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“Live or die, make your choice”: American Survival Game Horror

**Thesis/intro**

This is part of a much larger project, this presentation represents one half of one chapter in my dissertation. This is also very much a work in progress, as I’ve just started working on my dissertation this summer. So, I very much appreciate any feedback, suggestions, and/or questions you may have. My dissertation focuses on early and 19th century American liberalism and present-day American neoliberalism. I'm interested in the ways that these two modes of reasoning depict what it means to be American, as well as the ways that 19th-century American gothic texts and contemporary American horror films challenge, support, and subvert these depictions through the deployment of repeated figures and environments.

This particular chapter focuses on the figure of the survivor. I’m interested in the survivor figures presented in early American gothic fiction and contemporary American horror films because they make an argument about what it means to be successful in America and what it takes to survive in these different moments of the nation’s history. For this presentation, I’m first going to very briefly share a definition of the survival figure in early American gothic fiction, before turning to the contemporary American survival game horror film. Finally, I will perform a close reading of the ur-text of this subgenre, James Wan’s 2004 film *Saw*, to see what these films say about surviving in today’s late-capitalist era and how they figure into the larger American gothic tradition.

**Early American survivor**

According to Siân Silyn Roberts, early American gothic fiction “imagines Americanness as an ability to change, adapt, travel, and even subsume individual difference and cultural particularity
beneath forms of mass collectivity” (7). Roberts uses the term “gothic subjects” to refer to the “different narrative personas whose mutability and adaptability make them ideally suited to a fluctuating Atlantic world” (ibid.).

Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse explain that early American novels were dedicated to advocating the removal of all social and geographic obstacles in order to have a democracy defined by “unlimited circulation and…freedom to associate.” These novels viewed the young nation as a collection of hubs within a national and international network of circulation.

So, to survive in an early American gothic text, a character would need to be able to move through different environments, meet with diverse people, and adapt and change as necessary throughout these interactions. Charles Brockden Brown’s Arthur Mervyn is an excellent example of this sort of surviving character, though I’m also very interested in looking at the narrator from Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher.” I’d love to hear from the audience if you have any ideas of a key survivor figure from American gothic fiction that I should look at for this chapter.

American Survival Game Horror & Saw

The survival game horror film is any film that features an insulated game in which the stakes are life and death and players are forced to make choices between two deeply unwelcome options, often transgressing moral and social boundaries in order to win. More than just gamification, these films contain actual games designed by some human agent and the players are aware that they are operating within a game that, unfortunately, unlike other games, is not a complete fiction, but instead has severe real-world consequences.

Why this subgenre? It’s incredibly popular in the 21st century; its ubiquitous presence not only in the horror genre but at large, which means that this subgenre is ripe for analysis.
To get a better grasp on this subgenre, I first turn to Jane Elliott’s *The Microeconomic Mode* (2018). She defines the microeconomic mode as one that uses the aesthetics of abstraction and excess to not allegorize some more complex reality, but instead to press its audience to consider what happens when the world itself shrinks to become a model. The microeconomic mode is an example of taking economic logic and stripping it of all ties to economics, instead applying it to human life. This is a helpful way to examine and locate neoliberal thinking in popular culture. According to Wendy Brown, neoliberalism operates in a similar way to Elliott’s microeconomic mode, as neoliberalism doesn’t “literally marketize all spheres,” but instead “disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities— even where money is not at issue— and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors” (31). Because of this extreme focus on the individual, both the microeconomic mode and the neoliberal imagination remove all social/political contexts from their understanding of the individual and instead focus on the individual’s choices. It does this largely through the implementation of what Elliott terms “live models” which place the characters in either a hermetically sealed-off environment, a deserted island, or a post-apocalyptic world. Once these contexts are removed, the live model allows the microeconomic mode to imagine decisions made within a complete vacuum. Instead of attributing failure, death, injury, poverty (or any other result) to socio-political factors then, the microeconomic mode focuses on the individual, and in particular the choices made by the individual.

For Elliott, the survival game is slightly different from the live model in that the survival game is made and managed by a human agent. They operate as and use the language of a game, but are more than just mere gamification in that they cause real-world consequences that cannot
be un-done. She notes that “the survival game imagines how it is that, for example, the same subject who unravels into flows of information can also be an individual whose one and only life is irreversibly blighted by a bad credit score or a felony conviction or an industrial accident— that is, by permanent consequences that attached to a single, identified agent” (87). Not only can we see clearly that economic logic is being applied to human life here, but we also see how, once social, political, and cultural contexts are removed, all responsibility and blame falls on the individual. For example, under the logic of the microeconomic mode, if someone was in an industrial accident, rather than questioning why the company didn’t maintain a safe work environment, we are made to question the individual’s choices: why did they take on such a bad, unsafe job? Why didn’t they use better equipment?

