilism does not resolve all of *Saw's* apparent contradictions. Being part of the world-as-it-is, the radical nihilist is among the factors that inhibit their ideal values from coming into existence. That is, the destruction of *everything* a priori necessitates the nihilist's extermination too. The radical nihilist's despair is underpinned by that realisation, and is amplified by a further problem. The radical nihilist's ideal values may also be obliterated along with them. Radical nihilism is futile then, insofar as it essentially involves destroying even the values that inspire annihilation. The result is hopelessness, and without faith in the possibility of change – the prospect of the world-as-it-ought-to-be – the radical nihilist's dissatisfaction with the-world-as-it-is can only lead to spiralling decay.

Radical nihilism therefore entails relinquishing to the impossibility of change. Radical and passive nihilism are thus intertwined. The nihilist comes to rely on the world-as-it-is being non-ideal in order to understand existence, since the nihilist is defined by their attitude towards that non-ideal world. The formulation "world-as-it-is" is founded on the imperfection of that state, which is diametrically opposed to the idealised world-as-it-ought-to-be. Jigsaw's world-view is one of destructive acquiescence. He resigns himself to the fact that people are 'easily' anticipated and thereby slaughtered. He allows them to be human, and being human they inevitably doom themselves. Despite Jigsaw's destructive actions, he *relies* on the world-as-it-is continuing, despite also being the source of his dissatisfaction.

Hence, it is apt that the *Saw* series has no distinct beginnings or ends inasmuch as the earliest and latest points in the *Saw* timeline are continually revised as the narrative unfurls. Beyond *Saw III*, flashbacks uncover earlier and earlier points in the plot. The rolling narrative moves backwards as much as its diegetic present moves forwards. Nihilism stems from disorientation based on telotic uncertainty (Heidegger 1977: 61). That is, causal relations and aims are not assured. *Saw* reifies that irresolution via the narrative's continual revision of events, as well as Jigsaw's inexact attitudes towards his own role as causal agent. His inability to relinquish his values is induced by the series' flashback-laden narrative structure, which continually evokes the past as if it is recurring in the present. Despite his nihilistic actions then, Jigsaw is more akin to his resentimentalist victims than he proclaims to be. In the language of nihilism, Jigsaw is a 'man of resentment', who 'does not, cannot, forget' (Diken, 2009: 16), and who is thus 'never through with anything' (Deleuze 1983: 113).

Both in form and theme, *Saw* presents a state of flux where meaning is not final. Jigsaw's method consumes the unfolding narrative. His nihilism cannot ever become a stable replacement belief system since that implies a clear telos, and it is the loss of telos that

instigates a nihilist outlook in the first instance. That is, if nihilism fulfils its goal (total destruction), the nihilist's life is given purpose. Having a reason to exist would undermine the nihilist's motive, which arises from their perceived purposelessness. Necessarily, the nihilist's campaign can have no end. Rigg's game – which is placed at the franchise's mid-point – revolves around the criticism offered to Rigg by several characters: 'what you can't do is save everyone' (*Saw IV*). The opposite is equally true: what Jigsaw cannot do is *kill* everyone. Jigsaw fails to spot not only that Rigg's quest to 'save everyone' is a form of action (meaning Rigg is not a man of resentment), but also how similar the flaws in Jigsaw's and Rigg's quests are.

The traps create an impression that Jigsaw is different to his victims because he is physically distanced from them. However, closer inspection of the victims' apparent flaws reveals how similar they are. Indeed, those physical distances connote Jigsaw's inaction, and ultimately his unwillingness to destroy everything. Centrally, Jigsaw's campaign can never result in total destruction as it would mean that he 'would be deprived of his "evil enemy", the hostile world, which he can accuse for his impotence and failures' (Diken, 2009: 18). The victims are sacrificial pawns in Jigsaw's games because they do not matter as individuals, at least for Jigsaw's purposes. The beginning and end point of Jigsaw's nihilism is Jigsaw himself.

