

***Jigsaw*, dir. Michael Spierig, Peter Spierig** (Lionsgate, 2017)

Finality is a concept the implications of which the horror genre seems to have blissfully disavowed when developing sequels. Studios have learned to contend with the inescapable fact that, although everything ends, a franchise's lifespan can be prolonged by injecting a little creative adrenaline to revitalise even the most ailing brands. Narratively, it is possible to exhaust many conventional storytelling possibilities before a property changes form, such as when the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise (1984-2010) moved firmly into experimental meta-territory with *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994) after *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (1991). The term 'final' can also signal the onset of a crossover phase where similar properties team up for a showdown, as in *Lake Placid vs Anaconda* (2015) following *Lake Placid: The Final Chapter* (2012). Others are satisfied to ignore continuity and proceed unabated; slasher legend Jason Voorhees, for example, has twice bid farewell to audiences in the same established canon with *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>: The Final Chapter* (1984) and *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday* (1993). Perhaps most amusingly guilty of having to navigate this challenge is the *Final Destination* franchise (2000-11). In a series built around the idea of finality, the conclusively titled *The Final Destination* screened in 2009, yet reneged on its promise, as *Final Destination 5* (2011) arrived only two years later.

Thus, following *Saw: The Final Chapter* (2010), comes *Jigsaw* (2017), the eighth instalment in the long running torture-porn series (2004-17) now explicitly named after its titular villain. *Jigsaw* is the first entry to be directed by the Spierig brothers, whose filmography includes vampire escapade *Daybreakers* (2009) and the underrated time-travel mystery *Predestination* (2014). This latest addition to the *Saw* franchise is the first after a seven-year hiatus, largely due to the waning popularity of the sub-genre, in conjunction with the rise of the *Paranormal Activity* series (2009-15), which usurped its long-held throne at the Halloween box office. To mark the tenth anniversary of *Saw* (2004), the original was re-released into cinemas in 2014, providing a barometer to gauge the appetite for the return of torture porn – it bombed spectacularly. Nonetheless, as it remains a familiar and lucrative multimedia artefact – even boasting its own rollercoaster ride in Thorpe Park in Surrey – it was inevitable that a new movie would eventually surface.

*Jigsaw* emerges during a renaissance for horror, exemplified by the overwhelmingly positive critical reception of Andy Muschietti's adaptation of Stephen King's *It* (2017) and Jordan Peele's subversive racial commentary, the Academy-Award winning *Get Out* (2017). Hence, *Jigsaw* is somewhat out of place, as torture porn came to prominence in a cultural

climate dominated by heightened fears of terrorism post-9/11, and capitalises on the moral outrage cultivated by the Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib scandals. The *Saw* variety of excessive visual sadism now feels at odds with the ultra-low-budget but high-tension premises of recent hits like *Don't Breathe* (2016). *Jigsaw* circumvents any potential friction that may be caused in trying to reconcile these two extremes, by opting to uphold its identity, albeit with some slight amendments, rather than force an adherence to fashionable cinematic trends.

Picking up ten years after the death of John Kramer aka Jigsaw (Tobin Bell), the film sees Det. Halloran (Callum Keith Rennie) trying to solve a wave of homicides that suggest that Kramer has risen from the grave and is playing games once more. Two forensic specialists – straight-edged army veteran Logan Nelson (Matt Passmore), and edgy Kramer enthusiast Eleanor Bonneville (Hannah Emily Anderson) – assist in examining the increasing number of casualties, each raising suspicions that they may be involved in the murders. The game in question takes place in a barn, where five rivals are warned they must confess their sins to gain freedom from the traps.

The return of Kramer is teased, but handled predictably enough using a plot device comparable to that employed in *Saw II* (2005), in which past- and present-day stories run concurrently to mislead the audience. In doing so, it plays on viewers' knowledge of previous instalments, while jettisoning some of their less-credible scenarios. While the franchise routinely calls for the suspension of disbelief, it would be highly implausible to accept that Jigsaw could orchestrate his own autopsy, as depicted in *Saw IV* (2007). This is a wise business decision, as Lionsgate could have substantially undone the remaining consumer goodwill by legitimately resurrecting Jigsaw and undermining whatever developments cinemagoers would be willing to abide at this stage in the story. Ultimately, during the film's climax, it is revealed that the baton (saw?) has been passed, and Nelson has assumed Jigsaw's mantle.

The new film is reasonably successful in terms of negotiating this transition. In Nelson's closing monologue, we learn that it was he who, as a medical resident a decade beforehand, mixed up Kramer's X-rays, hampering an early cancer diagnosis. As punishment for this transgression, Nelson was placed in Jigsaw's very first game. However, excusing this mistake, Kramer shows mercy and adopts Nelson as his student. Nelson concludes his speech by declaring that Halloran's criminal informant Edgar Munsen (Josiah Black) was responsible for killing Nelson's wife, and promises to avenge others failed by the detective.

