
Faces of Death

Saw

A Film by James Wan

Lions Gate Films, 2004,

100 minutes.

Saw II

A Film by Darren Lynn Bousman

Lions Gate Films, 2005,

91 minutes.

Reviewed by Assaf Sagiv

If we are to believe Michel Foucault, the Western world is no longer able to stomach public displays of cruelty. Of course, things were once very different: In his classic study, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, the French thinker devoted a lengthy and forbidding chapter to the “spectacle of the scaffold” that was common in Europe until two hundred years ago. The old practice was usually carried out in accordance with a basic formula: Condemned

men were led to the gallows in the town square, severely tortured, and finally executed before a crowd looking on in fascination at the terrible sight of a fellow human being’s agony and death.

Alas, every show must come to an end. Solemn ceremonies of atrocity no longer suited the delicate tastes of modern culture. In the early nineteenth century, in the face of growing moral protests, they were replaced by more “humane” forms of punishment and discipline, most of them hidden from the public eye. Thus, according to Foucault: “The great spectacle of physical punishment disappeared; the tortured body was avoided; the theatrical representation of pain was excluded from punishment.”

Had he happened upon some of the horror films produced in recent years, Foucault might have modified his thesis. The two *Saw* movies, for example, which feature an especially creative and innovative serial killer, offer the viewer something that has been denied him since the end of

the eighteenth century: A spectacle of physical punishment, theatrical representations of pain, and tortured bodies aplenty. All this, of course, did not detract from the excitement with which these movies were received. On the contrary: The first movie, directed by James Wan, was first shown at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2004 and went on to become a box-office hit and an instant cult classic; *Saw II*, directed by Darren Lynn Bousman, was released in October 2005 and did even better commercially, topping the U.S. blockbuster list for a while. Considering these precedents, it seems likely that the third installment in the series—scheduled for release in the fall of 2006—will follow suit.

Notwithstanding the *Saw* movies' box-office success, it is easy enough to brush them off as cinematic junk, a typical product of a genre not usually taken seriously by critics. But it would be a mistake to ignore the underlying message in these movies or to disregard the reasons for their success. A closer look at *Saw* and *Saw II* may point to a cultural phenomenon of considerable importance, and may offer an explanation—if only partial—of why it is that public displays of monstrous cruelty have turned, yet again, into mass attractions.

As the name suggests, the main objective of horror movies is to frighten. This is their justification and the secret of their success. A good horror film is supposed to make the viewer jump out of his seat, or at least make his flesh crawl. *Saw* does a good job of this, but the movie's aspirations do not end here. It aims higher. It attempts to teach us a lesson; it strives to be a morality play as well.

Ostensibly, there is nothing really new in this. Even the most exploitive horror films toy with some kind of moral agenda, however twisted. Slasher movies like *Friday the 13th* or *Halloween* feature scenes of excessive violence and sexuality, but their true message is puritan through and through. The victims of the vile acts depicted in these movies are usually youngsters who indulge in permissive behavior. The deaths of these reprobates at the hands of the murderer can be seen, therefore, as retribution for their profligacy. (Of course, we may be tempted to indulge here in the obligatory Lacanian analysis and discuss the "obscene" core of morality, or vice versa, but we must restrain ourselves.) In one of the main scenes in *Scream*, a thriller with an ironic self-awareness, one of the movie's heroes points out the main principles of the genre. "There are certain *rules* that

one must abide by in order to survive a horror movie,” he explains to his friends. “First, you can never drink or do drugs. Second, you can never have sex. *Big no-no*. It’s a sin. It’s an extension of number *One*.”

The strange moral high-handedness in horror movies has thus reached a stage of post-modern self-parody. But *Saw* and its sequel take this one step further, and the result is not at all amusing. The star of these movies, a serial killer nicknamed “Jigsaw,” is not your garden-variety psychopath; he sees himself as a judge and an executioner, who punishes others for offenses major and minor. Moreover, the traps that he sets—grotesque challenges that drive his victims to death or insanity—are supposed to mirror those very same offences. A person who tried to commit suicide by slashing his wrists is forced to crawl through a maze of razor wire—this time in order to remain alive; an insensitive and arrogant doctor who daily informs his patients that they are about to die of cancer is ordered to shoot someone he has never met, and, by doing so, to become a “cause of death” in his own right; a police informer, who has made his living out of spying on others, is ordered to pull out a key that is hidden in his head, behind his eye socket, in order to examine if he is capable also of looking

“inwardly”—and so forth. In all these cases and in others, the killer (who rejects this title, since, according to him, his victims cause their own deaths) devises a clever punishment, or test, that constitutes a perverse reflection of the victim’s own crimes.