'I am still among you':⁵ Auto-Nihilism

Nihilism may initially appear to be egotistical insofar as it entails one individual's dissatisfaction with the world being forced onto everyone. However, the target of the nihilistic mind-set is not the world or values per se, but the nihilist's own self. Suicide is the most obvious means of resolving the nihilist's dissatisfaction with the world, and the hopeless futility of their hatred. This is the key aspect of *Saw* overlooked in complaints about Jigsaw's hypocrisy. The target of his campaign may appear to be other people since others are so graphically tested. However, as the nihilism paradigm highlights, Jigsaw's true target is himself. His victims are selected because they are involved in his personal history, and their destruction ultimately serves to erase aspects of Jigsaw himself from the world.

Jigsaw's proclamations misdirect because they are outwardly focused. He overtly blames others for his dissatisfaction with the world-as-it-is. Verbally, Jigsaw downplays his responsibility for murder, but this also seeks to mask his self-orientation. Lawrence (Kramer's oncologist) and William (Kramer's health insurer) are picked as targets specifically because Jigsaw holds personal grudges against them. Even if Jigsaw proposes that their mistreatment of him is indicative of their broader faults, the changes Jigsaw instigates are highly limited in scope, only affecting individuals in his immediate vicinity. This personal bias

is confirmed by a news report in *Saw VI* that warns ‘victims have included anyone associated with the life of John Kramer, however remote’. Despite Jigsaw’s declaration that tests ‘can never be personal’, the only way ‘all the pieces...fit together’ (*Saw V*) is via Jigsaw himself. This is typical inasmuch as nihilists internalize external factors that ruin their life. By ‘inflicting evil’ (acting spitefully), nihilists thus fail to ‘comprehend the dimensions and meaning’ of their actions (Pauley, 2011: 107).

Since Jigsaw is at the centre of his own destructive campaign, it is frequently self-oriented. For instance, he selects Bobby (*Saw 3D*) and Pamela (*Saw VI*) because they appropriate his ‘message’, gaining fame from his ‘notoriety’. These targets are not selected because they fail to value their own lives, but because they personally affront Jigsaw. Yet, Jigsaw is not properly egotistic inasmuch as his self-focused actions are futile. His proclaimed aim is to become immortal by ‘creating a legacy...living a life worth remembering’ according to Amanda (*Saw II*). Bobby and Pamela help Jigsaw in that regard by bolstering his reputation. Jigsaw over-invests in himself, but also eradicates his own legacy. His self-focus contributes to the eventual destruction of everything. This self-defeat is ultimately a form of self-mastery, rather than an exertion of power over others (Nietzsche 1996: 67–8; see also Taskale, 2010: 79).

Jigsaw is, in this sense, a ‘radical loser’ who cannot reconcile his own responsibility for others’ fates with his desire to blame others. As Enzensberger (2005: 10) theorizes, the radical loser resolves that tension by ‘fus[ing] destruction and self-destruction, aggression and auto-aggression’. Refusing to passively accept the fate they themselves cause, the radical loser instead ‘radicaliz[es]...resentment into spiteful acts’ (Diken, 2009: 5; see also Taskale, 2010: 79). Jigsaw’s motivating factor – dissatisfaction with the world-as-it-is – is really concerned with his relation to the world. Accordingly, change begins with himself. Kramer tries to commit suicide, intentionally crashing his car following an act of fate (Jill’s miscarriage). Jigsaw internalises that trigger-event, declaring the miscarriage to be his fault (‘I find it difficult to forgive myself for what happened’ (*Saw V*)). Auto-destruction is as close to gaining control as the radical loser comes, and here Kramer’s suicide smacks of auto-abortion (‘auto’ both in the senses of “self” and “automobile”). The suicide attempt reverses Kramer’s inability to control his unborn son’s accidental death by targeting himself. Moreover, the suicide attempt underscores that *Kramer* is guilty of not valuing his own life (‘[t]hose that do not appreciate life do not deserve life’ (*Saw II*)). When he survives the crash, Jigsaw continues to reverse blame by externalising punishment rather than internalising further. Hence., killing others is an expression of Jigsaw’s own self-punishment and blameworthiness.

