Cut
Execution, Editing, and Instant Death

Scott Combs

A thief is fastened to a chair. His captor, the torture juggernaut known as Jigsaw, informs him that the only way to escape is to push his own face into a fashioned net of blades. (Figs. 1-2) If he pushes far and hard enough, his binds will be released. If he decides it is too much and relents, the helmet will explode his head. As he presses harder, I look away, trying to resist the torture scene’s control over my experience of time. Close-ups of the thief’s bloodied face, intermittent screams, and shots of his stoic perpetrator prolong the possibility of death and delay its arrival. Will death come now, as he thrusts deeper into the helmet? Or perhaps here, after this scream of submission?

The film is Saw IV (dir. by Darren Lynn Bousman, 2007), the latest installment in the popular Saw series originally created by Leigh Whannell and James Wan. Although this scene purports to show a new level of onscreen pain, and to revel in events worse than death, it strikes me as a template for the way cinema more generally represents the activity of dying. Sustained self-torture arrests the spectator more aggressively than a sudden violent end, and Saw IV prefers to prolong the duration of pain and suspend the final moment. However, it seems that on a formal level the film is experimenting with a question that the medium has long been figuring out: where, or at which instant, can death be located?

Saw IV’s time-based death scenes, in fact, have a rich prehistory in the American cinema, a prehistory that leads even further back, before cinema, to American experiments with execution technique that took place at Thomas Edison’s lab. While the Saw series (and much of recent cinema) has increased the duration and intensity of torture, I would suggest that it has merely refreshed the medium’s more perdurable interest in the dying process, an activity that takes place over time rather than in a quick flash. Working within the first decade of cinema’s stirrings, the earliest wave of filmakers to produce cinema death participated in a notion of instant death previously developed by nineteenth-century discourses of physiology and amateur execution “theory.” At Menlo Park in the 1880s, scientists and amateurs had divined the necessary charge of electrical current that would produce instantaneous death. Where animals did not die fast enough, they underwent a veritable process of torture that might have turned the heads of even the creators of the Saw films. Following on the heels of those experiments, the early films sought the quick fix—through beheading, hanging, electrocuting, and other execution technique—to inculcate the impression that the moving image camera could capture the change between life and death. As early as 1895, Edison’s kinetoscope company produced a reenactment—Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots—employing a device now known as the substitution splice to create the illusion of beheading.

Though Mary’s filmic structure resembles in part the quick mechanics of modern American executions, the projected image of Mary’s death proved insufficient for displaying the process of transition between “alive” and “dead.” In what follows, I will focus on this first known moving image death to offer a string of observations on
cinematic instantaneity. I will argue that even though film could not capture the death instant, its failure to do so contributed to the impression of death as instantaneous. Given the momentum of the moving image, it follows that the end of dying—the inanimate or inert body transformed from an animate one—is often difficult to behold or resolve as the end of the scene. \(^1\) I will argue that film has always been driven to find solutions to this problem. Using the resources of editing and mise-en-scene, cinema moves the finality of death into the space surrounding the body, where it can be registered as a cognitive fact.

Both *Mary* and the *Saw* films propose methods to approximate death by cutting—the one with the executioner’s axe, the other with various masochistic tools (blades, knives, arrows). *Mary*’s fatal cut, the one that leads to her demise, is clearly marked as the moment the head separates from the torso; the cuttings (and punctures and pullings) in *Saw* appear less clearly marked, and pointedly so, making it impossible to know which instant will lead to a reprieve, even of death. On a formal level, cutting is everywhere in *Saw*, in the editor’s cutting to and away from the body, a relay that controls the rate of suffering and the arrival of its end. On a formal level, Edison kinetoscope prefigures the extent to which cinema would transform the death shot into the “death scene” by inscribing fatality onto the figures and into the space surrounding the body.

On August 28, 1895, the Edison Company camera operator William Heise, upon the suggestion of Alfred Clark, filmed what may constitute the first cinematic attempt to visualize a death. A closer look at the film is in order. Their short kinetoscope reenactment of Mary’s beheading begins rather scrupulously. The executioner, framed centrally in a long shot (his height roughly matches the frame’s vertical limits), touches the chopping block with the cutting end of his axe: to his right, Mary is blindfolded by one of two other women in the frame. Eyes covered, she kneels down by the block and bows her head over her clasped fist of hands. The blade is raised. Behind the executioner and his kneeling target, male onlookers cloaked in period garb are gathered in a background line. As the axe falls, the crowd separates in its reaction: the two women framing screen left and right cover their eyes and brace themselves, while the men behind encourage the cutting by first raising their scepters and then physically leaning into the axe’s fall, mimicking the executioner’s swing. As the head rolls away from the stump of violence, the onlookers jump a bit and move in closer to examine the headless body, then the removed head, then finally both, back and forth. The executioner picks the head up off of the ground and then raises it over his own, to the noticeable approval of his male witnesses, in an image of conquest. (Fig. 3) Even
in this most rudimentary of movie deaths, even in a scenario in which the death moment could not be more clearly marked or more perceptibly instantaneous, there is a sense that the action itself is not enough, that something must be added. Someone inside the scene—a survivor—must confirm that the image of dying is complete.

Reproducing the actual individual frames, as one silent film historian has done, allows us to grasp the exact work of intervention.\(^2\) (Figs. 4–5) At some point, the camera is turned off, the body of the actor switched with the body of a dummy, and the camera is restarted. It is the dummy that loses its head, not Robert Thomae, the actor playing Mary.\(^3\) Later, the two strips of recorded image are fused together, so that playback allows for the impression of one continuous fatal flow. But were 1895 spectators able to perceive where the fakery might lie? Charles Musser, for one, says no: “When the two takes were spliced together, the interruption was not evident to the spectator and appeared as one continuous shot.”\(^4\) Musser nuances his claim about the novelty of the substitution splice with a note on its historical limits: “This stop-motion substitution, along with the depiction of historical subject matter, were significant innovations; even so, [Alfred] Clark’s film subjects commanded only modest sales, and very few additional pictures were made in the following months.”\(^5\) For a short time, then, spectators may have believed that film decapitation looked as real as any other subject. Paying to watch again, even multiple times, they still may not have noticed, for example, the slight mismatch of the raised scepter one moment with no raised scepter the next, one “glitch” that tells on the film. Because the image viewed through the kinetoscope peephole was continuous, it was difficult for early spectators to look “closer.”\(^6\)

Mary’s splice, though it appears slapdash to some contemporary viewers, is closely connected to later editing strategies tirelessly used to visualize deaths, especially of the violent kind. Focusing on the canicane of stop-motion substitution, it must be noted that from nearly the beginning cinema makers found they could “execute” or “kill” someone—that is, visualize death—by intervening in the process of motion recording. Such quick-change murder characterizes a surprising number of early films. During the first decade of production, films continued to frame the moment that moving bodies appeared to stop moving. Some of these bodies were beheaded; some were hanged. Later, a few were electrocuted. Until 1905, execution films thrived as “a particularly popular subgenre.”\(^7\) The Edison Company reenacted Joan of Arc’s burning at the stake with the same splice device used for Mary before moving on to hangings of relatively unknown African American and female “criminals.” Faking famous deaths from history hardly exhausted cinema’s early interest in murder. Indeed, the Edison Company’s approach took a serious turn when it began to fake contemporary executions that could have been recorded on film.

The instant head-chop would not be the only method of early screen violence. Electrocution films (1901–1905) departed from earlier splice films by using the invisible lethal agent of electricity. The current’s flow was made evident through the body’s stiffening, jolting, and return to seated inertia. Much has been written of two Edison electrocution films in particular.\(^8\) In the reenactment Execution of Czolgosz (1901) and the actuality Electrocuting an Elephant (1903), one can witness intervals of bodily twitching. Czolgosz shows the purported condemned’s body sustaining three apparent jolts before slacking back down to stillness; doctors confirm lack of vital signs and the warden nods officiously at the camera. Elephant features the actual electrocution of a Coney Island circus elephant named Topsy. She topples over after stiffening, and a grounds man enters the frame as if
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to inspect the body. But Topsy continues to twitch unruly for the cameraman’s attempt to grab a clear sign of her completed dying. In their stubborn jolting, both of these electrocuted bodies express the temporal process of dying—a period of transition between “alive” and “dead”—that I would oppose to the lethal instant of decapitation in Mary. With Topsy, the point was as much to find out what truths that transitional time might contain as to fill it in with a preconceived, or prefabricated, body motion.

