

***Jigsaw*: Torture Porn Rebooted?**

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After a seven-year hiatus, ‘just when you thought it was safe to go back to the cinema for Halloween’ (Croot 2017), the *Saw* franchise returned. Critics overwhelmingly disapproved of franchise’s reinvigoration, and much of that dissent centred around a label that is synonymous with *Saw*: ‘torture porn’. Numerous critics pegged the original *Saw* (2004) as torture porn’s prototype (see Lidz 2009, *Canberra Times* 2008). Accordingly, critics such as Lee (2017) characterised *Jigsaw*’s release as heralding an unwelcome ‘torture porn comeback’. This chapter will investigate the legitimacy of this concern in order to determine what ‘torture porn’ is and means in the *Jigsaw* era.

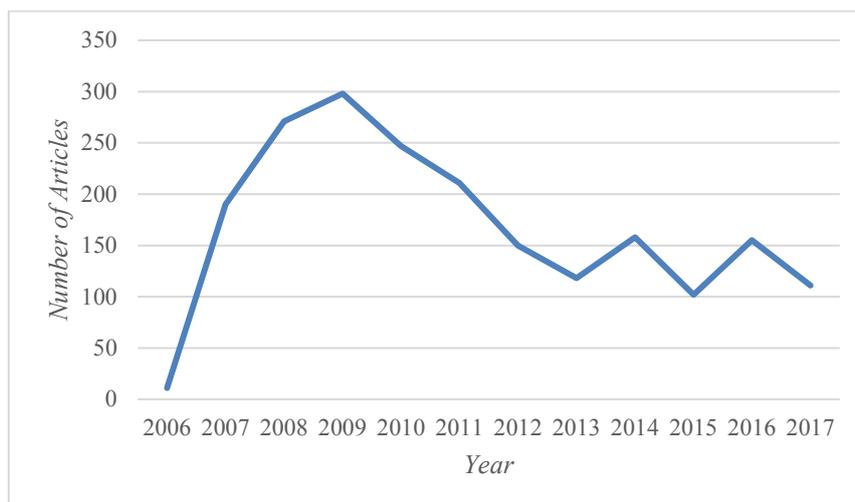
‘Torture porn’ originates in press discourse. The term was coined by David Edelstein (2006), but its implied meanings were entrenched by its proliferation within journalistic film criticism (for a detailed discussion of the label’s development and its implied meanings, see Jones 2013). On examining the films brought together within the press discourse, it becomes apparent that ‘torture porn’ is applied to narratives made after 2003 that centralise abduction, imprisonment, and torture. These films focus on protagonists’ fear and/or pain, encoding the latter in a manner that seeks to ‘inspire trepidation, tension, or revulsion for the audience’ (Jones 2013, 8).

The press discourse was not principally designed to delineate a subgenre however. Rather, it allowed critics to disparage popular horror movies. Torture porn films – according to their detractors – are comprised of violence without sufficient narrative or character development (see McCartney 2007, Slotek 2009). The label allowed critics to posit that various horror films adhered to a shared set of values and a narrative formula. Indeed, critics typically presented individual films and filmmakers as a collective, as if each were intending to ‘out-do’ another by intensifying the amount of gory violence displayed within each film (see Johnson 2007, Puig 2009), and by aiming to shock audiences who allegedly treat cinema-going as a masochistic endurance test (see Billson 2008, Hare 2010, Hill 2007). Torture porn films have been presented as ‘shoddy ... lazy’ examples of filmmaking (Nelson 2010; see also Tookey 2007). Even more damningly, torture porn films have been deemed altogether ‘pointless’ (Cumming 2010, Muir 2010) and ‘meritless’ (Ordoná 2010) by some critics.