Jigsaw’s nihilism, which ‘paradoxically, turns back against itself’ and annihilates the nihilist, is thus ‘perfect nihilism’ (Diken, 2009: 6; see also Taskale, 2010: 84) precisely because it results in total destruction. His attempted suicide is pivotal since Jigsaw posits that ‘it was

the moment...that started me in my work and brought meaning to it' (*Saw II*). While a fleeting incident in *Saw*'s narrative-whole, its centrality is highlighted by the suicide motifs that resonate across the series. Jigsaw's victims choose whether to 'live or die', meaning that 'technically speaking, he's not really a murderer...he finds ways for his victims to *kill themselves*' (*Saw*, emphasis added). Paul (*Saw*) is selected because he attempts suicide. Jeff's test (*Saw III*) is focused on his inability to overcome the death of his son, reflecting Jigsaw's own motivation. The message that Jigsaw presents to Jeff – 'one bullet will end it all' – is permeated by that interconnection. Even Kramer's proposed cancer treatment carries auto-destructive connotations, since it involves injecting 'suicide genes' (*Saw VI*). Given this running theme, it is unsurprising that the series' very first shot of Jigsaw depicts him lying on the bathroom floor as if he has recently shot himself in the head.⁶

This opening disguise is apt inasmuch as it presents Jigsaw as "dead" from the outset. Jigsaw is like a ghost haunting the series' events. He is uncannily both involved in and yet distanced from each trap. Even the test-subjects' various dialogic claims hint towards Jigsaw's spectral qualities. Cecil declares 'you're fucking dead' to Jigsaw in *Saw IV*. Lyn refers to Jigsaw as 'a dead-man walking' when discussing Jigsaw's cancer in *Saw III*. Indeed, Jigsaw's plans and presence continue beyond his death in *Saw III*. That is, Jigsaw is literally dead for the majority of the series. *Saw IV*'s refrain – Jigsaw's beyond-the-grave 'promise that [his] work will continue' – could not be more apt to signal that auto-eradication defines his character.

In this light, it becomes clear why the games involve coerced suicide rather than murder. Jigsaw projects his destructive desire outward, killing himself via his victims. Jigsaw's targets are more than just people who personally affronted him. In keeping with the series' emphasis on auto-nihilism, the victims commonly mirror Jigsaw's own obsessive traits. Jigsaw's motivation is not to punish others' wrongs, but to erase problematic aspects of himself that he sees reflected in external ciphers. Jigsaw abducts people to gain control over his own fears: his inability to protect his 'loved ones' (Jill and his unborn son), which led Kramer to feel 'powerless' (*Saw V*). In the individual cases, the correspondence becomes much more specific. *Saw VI*'s central victim (William), is paralleled to Jigsaw. On refusing to give a client (Harold) health insurance, Harold refers to William as 'a criminal', declaring that the decision is a 'death sentence'. William's response – 'those are the rules...your actions have caused this' – recalls Jigsaw's dialogic motifs, which are well-established by that point in the series. Moreover, William's disciple Josh is said to want 'to be' William by another colleague. Before Josh is executed, he states that William's calculations are 'bullshit'. These strains uncannily echo Jigsaw's disciple Amanda denouncing Jigsaw's 'bullshit' campaign moments before her death (*Saw III*). The parallel between William and Jigsaw is corroborated by a conversation they have when they first meet, before Kramer becomes Jigsaw. William observes that it 'sounds like we're in a similar business...you try to predict people's behaviour. So do I'. Kramer's reaction – 'you choose who lives or dies' – expresses

Kramer's aversion to William's comparison, yet it only underlines the aptness of William's appraisal. William is targeted to quell Jigsaw's distaste over his own murderous project. That is, erasing William is a means of denying that Jigsaw makes cold calculations about who will live or die, and who is worthy of salvation.

