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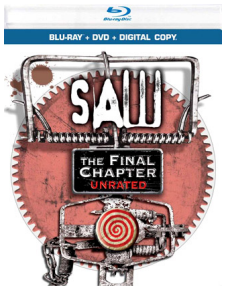
Hello, dear horror film fan… I want to play a game. You are guilty of the crime of complacent compliance. Time and time again, you have shelled out your hard-earned money at the cineplex for the waning SAW series, keeping it alive long enough to spawn yet another annual entry in the lengthy legacy of Jigsaw. It’s nearly been a decade since James Wan and Leigh Whannell’s SAW made a splash at Sundance, snatched up by Lionsgate for a quick million-dollar acquisition, so it’s nearly forgivable that you’d forget what made the original so fresh.

But now, dear horror film fan, you’ve slipped into a stagnant state of cinematic apathy that seems to incessantly plague the genre nowadays. By returning to the series year after year, you’ve enabled Lionsgate to pump out one unnecessary entry in the franchise after another, creating a strained daisy-chain of diminishing sequels…

You are the problem, horror film fan. Not the studios. Not the filmmakers.

I want to give you a choice. Now on DVD/Blu-ray, SAW: THE FINAL CHAPTER is also cluttering up your Netflix queue. If you choose to rent/purchase this film, you will be aiding and abetting in the prospect of yet another sequel. If, however, you choose to watch something else, the studio will be compelled to put the SAW series out of its misery—once and for all.

The choice is yours. You have one year before Lionsgate cranks out another…



Bless the heavens for PARANORMAL ACTIVITY. Love it or hate it, the one thing you can say about Oren Peli’s haunted-houser is that it put the studio system’s profit-at-all-costs pandering on full-display. In this wonderful democratic/cinematic society we all live in, we the moviegoing people can let our collective voice be heard by the films we choose to support—“Yes, we can!”—and in 2009, the tallied ballots at the box office put PARANORMAL ACTIVITY ahead of SAW VI, desiccated cash cow that it was, making it the first sequel in the series to fall short of claiming the number-one spot on its opening weekend. How prescient, then (re: cost-effective), that 2010’s entry in the series, which played theatrically as SAW 3D, has been rechristened THE FINAL CHAPTER for its home release. Any genre fan worth their salt would have to snicker a bit hearing this. Jigsaw? You and Mr. Voorhees should have a chat about final chapters…

Much like FRIDAY THE 13TH, not to mention NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET, HALLOWEEN–and even JAWS—the SAW franchise officially jumped the shark a long, long sequel (or two…or five) ago. This moment near-universally comes when the makers of these films attempt to shift the audience’s empathy for their victims to the overt celebration of its killers. With every cinematic horror series that finds the profit margin to extend beyond a mere handful of entries, there comes an unsettling turning point where the viewer transitions from fretting over who’s going to get it next to actually rooting for whichever monster is at the center of its storyline. Jason becomes a folk hero. Freddy is rendered a rock star. Any sense of narrative tension is thrown out with the bathwater as these films exclusively become an exercise in imaginative dispatching.

Gone is the *whodunit*, promptly replaced with *whenwilltheybedunin*. The shock of a character’s demise is altogether squandered in favor of how brutally they will die—hence the limitless stream of forgettable victims flooding these sequels with their own viscera. The deeper into a series you go, the more superficial characters become, leaving the viewer with a composite of clichés: The Prude, The Jock, The Stuck-Up, The Nerd, The Nymphet, The Stoner, etc…all lining up for the slaughter.

SAW seemed willing to make this transition very early on, eager to posit Jigsaw in the pantheon of nü-movie monsters from the get-go. Within its first three entries, the Cult of Jigsaw was complete with its own prepackaged mythology. The victims of his “games” weren’t the brand of bland sex-starved teenagers of the Freddy and Jason films, but a motley stock of post-SE7EN urban denizens: The Addict, The Racist, The Philanderer, The Abusive Husband, The Corporate Hack, etc. Do viewers root for the targets of Jigsaw’s traps to live or die? Die, of course. *Of course*. At no point within any of these films is there one second, one infinitesimal fraction of an iota of a moment where the viewer expects the survival of Jigsaw’s quarry. We are here to merely watch these people be obliterated. The more brutal, the better. Case closed.

Not since the first SAW has there been any remote sense of identification between viewer and victim. Watching Whannell and Cary Elwes struggle to survive, the palpable tension of what would come next made for a fun, pulpy film. But once the cat was out of the bag and Jigsaw was on the campaign trail to become the Leatherface of a new generation, there has been no alternative for the viewer but to shift gears and suddenly cheer for the inevitable demise of every last individual who has the misfortune to find him- or herself onscreen.

Is this truly what Jigsaw would want from us? Isn’t this going against his own bloodied brand of *carpe diem* that he has spouted since film one?

The SAW series, sadly, has become a contradiction of its own sermonizing. Jigsaw once said, “Most people are so ungrateful to be alive…” The lesson at hand, in essence, was: By putting one’s life at risk, the survival instinct will surely kick in. By enduring the near-death brutality of Jigsaw, we are brought back to life. *Live through this and you will be free*, etc. But what about the hypocrisy of Jigsaw? None of his survivors seem to follow through with his mantra. Quite the contrary: Jigsaw’s “games” more often than not turn out to be nothing more the recruiting sessions for the serial killer’s own cult, made all the more confounding by his successor Lt. Hoffman (Costas Mandylor).