Jigsaw’s *modus operandi* is reminiscent—and not by chance—of the sort of moral mechanics prevalent in Dante’s *Inferno*. The first part of the *Divine Comedy* depicts the tortures and agonies that are the lot of the wicked in hell. This miserable world conducts itself according to a strict logic of *contrapasso* (counterpoise), a divine retribution that parallels the crime. The sinners who are guilty of carnal sins, who subjected reason to lust’s command, are forever buffeted by a violent storm; the heads of the fortune-tellers turn in the opposite direction to their bodies and they are doomed forever to face backwards; the fraudulent counselors, including Ulysses, are wrapped in tongues of fire, which conceal them just as in life their speech concealed their thought; and the traitors, who turned their backs on the warmth of human relationships and love of God, are trapped in a frozen waste. They all get a punishment that perfectly and pitilessly fits their sins, with no hope of salvation. When Dante breaks down in the face of these sights and

bursts out crying, he is censured by Virgil, his guide. “Are you foolish as the rest?” he asks. “Here pity only lives when it is dead. Who is more impious than he that sorrows at God’s judgment?”

There appears to be something in the cruel rationale of the *contrapasso* that appeals to our own generation. Modern readers of Dante might perhaps feel a measure of discomfort at the sadistic creativity invested in his descriptions, but it is hard to deny his allure. Not by chance is the *Inferno* considered the most interesting part of the *Divine Comedy*; it captures our imagination, not only because it gives us a sense of order and meaning, but also because it answers to a darker drive, a secret delight at watching the suffering of others—a pleasure that is “human, all too human,” as Nietzsche put it—while harnessing them in the service of an exalted moral objective, under the auspices of none other than God himself.

But there is no God in the urban hell of *Saw*; he is either dead or hiding his face from humanity. His place is taken by a serial killer—not as a representative of pure evil, but as a personification of justice gone wild. This is a horrifying investiture, but the creators of *Saw* move confidently down a road that has been paved already in movies like *Seven* (1995)

and *Hannibal* (2001). Like killers such as John Doe in *Seven* and Hannibal Lecter, Jigsaw is not a regular mortal but a person with extraordinary understanding and initiative and, as such, he takes a position of superiority over a legal system floundering in mediocrity and bureaucracy. He can adopt a god-like point of view, trying the “hearts and reins” of men and deciding on the fate of his peers as he sees fit. And exactly like his divine counterpart, he is a jealous and vengeful god. “Don’t ask me to pity those people,” John Doe says to the detectives who question him. “I don’t mourn them any more than I do the thousands that died at Sodom and Gomorrah.”

In certain respects, installing a serial killer in a niche reserved for God is an unsurprising cinematic ploy. Although in reality serial killers are miserable creatures, eaten up with sexual frustration and morbid obsessions, on the silver screen they often take on super-human dimensions. This fictitious image has become a cliché, but one that audiences never seem to tire of. If anything about moviegoers is to be learned from the success of these films, it is that they enjoy watching larger-than-life psychopaths: Brilliant, fearless, and, as in *Saw*, even invincible.

One explanation for the bizarre reverence with which these murderers

are depicted could be grounded in the action that defines the serial killer—that is, in the taking of life. More than any other criminal type, he holds in his hands the absolute authority to decide between life and death. By seizing this sovereign authority, which has been relinquished by the penal systems in most of the world's enlightened countries, the killer acquires the kind of power normally reserved for God, and he, too, works in mysterious ways, beyond the comprehension of mere mortals. In Hannibal Lecter's first cinematic appearance in Michael Mann's *Manhunter* (1986), he declares to the FBI agent who caught him: "If one does what God does enough times, one will become as God is." Perhaps this is how Lecter and his murderous ilk come across to their audiences: As modern incarnations of ancient pagan gods, terrible beings who demand, from time to time, human sacrifice.

But this explanation gives us only part of the picture. It may account for the compelling presence of serial killers in public consciousness, but not for the feelings of identification they seem to arouse. In his book *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture* (2005), David Schmid, a professor of English at Buffalo University, points out that the enormous public interest in serial

killers is partly "a result of the way in which consumers 'identify' with these killers in the sense of wanting to be or think like them." This is undoubtedly a disturbing phenomenon and one that requires addressing—and *Saw* provides us with an intriguing hint.

In an important scene in *Saw II* (written, like the first movie, by Leigh Whannell, in collaboration with the director, Darren Lynn Bousman), the killer reveals his motives to one of the detectives who have come to arrest him. Jigsaw tells the policeman that his murderous career began only after he discovered that he was suffering from a terminal disease:

Can you imagine what it feels like to have someone sit you down and tell you that you're dying? The gravity of that, hmm? Then the clock's ticking for you. In a split second your world is cracked open. You look at things differently, smell things differently. You savor everything, be it a glass of water or a walk in the park.... But most people have the luxury of not knowing when that clock's going to go off. And the irony of it is that that keeps them from really living their life. It keeps them drinking that glass of water but never really tasting it.