Rigg's game (*Saw IV*) evokes the opposite side of the equation. Jigsaw critiques Rigg's 'obsession' with saving others, requesting that Rigg allow people to save themselves. However, this criticism should also be allayed at Jigsaw's own coercive-salvation method. Rigg's test – training Rigg to 'see what [Jigsaw] see[s]', and 'save as [Jigsaw] save[s]' – implies that there is a difference between their perspectives. However, that proclaimed contrast misdirects away from their intrinsic similarities. Rigg already does 'see as [Jigsaw] see[s]' inasmuch as Rigg stands in for Jigsaw's own obsession with others. Rigg's death manifests how futile Jigsaw's agenda is, insofar as the test fails to save Rigg, and also because Jigsaw's homicidal method cannot save anyone, period. Elsewhere, Jeff is punished for his inability to forgive those who hurt him. Jeff absolves Timothy and Jigsaw, but kills both (*Saw III*). Jeff's decisions parallel Jigsaw's own act of forgiving then slaughtering Cecil (*Saw IV*). Jigsaw's critiques of Kerry's solipsistic, obsessive character (*Saw III*), Adam's voyeurism (*Saw*), Eric's willingness to take the law into his own hands, condemn people and use violence as justice (*Saw II*) are all flaws that Jigsaw exhibits. Each of these victims reifies attributes of Jigsaw's persona that he rejects and erases.

Jigsaw's nihilism is not concerned with a disparity between ideal values and the world per se, but with the self that decides that what ought-to-be is not. In short, Jigsaw is the problem. The solution is his mission to expunge his own history. He systematically punishes every person that led to his suicide: including the drug-addict responsible for his unborn son's death (Cecil, *Saw IV*); the oncologist who failed to cure him (Lawrence, *Saw*); and the health insurer that prevented him seeking treatment (William, *Saw VI*). This purging also involves obliterating his legacy by massacring all the detectives that investigate the Jigsaw murders, as well as those who propagate his infamy via public discourse (Bobby (*Saw 3D*) and Pamela (*Saw VI*)). Jigsaw even tries to defer the "Jigsaw" infamy onto his disciple, Hoffman, before seeking to extinguish Hoffman (*Saw VI-Saw 3D*).⁷

The same process of erasing himself via others applies to Jigsaw's disciples as much as it does Jigsaw's other victims then. As signalled by Jeff's test (that also tests Lyn, Amanda and Jigsaw (*Saw III*)) or William's test (that equally tests Harold's family and Hoffman (*Saw VI*)), the killers' 'fates are linked' to their victims'. Hoffman superficially appears to be different to Jigsaw, especially since Hoffman is so physically strong and enters the narrative when Jigsaw is physically incapacitated (*Saw III*). However, Hoffman perfectly reflects Jigsaw's arrogance. Hoffman echoes Jigsaw's callousness, brutality and desire to control others. Although Jigsaw punishes Hoffman for exhibiting these traits in the close of *Saw 3D*, Jigsaw is just as guilty of exhibiting those characteristics. The traps expose that parallel. In *Saw V*, it is revealed that

Hoffman illegally avenged his sister's murder by executing her killer (Seth). Hoffman mimicked Jigsaw's modus operandi to cover up his personal grudge. Jigsaw decries Hoffman's actions, proffering that Hoffman's behaviour highlights the differences between them. In fact, it more pertinently reveals their similarities.

