"I Want to Play A Game": How to See Saw

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In the opening scene of the first Saw film (2004), Adam (Leigh Whannell) struggles to consciousness in a filled bath to find himself chained to a pipe in a derelict room. Dr Lawrence Gordon (Cary Elwes) is similarly restrained in the corner opposite. The audio tape Adam subsequently finds in his pocket provides only the barest of explanation. "You're probably wondering where you are," the deadpan voice of Jigsaw tells him. "I'll tell you where you might be. You might be in the room that you die in." That expression of possibility is central to the concerns of the film and to the game Adam and Gordon must play if they are to have any hope of survival.

At the start of *Saw II* (2005), Michael (Noan Jenkins), a police informant, is faced with the prospect of cutting a key from within his eye in order to release himself from the death-mask locked around his neck. "How much blood will you shed to stay alive Michael?" Jigsaw speculates. "Live or die, make your choice." Michael, choosing to discard the scalpel provided for him rather than use it, is subsequently added to the list of Jigsaw's victims.

Towards the start of *Saw III* (2006) yet another victim, Troy (J. La Rose), trapped in a schoolroom, is forced to rip free rings secured through various parts of his body in order to avoid an explosion. Ultimately, his failure doesn't matter; even if Troy broke his chains the room is inescapable, as Detective Kerry (Dinah Meyer) notes after they have to use blowtorches on the door to gain entry.

Of the three traps described, the last is not solely the work of John Kramer, the infamous 'Jigsaw Killer' (played in all three films by Tobin Bell) but is staged by Amanda (Shawnee Smith), his protégé, the person chosen to maintain Jigsaw's work and provide him with a legacy when he finally succumbs to cancer. It is through Amanda that Jigsaw intends to achieve his desire for immortality. Crucially, Amanda misinterprets the rules. Despite having played twice herself and been forced to make her choice between living and dying she overlooks the fact that although Jigsaw's games are grisly and always potentially lethal, he plays fair, adhering to a strict personal philosophy based upon the will to survive and an appreciation of life.

The subject of one of Jigsaw's games is therefore always presented with an opportunity, the aim of which is to reinvigorate the potential of the subject, jump-start the survival instinct and instil a celebration or 'savouring' of life. In Deleuzian terms, it is the potential of life that is at stake. Amanda's traps, however, are simply brutal killings disguised as games. Her victims, unlike Jigsaw's subjects, find themselves in situations where they have no chance of winning. Those caught in Amanda's games have already been judged undeserving and lacking. Her misinterpretation is such that she closes off all opportunity, denies any potential for escape and offers only death. If Jigsaw's games are encounters with Deleuzian affect, Amanda's games are anti-Deleuzian, operating more as encounters with Lacanian notions of the signification of death within the symbolic order and the death drive. This is because Amanda, as a Lacanian subject, becomes caught between her own subjectivity and the object of her desire. In purely cinematic terms, Jigsaw directs his games while Amanda acts in hers.

Playing The Game

Gilles Deleuze's two books on cinema, The Movement-Image (1986) and The Time-Image (1989), place an emphasis on the potential or the virtual, that is, varying lines of possibility or 'lines of flight' offered by the meeting of human technology and cinema technology. In a philosophy based around notions of flows and folds, forces and speeds, and the potential both of and for difference, cinema's production and images offer a way of identifying this perception, making it the "organ for perfecting the new reality."(1) The cinematic techniques of montage or jump cut, for instance, introduce a new line of thought, a fresh way of understanding reality. Cinema then allows the potential of life to be thought – a key aspect of Deleuze's philosophy. Cinema's techniques open perception beyond the everyday, expanding beyond the lulled, quotidian routine one may experience. As Claire Colebrook explains, this is best identified in extreme or extraordinary circumstances. "Life's power is best expressed and evidenced, not in the general and everyday, nor in the normative, but in the perverse, singular and aberrant (for this is when life exposes its creative and diverging power, not the illusion of sameness which we require for utility)."(2) It is this that gives Jigsaw's games their Deleuzian tone, the urgent revitalisation of life occasioning new experiences to be learnt and assimilated: such as the perverse, singular and aberrant situation of waking to find a man-trap secured around you neck. There is then the instruction to live or die, to make your choice, to survive the encounter with affect, or the affection-image, which Deleuze explains through the notion of a reflexive face able to "say 'something' common to several objects of different kinds." (3) Affect can also be understood (perhaps more appropriately for Jigsaw's games) as "the turning point at which a physical system paradoxically embodies multiple and normally mutually exclusive potentials, only one of which is 'selected.'"(4)

