See, Seeing, Seen, Saw: A Phenomenology of Ultra-Violent Cinema

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Abstract. Vivian Sobchack claims in *Carnal Thoughts* that human bodies are continually remade by the "technologies of photography, cinema, and the electronic media" (2004, 135). One such sphere of contemporary media that continuously redefines the notion of the human body is horror cinema. The recent advent of so-called 'gorenography,' spearheaded by James Wan and Leigh Whannel's *Saw* (2004), issues conceptual and philosophical challenges to the presentation and conceptualization of the phenomenal body. Following in the scope of frameworks advanced by both Sobchack and Jennifer Barker this paper aims to explore how the body of the *Saw* series is constructed and how it emulates both the conceptualized bodies of its viewers and the state of modern information flow in a technological age. It will be argued that the *Saw* series not only recognises viewers' enjoyment of its genre conventions but also acknowledges and manipulates their engagement with the film as a phenomenological object through which a sense of re-embodiment can be enacted.

Keywords: Leigh Whannel: *Saw* (2004), phenomenology, "gorenography," ultra-violent cinema.

Amanda Young (Shawnee Smith) is led into a police interview room. She sits at the table, her head and shoulders shaking, twitching, as her eyes flit restlessly. Despite the eye-line shot taken by the camera Amanda does not meet its gaze. A non-diegetic soundtrack looms in the background, quietly at first with a steady, monotone timbre. Chiaroscuro lighting emphasises the contours of Amanda's face as the camera slowly zooms to a close-up and stark cheekbones draw one's gaze to the angry bruising at the corners of her mouth. The shot cuts harshly, contrasting light and shade created by the chiaroscuro lighting is replaced by green-filtered harsh light reminiscent of flashbulb after-images. The camera performs a fast arc around a soft-focused scene punctuated by pools of green-tinted hard light. The disorientation created by this movement is halted starkly

as the camera rests upon a close-up of Amanda, her eyes double framed by the screen and the mechanical apparatus that obscures the bottom half of her face; clearly unconscious. The few seconds of stillness allow the prominent features of the scene to be assessed: the framed eyes and the hard, dark metal surrounding them. As she arouses to consciousness the camera once again arcs around the restrained figure but this time the arc is disrupted; dissected and reassembled out of order. Amanda rolls her burdened head counter to the camera movement as the velocity of the arc increases. The juxtaposition of the camera arc and Amanda's lolling head create the illusion of frenzied movement, a dizzying effect. And then it stops. The scene is perfectly still as something off-screen catches Amanda's attention. The shot/reverse-shot technique reveals a television set buzzing to life, the profile of a ventriloquist's dummy flickering silently. Amanda turns to face the television; the dummy turns to face Amanda and the viewer now turns to watch this exchange very closely indeed. As the dummy explains Amanda's predicament both scenes – Amanda on the cinema screen and the dummy on the television set – remain still and silent except for the movement of Amanda's twitching head, the dummy's mechanical chin and the ever-louder pulsing, non-diegetic soundtrack. The dummy finishes his monologue, the television screen gives way to green-tinted static and Amanda slowly turns her head. She looks first directly into camera, combining for a split second the inter- and extra-diegetic gaze, and then further to her right to present the viewer with a perfect profile of the apparatus she is wearing. Suddenly, and with much urgency, the low pulsing soundtrack makes way for industrial rock beats. The camera resumes its fast arc, the scene around which it revolves distorted by both soft focus and the digital simulation of under-cranking the camera, as Amanda struggles wildly. The disorderly movement of the camera and the speeding up of Amanda's movement, together with the heavy soundtrack recreate the discomfort of the cinematic viewer as they are forcibly drawn into reciprocating the sense of panic which emanates from the screen before them. The kinetic energy created is once again immediately dissipated as all motion, Amanda's, the camera's, and the soundtrack's, ceases. Amanda stands up, triggering the pin to the apparatus she wears and the sound of a ticking clock, echoed in the bright, wide eyes that are shown in extreme close up, fills the screen. A few seconds of ticking and then panic resumes: the camera returns to its fast, disjointed arc, Amanda's struggles are shown in double-time and the arc gets faster and faster. Finally, in a frenzy of circling the screen goes to whiteout and the shot cuts to the low-key lit police interview room as Amanda opens her eyes.

By Halloween 2004 this shot sequence had begun to amass some of the infamy that now renders it one of the most iconic scenes in contemporary American cinema. The combination of low key lighting, lingering close ups of injuries, disorientating movement from both the camera and on screen characters and a peculiar stop-start rhythm all contribute to what was to become a defining feature of James Wan and Leigh Whannel's (2004) franchise.[1] In this short sequence, with barely any physical movement or narrative development and counterpointed with a kinetic editing rhetoric, the film brings together elements of *mise-en-scène* and technical form in a way that encourages what Laura Marks refers to as 'a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image' (Marks 2002, 3) that brings the viewing body and phenomena viewed into direct contact. Rather than proposing identification with the contents of the film, through the traditional methods of identification with either camera or character, it is the form and presentation of the images themselves that takes precedence. At the heart of the *Saw* series lies a partial inversion of voyeuristic spectatorship that hinges upon the intensely sensory and embodied nature of contemporary cinematic techniques: viewers of these films do not just watch the destruction of human bodies but also the deconstruction of the traditional viewing position.