The stillness of the human “corpse”—one logical end result of an execution scene—was not sufficient to generate closure for the reenactments. Not moving seemed not enough to convince the spectator. Conviction was supplied by other figures surrounding the body (kings, executioners, wardens, policemen) that stepped in to check vital signs or manage the body, occasionally looking at the camera to intimate “yes, he’s dead.” I shall call these figures “registrants” in reference to the service they provide for the absent spectator: recognizing, confirming, and cognitively registering that death has occurred. What is surprising, however, is that the precursor to the registrant lies within Mary, where it would seem least warranted. Though the Queen’s death could not be more obviously marked as the head’s removal from its torso, the executioner performs something of a registration service, holding up the head as if to let the picture itself acknowledge that it has finished death, that it has reached the end of its spectacular action.

The particular form of instantaneity assumed by the earliest recorded deaths could only be accommodated through supplemental features of stillness, gesture, and recognition outside the body in question. Poised to capture death’s instant, the apparatus inadvertently inherited the age-old problem of determining that death has occurred. It will be productive, here, to consider some of the earlier modern productions of the death instant, in order to illustrate where and how cinema, specifically, places death.

Cinema death followed in the wake of earlier investigations into the body’s mechanics. French studies in physiology in the 1880s, most notably the work of Etienne-Jules Marey, employed photography as a graphic recording tool for the body, visualizing the increments of movement that hid from real time and spoke the secrets of the body’s mechanics. By the end of the century, French efforts in experimental body study had absorbed the cinematic apparatus, first focusing the body’s exterior to study locomotion with proto-cinema devices, then taking the film camera into the body to record its inner motion. In the 1890s, Scottish physician John Macintyre rephotographed onto film a series of X-ray images of a frog’s leg, and Viennese Ludwig Braun filmed the exposed pumping of a living dog’s heart. Lisa Cartwright has shown how these more benign demonstrations of cinematic vitality emerged from within an experimental tradition that had a darker side. Physiology had previously inspired scientists to break the outer mold of observation, producing spectators anything but passive. For instance, Claude Bernard’s 1865 experiments actively
interfered with the body studied. Bernard would isolate a nerve function in question and prevent it from working to observe its effects, for example the section of the face where the nerve’s absence would cause twitching. The life he saw, Cartwright writes, was “something perceptible only through a rigor mortis of the nerve,” suppressing a bodily function to produce a different, involuntary movement. 10

At the same time, American animal experiments used an invisible agent—electricity—to induce a theoretically instantaneous death on living subjects. The threshold of electric death was a matter of voltage and amperage. During the 1880s, investigators played with increasingly high voltages of electrical charge to eliminate the painful dying process from execution. Interested parties conceptualized instant death as a process eliminated from outside the body.

The use of electricity to execute humans was first officially introduced in 1886 when New York Governor David Bennett Hill commissioned a group composed of Alfred Southwick, Matthew Hale, and Elbridge Gerry to examine the most humane means to end life. 11 After two years of research, which included writing to Thomas Edison to request his opinion, their published report to the New York legislature argued in favor of electrocution on account that its death would be “instantaneous and painless” and “devoid of all barbarism.” 12 Eliding prolonged technique with torture, the commission alphabetically catalogued previously employed means, from beheading to suffocation. This newest “instantaneous” death would get rid of the horror of botched hangings. A switch would now clean up visible death, as it were, by taking dying out of it, by omitting the live writhing of a body still in pain. Like the filmed reenactment of Queen Mary’s beheading, electricity attempted to situate the death moment within a newly induced stream of motion and time, to hide it from lay spectators. The commission was also interested in curbing the spectacle of those “scaffold dances” at which unruly crowds tended to gather. Included in their report was a press gag clause that advised fewer than twenty attendees be permitted entrance to the executions which should only take place in one of the three state prisons. That audience would include a state Supreme Court judge, two physicians, and “twelve reputable citizens.” 13