Under the most superficial scrutiny, it’s clear that Jigsaw—or the filmmakers, or Lionsgate, *somebody*—is having their sadist’s cake and eating it too. As early as part two, it became obvious that the filmmakers were more interested in the wholesale slaughter of Jigsaw’s subjects rather than their survival. As counterintuitive as that sounds to gorehounds, the truth is: It’s more dramatic, more engaging, to believe, to hope, that these victims could possibly survive. Without that belief, that minuscule sense of hope, there went whatever possible drama SAW could squeeze out of its basic premise. The moment the audience stopped caring about who was in the trap, the series became nothing more than a succession of elaborate Rube Goldberg-inspired sequences of death. The Grand Inquisition as directed by David Fincher. (The sole exception that comes to mind is the character of Lynn in SAW III. As portrayed by Bahar Soomekh, Lynn possessed a sense of humanity that has sorely been missing since the drastic overhaul of creative forces behind the camera. When her head went up in a flurry of bloody blasts at the end of part three, so went the viewer’s empathy. Splat.)

A simple compare/contrast for other lucky number sevens:

FRIDAY THE 13TH PART VII: THE NEW BLOOD: By no means a masterpiece, but what is most surprising about this later-stage entry in the FRIDAY series (beyond its batshit CARRIE cash-in premise) is its lead Tina. As portrayed by Lar Park-Lincoln, Tina possesses the slightest sense of personality (screenwriters used to call that character in ye olden days) that the viewer actually feels somewhat invested in her final *tête-à-tête* with Jason Voorhees. Just a little.

HALLOWEEN: H20: Jamie Lee Curtis came back to reprise her role as Laurie Strode, displaying a interesting mixture of vulnerability and strength that comes with this kind of serial-killer-survivor’s guilt. Now an alcoholic, overprotective mother, Laurie has to face her monsters, both literally and figuratively, to survive one more showdown with Michael Myers.

WES CRAVEN’S NEW NIGHTMARE: Craven drags Heather Langenkamp back to face Freddy once again, this time exploring the emotional toll of an actress—Heather Langenkamp as “Heather Langenkamp”—whose celebrity is so fatefully intertwined with the malevolent monster her character combatted onscreen. It was an interesting twist on the final-girl motif that, while not-so scary, at least provided an intellectual bent to a series that sporadically aspired to more than its standard slasher underpinnings.

So. What does SAW: THE FINAL CHAPTER offer its viewer? Very little. The premise of self-proclaimed survivor Bobby Dagen (Sean Patrick Flanery) is an interesting one, but the trial he must endure smacks far too closely of that suffered by Angus Macfadyen’s Jeff in SAW III. One of the series’ strengths was its abstract, near cubist, narrative—and yet, within the stretch of sequels four through seven, the timeline of Jigsaw has been so sliced-and-diced, viewers need a cheat-sheet just to keep up with its own muddled chronology.

Ultimately, the biggest crime of SAW: THE FINAL CHAPTER is that this review could in fact have been written for any of the previous entries in the series. The characters? Interchangeable. The traps? Nonsensical. The carnage? Dull. What’s been missing from this series for so long now is horror. Actual fear. That sense of dread inspired in the viewer within those final moments of the first SAW. Since then, with each subsequent sequel, there has been no sense of tension, no asking oneself *what’s going to happen next* because the viewer already knows *everyone will die*.
This is not a spoiler. This is the nihilistic inevitability that the SAW series has spawned. What the viewer is left with is SAW’s own patented brand of bland sadism—not horror, mind you—but dunderheaded sadism, boiled down to the lowest, most negativistic common denominator. Before any reader accuses me of not being able to take my violence in stride—please, by all

means, let me recommend SALO, OR THE 120 DAYS OF SODOM over this grim tripe. Or that you just rent SE7EN seven times in a row.

In 2010, PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 2 opened as SAW 3D attempted to go out with a three-dimensional bang, the two duking it out like King Kong and Godzilla (or Freddy and Jason) grudge-matching against each other for box-office dominion. The true horror of all this was that the true horror film fans were caught in the crossfire. Studios will continue to rehash last year’s successes until we stop paying to see them…

…And speaking of studios cynically pandering to consumer trends, the bonus features on SAW: THE FINAL CHAPTER’s R-rated DVD and unrated (for extra suffering!) 2D & 3D Blu-rays feel oddly mocking to this particular viewer. It seems with every sequel, the number of music videos by forgettable fill-in-the-blank bands only grows larger. That these groups probably aspire to land one of their tunes on a SAW soundtrack rather than cut a record shouldn’t come as much of a surprise. But the sudden inclusion of SAW ringtone offers from the Lionsgate Live menu system simply smacks of cheap marketing tie-ins that more often than not distance the viewer from the actual film-viewing experience.

This Blu-ray’s widescreen transfer definitely goes out of its way to make that experience perfect. Presented in 1080p high definition, the gloomy-aquarium hues are as crisp as can be, which is pretty impressive. Flakes of rust take on a palpable crust around the edges of the television.

When the bonus features actually focus on the film itself, things are relatively more engaging. Of the two provided audio commentaries, one by the producers and the other by screenwriters Patrick Melton and Marcus Dunstan, the latter is an intriguing listen for those interested in the process of developing/editing the storyline of the SAW series. Of the six deleted snippets, most are merely extended versions of pre-existing scenes already contained within the film—which stretches the notion of “deleted scenes” to its snapping point, in this reviewer’s humble opinion.

But most egregious of all, hands down, is the inclusion of the featurette “52 Ways to Die: Recounting the Traps from the SAW Films.” Let us forgo narrative altogether and cut to the chase: You are here not to watch a movie, but to “experience” a nonsensical sequence of mechanized death. Akin to a YouTube-spliced slice-and-dice, this is Jigsaw’s greatest hits. One can imagine this prompting the spawning of another sequel—SAW: The Desensitized Edition. *Sans*
storyline,

sans
character. Just one dull murder after another. You know you want it…

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