It is this point – the opportunity to choose to 'win' and go free afterwards, presented without partiality – that Amanda does not get; along with Rick Worland, who, in *An Introduction to the Horror Film* (2007), aligns *Saw* with *Peeping Tom* (1960) and *The Abominable Dr Phibes* (1971) as films that "frighten not just with the mortal punishment the victims endure but from the soul-killing depression of knowing that the perpetrator is all-to-human and drawing a sadistic thrill from the victim's agony."(5)

In fact, Jigsaw's principle games – played by Adam and Dr Gordon in *Saw I*, the group trapped in the house and policeman Eric Matthews (Donnie Whalberg) in *Saw II* and Jeff (Angus Macfadyen), Lynn (Bahar Soomek) and Amanda (yet aga*in*) *in* Saw III – are designed to be winnable by their subjects as long as they take care to follow the rules and Jigsaw will accept any outcome with equanimity. There is no thrill, sadistic or otherwise, in setting these games; they are throws of the die by the subjects, aleatoric opportunities. Adam and Dr Lawrence Gordon are initially provided with the key to their leg restraints (although that particular baby disappears down the plughole with Adam's bathwater because Amanda merely tosses it into the bath when she helps to set up the game). Similarly, the group in *Saw II* also have a key and an escape route in the room they wake up in, whilst Eric Matthews has only to sit and listen to Jigsaw in order for his son to be returned to him safe and well.(6) In these examples, at least, there can be gain with a minimum of pain if one is willing to respond attentively and thoughtfully to the challenges presented.

Elsewhere, the command to search within for the will to survive is altogether a more literal and bloodier affair, although it is clear that these games are still centred on the chance to survive, if you've got the guts (or somebody else's). Paul (Mike Butters), a successful businessman 'guilty' of cutting himself, has to

tunnel through razor-wire before a basement door on a timer is locked and he is entombed. Amanda's first test involves slicing open the stomach of an incapacitated man to retrieve the key to the 'reverse man-trap' secured around her head whilst in *Saw III*, part of Jeff's game is to restrain his desire for vengeance and forgive and rescue the people perceived as responsible for, or implicated in, the death of his son in a car accident.

When Jigsaw, via recorded message or video-taped Billy doll, tells his subjects "I want to play a game", he is not there as a participant or even a spectator but instead as a referee, observing the rules pertinent to that particular subject rather than salaciously enjoying the 'victim's agony'.

Self Help

As Jigsaw makes clear to Detective Matthews during their conversation in *Saw II*, where Jigsaw's motivation and philosophy are most comprehensively explored, "I've never murdered anyone in my life. The decisions are up to them." Whilst it probably wouldn't stand up in court, he is at least correct in his usual, carefully literal sense. The decisions, the choices, the selection of a potential, are in the hands of the subjects of his games and he only intervenes in order to keep the game within its rules so a decision can be reached. The subjects are faced with a shocking choice that forces them to acknowledge what Deleuze identifies as the virtual – that is, the unacknowledged aspects of our experience with reality. Gregory J. Seigworth observes that:

The virtual is perhaps easiest to consider as what transpires in those passing everyday moments that never really present themselves to our conscious minds, generally because such moments (in their various contexts and variable durations) arrive with insufficient force or otherwise descend with an intensity that is altogether dispersed or atmospheric.(7)

Challenged by Matthews, Jigsaw responds by representing the renewed awareness of life he achieved following the discovery of his inoperable brain tumour precisely through the virtual, those patches of life that emit such little intensity they can remain unacknowledged or unperceived in everyday life. "In a split second your world's cracked open.(8) You look at things differently. You smell things differently. You savour everything, be it a glass of water or a walk in the park."

Although never made explicit, it seems that John Kramer only embarked on his career as Jigsaw, orchestrating games to "test the fabric of human nature", after this traumatic revelation and, specifically, after he survived a subsequent suicide attempt. "My body had not been strong enough to repel cancer cells, yet I had lived through a plunge off a cliff," he explains to Matthews. This encounter with death is a transformative moment; more than 'John Kramer' flees from the side of the crashed, cracked car. Deleuze (writing with Guattari) notes how:

[W]hen we ascend toward the virtual, when we turn ourselves toward the virtuality that is actualised in the state of affairs, we discover a completely different reality where we no longer have to search for what takes place from one point to another, from one instant to another, because virtuality goes beyond any possible function. (9)

This, in effect, is the particular game that Jigsaw himself plays – one where the organism might be failing but the flow of desire succeeds and endures. Jigsaw might resort to discussing Darwin's "little trip to the Galapagos Islands" to provide a theoretical underpinning for his project and echo Nietzsche in talking of the will to survive, but this merely misdirects investigators and witnesses in the same way that the gruesome traps and freely-flowing gore earn him his unsettling serial-killer soubriquet.

Jigsaw's games are designed to crack open the world of their respective players: the challenges are nearly always relevant to the subject's lifestyle in a symbolic or literal way, bringing them to (painful) self-awareness, prompting a reappraisal of their squandered potential. Thus, Michael, the police informant, has to sacrifice an eye, while As Deleuze (a successful suicide) notes, "A life should not be contained in the simple moment when individual life confronts universal death. A life is everywhere, in all the moments a certain living subject passes through".(10) It is important to recognise that this also encompasses non-actualised moments, that is, potential moments that *may* occur but do not, the ripples within/alongside actualised moments that remain at the level of the virtual, of affect. Discussing this non-actualisation Colebrook comments that:

Affect is not the thing itself, for we only have things insofar as we (as sets of movements) are respondents to other movements [...] Thus affect is just that vibratory or felt movement that may or may not result in action [...] In order for there to be a self *that* decides or pictures its world there has to be some differentiation, and this is established through affect [...] It is only in *not* acting, in *not* expending energy but in 'absorbing' the force of the image, that something like a site of pooled energy as the reception of affect can be formed.(11)

In Jigsaw's game with Detective Matthews, his challenge is exactly this: *not* to act. The rules, simply and unequivocally, are that Matthews sits privately with Jigsaw away from his police colleagues and listens, 'absorbing' Jigsaw's conversation until the defined time is over. The distraction of another game being played on a series of monitors, with Matthews' son, Daniel, as one of the participants, is in fact part of Detective Matthews' game. The police assume – erroneously – that they are watching a live feed, but Daniel has already played his game. Eric Matthews' failure to heed Jigsaw's rules, his inability to listen on any level in favour of (forceful) action, is what condemns him not see his son Daniel again (who is released just as Jigsaw said he would be) and consigns Matthews to the same fate as Adam and Dr Gordon.

Pieces of the Puzzle

Just as Jigsaw's misunderstood instructions are partly a result of his misdirection, so the name 'Jigsaw Killer' is erroneously applied to John Kramer through the deliberate ambiguity of his actions. Jigsaw does not consider himself a killer, in the strict sense that he never personally commits an act of murder, he merely provides the open field where such an eventuality may occur. Indeed, he says to Lynn, the physician forced to keep him alive in *Saw III*, "I despise murderers", in a rare glimpse of intensity and personal opinion. Similarly, the police and the press misconstrue the practice of marking failed subjects by cutting a jigsaw piece from them. It is understood as an aesthetic impulse, acknowledging 'ownership' of the victim or culpability for the crime. Steven Jay Schneider, in *Dark Thoughts: Philosophic*

Reflections on Cinematic Horror, [2003] summarises horror films concerned with murder as artistic product or artistic performance.