**Saw (2004)**

So this brings us to *Saw*. Elliott spends a brief portion of her chapter on survival games discussing *Saw*, but I want to go a bit further by looking at two ways that *Saw* both fits into and pushes past the survival game sub-genre as defined by Elliott. Through this close-reading, I will also point towards the ways that *Saw* builds off of a larger American gothic tradition.

In case you haven’t watched the film in a while or at all, let me give you a brief summary of *Saw*. Two men, Lawrence Gordon, a neurosurgeon, and Adam Faulkner-Stanheight, a photographer, wake up chained to pipes in a disgusting and abandoned industrial bathroom. They soon discover that they are the latest victims of the Jigsaw Killer, a serial killer who famously never directly kills his victims, but instead crafts elaborate “games” that encourage his victims to kill each other.

Right off the bat, we can see that this film fits Elliot’s definition of a survival game: the two men are trapped in a hermetically-sealed room and must play in a game that is designed and
controlled by a human agent. We might also argue that all socio-political contexts are stripped away, leaving us with two individuals, Lawrence and Adam, who must operate as subjects of life-interest in order to persist as living beings.

However, _Saw_ also seems to make the argument that these contexts still come into play. After the two wake up, Lawrence introduces himself, immediately adding that “I’m a doctor” after sharing his name. He then asks Adam to share the last thing he remembers. Adam laments that he “went to bed in my shithole apartment and then I woke up in an actual shithole.” Near the end of the film, when Adam reveals that he was hired by a mysterious stranger to take photos of Lawrence, Lawrence explodes, asking “How could you take his money to invade my privacy? You’re not a victim of this game, you’re a part of it!” The game’s logic seems to agree with the idea that Adam is not a player with agency, but is instead just a part of the game. While Lawrence was given a cassette tape that contained clear instructions for his game (“Dr. Gordon, this is your wake-up call...Your aim in this game is to kill Adam. You have until 6 on the clock to do it. …There are ways to win this hidden all around you. Just remember: x marks the spot. Follow your heart. If you do not kill Adam by six, then Alison and Diana will die, Dr. Gordon. And then I’ll leave you in this room to rot. Let the game begin.”) Adam’s tape is incredibly vague (“Rise and shine, Adam. You’re probably wondering where you are. I’ll tell you where you might be: you might be in the room you die in. Up until now you’ve simply sat in the shadows watching others live their lives. I wonder, what do voyeurs see when they look into the mirror? Now, I see you as a strange mix of someone angry and apathetic but mostly just pathetic. So are you going to watch yourself die today Adam, or do something about it?”). Throughout the film, Adam _does_ do a lot of things (he keeps secrets, he smashes a mirror, he discovers the hostage polaroid of Lawrence’s child and wife, he kills someone…) and he even survives past
6:00. Yet he still loses the game and Jigsaw leaves him in the room to die. It seems that while Lawrence Gordon, the successful brain surgeon, was given clear instructions, numerous tangible clues, and was allowed to leave the bathroom even after he clearly lost based on those instructions (and, in later sequels, he’s even asked to join Jigsaw’s team), Adam is pretty much just set up to die. It seems like Lawrence may be right—Adam isn’t a victim of the game, but rather just a part of the game to help determine if Lawrence can kill to save himself and his family or not. Adam seems to be given very little opportunity for gaining agency and making choices, and he also seems to be blamed for the sketchiness of the job he took as if it’s a moral failing rather than something he does because of, as Adam puts it, his “need to eat.” That being said, I think there’s more to this question of Adam than his class distinction, which I’ll discuss shortly.

The second major part of the microeconomic mode according to Elliott is the hyper-individualized and competitive subject of life-interest. Players in Jigsaw’s game are encouraged to compete with each other, as well as to transgress moral and social boundaries to protect their own life. For example, Lawrence is tasked with killing Adam.

However, Saw also argues against this view of the hyper self-contained individual in many ways. Firstly, Lawrence manages to convince Adam that they need to trust each other and work together to pool their knowledge, clues, and information in order to escape the bathroom. The two work together to do this throughout the most of the film.

Secondly, Lawrence has a major lifeline in his human connection to other individuals. The audience is shown his family, his medical students, and his mistress. Although we see that Jigsaw chooses Lawrence to be a player in his game because of Lawrence’s failure to see his
patients as humans and his distancing himself from his family, Lawrence still has this lifeline. Jigsaw asks Lawrence to choose between killing Adam or letting himself and his family die. It’s ultimately Lawrence’s family, which trickles in from the outside world and into the bathroom via a phone call and a photograph, that pushes Lawrence to select a third, unspoken choice: sawing off his foot and leaving the room.