Amanda too is criticised by Jigsaw for being jealous of Lyn (*Saw III*), although Amanda's personalisation of the issue, her self-harm, her cowardice, her anger, and her reactionary nature reflect Jigsaw's own worst characteristics. Fundamentally, Jigsaw disapproves of Amanda making her games 'unwinnable' (*Saw III*), yet that futility equally beleaguers Jigsaw's games. Amanda herself is proof that his method is ineffective. Amanda angers Jigsaw not because her traps are unfair, but because Amanda's games expose how unjust the method itself is. Amanda was originally tested because she was 'a fucking junkie', but she only became a drug-addict after Eric framed her for a drug-related crime she did not commit. That injustice is paralleled by how unfair Jigsaw's path is. Kramer did not choose to survive his suicide attempt or to contract cancer. *Saw's* imposed order – the method – lays bare that the world is structured by injustice and chance. People do not have a choice to live, or to enter into existence. People only have the choice to survive or to die. Sometimes, as in the case for Kramer's unborn son, events conspire to make that decision on their behalf.

Game Over: Conclusion

Early in *Saw*, Lawrence makes a suggestion that has greater significance than is first apparent: 'what we need to do is start thinking about why we're here'. While Lawrence intends 'here' to mean the bathroom in which they are imprisoned, his suggestion also conveys "in existence". The games are undergirded by that very question. Yet Lawrence's subsequent inference – that 'whoever brought us here...must want something from us' – attests to his bewilderment and commitment to the telos implied by the game's cause-effect, puzzle-solving, time-driven surface. Jigsaw's aim is not as productive as Lawrence implies, and this initial misdirection muddies Jigsaw's destructive intentions. The series' denouements are characterised by narrative twists that undermine present immediate aims. What appear to be concrete, knowable goals are revealed to be falsities. Adam could have escaped by using the key floating in his bathtub, yet simply by regaining consciousness, moving, and inadvertently removing the plug attached to his person, the key vanished before he was conscious of his imprisonment. All other goals are rendered meaningless for Adam because of this initial hopelessness. The franchise's opening incident is indicative of the nihilism that follows across the seven films.

Teleological ambiguity – that the solution is present yet unattainable – is paralleled by ontological uncertainty. Deaths ensue that are not technically murder despite looking like they are. Roles that traditionally signal a difference between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ (victim/killer/police) are problematized by victims who are also criminals, Hoffman’s and Eric’s presences as corrupt police-detectives, and so forth. *Saw*’s moral values are not “confused” as critics have asserted. These narratives just refuse to finally demarcate “good” and “evil”. That is precisely a Nietzschean conception of morality (see Nietzsche 1996: 37). This is not hypocrisy. *Saw* defies unrealistic narrative conventions for distinguishing between “good” and “bad”.

The self-destructive and apparently contradictory nature of Jigsaw’s stance makes it difficult to relate to him, despite the lengthy access to him the franchise’s seven films provide. That remoteness – which parallels the distances between Jigsaw and his victims – offers an opportunity to engage with the moral implications of Jigsaw’s agenda. Critics who disregard the series as “muddled” miss its fundamental richnesses. As Pauley (2011: 103) notes (following Hegel), the idea that ‘all sorts of horrendous evils are “necessary” for the full development of self-consciousness and freedom’ causes ‘philosophical and moral offence’. *Saw* openly, overtly and productively explores those forms of offence. The problems – being linked to Jigsaw’s self-focused/projected nihilism – scrutinize the nature of existence itself. Jigsaw fits the Nietzschean paradigm of a ‘paradoxical subject’, to whom ‘pain and suffering are necessary’ since they ‘construct his subjectivity’ (Diken, 2009: 28). The series’ violence – which provokes visceral reactions – connects these theoretical-existential notions to the characters’ flesh and the viewer’s bodily reality. This imbues the images with urgency. These are not abstract questions, but foundational conundrums about the lines between life and death, and the pertinence of what occurs in-between those states.