With respect to the former trend, what matters most from an aesthetic point of view is the scene of the crime and/or whatever remains of the victim(s), rather than the motive, the *modus operandi*, or even the presence of the murderer. With respect to the latter trend, what matters most aesthetically speaking is precisely the contrary of this, namely the way in which the murderer goes about committing (i.e. 'performing') his crime. It is important to keep in mind however, that these trends are by no means mutually exclusive; many horror films play around with both of them, often in interesting and complementary ways.(12)

The jigsaw piece is read as a logo or stylised signature, announcing the product and identifying the killer behind the performance (or perhaps 'installation piece'). Detective Kerry, assigned to the Jigsaw serial slayings, and the obsessed near-victim Detective Tapp (Danny Glover), seem to understand the jigsaw mark as a vital clue, part of their inevitable procedural 'building' of the killer's profile, a progressive 'piecing together' of the puzzle of his identity. Jigsaw, however, is up to something quite different. As he explains to the inattentive Detective Mathews, "The jigsaw piece I cut from my subjects was only ever meant to be a symbol that that subject was missing something – a vital piece of the human puzzle – the survival instinct." Far from being a stamp of final approval, a post-(mortem)-script to the game, the jigsaw piece represents the admission of the subject's missing survival instinct, the corporeal body's non-relational or 'snagged' desire. Those marked with jigsaw pieces are the ones that got away, left inert, reduced to the zero intensity of death. It would seem strange that Jigsaw – surely the last figure ever to be deemed sentimental – should choose to extract this symbolic jigsaw piece from these subjects, except that Jigsaw is linguistically consistent in explaining how he 'takes' or 'cuts' the piece of skin. The jigsaw shape marking those who 'fail' is the adding of a subtraction – in effect, the removal of their inability, their unfulfilled potential or their lack – the excision that leaves the whole of the body that is not the closed, inert corporeal body but is, instead, the 'body-without-organs', that is, the nexus point where energy pools amid the flow and fold of forces and durations, existence beyond the living organism. Deleuze has various methods of explicating the 'body without organs', throughout his philosophical career (and in conjunction with Felix Guattari) but the consistent point is its nonorganic condition. "The body without organs is an affective, intensive, anarchist body that consists solely of poles, zones thresholds, and gradients. It is traversed by a powerful, nonorganic vitality."(13)

It's No Game

If it looks like a lack and smells like a lack it must be Lacanian. This is the point where Amanda gets it wrong, adopting "the cinematic theory inspired by Lacan, where the image on the screen stands in for, or covers over, that which we imagine as lost or lacking" (14) rather than adhering to Jigsaw's Deleuzian model. As Lacan states (in relation to Freud's Fort! Da! game), "the symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing, and this death constitutes in the subject the eternalization of his desire." (15) The subject's of Amanda's games, undertaken for Jigsaw, constitute only the throwing away, the discarding, (the Fort!). At the most basic level, Amanda does not allow chance or potential to interfere, only ever seeing Jigsaw's games as constitutive of the symbolic order, as an elaborate cover for staging the death of those who lack the survival instinct and thus do not deserve life – and her traps are truly elaborate. As

writer Leigh Whannell observes on the audio commentary for *Saw III*, "The traps themselves are slightly hyper-real. They look like props from a Nine Inch Nails video." Luridly lit, shown through rapid slices of jump-cut editing, the traps featured in the *Saw* films are frequently exaggerated feats of engineering if not 'hyper-real' but none more so than the spectacular, impressive and excessive trap that kills Detective Kerry.

Drenched in a necrotic green light, suspended in a space reminiscent of a chapel arch, Kerry's game seems to occur in *l'espace de l'entre-deux-morts* ('zone between-two-deaths') of mortal death and annihilation.(16) Having been kidnapped in her home by Amanda who is disguised in the pig mask, Kerry wakes to find herself locked in the 'Angel of Death' trap, the 'wings' of which are secured by pins through her ribs. She has to retrieve a key from a jar of acid to free herself yet when she successfully completes this the trap springs open anyway, effectively disembowelling her. Judged by the Billy doll as "dead on the inside" and keen to join the dead who constitute the "only family she has ever known", Kerry is presented with no chance of escape, no possibility of survival despite having proved her will to live. These wings kill, rather than offering the chance to fly to safety. It is through this that Amanda "rediscovers in negation a final triumph", in Lacan's phrase.(17) Yet Kerry's bloody demise, witnessed by Amanda dressed as Jigsaw, shares this zone with the 'second death' that is annihilation, the ending of the possibility of cyclical transformation or regeneration, for it is here that Jigsaw's intended heir-apparent confirms her unsuitability. Her success constitutes her failure.