Marks defines haptic perception as a 'combination of tactile, kinaesthetic, and proprioceptive' stimuli that define our interaction with objects (Marks 2003, 2). Haptic images can, therefore, be considered as images that encourage multisensory

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1   In this essay *Saw* (2004) and its six sequels, released at one yearly intervals to both the US and European markets the week before Halloween until *Saw VII: The Final Chapter* (2010), will be approached as a series rather than individual films. While *Saw* (2004) was the only release specifically under the direction of James Wan and Leigh Whannel, being developed from their 2003 short film of the same name, they retain executive directorship of the franchise throughout. Additionally, following the success of the initial release producers Gregg Hoffman, Mark Burg, and Oren Koules formed Twisted Pictures; the company was subsequently awarded a nine-film deal with Lionsgate, six of which were *Saw* sequels. Members of the production staff on the initial releases, including film editor Kevin Greutert and production designer David Hackl, would go on to direct the later installments of the series. As a result of the continuity in production and directorship, and the fact that *Saw* was the foundation for Twisted Pictures success, the aesthetic of the initial film adapts relatively little during the series. Arguably, elements of theatricality develop in the convolution of the some of the later plots but within each title there are numerous elements of content, theme, and appearance that tie them together as a series. One would find it difficult, for example, to watch *Saw IV* (2007) without knowledge of *Saw III* (2006) and much of the impact of the final twist in *Saw VII* (2010) would be dissipated without having first seen *Saw* (2004). In this manner the series condemns itself to formulaic circularity and excludes those viewers who missed the first few releases yet it also ensures that its explorations of morality and death cannot be summarized in any single *Saw* film.

engagement. Such images go beyond the realms of pure visibility to stimulate directly, or simulate indirectly, the experience of additional sense modalities. The combination of uninhibited motion and the cultural connotations of nauseating colour in Amanda's trap sequence, for example, creates disorientation as it emulates the effects of gravity and velocity upon the viewers' sense of balance. Such haptic images, via a combination of visual, aural, and proprioceptive stimuli, move the viewed body of Amanda Young and the often-overlooked bodily experience of the cinematic viewer into close proximity to one another. Amanda's panic is embodied in the sickening arcing of the camera coupled with green-filtered lighting and the oddly soft focused motion shots. The oddness of the focus is of course derived from the routine deployment of soft focus in romantic and nostalgic scenarios. Usually connoting a heightened positive emotional response the technique is used, in this example, to dull the dominant sense of sight thus encouraging viewers to engage through other sense modalities in order to gain a clearer picture of the onscreen events. Amanda's confusion is articulated by the stop-start rhythm as the shot transitions from hectic, disjointed spinning, to serene and silent stillness. The return to the double-framed image of Amanda's eyes reiterates the constructed nature of the image. Coupled with the continued use of steady camera shots this framing reflects the slickness and hyperreal nature of the image. The film's body effectively foregrounds its own status as image, a construct of an un-reality. Such foregrounding of the artifice of the cinematic image creates a tangible barrier between the viewer and the narrative: there is no disputing, even for a millisecond, that the meticulously compiled combination of light, sound, and movement is anything other than extreme fictional artifice. All that remains in this hyperreal cinematic experience is the 'close and bodily contact' between the viewing body and the film-object that is invited by such haptic imagery (Marks 2003, 13). With only the images for company the effect on the viewer is similar to that of a roller coaster: visceral yet ultimately controlled. This section of film stirs within the viewer a sense of motion that is imitative of the movement of the body on screen but which is manifest in physical sensation: confusion, dizziness, and anticipatory excitement. The film's body, the body on screen and the body of the viewer are drawn into an intimate embrace.

Marks suggests that the desire 'to make images that appeal explicitly to the viewer's body as a whole, seem[s] to express a cultural dissatisfaction with the limits of visuality' (Marks 2003, 4). Contemporary Western culture privileges sight; from advertising billboards, the spectacle of celebrity culture and YouTube's five minutes of fame design the desire to see and the need to be seen are paramount.