To confirm success, the Death Commission relied on a series of its own animal tests conducted by Alfred Southwick for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. A steamboat engineer and dentist, Southwick corroborated with Buffalo physician George Fell to electrocute stray dogs by standing them in cages filled inch-deep with water and placing an electrical cord inside. The SPCA commended their method for inducing vital cessation “instantaneously and seemingly without pain.” 14 Scientists had first played with lethal electricity in the early 1880s to euthanize animals, providing old or abandoned strays with a “good” death. However, the exact voltage and amperage needed “to produce death with certainty in all cases,” notably human cases, remained unknown. At first Edison refused to comment on the electrocution commission, writing Fell that he was opposed to capital punishment in general. But after subsequent nudging that electrocution would at least sanitize the process, Edison offered his opinion that “the most suitable apparatus for the purpose is that class of dynamo-electric machine which employs intermittent currents.” He went on to name names: “The most effective of these are known as ‘alternating machines,’ manufactured principally in this country by Mr. Geo. Westinghouse, Pittsburgh.” 15 But on 5 June, 1888, the day after the New York Times reported the new (slightly modified) electrical law set to pass, a little-known entrepreneur named Harold Brown published a letter in the Evening Post titled “Death in the Wires” in which he warned that high voltage of alternating current would be dangerous if put to residential or commercial use. Brown commissioned Edison’s lab at Menlo Park to perform tests to demonstrate his claim, and Edison was eager to oblige, for he was about to engage in a battle to save his own direct current (DC) from the Westinghouse-Tesla monopoly of alternating current (AC), a two-way stream which could be carried at higher voltages and at greater distances. 16 Both Brown and Edison meant to exhibit the peculiar devastation only AC, a faster and stronger surge from farther away, could commit to a living body.

On both sides of the Atlantic, then, experimenters were divining the threshold
between life and death through experimentation. Just as Marey was making the space between chronophotographic frames perceptible, American scientists were reducing the length of time between vitality and cessation to the instantaneity of the electrical switch. Where Marey used the non-projected filmstrip to enhance the body with a new visibility, electrocutioners created a new body for visual culture by ejecting the painful and prolonged, thus uncertain and experimental, change over time that comprised execution’s most harrowing spectacle. Though always experimental in nature, the production of instantaneous death by electricity—that ever-present fuel for motion pictures to come—developed a particular concept of the instant as a mask over a process that would otherwise take over.

Looking ahead, Edison (or someone near him) may have foreseen the possibility of an electrical spectacle of bodily destruction that could be seen outside his studio. The Kinetoscope Company would waste little time before putting on such a spectacle; by 1895 Mary’s beheading had reached eyes outside Menlo Park. With the electrically run kinetoscope showcasing the beheading, two of Edison’s technologies fused together. Mary’s death applied a notion of the instant as the product of an omitted process—in this case, the process of replacing human body with dummy. And Mary was nothing if not inspirational. Subsequent execution films continued to visualize the transformation from life to death as a change from moving to inert body. The substitution did not occur at the death moment but rather some time before: in Mary, it occurs at the beginning of the axe’s fatal arc; in Execution by Hanging, it comes just before the gallows floor’s dropping. Splicing strived to keep murder intact as a continuous movement—from whole to split, or from breathing to asphyxiated body. Doane writes of the mechanics of Execution by Hanging’s noose:

At this point there is a barely perceptible break in which, evidently, the actors freeze in position, the woman is removed, and a dummy is substituted for her so that the execution can continue unimpeded. When the film is screened, the break is all but invisible. Such a strategy is a denial of process and ensures the spectator’s experience of continuous time.17

Not only is the substitution splice a process “denied” by motion, it is also replaced by another process, the one that film could specifically promise—that of the body’s slide from voluntary movement to
falling to rigid.

Magic theater had routinely provided convincing cuttings, dismemberments, and sudden transformations. In Erik Barnouw’s book *The Magician and the Cinema*, we can glimpse some specific metamorphic acts common to the magic stage, as for example the sideshow transformation into a skeleton of a volunteer from the crowd. This effect is created by placing on a diagonal axis a glass wall, onto which is projected the image of an actual skeleton hidden on the side, both from the volunteer and from the astonished spectators. The two figures spatially coincide. Transformation often involved split-timing synchronization—turning off the lights on the volunteer to be rendered skeletal, and turning on those that would illuminate the skeleton. Though the earliest film deaths were predicated on timed techniques such as this, they departed from stage traditions in at least two significant ways.