As Diken (2009: 6) argues, the ‘paradoxical, contradictory character [of nihilism] is the strength, not weakness, of the concept’. The same is true for the *Saw* series’ moral complexity, which implicitly critiques banal “good triumphs over evil” conventionality. The series offers an enquiry into the nature of justice itself, which could not be more Nietzschean in tone. The rolling narrative calls the value of all values into question, beginning with the presumption that ‘morality is a non-optional, in-eliminable part of civilized humanity’ (Robertson, 2011: 563-4). Jigsaw’s nihilistic reinvestigation of himself and his world is franchise’s driving force. The drama form allows the audience to perceive the tensions from numerous stances, and to frequently re-examine the same events from multiple perspectives. Horror narratives distance audiences from personal endangerment, but retain enough emotive engagement to curb apathy, prompting philosophical contemplation, even if audience’s responses do not immediately appear to fall into that category. This, I contend, is what makes *Saw* so rich, and why horror fiction more generally is so culturally valuable.

Bibliography

- Aston, James and Walliss, John (2012) "'I've never murdered anyone in my life. The decisions are up to them.': Ethical guidance and cultural pessimism in the *Saw Series*", Journal of Religion and Popular Culture, 24:3.
- Deleuze, Gilles. Nietzsche and Philosophy. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.
- Diken, Bulent. Nihilism. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Enzensberger, Hans M. (2005) 'The Radical Loser'.
<http://www.signandsight.com/features/493.html> Original German language version:
Enzensberger, Hans M. (2005) *Der Spiegel* November 7.
- Graham, Jane (2009) "Caught in a Trap, and I Can't Back Out." The Guardian, October 16.
- Heidegger, Martin. The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays. New York: Harper, 1977.
- Kellner, Douglas. Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Neumaier, Joe and Weitzman, Elizabeth (2009) "Fresh Blood at the Cinema Lifts the Lid on a Haunting Halloween." Daily News (New York), October 30.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. On the Genealogy of Morals. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- . The Will to Power. New York: Vintage, 1967.
- Nishitani, Keiji. The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism. Trans. Graham Parkes and Setsuko Aihara. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990.
- Pauley, John. "The Problem of Evil and the Possibility of Nihilism." International Journal of Philosophical Studies 19.1 (2011).
- Reginster, Barnard. The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Robertson, Simon. "A Nietzschean Critique of Obligation-Centred Moral Theory." International Journal of Philosophical Studies 19.4 (2011): 563-591.
- . "Nietzsche's Ethical Revaluation." The Journal of Nietzsche Studies 37.1 (2009): 66-90.

Taskale, Ali Riza. "Clash of Nihilisms." Domination of Fear. Ed. Mikko Canini. New York: Rodopi, 2010.

Thomson, Desson (2008) "Hollywood and Indie Offerings." The Washington Post, February 15.

Walsh, John (2006) "I Saw *Saw III* and Survived." The Independent November 4.

¹ Graham (2009: 6), for instance, posits that 'the general view among grown-up commentators is that the *Saw* movies represent an artistic and moral black hole'; Neumaier and Weitzman (2009: 37) refer to Jigsaw's 'moral code' as 'oblique'; Walsh (2006) berates *Saw*'s 'smug moral hypocrisy'; and Thompson (2008) mockingly dismisses attempts to explicate *Saw*'s moral messages as 'creative rationalisation'. None of these critics engage with the series' content or morality in any detail or depth, pointing to a shortcoming with their analytical skills more than with the series itself. For a detailed examination of *Saw*'s ethical complications, see Aston and Wallis, 2012.

² While Nietzsche is concerned with monotheism, I will not address religion per se. It would be rather insipid to suggest that Jigsaw is an ubermensch, a god-like adjudicator deciding who deserves to live, for example.

³ On nihilism and its relation to post-politics/terrorism, see Taskale, 2010: 90-92 and Diken, 2009: 75-83.

⁴ Hoffman quotes the title of Pamela Jenkins' 'sensationalist' article *Saw VI*.

⁵ Jigsaw in *Saw IV*.

⁶ The revelation that Amanda's apparently 'dead cellmate' is actually alive hints that Jigsaw's disguise is a falsehood early on in *Saw*.

⁷ The futility of Jigsaw's strategy (which parallels the futility of his nihilism) is that each new murder only sustains his infamy.