*Jigsaw* therefore confers Nelson with several of his mentor's attributes, such as suffering from a family bereavement and an encounter with mortality – this time cleverly portrayed through his detention and torture in Fallujah. Nelson's occupations are testament to strong screenwriting, as they immediately imbue him with history, experience, and motivation, as well as neatly granting him the practical skills and personality traits necessary to facilitate the smooth exchange of *Jigsaw*'s quintessential qualities to a younger leading man.

As *Jigsaw*/*Jigsaw*, both brand and villain, seek to forge a new identity after a period of extended absenteeism, the depiction of Nelson in this way is apt. Like the tool, the brand has dulled and is in need of renewal, but more critically, the soldier is himself a political tool, instrumental in implementing foreign policy – in this case, in dismantling the tyrannical regime in Iraq. Following his tour of duty overseas, Nelson continues to shoulder the burden of this labour, referring to himself as a 'broken man'. Despite reconstruction and reunification, his self-identity is still fragmented, physically illustrated through the scars on his back from enduring *Jigsaw*'s trap. Thematically, the film nods here towards national anxieties surrounding the figure of the returning serviceman, as Nelson murders his fellow citizens on US soil, drawing uncomfortable parallels with Oklahoma-City bomber Timothy McVeigh.

This is not to say that the franchise is completely overhauled; the spellbinding Tobin Bell brings his usual commanding presence to his brief appearance, which allows for the bulk of the screen time to focus on the new faces of the *Saw* franchise. Kramer's rhetoric exhibits a godlike vigilantism as he vows to ensure that the 'sins against the innocent are atoned for', positioning himself as a liberator through hostility as he demands a 'blood sacrifice', pledging 'salvation' in what captive Ryan (Paul Braunstein) describes as a 'fucked up confessional'. In one unsettling instance, the prisoners are dragged from one room to another chained by shackles around their necks, only to realise they are to be hanged unless they admit their misdeeds. Here, *Jigsaw* acts as if he were a divine judge, jury, and executioner, espousing a retributive ideology anchored by its own ethical code. Accordingly, *Jigsaw*'s ubiquity resonates through the slogans on the film's one-sheet advertisements, which state that he is 'everything', 'everyone', and 'everywhere'. The diversity with which his followers are represented on the posters confirms how the scope and reach of his message infiltrates a broad cross-section of society, with their shared duty being succinctly communicated in a short promotional clip exclaiming 'we all have a part to play'. Tellingly, each devotee dons a

pig's head disguise to carry out their mission in secrecy, in a costuming that evokes the Guy-Fawkes mask of international hacktivist group Anonymous.

*Jigsaw* also extends the series' constant self-revisionism, which promotes multiple viewings. While one could argue that these elaborations are overly contrived, they do serve to enrich the characters by encouraging further consideration of their *raisons d'être* – but only up to a point. Minor addendums to the *Saw* universe's lore are now diluting the central conflict of the Kramer character. This is particularly evident during a flashback sequence centring on Mitch (Mandela Van Peebles), a young man who sold Kramer's nephew a defective motorcycle that caused a fatal accident. The scene is conducted in a perfunctory way, and this additional information seems unnecessarily tacked on. It is also extremely jarring to get such an eleventh-hour plot point, especially documenting specific biographical events that inform the primary character's life experience and ultimate criminality, particularly considering that the catalyst for Kramer to begin his 'work' was his surviving a suicide attempt, as was clearly outlined all the way back in *Saw II*.

The other main protagonists are, to a certain extent, stock characters, but are reasonably well drawn. Halloran's red sports car and casual chauvinism, for example, easily endow him with the swagger of a crooked-cop type, as he admires Eleanor's 'great ass', refers to her as 'sweetheart', and asks if she is one of those 'kinky types'. While it would have been intriguing to pit him against *Saw*'s other principal foe, Mark Hoffman, sadly Rennie's greatest battle is maintaining a convincing American accent, his Canadian inflection sporadically breaking through. Classic characters like Dr Gordon fail to appear, and Kramer's ex-wife Jill Tuck only gets a passing mention; however, the film preserves and explains some key *Saw* markers, such as how Nelson recreates *Jigsaw*'s audio recordings by digitally splicing sound files together. This rationale sustains the property's brand recognition and informs the inclusion of other identifiable signifiers, including the infamous hacksaw and Billy doll – one can't help but sense the market research at play here.

Nonetheless, for this 'soft' reboot to succeed, it must also demonstrate evidence of modernisation. From the introductory credits, the film announces itself as an update, with a revamped 3-D logo, as well as a techno variation on Charlie Clouser's (ex-NIN) sinister theme tune. *Jigsaw* further enhances its world with advanced technology, for example when Bonneville uses a laser to remove a bucket from a cadaver's head, leading to the recovery of a flash drive – because Dictaphone tapes are so *Saw IV*. This welcome change confirms that *Saw* has finally begun to progress to the next phase of industrial evolution, as the use of

cassettes and CRT televisions, although effective in generating a creepy atmosphere, seemed dated even throughout the series' initial run. The decline in the use of such outmoded items highlights *Jigsaw*'s place within a horror landscape in which the restored popularity of retro culture in film (in, for example, Muschietti's work) and indeed on television with throwback hit *Stranger Things* (2016-present) reigns supreme.

That said, considering that the franchise is famed for its grisly violence, the traps in *Jigsaw* are mostly lacklustre watered-down affairs, featuring common elements such as poison and circular saws. One notable exception sees Mitch and Anna (Laura Vandervoort) locked in a filling grain silo, implying they will be buried alive, only for it to transpire that it will immobilise them as knives and garden tools are rained in from above, delivering an imaginative twist. Unfortunately, for these incidents to produce any dramatic impact, the audience must be emotionally invested in the people involved. This, indeed, is one of *Jigsaw*'s foremost shortcomings, as the players are essentially forgettable cannon fodder. This is in contrast to Adam and Dr Gordon in the original, where the entire film hinged on deftly shifting audience allegiances by drip feeding details of their backstories. Even the outcome of Anna and Ryan's decisive confrontation, during which a crucial choice is supposedly made, is a damp squib. Traditionally, the major spectacle is reserved for the finale, and here the brutal head split is certainly impressive, redeeming the film somewhat on this score, as the bloodshed to this point is tame when compared with the nauseating heights of *Saw III* (2006), *Saw IV*, or *Saw: The Final Chapter*.

Overall, visually, *Jigsaw* disappoints. Lacking the grimy gloss of its predecessors, the decidedly clean register detracts from the action to such a degree that the captives' performances resemble the dress rehearsal of a high-value community-theatre production. Likewise, the game's barn setting looks cheap and artificial, with its brightly lit open plan exposing the relatively low budget, instead of disguising it. This uninspired set design is especially conspicuous during the final scene, when Nelson and Halloran must activate controls before them to escape from their restraints – the red buttons and green arrows seem to simplify the control's functionality and spoon-feed the viewer. The choreography of the opening police chase is equally unimaginative, culminating in Munsen's car crashing through yellow water-filled barrels, a feature more at home in 1994's hi-octane thriller *Speed*. Equally, the explosion of Ryan's friend's car in a flashback feels staged; the viewer can all too easily picture the pyrotechnicians just off screen. The use of rapid-fire crime-scene photos that peppered the original movies is also missing, depriving the spectator of this customary

graphic embellishment. Tonally, the unremarkable cinematography and generic set pieces give the film's presentation at best a made-for-TV aesthetic, or at worst a *Scary Movie* (2000-13) interpretation of *Saw*.

To conclude, *Jigsaw* is a studio-mandated franchise revival, engineered to complete a checklist of pre-ordained narrative beats, and, as such, plays out like a montage of *Saw*'s most memorable moments. Regrettably, the creativity shown in the Spierig brothers' earlier work has been curtailed, likely succumbing to pressure to adhere to the business plan for a prized product. The real litmus test for the health of the *Saw* franchise will be found in a sequel, should it materialise – this could help establish the direction of a new saga, possibly re-incorporating Dr Gordon and Hoffman further down the line, with Bonneville likely to assume a role akin to that of faithful apprentice Amanda Young. Future instalments would benefit from moving beyond philosophical enquiries into survival, immortality, forgiveness, and obsession found in earlier entries, to investigating weightier socio-economic themes, as accomplished by the surprisingly provocative *Saw VI* (2009), which explores the method by which insurance companies determine a customer's eligibility for cover.

Encouragingly, *Jigsaw* seems cognisant of such global matters, tentatively acknowledging the zeitgeist for collective social activism with its marketing. Similarly, the film recognises the worldwide fiscal downturn by penalising those who embody the precariousness involved in securing domestic space, as Ryan owns up to having 'sold bad mortgages'. Should the franchise more fully realise its potential in this regard, and frame the torture against backdrops of other pertinent social problems, perhaps scrutinising political divides, religious tensions, and class inequalities, it might be a while before we see *Jigsaw: The Final Chapter*.

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