First, the frame could display a remote scene with environmental traces still intact. The outdoor locations, notable in a film like *Mary*, contributed to the impression that the camera was in fact there, where spectators were not. The image was not bound by the proscenium’s three walls but by the screen’s two-dimensional frame. That frame—a surreptitiously changing window onto the world—filtered a death as arriving from elsewhere, indeed from elsewhere. Anne Friedberg has argued that the gaze constructed by the cinematic experience continued virtual and mobile perceptions of space and time earlier introduced by the panorama and diorama. Just as these earlier venues provided virtual spatial mobility by “bringing the country to the town dweller” and virtual temporal mobility by “transporting the past to the present,” the cinema camera brought a quick death to an immobile spectator. Though the earliest film deaths were predicated on timed techniques such as this, they departed from stage traditions in at least two significant ways.

Second, film deaths worked with a unit of time that was unavailable to the stage. Reexamining the work of Méliès’ magic films for their use of cutting, André Gaudreault finds that the transposition of stage effects to the screen required Méliès to further intervene as editor to employ stop-motion substitution. Méliès himself explained:

> Every appearance, disappearance or substitution was of course done in the camera but was always re-cut in the laboratory on the negative, and for a very simple reason: this trick effect...will not work if the rhythm is broken. But the inertia of the camera was such that it was impossible to stop on the last frame of the “shot” before the “trick,” change the background or the characters, and start up again on the first frame of the “shot” after the “trick” without having a noticeable variation in speed.

Méliès suggests that cinematic spectacle was dictated by the speed of the moving image; this surplus dimension of time, or momentum, required the role of the editor to further splice the two separately recorded strands of live action. Gaudreault contends: “Fundamentally, Méliès’ films are montage films except that—and the exception is essential—many of his cuts juxtapose two ‘shots’ with the same framing: Before and after a stop-motion substitution, the framing remains the same.” Tom Gunning extends this line of analysis by suggesting that much of early cinema was interested in continuity of viewpoint across shots and thus did involve editing. Achieving continuity across multiple images by duplicating the framing is quite distinct from the continuity system of later narrative cinema, yet it confirms that substitution acts did not passively replicate the theatrical proscenium for magical effects. “Early films are enframed rather than emplotted,” Gunning explains, “and what is contained by their framing is often a result of a detailed and complex labor, one which, in the tradition of nineteenth-century illusionism, labors to efface its traces just as surely as did the later classical style.” Edison’s film, like many by Méliès, worked with a cinema, not a theater, of illusion. Cinema granted separate film pieces a temporal relation that produced not a theatrical unity, but rather a “cinematic synthesis of time.” If examined too closely (e.g., projected in slow motion or viewed frame by frame), the movie did not divulge death’s secret, but cinema’s.
The addition of cinematic momentum slots the death moment within a synthetic time frame that exists only if the film is projected. Removed from the process of projection, the filmstrip will show no death.

The new representational tool poses a double bind—ready to capture the movement from “alive” to “dead” that evaded still image traditions of painting and photography, film first visualized death as an instant of sudden change. Certainly magic theater had produced quick sleight-of-hand tricks of fatal body damage. But film sheds the necessity of the off-scene prestidigitator. The picture scene itself attempts to confirm that death has occurred. The fact that it hasn’t occurred in Mary is all the more reason why the executioner continues the action by demonstrating the separated head, a strangely phantasmatic proof of fatality. Registration surely accompanied stage beheading. But what is striking in Mary is that such registration becomes a function of the image itself, and as such, it must traffic in the flux between presence and absence that characterizes the film image. Though we are not present at the beheading (and could never be, given that the film is a historical re-enactment), we see the moving picture version acknowledge that death has occurred in our time. The film represents for us that death has happened again after having already represented its occurrence.

When used by technicians to achieve instantaneous cessation, electricity also produced a new image of death, a moving image that produced the uncanny effect of confirming deadness after it had supposedly been induced. Back in Edison’s lab, in 1888, Harold Brown displayed (with Edison’s dynamos) to the Electrical Control Board his ability to instrumentally induce an instantaneous death. Along with electrician Arthur Kennelly (then employed by the Edison Co.), Brown astonished his audience with a battery of tests, which he performed at various venues over the next two years, including at the trial concerning the “cruel and unusual punishment” of William Kemmler, the first human executed with AC. Brown would start with a small dog and shock it with DC charges at increasing intervals (300, 400, 700, 1000, 1400), with the dog reacting more fiercely at lower resistance levels (from 15,000 to 2500 ohms). He would then switch to a 330 voltage of alternating current, and the animal would fall dead on the spot, answering the question of which current and voltage would produce vital cessation.