Within such a frame the senses of hearing, touch, taste, interoception, and proprioception, and the interaction between modalities of sense perception can often be marginalised.[2] Perhaps the design of haptic images in films such as the *Saw* series could be seen as an embodiment of a critique not necessarily of the limits of visuality but of the cultural reliance on a single un-isolable sense. The human senses are often conceived of as distinct operations with, for example, visual input appearing isolated from auditory or olfactory input. While each of the special senses – vision, hearing, taste, touch, and smell – along with non-specialized modalities such as temperature and pain perception, do make use of specialized receptor cells and afferent nerve fibres the sensory consolidation areas in the brain receive input from a variety of different sense modalities pertaining to a single perception. Within the human midbrain, for example, lies the tectum tegmentum whose "principle structures are the superior [and inferior] colliculi" that receive synaptic transmissions from incoming visual and auditory neurons respectively (Carlson 2011, 76). The superior and inferior colliculi also share numerous synaptic connections with one another suggesting that there is a strong link between the visual and auditory fields. Indeed, the closeness of the visual and auditory fields, and the potential for manipulation, is perhaps most explicitly realized in contemporary horror film. The soundscape of horror, once dominated by the cacophonous orchestral sounds of either borrowed classical pieces such as Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* in the 1931 production of *Dracula* (directed by Tod Browning), or specifically written musical pieces such as John Carpenter's iconic score for *Halloween* (1978), has more recently been overtaken by the invasive sounds of heavy metal. In Amanda's trap scene the metallic, industrial rock music appears in waves, building to crescendo to coincide with Amanda's panic and fading to silence as it imitates her stillness. The very nature of the hard, heavy, repetitive sounds and the increased volume in the cinematic environment renders the music, like Amanda's bear-trap device, impossible to ignore and escape from. Vision and sound here combine to produce a type of sensory overload in the viewer that mimics the uncontrollable fear manifest in Amanda's facial expressions and actions.

Indeed, such interconnectivity of sensations is demonstrable outside of the cinema auditorium by the McGurk illusion that manipulates vision and sound through the presentation of conflicting stimuli. When spoken aloud the English

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2   Interoception refers to 'inward' looking sensory perception that transmits information regarding the internal state of the body to the central nervous system including, but not limited to, hunger, thirst, vestibular sensations of orientation and balance and, arguably, pain; proprioception refers to the sense of bodily positioning and movement.

phonemes 'ba' and 'da' are easily distinguishable; the phonemes are also distinct when the auditory input (the spoken sound) matches visual input (the mouth shape of the speaker). When auditory and visual input is incongruent, that is when the subject hears 'ba' but sees the mouth shape for 'da,' or vice versa, a third phoneme, 'ga,' is perceived as being spoken. The human brain senses the incongruent stimuli and in comparing the two produces a best-fit model of interpretation. Reputed to be a "consequence of the evolutionary imperative for quick decision making" amongst the slew of sensory input received by the brain the illusion demonstrates how sensory modalities combine and interact to produce sensations that are not physically present (Smith 2000, 402). It is in this manner that the visual and auditory aspects of Amanda's trap scene are able to communicate, through sensory overload, the fear, panic, and confusion that the character is subjected to. In manipulating the combination of sensory input the film's body entices the viewer's body into mimicking the state of heightened excitement portrayed onscreen. At the crescendo of sound and movement, as overstimulation borders on pain, the viewer's heart rate might increase, they may squint or look away in an effort to remove all or part of the stimulation and they may move uncomfortably in their seats. They will not be feeling, vicariously or otherwise, the precise emotions intimated to be felt by Amanda but the experience will be visceral, bodily and above all, insistent.

While the human senses are often conceptualized, outside of the life sciences, as serial processes of input-process-output, the neural connectivity between sensory modalities actually creates a 'tangled hierarchy' in the brain with sensory data travelling upwards from sense organs to the central nervous system (CNS), downwards from the CNS to sensory-motor organs and 'sideways' between sensory-motor organs, neural pathways, and brain areas (Smith 2000, 33). It is such interconnectivity between sensory modalities that creates the richness of phenomenological experience and renders it difficult to analyse, describe, and explain an experience in its totality without reducing it to a sequential progression of instantaneous perceptions. In its overt manipulation of multiple senses the *Saw* series highlights the intricate connections between these senses and questions the cinematic and cultural reliance upon the singular sense of sight. The critique of the cultural reliance upon vision that is embodied by the series is, however, only enabled by the utilization of digital imaging technologies that appeal directly and primarily to that sense: digital recording equipment; editing techniques that disconnect and splice sections of the camera arc out of sequence, and, perhaps most prominently, the ventriloquist puppet's screen-within-a-screen/recording-

within-a-recording shot [Fig. 1]. Without the progression in digital visual technologies, which inherently favour one sense modality over others, films such as *Saw* would not be so easily made or so readily distributed. The *Saw* franchise, along with many other contemporary horror franchises, exploits the cultural reliance upon, or at the very least the cultural comfort with, vision as the primary mode of gathering perceptual information by using technology descended from this rhetoric of reliance to subsume and deconstruct the cinematic image. While the combinations of sensory modality available to cinema may not have altered considerably – one is still only able to effectively and consistently combine visual and auditory modalities – the ways in which they are combined and manipulated has developed alongside technological advances. The effectiveness of Amanda's recollection in *Saw* is based almost entirely upon such combinations. A key aspect of this scene is the sense of motion communicated to the viewer achieved by three elements of the film's body: the cultural associations of the colour green, the digital editing techniques that allow camera speed to be exaggerated and camera direction to be reversed and inverted, and the hyper-rhythmic qualities of the industrial rock soundtrack. The speed of the camera movement invokes dizziness which, coupled with the green filter, in turn suggests nausea. The heavy beat of the music provides a rigid structure that not only echoes the frantic movement of the camera in its tempo but also serves as a mediator of time. Once the soundtrack has commenced it stops only once as Amanda first stands. The music is abruptly replaced by two similarly repetitive sounds: that of the pin triggering and the mechanical ticking of a timer. The sharp echo of the pin sounds on the final bass beat of the music, acting as an abrupt stop. Immediately following this, however, the ticking of the timer mimics the music in both its tempo and regularity. When the music begins again, starting as it ended by synchronising with the mechanical tick of the clock, and both it and the timer run at the same speed the imposing sound track becomes an elaborate clock. When the music then speeds up to match the fast-motion of the camera movement time itself appears to increase. The camera, Amanda and the perception of time all increase the velocity of movement within the scene and the viewer. The modalities through which this velocity makes itself apparent – vision, audition, vicarious proprioception, and time perception – surround the viewer and induce an illusory sense of unstable balance and movement within the viewing body.

The development of cinematic technologies has been accompanied in the last thirty years by the rapid and increasingly accessible proliferation of digital communications media: home computers, the Internet, wireless and Bluetooth

technology, RSS web feeds, social networking software, viral advertising, and mobile communications devices. Such technological innovation is, for a limited but growing demographic, creating what Manuel Castells calls "a new communication system" which creates and distributes "words, sounds and images of our culture." The novelty of this system does not lie in any one piece of technology but rather within the interaction between different forms – television and smartphone applications; computer networks and video technology – which increasingly signals the integration of "the written, oral, and audio-visual modalities of human communication" (Castells 2000, 2; 328). The integration of communications modalities intimates at the desire for the multi-sensory appeal of technology that is evidenced in the *Saw* franchise. While not necessarily expressing "dissatisfaction with the limits of visuality" such developments do seem to acknowledge the multisensory nature of human communication and bodily existence. Like the sensory manipulation of the McGurk illusion, and the appeal to balance found in Amanda's recollection, it is practically impossible to envisage a truly isolated sensory experience; even the act of looking at a glass "automatically activates the motor programs [in the brain] of a grasping movement toward" it thus integrating vision, proprioception and touch into a seemingly singular sensation (Jung and Sparenberg 2012, 141).

The *Saw* series pertinently overwhelms its viewers not only with visual, auditory, and interoceptive stimuli but also with images of human bodies in sensorial states, usually the state least conducive to communication: pain (Scarry 1985, 6). Pain is a state that is irreducible to a singularity. It combines elements of the physical, psychological, and social in a way that renders it virtually impossible to claim exclusively *pain is x*. Pain is physical, various neurological pain pathways have been identified and documented from the skin receptors to the brain centres that disseminate sensory input; pain is psychological, one could not claim that the pain of losing a loved one is any less valid than the pain of a broken leg simply because it lacks physical damage; pain is social, it can be elicited when no painful stimuli is directed at the individual through the stimulation of associative neuronal pathways and mirror neurones. In addition, pain – physical, psychological, or social – can be stimulated directly (for example, through the burning of the skin) or indirectly through any other sense modality such as the overstimulation of the eyes under intense light. The confused origins of the state of pain contribute to what Elaine Scarry theorises as the unsharability of pain, its resistance to "objectification in language" (Scarry 1985, 5). Pain, for Scarry, is a state that isolates the subject and removes them and their pain from language completely. And yet pain remains

the subject of visual art from the passion of Christ to Edvard Munch's *Der Schrel der Natur* (*The Scream of Nature*), from PainExhibit.org[3] to Rodleen Getsic's performance art piece *The Bunny Game* (dir. by Adam Rehmeier, 2010). As Susan Sontag notes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, when words fail to sufficiently communicate pain the image steps in as "a record of the real," a link between what is incommunicable in language but intensely and sensationally available through the image (Sontag 2003, 23). It is through a deluge of sensorial images, lacking in spatial and temporal linearity, that the *Saw* films refocus spectators' attention from content to the multi-sensory mode of transmission in an effort to communicate this most universal and ambivalent sense.

The seven films in the *Saw* series follow the career of serial killer John Kramer (Tobin Bell), better known as The Jigsaw killer, as he abducts and tests his human subjects' will to live. Each of the seven films reproduces a very similar central plot and structure: there is a primary game which develops over the course of the film, the player of which is given a little background and development; around this the police investigation hobbles along and vignettes of other, less elaborate but not less-visceral games punctuate the proceedings. Few subjects make it out of Jigsaw's games alive and the series has a preoccupation with using the plot twist that sees Jigsaw captured-but-not-really or one of his apprentices being ousted by a new one. Far from being screenplay or editorial sloppiness, however, the convoluted and repetitive storyline works to draw viewers away from the temptation to invest oneself exclusively in the narrative. The narrative is so tenuous, formulaic, and familiar that there is really very little to invest in. A poignant example of such narrative destabilisation can be seen in *Saw IV* (Darren Lynn Bousman, 2007).