For Jigsaw, the news of his imminent demise is like a sudden illumination that allows him to reach a higher state of awareness and raises him above the trivial life most men lead. This notion is oddly reminiscent

of some of the ideas put forth by Martin Heidegger in his monumental work *Being and Time*, and especially the part that deals with what he calls “being-toward-death” (*Sein-zum-Tode*). As social creatures, Heidegger explains, we tend to sink into a life of alienation, mediocrity, and banality. But if a person truly accepts the fact that he is destined to die, if he confronts his own temporality with honesty and courage, then he can begin to live a meaningful life of “impassioned freedom towards death.” Only a person like this is worthy of being considered complete and authentic, since he is free to choose his destiny and to “become resolute with his ownmost possibilities.”

The criminal hero of the *Saw* movies does indeed decide to take full and unconventional advantage of his remaining days and use them to test “the fabric of human nature,” as he puts it. But as someone blessed with penetrating insight into the real essence of existence, he has only disdain and animosity for the common people, who continue to live out petty and insignificant lives. “Most people are so ungrateful to be alive,” he complains. Accordingly, he sets diabolical traps that will teach his victims to value each remaining breath, each remaining heartbeat. He does not make do with taking personal stock

of his life; he wants to punish and to teach, to force others to see the world as he himself sees it. This is the didactic legacy he intends to pass on to the generations to come (as well as to *Saw III*).

It is difficult to shake the impression that the movie’s creators—together with a large number of the viewers—would have signed on the main points of Jigsaw’s credo and embraced such an outspoken protest against the quiet desperation of modern life. After all, in the moral universe of *Saw* and movies like it, the worst offense, the greatest scandal, is *insipidity*, the horrible waste of human potential on a shallow existence. “What sick ridiculous puppets we are,” muses the killer in *Seven*, “and what a gross little stage we dance on. What fun we have dancing and fucking. Not a care in the world, not knowing that we are nothing, we are not what was intended.” Although many people might sympathize with the contempt and alienation expressed in this monologue, its aggressive excess demands a high price in blurring, even eliminating, the difference between good and evil. Through this pseudo-existentialist prism, normal, dull, routine life might be construed as something that is to be ashamed of, whereas a psychopathic murderer comes across as an authentic rebel who

lives on the edge—in other words, on some level at least, as an admirable figure.

Saw delivers its violent ethic dripping in blood and gore. Presumably, its message would have been received differently were it not for its shockingly brutal displays. Had its creators wished, they could certainly have found artistic justification for this vile exhibition in the writings of playwright and essayist Antonin Artaud, founder of the “Theater of Cruelty.” Artaud, a disturbed genius, strove to restore to the performance arts some of the wild vitality they had lost when they adopted a bourgeois dignity. The sentiments in his 1933 second manifesto of the “Theater of Cruelty” would most certainly have been to Jigsaw’s taste:

The Theater of Cruelty has been created in order to restore to the theatre a passionate and convulsive conception of life, and it is in this sense of violent rigor and extreme condensation of scenic elements that the cruelty on which it is based must be understood. This cruelty, which will be bloody when necessary but not systematically so, can thus be identified with a kind of severe moral purity which is not afraid to pay life the price it must be paid.

It is questionable whether the creative powers behind the *Saw* movies

had Artaud’s esthetic ideals in mind. And yet there is no denying a certain affinity between the avant-garde vision of the agonized artist and the mood reflected in these movies. This affinity results from similar feelings of dissatisfaction and yearning: Dissatisfaction in the face of the vacuity that characterizes human existence nowadays and a yearning for a shocking experience that will shatter this ossified reality. And if the only way to achieve such a climax is through a festival of cruelty, well, so be it.

This mood has brought “the spectacle of the scaffold,” to use Foucault’s expression, back to the public eye. Once again the masses are flocking to sites of public gatherings—once it was the town square, today, the cinema halls—in order to watch the suffering and death of other people. But even if we leave aside the difference between reality and fiction—which in any case loses its potency in our post-modern age—we must take into account another dissimilarity: Whereas the rituals of torture and execution described by Foucault were aimed at demonstrating the terrifying power of the sovereign and at sustaining the people’s belief in the political and legal systems, cinematic displays of serial murder and atrocity serve a quite different objective. They “reveal” to the viewers both the

inadequacy of the existing order—the pathetic nothingness of their lives, the impotence of the authorities who are responsible for their security—and the greatness of the psychopath, who dares to transgress all boundaries and to spit in the eye of society.

Such a horrid state of affairs reminds us once again of Dante’s grim fantasy. In the third canto of the *Inferno*, the poet arrives at a dark plain, on the bank of the River Acheron, and notices a vast multitude of spirits, whining and shoving each other, all the while being attacked by angry hornets. These are the “miserable people” (*genti dolorosa*), who, Virgil explains, “lived without disgrace and

without praise,” because they did not dare to do either good or bad. Their lives were so valueless that they are not worthy of passing through the gates of hell, since even the wicked—who at least had enough courage to choose a path—are superior to them. One can only imagine, therefore, the longing that these souls feel for the inferno that has been denied them, and how envious they are of utter sinners, who made it to the promised land. And maybe, with movies like *Saw*, we don’t need to imagine at all.

Assaf Sagiv is Associate Editor of AZURE.