These attacks illustrate that critics were affronted by torture porn, or (more precisely) by its presence in the mainstream multiplex context. It appears that critics were intentionally aiming to drive torture porn out of that context. Notably, the films described (and decried) as torture porn were distributed theatrically (Jones 2013, 14). Few critics expressed concerns about the availability of torture porn on DVD, or the continued release of direct-to-VOD torture porn films. This is unsurprising given that press critics typically focus on cinematic releases rather than the home-viewing context. By pushing torture porn out of the multiplex, critics would no longer have to review films that they (evidently) found distasteful. That agenda is evident in recent responses to torture porn, including Smith’s (2017) admission that enduring ‘the extremes of *Hostel* and *Saw*’ was ‘the most challenging part of [her] otherwise rewarding job as a film critic’, and Lee’s (2017) disgruntlement that

‘the hardest’ horror is usually relegated to ‘the periphery’, but was ‘on wide release’ in the *Saw* franchise’s hey-day. Lee’s explicit denouncement of *Jigsaw* as a return ‘of ultra-violence that’s long been pushed back to the realm of the video nasty’ demonstrates his support for the critic’s ostensible role as guardian of mainstream cultural sensibilities.

Having supposedly defeated torture porn once before by seeing off the *Saw* franchise in 2010, critics such as Lee seek to hinder a resurgence of multiplex torture porn before it recurs. Indeed, Lee’s article used *Jigsaw* as an excuse to describe ‘why the horror genre doesn’t need a torture porn comeback’, prior to *Jigsaw*’s release. This prejudicial assessment of *Jigsaw* exemplifies a problem with torture porn discourse more broadly; torture porn’s detractors routinely ignore filmic content in favour of ill-evidenced, hyperbolic claims. To illustrate, numerous commentators exaggeratedly posited that torture porn was a transient fad (see Kenny in Johnson 2007, Monahan 2010), suggesting that torture porn was always-already ‘over’ (see Barnes 2009, Safire 2007, Mundell 2008). *Saw*’s return threatens to dispel that story, even if some critics strive to maintain that notion in their responses to *Jigsaw*; *The New Zealand Herald* (2017) claims that *Jigsaw* is unnecessary because ‘horror has evolved beyond torture porn’, for instance. Moreover, torture porn did not decline to such an extent that a ‘comeback’ would be necessary. Although torture porn may have been less visible in the multiplex since 2010, it certainly has not vanished from press discourse or the filmic landscape. In 2017 alone, numerous theatrical releases have been referred to as torture porn in press reviews, including *Detroit* (see Semley 2017), *Eyes of My Mother* (see Potton 2017a), *Killing Ground* (see O’Sullivan 2017, Jaworowski 2017), and *mother!* (see Nashawaty 2017). Indeed, contrary to long-standing journalistic claims that torture porn has been ‘over’ since 2007, press use of the term in major English-language world publications peaked in 2009, but has not dipped below 100 uses per year since the term was instituted in late 2006.



[Figure 1]: ‘Torture Porn’ use in Major World English-language Publications (data source: Nexis UK)

This data only accounts for cases in which the label itself is used. Since torture porn is a pejorative discourse, it is only applied to films that critics seek to disparage. Thus, films that

fit into the category but which do not affront critics are described using alternative terms. Occasionally, there is slippage; films such as *Hounds of Love* have been valorised for not being torture porn (Stratton 2017). Yet it is unclear why *Hounds of Love* – in which a young woman is abducted, spends most of the film tied to a bed, and is sexually abused by her male captor – does not match the prevailing (mis)assessment that torture porn is ‘a cinematic genre in which women are bound, gagged, [and] raped’ (Kingston 2007, see also Orange 2009).

Jigsaw certainly fulfils the essential criteria journalists used to categorise torture porn movies. Protagonists are abducted, chained up, and told to ‘confess their sins’ under physical duress. In that sense, the sustained ordeal they face could be termed torture. The film follows those protagonists, centralising their fear and emotional reactions. Since *Jigsaw* is a horror film, the situation is encoded with the apparent intention of leveraging protagonists’ emotional responses to generate related emotive reactions in its audience. The latter is associated with salacious gratuity (‘porn’) in torture porn discourse (see Jones 2013, 78-80, 129).