The film opens with a short montage recap of the ending of *Saw III* (Darren Lynn Bousman, 2006) – these two films are the only two in the series to be explicitly temporally linked – followed by an extended sequence in which the body of John Kramer undergoes an autopsy. Shot in bleached colour, the almost-entirely grey scenes are eerie in nature: the diegetic sounds of sawing, cutting, and peeling dominate the auditory field whilst visually, the only colour not bleached is the deep scarlet of John Kramer's blood [Fig. 2]. As the autopsy progresses the doctors find a tape in his stomach, which analepsis reveals Kramer swallowed at the end of *Saw III*. Detective Hoffman (Costas Mandylor) is called to listen to the tape. On his way to the mortuary Hoffman is informed that "another doctor has gone

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3   An online gallery of representations of the various facets of pain available via open access: *http://painexhibit.org*.

missing from the hospital," a reference which nods to *Saw* (2004) protagonist, Dr Lawrence Gordon (Cary Elwes), and refers specifically to *Saw III* protagonist, Dr Lynn Denlon (Bahar Soomekh). The tape is addressed to 'Detective' and assures him that he will not walk away untested. Following these scenes the film cuts and begins the narrative, the easily missed references to the previous films seemingly set aside. The remainder the *Saw IV* plays out until the final sequence of events casts doubt upon the linearity of both *Saw IV* and *Saw III*. This sequence sees the FBI's Agent Strahm (Scott Patterson) discovering Jigsaw's lair. He enters a familiar room filled with equipment and on progressing to the next chamber Strahm discovers the final scenes of *Saw III* apparently playing out simultaneously with the events of *Saw IV*. It is at this point that viewers are left wondering how the autopsy of John Kramer ever occurred as up until these final scenes the autopsy appeared to begin the narrative of *Saw IV*; it is only now that it is revealed as prolepsis. The narrative is deliberately inverted and fragmented in a covert manner to prevent traditional methods of narrative interpretation: it is difficult to identify with a character when you do not know who they are, what they are doing, when they are doing it or why. Denying the viewer traditional narrative authority entices them to experience the images before them as simply images of experience: the film's body and the viewer's body draw close together. Narrative structure is foregrounded and flaunted so that, rather than being an anti-narrative series, the films present bodily engagement with haptic images as a pleasing alternative to attempting to unravel the labyrinthine and unconvincing plot. The images in this film series are flattened, as signification does not occur within the images but within the viewer's interaction with them. It is within this remit that the use of ultra-violence becomes important.

Ultra-violent films are typified by extreme, visceral, apparently mindless violence against human bodies. It is the extremity of the scenes of violence that contribute, along with narrative destabilization, to the refocusing of viewer's attention from content to mode of transmission. Ultra-violence remains an emerging subgenre of contemporary horror cinema and the term ultra-violent is preferential to both 'torture porn' and 'gorenography,' terms alternately used to describe the *Saw* series, as it provides a more neutral foundation for ensuing criticism. Both torture porn and gorenography share connotations with pornography, voyeurism, and socially abject viewing positions that infuse any reading of films classified as such with psychoanalytic notions of identification. Whilst notions of character or camera identification are an important consideration in film studies the unsatisfactory character development, the lack of convincing

pre-narrative context and the continuous highlighting of the mechanical aspects of film enable the *Saw* series to shift the emphasis to the embodied relationship between viewer and film without presenting that relationship as either inherently positive or negative. At no point is the viewer encouraged, or indeed 'allowed' to conveniently forget that each and every element of the *mise-en-scène*, down to the colour of Amanda's clothes and the specifically metallic ping of the trigger, that mimics the harsh sounds of the heavy metal overture and allows rhythm and time to become one, is artificially selected for maximum signification and effect. Identification with characters and camera is refused with each inter-diegetic twist and turn until the viewer can relate only to the image and the image, in and of itself, is not subjected to as fervent ethical rhetoric as, for example, the representation of female victims in traditional horror cinema may be.

Ultra-violent films usually emphasise extreme, non-instrumentally motivated violence against predominantly human bodies; a flaunting or negation of traditional narrative structures; and, a certain degree of post-modern self-awareness.[4] Ultra-violent films typically, and crucially, reach beyond the boundaries of decorum and narrative function as demonstrated by a short scene in *Saw VII* (Kevin Greutert, 2010) during which John Kramer's widow, Jill Tuck (Betsy Russell), has her face decimated by the reverse bear trap device premiered by Amanda Young in *Saw*. The entire scene is shot in close up; in full colour; in 3D and with surround sound. The significance of this trap is not in the death of the character or in the aptness of her demise but solely in that fact that, since its debut, this trap had been the only Jigsaw creation that had never fulfilled its destructive potential.

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4   In this vein the *Saw* series may be categorised together with Eli Roth's *Hostel* (2005) and *Hostel II* (2007); Alexandre Aja's *The Hills Have Eyes* (remake; 2006) and Martin Weisz's *The Hills Have Eyes II* (2007); Greg McLean's *Wolf Creek* (2005); Neil Marshall's *The Descent* (2005); Jon Harris's *The Descent Part 2* (2009); Rob Zombie's *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003) and *The Devil's Rejects* (2005) and, arguably, his remake of John Carpenter's *Halloween* (2007) and its sequel *Halloween II* (2009); Jaume Collet-Sera's *House of Wax* (2005); Christophe Gans's *Silent Hill* (2006); Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (2007); Breck Eisner's *The Crazies* (2010); Darren Lynn Bousman's *Mother's Day* (2010) and *Repo: The Genetic Opera* (2008); Marcus Dunstan's *The Collector* (2009); Tom Six's *The Human Centipede* (2010); Srdjan Spasojevic's *A Serbian Film* (2010); Adam Rehmeier's *The Bunny Game* (2010); and, Robert Lieberman's *The Tortured* (2010) among others. With Tom Six's *The Human Centipede III* in pre-production, Rob Zombie's *The Lords of Salem* in post-production and anticipated film festival debuts of Elias's *Gut* (2012), Jen and Sylvia Soshka's *American Mary* (2012), and Jennifer Chambers Lynch's *Chained* (2012) the trend towards ultra-violence in horror films shows few signs of abating. Note that some titles considered ultra-violent under this remit, such as *House of 1000 Corpses*, *The Human Centipede*, *Silent Hill* and *Repo: The Genetic Opera* do not comfortably fit into the categories of torture porn or gorenography.

The combination of visual and auditory sensations, coupled with the viewer's own expectations and heightened by three-dimensional technologies, produces an intensified physical response: of tension, shock, satisfaction, or disgust. The visceral image divested of traditional narrative modes of interpretation "invite[s] the viewer to dissolve his or her subjectivity in […] close and bodily contact" with itself (Marks 2003, 13). That such a scene can elicit a sense of bizarre satisfaction is testament to the powerful influence that the *Saw* series, the most commercially successful horror franchise of all time, exerts over some viewers and, of course, the power that digital media has and continues to exert over how information is presented and disseminated.

In *Carnal Thoughts* Vivian Sobchack claims that "technology not only differently *mediates* our figurations of bodily existence but also *constitutes* them," implicating a reciprocal relationship between technology and our conceptualisation of our own body (Sobchack 2002, 136). Technologies continue to impact the way in which individuals in Western cultures communicate, learn, browse, and shop. Physical proximity to friends and family has been replaced by the virtual closeness of Skype. Not only does this alter the behaviour of individuals, who perhaps venture further abroad safe in the knowledge that loved ones are only a click away, but it also constitutes a different, virtual mode of existence. The human body, in certain cultures, is increasingly conceptualized as a paired device for some other technology, ready and waiting to be 'plugged in' and connected to the network. The body is now a conduit, a gateway to a world that is at once expansive and minimal, exploratory yet ultimately contained. As a result, cultural notions of the category 'body' are affected not only by mediatised representations of bodies, including those presented by the *Saw* films, but also by the ways in which, as embodied subjects, individuals can interact with such representational technologies; and how the technologies can interact with us. Communicating, learning, browsing, and shopping can all be undertaken not by physically meeting people, searching for resources or visiting a precinct but simply by connecting to a network. The notion of an active consumer becomes partially inverted; the digital consumer no longer searches for the products they seek, they simply wait until the product makes itself available to them.

Digital consumer culture differs in its practices from traditional notions of consumption in two key aspects. Firstly, the digital consumer operates, primarily although not exclusively, within a virtual world. Secondly, this virtual world is almost entirely mediated by the flow of information through digital communications technologies. The capabilities of the human body can be extended, and restricted,

through the technologies that construct the virtual consumer world: video calling renders spatial proximity irrelevant in order to initiate face-to-face, or screen-to-screen communication; forums and discussion groups similarly render temporal proximity redundant. This falsification of proximity and distance is manipulated throughout the *Saw* series – from John Kramer's uncanny proximity to his primary victims in *Saw* (2004) and his omniscient presence following his death in *Saw III* (2007) to the confused and negated distance between the narratives of *Saw III* and *Saw IV* (2008) – but it is perhaps most effectively realised in *Saw II* (Darren Lynn Bousman, 2005). A prime example of the narrative convolution of the series, *Saw II* begins by proposing one main game scenario, a group of convicted criminals must escape a trap-filled house or succumb to the effects of nerve gas toxins, and ends by revealing an entirely different one. One of the players of the fun house game, Daniel Matthews (Erik Knudsen) is revealed early in the narrative to be the son of Detective Eric Matthews (Donnie Wahlberg), the officer in charge of investigating the Jigsaw murders. Detective Matthews and his team discover the whereabouts of John Kramer and find him sat quietly at a desk while a bank of computers at the other end of the room display the events of the fun house game [Fig. 3]. In response to Detective Matthews's demands for his son's safe return Kramer declares: "I want to play a game. The rules are simple, all you have to do is talk to me; listen to me. If you do that long enough you will find your son in a safe and secure state." Spurred by the video feed that shows both the elaborate deaths of the other players and the mounting effects of the nerve gas Detective Matthews resorts to violence and demands to be taken to the house shown on the screens. Despite Kramer's insistence on the rules of his personal game, "talk to me, listen to me," he eventually takes the Detective to the house in question. As Detective Matthews enters the house, however, the viewers are transported back to Kramer's desk and the computer bank. The officers still viewing the video feeds on the computers become confused when Detective Matthews does not appear on their screens. The monochrome images had been assumed to be a live feed but the absence of Matthews contradicts this notion. As the officers realize that the video feed was in fact prerecorded a safe behind Kramer's desk suddenly clicks and creaks open revealing Daniel's unconscious body. As the viewer uncovers the literal nature of Kramer's guarantee – "you will find your son *in a safe* and secure state" – the status of the represented digital image as a purveyor of temporal simultaneity is shattered. Matthews's belief in the legitimacy of the image as a truthful recreation of the *current* experience of the body it represents leads directly to his own capture and torture. Had Matthews listened to Kramer's

warning and decided to disbelieve the digital image that holds such cultural capital in contemporary society, he and his son would have been reunited safely and Kramer would have remained in custody.

The human body, like the represented body of Daniel Matthews, is becoming metaphorically digitised and removed from the corporeal realm through both its projection as an image by the media and through the interaction between actual human bodies and the technologies of digital communication. It is within the material context of such dematerializing influences that the concept of the body is being abstracted away from the physical referent. The digital body of Daniel Matthews works to expose the cultural acceptance of the represented body as an alternative, spatially, temporally, and metaphorically, to the corporeal body it stands in for. Digital images of bodies no longer represent physical human bodies but streams of artificially generated 1s and 0s or a collection of coloured pixels: the phenomenological immediacy of the image, as a vector of the real, is reduced (Marks 2003, 149). The lack of a physical referent for digitally projected or produced human bodies has a curiously disembodying effect: the human body on screen becomes an image of an image rather than an image of a body. It is in this manner that the horrific scene of Jill Tuck's demise signifies not the death of a human being or the death of a fictional character, or indeed *death* in any sense, but the climax of visual breakdown. As the reverse bear-trap ticks away the seconds, accompanied by the now iconic thematic score, a montage sequence erratically and quickly unties the multitude of narrative threads that lead to this culmination. Scenes of Jill and John Kramer are spliced out of sequence with images of devious traps, Hoffman's injury, a baby's cot and graveyard headstone, and finally an ultrasound image. Having un-told the elaborate narrative and retuned to the origin of John Kramer's pathology, the death of his unborn child, the scene focuses on Jill, now completely still and staring into the mechanical eye of the camera. At this moment the inter- and extra-diegetic gazes meet as both viewer and character acknowledge, by their reciprocally widening eyes and glassy stare, what they know will happen momentarily. For the character this is the dawning of death, an undoing and refusal of the life they once had; for the viewer it is a complete reversal of narrative flow, a recreation of Amanda's traumatic and viscerally sensorial scene in *Saw* (2004) which finally and ultimately denies the potential of narrative, image, and digital body. A beat passes before the trap triggers and the camera stares, unblinkingly into the bloody hollow of the face in a moment that is entirely concerned not with death, or narrative, or finality, but with spectacle and satisfaction [Fig. 4].

Viewing on-screen bodies in this manner denotes a decrement in the corporeal nature of the viewer's conceptualization of their own body. If fictional bodies are able to signify beyond their physicality as bodies, then the flesh that animates the viewer is also open to incorporeal interpretations that separate the conscious mind from the physical body. In the same way that the body can be conceptualized as a conduit waiting to be connected to a network *my* body can also be conceptualized as *of* me but *not*-me. As such, violence against represented bodies, the fictional status of which is foregrounded in the *Saw* films by the manipulation of both narrative and film form, becomes in part justifiable as violence against an object rather than a person. The objectification of onscreen bodies leads, subtly and insidiously, to a reconsideration of the viewers' own physicality and bodily existence. Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, contemplates the phenomenon of self consciousness and physical existence suggesting that it is the dialectical relationship between an embodied subject and the philosophical Other (in the case of film, the onscreen body becomes the Other) that enables an existent Being to become conscious of its own objective physicality. Rather than being a simple case of objectification – the Other is an object for the embodied subject's consciousness, much like a dining chair or a vase is – Sartre suggests that "my connection with the Other is inconceivable if it is not an internal negation" (Sartre 1957, 339). In Sartre's dialectic the Self (viewer) recognizes that the (onscreen) Other exists *for it* as an existent object and that they exist *for themselves* as a prescient subject. Other human bodies are, therefore, both objects and subjects in the consciousness of the embodied viewer. This dialectic is, however, endangered by the relationship between Self (viewer) and Other (onscreen body) found in the *Saw* films: as an image of an image, divested of selfhood through a lack of characterisation and an extension of formal manipulation, the onscreen Other now has no existence *for itself*, it is no longer a body but a mere image, thus jeopardising the for-itself existence of the embodied viewer. It is in this manner than ultra-violent films are able to display such visceral acts of violence and depravity whilst attracting disproportionally less moral outrage than previous horror titles such as William Freidkin's *The Exorcist* (1973): viewers of ultra-violent films do not watch the evisceration of human bodies but the deconstruction of non-representative images.

Because the immediacy of digital information is diminished, and its un-reality pushed to the fore, the representation itself takes secondary relevance to the embodied relationship between the information and the perceiving viewer. The act of violence depicted or the volume of entrails displayed becomes incidental to

the mode of transmission. The predominant mode of information transmission in digital Western culture is increasingly becoming multimodal and multisensory: as the image disembodies the viewer, the medium re-embodies through its multimodal nature. Ultra-violent film, and particularly the *Saw* series, embodies a cultural shift in focus from content to mode of delivery that both allows images to become more shocking and favours multisensory communication as it is the experience of viewing the information, not the information itself, that is the primary desire. By de-realizing images of bodies and embodying the sentiment that in place of being our bodies we are "metaphorically […] 'housed' in our bodies," contemporary culture exposes a desire for multisensory experience that the *Saw* series seeks to provide (Sobchack 2002, 183). In doing so, however, it contributes to the continued "commodification of the human subject" as bodies threaten to become mere images for consumption (Jones 2006, 37).

Saw VII (2010) begins with the staging of a public trap in which the participants in a love triangle must decide which one of them should die. As the Perspex box containing them is revealed to a city square a crowd can be seen to gather. Individuals in the crowd are witnessed phoning their friends, taking pictures, and even videoing the trap on their mobile phones [Fig. 5]. This short scene acknowledges the commodification of images of the human body that digital media enables as one participant in the trap looks out incredulously into the watching crowd. The crowd, like the cinema audience, blindly consume de-realized images of bodies even when those bodies are animated and corporeal only a few feet from them. The Perspex box in this scenario becomes the cinema screen and the trap participants become digital representations. The incorporation of three dimensional technologies in *Saw VII* is also a key factor to the film's self awareness as it manipulates and redefines conventional perceptions of cinematic limitations: the film's body is virtually extended as it reaches out from the cinema screen to drag the bodies of the cinematic viewers into the experiential realm. As products of digital communications technology, and as cultural artefacts, the films cannot avoid embodying the very aspects of culture that they serve to critique. Through both its form and its content the *Saw* series, along with its ultra-violent brethren, can be seen as perhaps the purest expression of the conditions of contemporary culture.

The *Saw* franchise spans seven years and seven films and has been criticised by Christopher Sharrett as demonstrating "intellectual bankruptcy" for its lack of narrative originality and endless emphasis upon entrails and gore (Sharrett 2009, 32). Ironically, it is these exact characteristics that enable the *Saw* series to succeed in presenting a critique of visual culture. The images of bodies, alive,

dying, and dead, are de-contextualized and stripped of traditional signification so that the embodied relationship between the film's body and the viewer's body becomes the experiential focus of spectatorship. When Jennifer Barker poses the rhetorical question "if a film is projected in an empty theatre, does it still make a sound and throw out an image" the automatic response of logic may be yes (Barker 2009, 34). But, as engagement with the *Saw* series has demonstrated, the existential potential of a film under the influence of the digital communications culture cannot be realized without the parallel constitutive relationship between the film's body and the viewer's body. In order to fully experience the *Saw* series one must first have experience of the mode of transmission and of the digital communications culture that contributed to the making of the most profitable horror film franchise of all time.

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List of Figures

Figure 1. Screens within screens foreground the artificial nature of both the cinematic and digitally represented image thus questioning the cultural reliance upon digitally mediated images of bodies.

Figure 2. John Kramer's autopsy in *Saw IV* provided not only an opportunity for scenes of extreme, albeit sedate, violence against the human body, a literal destruction of human agency, but also functioned as an elaborate foil for narrative authority.

Figure 3. Detective Matthews uncovers the computer bank showing apparently live footage of his son, Daniel, participating in a Jigsaw game.

Figure 4. Jill Tuck's death provided a critical moment of visual breakdown and emotional satisfaction as *Saw VII* brought the franchise to a close.

Figure 5. *Saw VII* questions its own viewers' motivations with a self-reflexive public trap; onlookers film the impending death in a demonstration of unethical spectatorship that illustrates the increasingly incorporeal conceptualisation of the human body.