Amanda's role as Jigsaw's protégé is, for him, the solution to the question he poses to Detective Matthews during their conversation: "What is the cure for cancer?" Jigsaw decides that the answer is to achieve immortality through a legacy, having a successor to continue with his work. The impulse is Deleuzian. Jigsaw remains calm, neutral and impassive throughout the *Saw* films (not least because of his terminal condition) yet his only express wish, concern or desire, is that his legacy is maintained – the work of testing the fabric of humanity should go on. 'Jigsaw' – as the intensive site of being, a locus of desire, the body-without-organs – can survive the death of the organism John Kramer. 'Jigsaw' can endure through Amanda.

Jigsaw's desire is not the same as that of Amanda, nor does she share his philosophy. As Lacan formulates desire, desire is always desire of/for/by the Other.(18) For Amanda, Jigsaw-as-signifier can only ever stand in the place of a vexatious and frustrating lack and it is this which locates Amanda in such a conflicted position – having given "every cell" of herself to Jigsaw she is only able to act in an imitative and repetitive way, a second, or understudy, in danger of being only slightly more useful than the Billy doll, waiting both for and against Jigsaw's inevitable and impending death.

The difficulty Amanda has in locating herself within the symbolic order is evident in the *dénouement* of *Saw III*. In a flashback scene she commits a mercy-killing of Adam and is then attacked by the maimed Eric Matthews. Her face running with blood from their fight (reminiscent of Jigsaw's blood mask as he lies prone throughout *Saw I*), Amanda walks away from the injured detective until he begins shouting after her that she's "nothing" and "you're not Jigsaw." These taunts are what provoke a response. In the present of *Saw III* Amanda confronts Lynn and Jigsaw whilst brandishing a gun, angry and jealous over Jigsaw's apparent fondness for the physician, demanding to know why Lynn is so important to him, complaining that Lynn is "nothing" and "worthless" and crying that she (Amanda) doesn't mean anything to Jigsaw. "Nothing", "not-Jigsaw" and "not important" become the signification closing in around

Amanda – yet her demand "Fix me, motherfucker," is a mimicking of Jigsaw's continual ambiguity of speech as it carries the implication of her past drug addiction before she knew Jigsaw. Even at such a critical moment, jostling a gun between the terrified Lynn and the terminal Jigsaw, Amanda's desire to identify with her mentor remains.

Having fired a shot which hits Lynn, Amanda is in turn shot in the neck by Jeff. It is then she learns that the games played by Lynn and Jeff have been covers screening Jigsaw's final game of all – one last chance for Amanda, an attempt to prove herself despite her mistakes. Lacan distinguishes between two differing formulations of chance or aleatoric event: *automaton* and *tyche*. *Automaton*, located in and determined by the symbolic order, is not strictly arbitrary, unlike *tyche*, which is a truly arbitrary incident irrupting from the Real.(19) Amanda's final mistake, her last throw of the die, is to disrupt the end of what she believes to be Lynn's game. Her attempt to "[perturb] the symbolic structure – the smooth running of *automaton*"(20) turns out to be nothing of the sort; the die is loaded and Amanda is still caught within the smooth running of Jigsaw's meticulous planning. Jigsaw tells her, "This was your test. Your game. I was testing *you*. I took you in, I selected you to [*sic*.] the honour of carrying on my life's work. But you didn't test anyone's will to live. Instead you took their only chance. Your games were unwinnable."

Unable to speak, Amanda can only reach out to Jigsaw, who in turn tries to reach out to her, both of them anticipating ("anticipation being, as Derrida has it, first of all a matter of hands"(21)) the death of the other. Importantly, they do not manage to touch; the gap between them is too great. Indeed, the only connection Amanda manages to make with Jigsaw is in the symbolic ordering of their deaths – and it is quite beyond her control. Jeff, 'forgiving' Jigsaw as he exacts his vengeance, takes the saw Lynn used to save Jigsaw's life and slashes him across the throat.