Although *Jigsaw* broadly fits the torture porn mould, it deviates from the series’ established characteristics in numerous ways. The series has traditionally played with narrative space and time (Jones 2010). While *Jigsaw*’s twist relies on a temporal sleight-of-hand (revealing that the main game occurred ten years prior to the narrative present), the individual game-stages are not marked by the countdown timers that are among the series’ core leitmotifs. The industrial settings synonymous with John Kramer’s traps are also absent, having been replaced with an agricultural backdrop. Although these shifts are explained via the plot-twist – the main games are Kramer’s first-run, so he has not yet established his *modus operandi* – the shift also changes the series’ established aesthetic. The exaggerated primary-hued lighting that graced the series’ shadowy industrial buildings is replaced by a well-lit, neutral palette. The rapid editing that conveyed protagonists’ panic in prior episodes is absent from *Jigsaw*. These differences are arguably intended to help relaunch the series anew (see the directors’ comments in Quinn 2017). Regardless, they are indicative of discrepancies between *Jigsaw* and the franchise’s earlier chapters, rather than a shift away from torture porn’s tropes.

Many critics ignore these modifications in favour of erroneous presumptions about the series, however. Disregarding the overt alterations delineated above, Lazic (2017) posits that *Jigsaw* ‘seems to consciously adopt a retro, mid-noughties horror movie aesthetic’, for example. Gleiberman’s (2017) claim that *Jigsaw* ‘opens, as any *Saw* movie must, in an intensely art-directed enclosed space, with its human guinea pigs trapped, shackled, and terrified’ is patently untrue; *Jigsaw* opens with a police chase across a city, making it the only *Saw* film apart from *Saw IV* (which opens with Kramer’s autopsy) not to open with distressed protagonists in an enclosed environment. Rather than demonstrating that *Jigsaw* is a ‘Facile Reboot of a Gruesome, Facile Franchise’ (Yoshida 2017), such comments suggest that the critical discourse itself is a lazy retread of the accusations allayed at the franchise’s

previous episodes.¹ Indeed, many critics rehash previous complaints that torture porn exists (as most films do) to turn a profit (see Lacey 2009, Fern 2008, Collins in Di Fonzo 2007), suggesting that ‘sheer cash-grab cynicism’ is the sole explanation for *Saw*’s reinvigoration (Clarke 2017, see also Scheck, 2017).

Where critics notice how *Jigsaw* has changed over time, they focus on what was presumed to be torture porn’s defining characteristic; gory violence. However, the responses are intriguing. Clarke (2017) bemoans that *Jigsaw* offers ‘no shock, no horror’ resulting in a ‘tame’ film; Lui (2017) terms *Jigsaw* ‘more teen-friendly’ than its predecessors, and is disappointed because he ‘enjoy[s] a good squirm’. These criticisms suggest not only that the reviewers expected shocking gore (based on prior critical assessments of *Saw* and torture porn), but also that they were aggrieved by its absence. That is, the very trait reviewers previously objected to is now longed for. When Potton (2017b) declares that this new *Saw* film is ‘really not very scary this time’, it seems to be a half-hearted admittance that the previous entries’ directors – who stood accused of relying on violence and failing to scare (see Robey 2007) – knew what they were doing after all. Either way, it appears as if *Jigsaw*’s creators were doomed to critical failure because it was destined to be measured against ‘torture porn’, a label generated and imposed by the critical press in the first instance. Thus, *Jigsaw* was *a priori* damned for supposedly adhering to torture porn’s facets and condemned for deviating from that established paradigm.

Whether such denouncing will make much difference to the ostensibly entwined fates of the *Saw* franchise and torture porn is another matter. Although critics present their views as representing and speaking to most cinema-goers, *Jigsaw* – the eighth part of an established series – was unlikely to appeal that widely; rather it was likely to attract a core fanbase. The latter is mischaracterized in reviews of *Jigsaw* (and in responses to torture porn more broadly). Various critics proclaim that torture porn’s ‘violent set-pieces’ are sufficient to attract fans (Yoshida 2017, see also Scheck 2017), ‘who’ve come to regard empathy as a snowflake emotion’ (Gleiberman 2017), and who seek to slake their ‘thirst for blood’ by watching such films (Lazic 2017). These insults illustrate two pernicious aspects of ‘torture porn’ discourse. First, fans are disparaged along with the films, suggesting that anyone who enjoys a supposedly ‘bad’ film is also a ‘bad’ person (for more detail, see Jones 2013, 46-8). Second, critics’ condemnation of alleged fan responses is meant to signal the gulf between the two perspectives, with fan responses being found inadequate. However, that strategy also underscores that critics do not understand why fans find these films appealing (thereby undermining the claims made about what fans think).²

The *Saw* series did decline in profitability between 2004-2010, but to suggest that ‘the series lost its appeal’ because ‘[e]ach film would need to be crueller than the last...and eventually this became tiresome’ (Lee 2017) is to misrepresent the series’ narrative progression. The ongoing story was pitched towards a core fanbase rather than a crossover audience. For example, Leigh Whannell (2008) declares that he wrote *Saw III* ‘for the fans’, refusing to ‘pander to...people who haven’t seen the previous’ episodes, even if it meant the latter

¹ *Saw*’s critics routinely recycle their complaints. Notably, the *Daily Record*’s review of *Saw VI* (2009) purloins their *Saw V* (2009) review, superficially restructuring verbatim self-plagiarised phrases, while simultaneously accusing the series of ‘diminishing returns’.

² Fan responses are more articulate about *Jigsaw*’s failings; see, for example, Adlakha 2017.

'have a lot of trouble following' the sequels or even find them 'completely mystifying'. Up until *Jigsaw*,³ the sequels excluded casual viewers, including those critics who were not sufficiently versed in the ongoing narrative (Jones 2010, 225). Resultantly, it is unsurprising that the franchise declined in profitability over time; if one missed *Saw III*, one was unlikely to return for *Saw IV* (or, being baffled by its story, would be less likely to return for *Saw V*). This also helps to explain why critics perceived the *Saw* series as emphasising 'gory' over 'story': critics may have been tasked with reviewing one sequel in isolation, and so may not have been able to follow its plot.

Moreover then, the fanbase predominantly drove Lionsgate's decisions about whether to produce more sequels; while critics pass judgement in words, fans vote with cash. The insults aimed at fans in reviews speak to this underlying reality. Each *Saw* sequel was condemned in the press (see *Canberra Times* 2008; Anderson 2009; Croot 2017), yet the series accrued over \$980m (unadjusted, worldwide) in return for an estimated \$75m combined production budget (*The Numbers* 2017). *Saw's* future is based on whether *Jigsaw* turns a sufficient profit, not critics' opinions. *Saw's* success thus underlines the futility of reviewers' proclamations more generally.

If *Jigsaw* leads to a wider reinvigoration of torture porn in the multiplex setting, horror fans could take the opportunity to embrace 'torture porn', thereby debunking notions that horror films are 'brainless' (Mumford 2017) or 'concocted by and for people with a teenage boy's grasp of morality and human nature' (Yoshida 2017). By replicating 'torture porn's' pejorative connotations, horror fans reproduce a discourse that was founded on disparaging the genre and those who find it appealing. Buying cinema tickets to see torture porn films flags that critics' insults are impotent. Co-opting 'torture porn' as an acceptable subgenre label would be a powerful additional step towards legitimating horror despite those derogatory voices.

³ *Jigsaw's* separation from the series' prior events is its central weakness. This deviation may alienate the core fanbase. Although its title masks *Jigsaw's* status as a seventh sequel, a remake of the original would be more likely to reach a crossover demographic.

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