Producing death in this manner was a matter of incremental adjustments in voltage that anticipate the careful cutting of film sequences. There is a remarkable pre-cinematic quality to Brown’s experiments: spectators are positioned outside the spectacle object that is hooked up to electrical dynamos via ground wires. Substitute the horse with a thief, the electrical cord with a helmet of knives, Brown with another sadistic scientist/torturer, and move the scene from Edison’s lab to a not-clearly-accessible torture chamber, and you get Saw IV, or something awfully close.

Electrically induced human death proved difficult to perceive. In the newspaper coverage of Kemmler’s electrocution on August 6, 1890 at Auburn State Prison, we can find several eyewitness descriptions of the scene that reflect the difficulty of determining death from outside the body. Carlos MacDonald offered this testimony:

For obvious reasons, the only means of determining the question of death while the body was in circuit was by ocular monstration; so that it can not be positively asserted that the heart’s action entirely ceased with the onset of unconsciousness, though most of the medical witnesses present thought that it did.24

Because spectators could not make contact with the body, as MacDonald’s brief account underscores, they could not confidently read the effects of the theoretically instantaneous death from outside the body. The process of dying was not quite denied by electrocution, only disavowed.25 If early electricity was used to scrutinize bodily movement, it was also used to scrutinize bodily dying, that process or operation whereby a living being was made dead. For film to take an interest in this process and to reenact real executions required the apparatus to situate the death instant within the flow of time, setting the stage for the conflict between the apparently instantaneous death heralded by modernity and a gradual act still happening while we watch. The gradual character of dying, with its messy conclusion, was fully revealed by the later
electrocution films, but Mary encounters, then solves, the problem of “ocular monstration” with its in-frame supplemental gesture. It is as if the camera wanted to function as a registrant by itself but could not fathom death as a visible change without disseminating the death sign into the larger scene.

Determining the place of “death” within cinema has sparked recent theoretical investigation. Garrett Stewart has remarked on the deathlike moment of the freeze frame, the most fundamental level of the filmstrip coming forward into the momentous field of vision. It is true that photographs carry a death-like punctum into many a horror film. It may be that each irruption or arrest of the frame carries the germ of death, but one could just as easily argue that it is not the freeze frame but the cut, or perhaps more specifically, the splice, that contains death. Mary’s splice is a compromised blackout, acting like the one change that truly exceeds understanding, a change that must always be fabricated from an outsider’s position. The important point is that film motion is connected to dying, not death—for Stewart, because film puts the inert piece of its materiality (the frame, or photogram) into orbit by repressing it as the underbelly of motion; and for me, because film controls the rate of change between “alive” and “dead,” a transition which is located in the cut or splice. When it is not located in the cut—that is, when there is no cutting—death is notoriously difficult to perceive. I would argue that the duration of the shot undercuts the effect of the switch-like instant as a measured slice of death—ironically, the instantaneity that is a unique property of the medium itself. Film replicates and annihilates instant death in the same move.

As I have shown, after converting dying into a death that is seen, passed over, and concluded, the moving image wants more: a second look. That “look” is often provided by a beholder whose job is to enact the locus of recognition. As such, the cinema expands on the notion of the death instant by drawing on multiple registers for confirmation outside the body. Mary repeats the switch from “alive” to “dead” as a secondary act of recognition and embodiment, doubling the death. Walter Benjamin has written about the double-effect accompanying the novel transformation of longer processes into sudden singular hand-movements made possible by mechanical gadgets. Focusing on the photograph, Benjamin reasons:

Of the countless movements of switching, inserting, pressing and the like, the ‘snapping’ of the photographer has had the greatest consequences. A touch of the finger now sufficed to fix an event for an unlimited period of time. The camera gave the moment a posthumous shock, as it were.

The photograph’s “posthumous shock” contains a precise moment that is already dead once captured. While we may contest Benjamin’s assertion that a photograph is more important than, say, a trigger, his point does relate the flux of perception to instantaneous technological effects. Functioning in fact posthumously, the cinematic registrant carries the final weight and completes the picture of death on the outside of the slain body. Given that cinema moves death outside the body into supplemental registers that confirm finality after the fact, it amounts to a stroke of cinematic brilliance (even if unintentional) that Whannell and Wan titled their series “Saw”: as a verb, the term refers to the act of cutting, but is also the past tense of “see.” Seeing dying is what the films’ prolonged, suspense-driven torture scenes propose, but seeing death is always about looking back—both in the sense that the spectator can’t see it coming until it has already happened, and in the sense that the film editor manipulates the end result of each torture scene through hindsight (in “post”). Saw makes the point that while it may be impossible to catch sight of death, cinema’s promise to do so has long been the source of our ability to imagine it. Life’s final instant was an originary instance of post-cinematic manipulation.
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**Notes**

1 The best argument yet for this formal bias can be found in Vivian Sobchack, “Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* (Fall 1984), 283-300. Her essay was revised and republished in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 226-257.

2 The frame that harbors the trick, and the two neighboring frames, is reproduced in Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 87.

3 Though my approach is not primarily psychoanalytic, it should be noted that the missing filmic instant of Thomae’s substitution by a dummy, that two-tiered “cut,” begs to be read as an instance of castration, with the men eager to make it happen, the women already “knowing” it, and the amazing fact that Mary herself is played by a man—the treasurer of the Kinetoscope Company, Robert Thomae.

4 Musser, *Emergence*, 87.

5 Musser, *Emergence*, 88-9. Musser goes on to explain that the faltering kinetoscope business by summer 1895 was mostly the result of external factors, like low profit margin for the selling of individual kinetoscopes, and competition from Britain’s Robert W. Paul.

6 But this is not to say they weren’t tempted. Rather than fooled they had witnessed the historic queen’s execution, early spectators likely suspected some chicanery but lacked both the video technology and the moral imperative to sniff its exact workings out. Silent film historiography has taught us to respect even the earliest spectator’s capacity for disavowal, an ability to acknowledge film’s artificiality while unwittingly suspending that disbelief to appreciate the verisimilitude. Earlier entertainers had certainly encouraged spectators to work through optical tricks. Neil Harris has researched P.T. Barnum’s nineteenth-century predilection toward heartening spectators to scrutinize the mechanical workings of his humbug attractions, such as the Feejee mermaid. Hardly duped by curiosities and technological marvels, visitors came expecting to be trumped and felt encouraged to figure out how. For a sense of how Americans participated in Barnum’s shows, see Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (New York, 1973). Also, a key essay that drives my understanding of the early film spectator is Tom Gunning’s “An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credible Spectator,” *Art and Text* 34 (Spring 1989).

7 Mary Ann Doane discusses the prevalence of the execution genre in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), 145.


9 Writing about Etienne-Jules Marey’s method of 2-D overlapping of still images, Mary Ann Doane explains that “the graphic method had one distinct advantage over the chronophotographic: its record of a movement left no temporal gaps, and its inscription therefore allowed complete continuity.” Doane, *Emergence*, 57-9.


14 Essig, *Edison*, 94.


17 Doane, *Emergence*, 159.


20 As quoted in André Gaudreault, “Theatricality, Narrativity, and Trickality: Reevaluating the Cinema of George Méliès,” in *Journal of Popular Film and Television* (15.3 1987).

21 Gaudreault, “Theatricality,” 117.

23 Gunning, “‘Primitive’ Cinema,” 10.
24 *Buffalo Evening News*, 7 August 1890.
25 The first electrocution in New York, that of William Kemmler on 6 August 1890, was described the next day on the front page of the *Buffalo Evening News* as a “terrible” scene, “horrible and atrocious,” even “mismanaged.” The problem was that Kemmler continued to groan and move after what seemed to be cessation had been witnessed. At first, “the promoters of electric execution were elated. But the horror came later, when Kemmler showed signs of life.” Asked if Kemmler were alive after the first jolt, engineer C.R. Huntley reported “Certainly he was,” claiming “I don’t believe anybody not there can thoroughly appreciate the horror that came over us. I cannot shake it off.” *Buffalo Evening News*, 7 August 1890. The *New York Medical Journal* detailed the air of uncertainty presided over the event. Before Kemmler entered, the warden and physicians opined on the length of time electrical contact should be made. Kemmler’s execution set a tone of anticipating grisly mishaps.
28 Granting cinema this kind of control aligns the medium more clearly with killing than with dying, but the analogy turns to dying when the spectacle object is passively experiencing the final instant and we spectators are identifying with that figure.