The frustrations of desire operate to produce Amanda as an exemplary Lacanian subject. While she can be read through the employment of Lacanian terms such as 'castration', 'Oepidus' and 'Name-of-the-Father', it seems less appropriate to do so in the light of the films' increasing concerns with the transference of an identity. Jigsaw is, in the first film, assumed to be hospital orderly Zep Hindle. The key misdirection is revealed at the end of the film with the resurrection of the 'corpse' which has lain between Adam and Gordon throughout. John Kramer, barely-glimpsed cancer patient of Dr Gordon, is revealed as Jigsaw.(22) *Saw III* continually implies the handing over of the mantle from John to Amanda as his cancer becomes increasingly debilitating. What seems to be consistent thematically through the Saw films is that 'Jigsaw' is a part for various players, an identity composed of pieces and despite John's preparations and Amanda's willingness it is a puzzle into which Amanda is, simply, unable to fit. Her addiction to drugs and her self-harming are 'helped' via the games she plays by something that proves to be far more pernicious, as Jigsaw comes to stand not as the object of her desire but the cause. Far from achieving a sense of self, status and stability through her role as Jigsaw's disciple, Amanda is not 'reborn' and ultimately loses her sense of identity.

Amanda is reduced to nothing or, as Matthews accurately and devastatingly phrases it, "not-Jigsaw." Amanda Young grows out of her original place of signification and cannot occupy the space she desires, nor can she regress to fit herself back into the position of the signifier 'Amanda'. The inevitable pressure of this untenable negativity is what causes Amanda's dissolution. Unable to express her desire for Jigsaw,

unable to be Jigsaw and ultimately unable to be, she is squeezed out of any position within the symbolic order and caught in a horror of a hollow point of signification — which is the subtlest trap of all.

- 1. Deleuze, Gilles, Cinema 1: The Movement Image (Athlone Press: London, 1986), 8.
- 2. Colebrook, Clare, Deleuze: A Guide for the Perplexed (Continuum: London, 2006), 20.
- 3. Deleuze, Cinema 1, 90.
- 4. Massumi, Brian in Patton, Paul (ed), Deleuze: A Critical Reader (Blackwell: Oxford, 1996), 226.
- 5. Worland, Rick, An Introduction to the Horror Film (Blackwell: Oxford, 2007), 8.
- 6. As is usually the case, Jigsaw's speech must be listened to carefully. Daniel is already in the room with them, hidden in the safe.
- 7. Seigworth, Gregory, in Stivale, Charles (ed) *Gilles Deleuze Key Concepts* (Acumen: Chesham, 2005), 163.
- 8. "To paraphrase Deleuze and Guattari: like an egg as it cracks open, affect flees on all of its sides at once." [Seigworth, *Key Concepts*, 160]
- 9. Deleuze, Gilles & Guattari, Felix What Is Philosophy? (Verso: London, 1994), 157.
- 10. Deleuze, Gilles in Khalfa, Jean (ed), *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Gilles Deleuze* (Continuum: London, 1999), 172.
- 11. Colebrook, Guide, 54.
- 12. Schneider, Steven Jay and Shaw, Daniel (eds), *Dark Thoughts: Philosophic Reflections on Cinematic Horror* (Scarecrow Press: Oxford, 2003), 179.
- 13. Deleuze, Gilles, Essays Critical & Clinical (Verso: London, 1998), 131.
- 14. Colebrook, Guide, 42.
- 15. Lacan, Jacques, Écrits: A Selection (Tavistock Publications: London, 1977), 104.
- 16. Evans, Dylan, *An Introductory Dictionary Of Lacaninan Psychoanalysis* (Routledge: London, 1996), 31.
- 17. Lacan, *Écrits*, 104.
- 18. See Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis among various other sources.
- 19. Evans, Introduction, 24.

- 20. Zizek, Slavoj, Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid To Ask Hitchcock) (Verso: London, 1996), 230.
- 21. Pelko, Stefan in Zizek, Everything, 111.
- 22. On the table across John's hospital bed is a sketch of one of his traps, which suggests that John returned to hospital after his suicide bid.

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Filmography

Saw James Wan director. Leigh Whannell writer. (2004) Lionsgate Films

Saw II Darren Lynne Bousman director. Leigh Whannell & Darren Lynn Bousman writers. (2005) Lionsgate Films

Saw III Darren Lynne Bousman director. Leigh Whannell writer. (2006) Lionsgate Films