Adam, however, is shown as having no such human connections. The only people that the audience sees him with in flashbacks are tied to financial transactions, including the mysterious man who hired him to photograph Lawrence, and the people Adam stalks and photographs for money. So, while Lawrence is shown in his home office surrounded by photographs of his family, Adam is seen in his work space surrounded by photographs of strangers. Therefore, I think that the film sets Adam up to die because of his lack of human connections rather than his low class. Both he and Lawrence are shown focusing too much on work and not enough on human connections, but at least Lawrence has people in his life. Adam is so self-enclosed and so defined by his work rather than any sense of community that he has no avenue for gaining agency and survival. Even when he manages to kill another player, he’s left in the room to (watch himself) die.

That being said, there is a lot of connectivity within Jigsaw’s murder plot. Everyone, including Adam is deeply connected to each other and it is this connectivity that partly drives the plot forward. For example, Adam is hired by Detective Tapp to take photographs of Lawrence because Tapp suspects Lawrence of being the Jigsaw Killer, but the actual Jigsaw Killer turns out to be John Kramer, one of Lawrence’s patients. Saw therefore refuses the idea that Americans can be self-enclosed, instead displaying the many hubs within our national network.
This is strikingly similar to Armstrong’s and Tennenhouse’s work on early American fiction which I discussed earlier.

Saw’s democratic vision becomes even more clear through its use of anamorphism. Anamorphism is a visual arts term used to describe any image of an object that seems distorted when viewed from a traditional viewpoint, but becomes clear if viewed from a particular angle or perspective. Armstrong & Tennenhouse argue that anamorphic objects are vitally important in early American gothic literature. These are objects that can’t be viewed by a single dominant perspective, but instead must be viewed by multiple local and regional perspectives. These viewpoints coalesce around the object, filling in the blanks, but often disproving each other. Only by working together and sharing information can something close to truth or fact be reached. “From their first appearance, the novels of the early republic relied on the principle of anamorphism to eliminate the possibility of any one view dominating the rest. ... exploits the oscillation between dominant and peripheral perspectives in order to prevent any one view from incorporating the others. This situated early American readers in a polycentric world, where they could shift from one cultural perspective to another without relinquishing their own…” (163) A major example of an anamorphic object in early American gothic fiction is Roderick Usher’s sister: from one perspective, she rises from the dead, yet from another she was prematurely buried and has managed to escape her tomb.

In Saw’s memorable final scene, a dead body also appears to rise. Although this body is not as illegible as Madeline Usher’s, and we quickly discover the truth that the body was not only living the entire time, but that it belonged to the Jigsaw killer, it still functions as a contemporary version of the anamorphic object. Throughout the film, we assume that the body is dead because of our assumption that we are viewing the movie from a dominant and objectively
“true” perspective; however, the film’s final scene throws this on its head, as we learn, through Adam’s point of view, that this supposed truth was not entirely right.

*Saw* itself functions as a sort of anamorphic object, or an object that can’t be understood through a single perspective, because it takes multiple point of views to tell this story. Over the course of the movie, the camera takes on the position and knowledge of different characters, including Lawrence, Adam, Jigsaw, Detective Tapp, Lawrence’s daughter, Amanda, and Zep. *Saw* is also thematically concerned with this theme of perspective both in Leigh Whannel’s screenplay, as demonstrated through the many perspectives through which the story is told, as well as visually, through James Wan’s direction. All of the shots of Adam are shot using a handheld camera, while the shots of Lawrence are steady and controlled in order to relay the character’s personality through their part of the story. We also are shown countless images of different types of viewing, from Zep peeping through a closet door, security style footage, distorted parking-lot mirrors, Detective Tapp watching through windows, and Adam’s camera. Finally, in the bathroom scenes, as Adam and Lawrence discover new, tangible clues, the camera captures the object from the viewpoint of each character. This all leads to a very democratic narrative form, in which the audience is given multiple perspectives in order to understand this incredibly anamorphic-heavy film.

**Conclusion**

Because neoliberal rationality is haunted by earlier American liberal rationality in *Saw*, we see two possible arguments grappling with each other. Either A.) Jigsaw’s game functions as a miniature version of our present economy, in which subjects must compete against each other due to the lack of a guaranteed survival and in which some subjects have greater agency than others due to various privileges; OR B.) *Saw* argues for a return of the American liberal
imagination through its focus on the importance of community and its use of democratic narration; or perhaps both exist within this text. Saw’s depiction of brutal competition and its presentation of potential resistance and survival through collectivity seems worthy of exploration today when America not only continues to operate through a neoliberal rationality, but does so under a Trump presidency. I’m excited to see whether or not similar arguments are made in other twenty-first century American survival game horror films and where this project goes. I welcome any questions or thoughts from the audience. Thank you!

References:


