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Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation (1994, Kim Henkel, USA)
The Toolbox Murders (1978, Dennis Donnelly, USA)
Toolbox Murders (2004, Tobe Hooper, USA)
Tourist Trap (1979, David Schmoeller, USA)
The Town That Dreaded Sundown (2014, Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, USA)
The Undertaker (1988, Frank Avianca and Steve Bono, USA)
Urban Legend (1998, Jamie Blanks, USA/Canada)
Urban Legends: Final Cut (2000, John Ottman, USA/Canada)
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CHAPTER 2

EVERY RITUAL HAS ITS PURPOSE

Laboring Bodies in The Autopsy of Jane Doe

David Church

Viewers of the horror genre will have seen, but perhaps barely registered, many undistinguished appearances by ambulance crews, forensic investigators, medical examiners, morgue attendants, funeral home operators, cemetery staff, and other practitioners of what might broadly be called "postmortem labor." In the wake of the monster's deeds, a panoply of professions comes into the picture to effectively "clean up" the mess left behind when violent or mysterious deaths occur. Some of these roles are directly tied to the larger criminal-justice system, such as gathering evidence for use in prosecutions, while others are more discretely rooted in what the US Department of Commerce calls the "death-care industry," including the goods and services associated with funerals, burials, and cremations. (Coroners, who are often elected officials, bridge these two sectors, first by ordering autopsies to determine a cause of death and then by legally releasing a body for its eventual disposal.)

It would not be a stretch to claim that horror, more than any other genre of film, implicitly depends on the many forms of postmortem labor that attend to decedents in the time span between the crime-scene investigation and the body's final disposal. Yet most of these jobs are largely "invisibilized" within the genre itself, pushed to the narrative margins as professions that either come on-scene *after* the major narrative events or appear as a brief bridge *between* narrative segments while the monster is still at large. At first glance, this might seem an overly broad claim (and notable exceptions will always exist), but when postmortem labor appears more than superficially, it most often does so in horror films that mix with adjacent genres. Although morgues, funeral homes, and cemeteries commonly appear as settings in horror movies, it is often only in passing, such as when a loved one must identify a body or bury a relative. In *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (Wes

Craven, 1994), for example, Heather Langenkamp (playing herself) visits a morgue to confirm her husband's death in an apparent car crash, but the morgue attendant refuses to lower the white sheet far enough to reveal deep slashes in the decedent's chest, as if maintaining complicity with what is actually Freddy Krueger's handiwork.

Even when such settings do figure more prominently—for example, in *Phantasm* (Don Coscarelli, 1979), *Funeral Home* (William Fruet, 1980), *Night of the Demons* (Kevin Tenney, 1988), and *See No Evil 2* (Jen Soska and Sylvia Soska, 2014)—they tend to be figured more as spooky settings, without much attention paid to the actual types of labor performed therein. While there are certainly a handful of horror films that depict death-care workers as monstrous antagonists—*The Hearse* (George Bowers, 1980), *Dead and Buried* (Gary Sherman, 1981), *Mortuary* (Howard Avedis, 1983), and *The Undertaker* (Frank Avianca and Steve Bono, 1988), among others—workers in or near to the death-care industry feature less often as protagonists in their own right. When they do, it is often in horror-comedy films—such as *The Undertaker and His Pals* (T. L. P. Swicegood, 1966), *Re-animator* (Stuart Gordon, 1985), *The Return of the Living Dead* (Dan O'Bannon, 1985), *Nekromantik* (Jörg Buttgereit, 1987), *Body Bags* (John Carpenter and Tobe Hooper, 1993), and *Cemetery Man* (Michele Soavi, 1994)—that depict their close contact with corpses as a source of carnivalesque humor. Mortuary workers, for instance, tend to be depicted as bumbling oafs, perverse necrophiliacs, or morbid weirdos rather than competent professionals whose labor helps give comfort to grieving survivors.

Much as films set in and around the death-care industry generically mix horror with comedy, major characters on the criminal-justice side of postmortem professions tend to appear in horror films that border on the thriller or mystery genres, such as the many police-procedural films about serial killers that became mainstream Hollywood fodder following the success of *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) and *Se7en* (David Fincher, 1995). This cycle continued on through the late 2000s, when serial-killer films began focusing less on police or detectives as protagonists than on increasingly humanized depictions of the killers themselves (Simpson 119–124). Even the *giallo*-esque film *Nightwatch* (Ole Bornedal, 1994; Ole Bornedal, 1997 [US remake])—in which a night watchperson at a morgue becomes implicated in a serial killer's ongoing murders and becomes an amateur detective to clear himself of suspicion—more closely resembles a "thriller" than a straight horror film. Mark Jancovich argues that such serial-killer films achieved critical and popular success in part because having narratives structured around the *process* of detection seemingly distanced them from

the horror genre's lowbrow connotations of supernatural monstrosity and gratuitous violence, thereby allowing wider audiences to justify their consumption of these films via a more respectable genre label than "horror" (156–159). Indeed, as such procedural narratives began to wane in popularity at theaters, they increasingly migrated to television, with the popular series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (Anthony E. Zuiker, 2000–2015) and its many generic kin effectively justifying their scenes of graphic violence (e.g., computer-generated "fly-throughs" of extreme bodily trauma) through the moral reassurance that, week in and week out, forensic experts can solve even the most bizarre crimes in under an hour of screen time.

Overall, then, sustained and substantial depictions of postmortem labor are more likely to appear in films that border on genres other than the horror genre proper—which prompts the question of why a genre so intensely focused on death would seem to push these critical roles toward its representational margins. In this chapter, I examine André Øvredal's *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (2016) as a rare example of a critically acclaimed horror film that structures its narrative around the very process of conducting its titular act via a story that blends the criminal-justice and death-care spheres of postmortem labor, albeit without tonally departing into an adjacent genre such as thriller or comedy. Rather, by remaining squarely in the same generic territory occupied by witches and zombies, *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* depicts the professional labor of a father-son mortuary team overlapping with the genre's broader representations of endangered bodies struggling to survive. By commingling its depiction of postmortem labor with the protagonists' physical and emotional labor of trying to stay alive, the film points toward one of the horror genre's deepest ritual functions: reassuring viewers that the *actual* (unrepresentable) passage into death does not come easily and is not truly the end. Although *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* does bring on-scene a job that typically gets too close for comfort to the brute facticity of death when rendered soberly and realistically, it does so to suggest that decedents can continue to narrate their experiences from beyond the grave, hence providing fodder for future horror films.

Gendered Preliminaries

The Autopsy of Jane Doe opens at the scene of a gory multiple murder in Grantham, Virginia, where a forensic investigation finds that the Douglas family were killed apparently while attempting to break *out* of their own home instead of during a break-*in*. Unlike the partially or wholly opened

Figure 2.1. Finding the woman's body in *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (André Øvredal, 2016)

bodies strewn throughout the house, however, the semi-unearthed body of a young woman (Olwen Kelly), her nude form free of decomposition and her face serenely restful, is found in a hole dug in the basement floor. Although local officer Sheriff Burke (Michael McElhatton) initially suspects that a construction worker, also found dead inside the home, killed the unidentified woman elsewhere and attempted to hide the body beneath the Douglas family's basement, he cannot explain how this "Jane Doe" became such a strangely pristine corpse. The film thus begins very similarly to a police procedural, but after this prologue, the action quickly shifts away from the site of criminal-justice labor to the family-owned mortuary where the rest of the more generically horrific narrative will unfold.

We are introduced to the Tilden Morgue and Crematory via a montage of an autopsy in progress, as Tommy Tilden (Brian Cox) and his trainee son, Austin (Emile Hirsch), dissect the fire-scorched body of one Otis Howard. Set to upbeat rock music, the montage emphasizes the smooth and efficient professionalism that the father is imparting to his son, while also emphasizing that even with a corpse being opened on the slab, a morgue is not an inherently "creepy" setting but rather a place for highly skilled labor. Austin hypothesizes that smoke inhalation killed the man, but Tommy locates the true cause of death as a subdural hematoma in the cranium. "Every body has its secret. Some just hide them better than others," Tommy says, reassuring his son and foreshadowing Burke's unexpected arrival with Jane Doe. Needing to tell the press something more substantial about the Douglas family murders, Burke asks Tommy to stay past closing time to uncover Jane Doe's cause of death, hoping that the mysterious woman will be the key to unlocking the crime scene.

Although forensic pathologists or medical examiners typically perform autopsies at a hospital or other public health facility, it is not uncommon for funeral home operators to moonlight as local coroners in small rural communities that may lack medically trained pathologists—even if this necessitates shipping some bodies to a private medical examiner for autopsy (Weisheit et al. 90). While it is somewhat unrealistic for a family-run business specializing in such particular tasks as autopsies and cremation (as opposed to broader funeral services) to economically survive for multiple generations in a rural Virginia town, the Tilden establishment collapses these two professions (identifying causes of death and cremating bodies) under the same roof for the sake of narrative expediency. Hence, the Tilden Morgue and Crematory conflates different sides of the postmortem labor spectrum, from medical-cum-criminal investigation to death care, which are typically separate businesses.

On the other hand, however, because Tommy is *not* depicted as a funeral home director, the screenwriters are less obligated to depict him with a funeral director's requisite degree of emotional warmth and empathy toward bereaved visitors. Rather, the morgue, located in the basement of his home, figures as Tommy's masculine domain, a more clinical place where he can excel at his professional duties. Significantly, women have begun entering the death-care industry in far greater numbers since the early 2000s, engendering growing public curiosity about how they inhabit these traditionally male-dominated professions, especially given the association of female labor with emotional labor. This shift is evidenced by a handful of prominent memoirs and media representations, from Caitlin Doughty's YouTube series "Ask a Mortician" (2011–) to fictional characters such as funeral home operator Shirley Crain (Elizabeth Reaser) in Netflix's *The Haunting of Hill House* (Mike Flanagan, 2018).[1] While part of this curiosity surely derives from traditionally gendered assumptions that women would not want to muck around in close proximity to death and decay, it arguably gives such jobs a "kinder, gentler" face associated with women's culturally prescribed role as nurturers.

Although Tommy is depicted as an encouraging father, his professionalism is clearly based in a coldly medical empiricism that also manifests as a stereotypically masculine stoicism born of emotional repression. "Down here, if you can't see it, [or] touch it, it doesn't matter," he remarks, trying to dissuade Austin from making speculative leaps beyond ascertaining cause of death. As we soon learn, Tommy may be very apt when examining dead bodies, but he was blind to the emotional strain his work life was placing on his wife, who killed herself two years earlier. Meanwhile, Austin is torn between wanting to support his father but also hoping to pursue just about

any other profession, away from the family morgue. Still, even though he does not need to stay for the Jane Doe autopsy, Austin abruptly cancels his date with his girlfriend, Emma (Ophelia Lovibond), to assist his father, hinting that he is also inheriting his father's neglect toward (living) women. The film thus opens by rooting its emotional stakes in the two men's attitudes toward their work and whether they prioritize (masculine) professional futures over (feminine) romantic ones.

This tension between the cultural associations of "masculine" rationality and "feminine" emotionality is highlighted when Emma, visiting the morgue for the first time, asks to see one of the bodies and is shown an apparent "suicide" (whose actual cause of death was murder by poison, covered up by a posthumous shotgun blast). She asks Tommy why someone poisoned the man, but he scoffs at the question: "Leave the why to the cops and the shrinks. We're just here to find cause of death. No more, no less." Not only does he maintain that they perform a very compartmentalized role, tied far more strongly to science than psychology, but he jokingly compares Emma's question to Austin's earlier comment that the elderly Otis Howard "was all alone. That's why he died." ("He died because he fell and hit his head," Tommy corrected him.) According to Tommy, then, opening up to the less empirically grounded realm of emotion—and, as will soon be revealed, the supernatural—is more closely aligned with femininity, much as Carol Clover argues that horror films about supernatural possession are typically built upon a gendered conflict between male representatives of (Western) "White Science" and female representatives of "Black Magic" (70–85, 98, 109). Because women's bodies, since biblical times, have been seen as more "open" to supernatural invasion, they most often figure as the bodies called upon "to give literal and visible *evidence*" in possession films, typically via a battery of inconclusive medical tests to determine what is "occulted" away inside their bodies (82). Indeed, when Tommy answers Emma's query about why he ties a small bell to decedents' toes (his homage to an antiquated practice for preventing the premature burial of cataleptics), he shrugs and calls himself a "traditionalist," which also implicitly describes his gendered attitude toward his job. Although his nod to tradition may indicate a touch of sentimentality on his part, it still pays loving tribute to a male-dominated past, well before the recent influx of women into death-care professions.

Meanwhile, Austin's cancellation of his date suggests a necrophilic eschewal of his girlfriend, Emma, for the beautiful nude corpse. The film would have a different tenor were the mysterious corpse badly decomposed, but Jane Doe's sleeping-beauty appearance, resembling one of Poe's many female objects of desire (as Tommy's allusion to catalepsy makes more

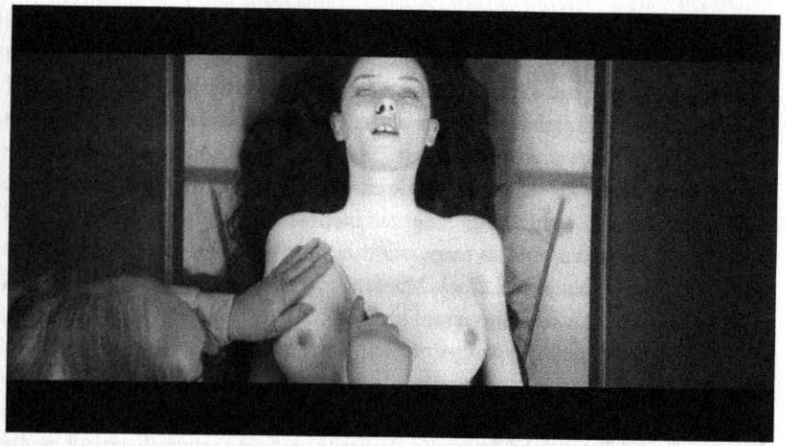

Figure 2.2. The passive female corpse in *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (André Øvredal, 2016)

explicit), invites the viewer to share a necrophilic eroticism that overlaps with a clinical male gaze.[2] Barbara Creed notes that "the ultimate in abjection is the corpse," not only because the decaying body often renders visible the various fluids and organs expected to remain within the body's corporeal boundaries but also because of religious prohibitions against a body without a soul (9–10). Yet the figure of the dead woman—especially the young, beautiful white woman—has served as a common object of aesthetic contemplation since the eighteenth century (again, see Poe) and has since become a latter-day cultural fetish (see true-crime narratives) that simultaneously condemns and mourns the woman as a figure of lost privilege and potential.

To quote Elisabeth Bronfen, *The Autopsy of Jane Doe*'s initial "image of a feminine corpse presents a concept of beauty which places the work of death into the service of the aesthetic process, for this form of beauty is contingent on the translation of an animate body into a deanimated one" (5). That is, the corpse of a beautiful woman serves as an idealized blank slate for the male pathologist to work his own magic upon, but this idealization is only possible *because* she is already dead (3–14). Although physically opened up, Jane Doe is depicted less as a source of repulsion than as one of the many "*dead-but-not-gone* women" whose posthumous "pseudoagency" in contemporary pop-culture narratives may pay lip service to a "feminist logic" of retribution but is "ultimately contained and reinscribed in an androcentric order that refuses to accept responsibility for the injustices and powerlessness that women *collectively* endure" (Clarke Dillman 11). Indeed, through a

preponderance of overhead medium shots and close-ups, Jane Doe is offered up for a (heterosexual) male gaze as an ostensibly passive female object on the slab, her porcelain skin and internal organs overexposed by the glow of the operating room lights, with her blank, clouded eyes seemingly unable to return the gaze. Yet she soon demonstrates a surreptitious resistance to the medico-patriarchal power of her male examiners (albeit to less certain ends). Although *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* centers postmortem labor via a far more procedural narrative than in most other horror films, its gendered tensions between White Science and Black Magic, as well as its Gothic preoccupation with an eroticized dead woman and her implicit voice from beyond the grave, all strongly resonate with long-standing genre tropes.

External and Internal Clues

Beginning nineteen minutes into the film's duration, the eponymous autopsy follows the overall trajectory of real autopsies, with the film's remaining narrative unfolding across the four standard stages of examination (external, internal, organs, and brain) that have been more methodically depicted elsewhere, whether in true-crime shows such as *Autopsy* (Arthur Ginsberg, 1994–2008) or "shockumentaries" such as *Autopsy: Voices of Death* (Michael Kriegsman, 2000).[3] Carla Valentine, an anatomical pathology technologist who served as a consultant on *The Autopsy of Jane Doe*, recalls that the examination-room set and makeup prosthetics were largely realistic, save such notable exceptions as the filmmakers' depiction of rib shears as oversized bolt cutters and their initial plans to depict brain extraction as requiring sawing off the whole skull cap rather than peeling back the facial skin and scalp to access only the rear of the skull (the latter prosthetic was revamped, at Valentine's insistence, for the sake of accuracy) (19–24, 27–33).[4] There is, then, still a strong element of the procedural in the film's narrative progression as the Tildens attempt to solve the cause-of-death mystery, but these elements are increasingly interrupted as supernatural events begin to occur, shifting the film more squarely toward horror territory. The lab's radio keeps reporting on a dangerous thunderstorm growing outside (interrupted at times by the creepy leitmotif of Stuart Hamblen's 1954 Christian-revival song "Open Up Your Heart [and Let the Sunshine In]," which recurs as radio interference), eventually leading to power outages in the basement morgue, and further lending the film a properly "dark and stormy night" setting more akin to the Gothic horror film than the conventional procedural.

Because Jane Doe's ankles and wrists had been shattered and her tongue

crudely severed, Tommy initially suspects that she might have been the silenced victim of a sex-trafficking ring, a hypothesis consonant with the contemporary "dead white girl" trope. Other clues, however, seem to scramble the temporal stages of decomposition: for example, her clouded eyes suggest a body that has already been dead for days, despite how the blood pouring from the Y-incision in her torso would only occur in a very fresh decedent. Tommy tries to explain away these anomalies through reference to past cases, but he cannot explain why Jane Doe's internal organs are badly scarred and her lungs blackened, without any external signs of trauma to her torso.

As the autopsy moves deeper into the corpse, the film moves deeper into the unexplained, requiring Tommy to begin confronting the bounds of his scientific knowledge—a process that also begins softening up his emotionally cold persona. The internal examination phase, for example, is interrupted when Austin discovers his late mother's cat (another Poe allusion) mortally wounded in the basement's air ducts; Tommy euthanizes and cremates the cat, asking for a moment alone because the pet reminded him of his dead wife. Much as Father Karras (Jason Miller) in *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) opens up to the possibility of supernatural instead of psychiatric explanations while simultaneously confronting his guilt over having neglected his dying mother, Tommy is increasingly confronted with reminders of his past mistakes as a man—all part of Jane Doe's soon-to-be-revealed retribution toward the living. This is, then, a cogent example of Clover's argument that "in the world of satanic or spirit films, the horror of being too open [as a woman] is matched only by the horror of being too closed" when a man fails to acknowledge the supernatural or arrives at the truth too late to save himself (90).

The film's adherence to the possession subgenre also comes into focus through its superficial similarity to several other films of the same period, especially *The Possession of Hannah Grace* (Diederik Van Rooijen, 2018), in which an ex-cop (Shay Mitchell) takes a night watch job at a Boston morgue, where the still-possessed corpse of Hannah Grace (Kirby Johnson), a young woman killed during a failed exorcism, begins orchestrating supernatural mayhem. Originally titled "Cadaver," the film was retitled by Sony to cash in on its similarity to the earlier Sony hit *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (Scott Derrickson, 2005), which was loosely based on the real-life case of Anneliese Michel (1952–1976), a young German woman who died during an attempted exorcism (her "possessed" state likely attributable to temporal lobe epilepsy). Although the anonymity of the placeholder name "Jane Doe" lacks the same specificity, *The Autopsy of Jane Doe*'s use of a person's name in its title nevertheless recalls not only *Emily Rose* and *Hannah Grace* but also

other possession films of the same period (including *The Taking of Deborah Logan* [Adam Robitel, 2014] and *The Possession of Michael King* [David Jung, 2014]), which a prospective viewer might think or want to imagine represents a tantalizing, real-world case file.

If the first two stages of the autopsy could plausibly remain in the realm of White Science, the latter two stages reveal how the heart of the mystery resides in Black Magic. As Austin remarks, "Whatever happened in here, we are way past possible." Examining Jane Doe's stomach contents, they find jimsonweed—a member of the nightshade family whose anesthetic effects have, in other contexts, been used as a pharmacological ingredient for creating the *zombis* of Haitian Vodou (Davis 164–165)—plus one of the woman's extracted teeth, wrapped in a cloth parchment inscribed with Roman numerals. Increasingly convinced that Jane Doe was the victim of some sort of ritual torture, Austin meanwhile pleads with his father to talk to him about Austin's deceased mother, Tommy's wife; with the dead woman finally beginning to reveal her dark secret, the film also becomes, to a lesser extent, an "autopsy" of male emotions. Finally, the men peel back her skin, revealing on the underside a pattern of symbols that seem to be of religious or demonological origin, at which point the overhead lights shatter and the morgue is plunged into darkness as the storm swells outside.

As the film tips wholly into the horror genre, the Tildens soon flee from the morgue's three other corpses (including Otis Howard), which have risen from their refrigerated niches to shamble through the basement as zombies. Jane Doe herself, however, remains stationary on the examination table throughout these and other scenes, her clouded eyes blankly staring into space. When Austin and Tommy resolve to break the spell by cremating the body, not only does the examination-room door lock them in, but their attempt to immolate Jane Doe's body with flammable chemicals leads to little more than a huge fireball and the body itself left magically untouched. Meanwhile, one of the risen bodies, an elderly woman whose lips have been sutured shut, now straining these stitches to moan at the men through a peephole, visually alludes to how Jane Doe is a dead woman finally "speaking out," even if the men do not yet fully understand what she is saying.

In one sense, the idea of the autopsied body "speaking" its experience to knowledgeable interpreters is such a familiar trope that it figures in the names of both nonfictional and fictional procedural series, such as *Autopsy 2: Voices from the Dead* (Arthur Ginsberg, 1995), *Silent Witness* (multiple directors, 1996–), and *Autopsy 7: Dead Men Talking* (Arthur Ginsberg, 2001). Yet Jane Doe's apparent ability to conjure the undead is just one example of how she is able to plant hallucinations in the Tildens' heads, which also includes

a vision of Emma suddenly returning to the morgue (just in time to be accidentally killed with a hatchet when mistaken for a zombie) as well as the thunderstorm raging outside. (Over the film's closing images, we hear a radio broadcast noting an uninterrupted string of sunny days, which confirms that the storm was another supernatural hallucination affecting only the immediate recipients of Jane Doe's wrath.) Through her magical power to make things (seem to) happen, Jane Doe arguably emerges as the narrative's true author/narrator figure (Lopes), a causal agent who demonstrates far greater agency than the two men by surreptitiously pulling the strings as she exacts her revenge. Austin's apparent killing of Emma, for instance, reminds Tommy of his wife's premature death, and he finally admits to his emotional neglect as they sit together catching their breath. Nevertheless, even as Jane Doe's machinations inflict this overwhelming guilt upon the men and encourage them to emotionally open up, the conflict between rationality and emotion is not yet resolved, since Austin recommits to finishing the autopsy. Hoping that finding the uncanny body's true cause of death will finally unlock the secret of how to stop her, he therefore effectively combines his emotional sensitivity to the "whys" of death with his father's faith in medical and empirical causality. But whether his emotional attunement will be sufficient to dispel the monster's threat is not yet made apparent.

Finishing the Job

The final act of *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* corresponds with the procedure's final stage, the brain, and the film is especially distinctive in its depiction of workers faithfully returning to complete their original job, even after the long digression into more action-oriented horror scenes. Having already found peat under her fingernails and various signs of ritual torture, the Tildens examine a sample of brain matter under the microscope and revisit the archaic parchment. They discover that Jane Doe's cause of death is so elusive because her brain is, in fact, still alive (or rather, *undead*) and that the parchment refers to the date 1693 and Leviticus 20:27, a biblical prescription to kill witches and wizards. Finally comprehending that Jane Doe was a victim of the Salem witch trials, one of the foundational events behind American culture's obsession with the "dead white girl" (Marcus; Bolin 16), Tommy reminds Austin that the women (and men) executed at Salem were all falsely accused, but he asks, "What if the ritual, performed on an innocent, accidentally created the very thing they were trying to destroy?" While this explanation is a rather quick hypothesis for such an empirically

minded character to reach, it nevertheless represents how Tommy has finally opened up to the existence of "Black Magic," as well as echoes Robin Wood's Freudian argument that sociocultural repression *creates* society's monsters instead of destroying them. Or, as Clover says, "Cause a girl enough pain, repress enough of her rage, and—no matter how fundamentally decent she may be—she perforce becomes a witch" (71). The film thus nods to what Laurel Zwissler calls the second-wave-feminist recuperation of the persecuted premodern "witch" as a protofeminist figure of political resistance, even as the film partly reasserts Jane Doe's demonization by depicting her as a horrific force to be defeated. (By contrast, in *The Possession of Hannah Grace*, the titular corpse is still possessed by a powerful male demon, and therefore its agentive acts never elicit even partial sympathy from the audience.) Yet, whereas ghosts typically operate in the horror genre as disembodied representatives of history's unresolved pains, Jane Doe's undecomposed corpse quite literally embodies her far more material status as an anachronistic reminder of historical injustice.

While the Tildens view their newly discovered status as trans-historical-revenge proxies as merely "stops along the way" (that is, collateral damage), they fail to recognize not only how Jane Doe seems to hold men corporately responsible for what happened to her but also their very role as latter-day representatives of the male-dominated medico-juridical complex that committed such historical crimes. In this respect, they are not "essentially 'innocents'" (Kern 20) who have simply been given the wrong job, but complicit in a larger patriarchal system whose collateral damage has arguably been the women in the Tilden men's lives. Indeed, because Jane Doe's brain is still alive, they suspect that she can feel the very autopsy being conducted upon her—as though they are reenacting, in a medicalized context, the ritual torture she experienced back in 1693.[5] Although the actual Salem witch trials did not feature physical torture (with the notable exception of Giles Corey's death by pressing) or burning at the stake, the influential, notoriously misogynistic 1486 witch-hunting manual *Malleus Maleficarum* recommended such medieval torments and presumably influenced the film's screenwriters in this regard.[6]

Ultimately, Tommy ends up much like Father Karras at the end of *The Exorcist*, sacrificing himself by inviting the witch to enter him in order to save a child who symbolizes the future; locking eyes with the corpse, Tommy silently opens himself to her influence, and her milky eyes turn clear as his vision suddenly clouds over. The physical signs of Jane Doe's external and internal tortures begin manifesting in Tommy, vanishing from her body as they painfully transfer to his, so Austin puts his father out of his misery with

a nearby scalpel. Despite Tommy's self-sacrifice, however, even Austin does not escape from Jane Doe's wrath, falling to his death from the basement's spiral staircase when his now-zombified father pops up behind him. Again, Clover's schema fits only too well here: whereas the woman at the end of the possession film typically goes back to her original state, as if nothing happened, the male character is utterly transformed (sometimes fatally) by his acquiescence to the "feminine" forces of Black Magic that have circumvented White Science's authority (98–99). Hence the Tildens, like the Douglas family before them, lie dead when Sheriff Burke arrives the next morning, while Jane Doe's body seems to have been left untouched, its Y-incision now vanished. With another unexplainably violent crime scene on his hands, Burke merely shunts the unidentified woman off to be autopsied in a different county's jurisdiction.

Ritual Purposes

"Every ritual has its purpose," Tommy remarks upon finding evidence of Jane Doe's torture, though his observation applies as much to the torments she underwent during her trial as to the secular ceremony of the autopsy itself, further suggesting the historical inheritance from one part of the medico-juridical complex to another. Indeed, autopsy practitioners frequently describe their work as not just a service to legal authorities but a solace to surviving loved ones. It is an almost ceremonial means of confronting abjection by breaking down the body's integrity in order to find what originally caused it to perish; yet its status as a highly skilled and in-demand job also transforms formerly living bodies into routine tasks on a daily to-do list. In one of the most famous cinematic depictions of this tension, the experimental short *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1971), Stan Brakhage filmed four different autopsies in a Pittsburgh morgue. Partly made to confront his own fear of morgues, the filming process led to nightmares about anguished conversations with the opened corpses, a premise that strangely recalls *The Autopsy of Jane Doe*, while Brakhage's assemblage of the film eschewed his stylistic trademarks of physically manipulated celluloid and rapid montage in favor of a much more documentary approach (Kase 6–11). Almost as striking as the bodies themselves, however, are the images of pathologists nonchalantly chatting, smoking cigarettes, and otherwise treating this seemingly ceremonial space like any other work site.

Ara Osterweil observes, "Unlike the slasher films that typically debut around Halloween, Brakhage's film explores the secrets of the opened body

without any assistance from make-up artists, special effects sorcerers, or editing wizards" (125).[7] Yet before its 2003 DVD release on the Criterion Collection's *By Brakhage: An Anthology, Volume One*, it was scarcely available outside bootleg video versions circulating through the paracinema catalogs examined by Joan Hawkins, where examples of "high art" and "trash culture" (such as gory horror movies) commingled through their shared ability to generate strong visceral affect (5–6). Writing in the early 1970s, Amos Vogel argued that Brakhage's film helped break cinema's final taboo, the depiction of death itself: "This final demystification of man—an unforgettable reminder of our physicality, fragility, mortality—robs us of metaphysics only to reintroduce it on another level, for the more physical we are seen to be, the more marvelous becomes the mystery" (267). An evocative assessment, to be sure, especially in terms of how a fictional film like *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* plays upon this idea of the autopsy as a "marvelous" and "mysterious" act, in Tzvetan Todorov's sense of "the marvelous" as fantastic fiction that confirms the existence of the supernatural (as opposed to "uncanny" narratives that ultimately offer rational and scientific explanations for seemingly supernatural happenings).

Still, for all its relative verisimilitude, Øvredal's film never uses real autopsy footage of the sort seen in Brakhage's film, much as *The Act of Seeing* does not actually capture the metaphysical passage from life to death—an inherently *unfilmable* transition, for which the taboo of postmortem footage can only offer a partial substitute (Bazin 30–31). Although sharing a similar interest in the "mystery" of the corpse, both films run up against definite limits in what can be cinematically represented. *The Act of Seeing* silently presents several anonymous autopsies without any commentary, soberly confronting the viewer with further bodily fragmentation via Brakhage's depersonified, handheld cinematography, while *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* instead opts to humanize the plight of a body whose postmortem state should seemingly evacuate her humanity.

For a more sustained attempt to capture the "indexical whammy" (Nichols 39) of actual death in itself, one must briefly look to a cinematic realm that at first glance seems a world away from the highfalutin avant-garde tradition associated with Brakhage and his peers. Mikita Brottman describes the "mondo" or "shockumentary" film (sensationalistic compilations of real or documentary-style footage, ranging from culturally Other customs to real deaths) as the horror genre's own "repressed" underside, an adjacent mode that the voluminous scholarship on horror subgenres such as slasher and zombie films generally tends to obscure or disavow (158). Real autopsy footage has remained a staple ingredient in such films over the decades, from

Mondo cane oggi (Stelvio Massi, 1985) and the notorious *Faces of Death* series (John Alan Schwartz, 1978–1990) to such imitators as *True Gore* (M. Dixon Causey, 1987), *Traces of Death* (Damon Fox, 1993), and *Phases of Death, Phase One: Through the Coroner's Eyes* (Jim Meyers, 1996). But even more than visualizing the already deceased body, the footage in these films aims to capture the very *moment* of death, as in *Africa addio* (Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi, 1966), *Des morts* (Jean-Pol Ferbus, Dominique Garny, and Thierry Zéno, 1979), *The Killing of America* (Sheldon Renan, 1984), and many others.[8] Once a relatively "underground" sector of the direct-to-video market, such content has since widely proliferated in volume and overall accessibility during the digital era; today, the use of mondo-like imagery ranges very widely, from staging graphic beheadings in ISIS propaganda videos to documenting the acts of police violence that have fueled the Black Lives Matter movement (Middleton).

Still, if mondo or shockumentary films represent the horror genre's own monstrously repressed discontents, they do so less in terms of taste and ethics; Brottman, for example, reclaims them in the tradition of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, citing their frequent use of gallows humor (e.g., ghoulish voice-over narration, incongruous soundtrack music) to "uncrown" death and therefore make it less dreadful (151–158). Rather, what these films actually reveal to us—contrary to the horror genre's extended scenes of victimized people struggling (and mostly failing) to survive—is the existential fear that real death, as captured on film, has a shockingly *mundane* appearance. In so many documentary images of actual death, the person cannot or does not valiantly fight back, go through death throes, or display the "cinematic language of dying" that Michele Aaron describes as so familiar from narrative films; the body bereft of life often simply collapses or abruptly stops moving, losing consciousness like a light going out. What is so disturbing about such footage is not so much the "taboo" of showing a real death—since the personal experience of death is, after all, a biological reality we will all eventually face—but rather its incredibly *understated* quality, compared to the sheer ubiquity of fictional depictions across so many genres (but especially horror) that overly dramatize the act of dying. In other words, the horror film is itself a sort of ritual that doth protest too much, focusing so intently on depictions of death in order to inoculate viewers with the more comforting illusion of human consciousness that does not slip so easily and unceremoniously into oblivion. Despite its visualization of postmortem labor, then, this is the reassuring illusion that *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* still maintains, whether framed via Jane Doe's posthumous agency or through Tommy and Austin's own strenuous-but-doomed efforts to survive the night.

Although it is a more or less accepted truism that for many horror viewers, the genre is rooted in "counterphobic" pleasures of vicariously confronting images of death in order to conquer them, the genre's own ritual function is limited by its generalized adherence to the melodramatic mode undergirding most popular American film genres. Linda Williams argues that melodrama operates as a sort of ur-genre, a narrative mode that provides a basic, morally inflected vernacular (e.g., sympathetic/victimized hero versus immoral villain) present in most genres. These moral oppositions typically reach a narrative climax that solidifies the suffering protagonist's goodness and that then either dwells on the resulting spectacle of pathos (as in the "weepie") or leads to more action-oriented scenes of a final chase/rescue/fight where good typically triumphs over evil ("Melodrama" 50, 58–62). Unlike the horror genre's most disposable characters, its nonmonstrous protagonists typically undergo the latter trials, which may include more lachrymal moments as well. In *The Autopsy of Jane Doe*, for example, the scenes of Tommy finally opening up to Austin about his guilt over his wife's suicide and of Austin tearfully killing his father after Tommy masochistically absorbs Jane Doe's pain both exemplify this generic proximity between horror and melodrama—especially if the horror film already shares the weepie's goal of inducing some measure of mimesis (shudders and tears, respectively) between the on-screen bodies and the viewer's own body (Williams, "Film Bodies" 3–9).

Much as Michele Aaron describes action cinema as a genre that generates suspense because its protagonists flirt with possible death, horror's more empathetic protagonists (unlike its more quickly dispatched victims) frequently undergo almost superhuman physical trials while attempting to survive. It is in this image of the desperate fight—with the survivors (or near survivors) of the horror film often emerging exhausted, losing no small amount of sweat and blood in the process—that so many of the heroically struggling bodies in horror films most closely resemble bodies subjected to very heavy, strenuous manual labor. Recall that *The Autopsy of Jane Doe*'s final acts, once the dead begin to rise, correspond with the last two stages of the autopsy itself, as the Tildens' efforts to complete the dissection quite literally overlap with the more generically common images of living bodies laboring to survive a monstrous threat. Although medical pathology is a predominantly middle-class profession, the Tildens resume the autopsy looking more like they have just stepped in from a backbreaking, working-class job. Part of their own nightmarish experience, then, is visually signaled through a state of physical strain more often associated with "lower" types of unskilled labor.

Much as we do not know the circumstances of Jane Doe's death ("Salem" serves as metonym enough for the historical injustices of a patriarchal

Figure 2.3. Mysterious autopsy in *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (André Øvredal, 2016)

society), the film does less to answer the question of whether her vengeance ever *could* be assuaged. Although she fatally transfers her tortures into Tommy's body, her own corporeal form is apparently healed up and ready for the next examiner and film—as the jingle of the bell on her toe, while her corpse is transported to the next county in the film's final shot, makes only too apparent. On one hand, the fact that her vengeance does not stop with Tommy but also extends to his son, Austin, suggests that her true target is the generational continuance of the medico-juridical complex that originally put her to death. On the other hand, the fact that dead women are present in the Douglas home (a family with no apparent ties to the fields of law or medicine) implies that her retribution is ultimately more personal than political, so even the recent influx of women into postmortem labor positions would likely prove no safer from her dark magic.

Hence, much as the film overlays images of postmortem labor onto generically conventional images of the Tildens melodramatically struggling to survive the autopsy job itself, Jane Doe's own ritual opens the door for a potential sequel that would no doubt include similar depictions of living people laboring to survive the monster(s). Rather than truly confronting the mundaneness of what real deaths so often look like, then, the almost inevitable turn toward such ritualized images of premortem bodies rests upon a culturally reassuring fantasy that undergirds most horror films: that death cannot stop us from telling our stories—even if these are horror stories (as Jane Doe's premature demise certainly was)—or at least that death does not greet us before we can melodramatically rage against the dying light. Perhaps this is why Jane Doe gets the last laugh in the end: "speaking" indefinitely from beyond the grave, *her* labor as the film's silent author and narrator figure is that which truly drives the horror genre toward future narratives.

Like so many other monsters—sometimes defeated, sometimes not—her story will always recur in some other generic form (another witch, another zombie, etc.), helping the rest of us to disavow the uncomfortable facticity of the undramatic, routinized deaths that real-world postmortem laborers deal with day in and day out. If every ritual truly has its purpose, then keeping postmortem labor largely hidden from view only seems to help the horror genre in doing its own deeper cultural work.

Notes

1. Also see Doughty 200; Valentine 79.
2. For a more elaborate reading of the film in the Poe tradition, see Lopes.
3. Nevertheless, even commercially available videos claiming to show real autopsies from beginning to end very rarely depict the entire process, often skipping over the pelvic organs, neck organs, bone biopsies, and so on in favor of more spectacularly visible steps. For comparison, see Collins and Hutchins.
4. Much like *The Autopsy of Jane Doe*, Valentine's memoir is also structured via the process of the autopsy, proceeding through the four stages.
5. This revelation recalls Aldo Lado's 1971 *giallo* film *Short Night of Glass Dolls*, whose narrative unfolds as the flashbacks of a still-live man who, unable to communicate in his cataleptic state, is about to undergo a premature autopsy.
6. Defenders of chattel slavery in the antebellum South spread the myth that witch burnings were carried out at Salem, attempting to discredit Northern abolitionists' claims of moral superiority (Baker 267–268).
7. Real or rumored autopsy footage has, however, occasionally been used in horror films in place of special effects, including in *Autopsy* (Armando Crispino, 1973), *Hunchback of the Morgue* (Javier Aguirre, 1973), *Beyond the Darkness* (Joe D'Amato, 1979), and *Men behind the Sun* (Mou Tun-fei, 1988).
8. See Goodall; Kerekes and Slater.

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CHAPTER 3

GEORGE A. ROMERO AND THE WORK OF SURVIVAL

Adam Lowenstein

When it comes to envisioning what the world looks like once it stops working, George A. Romero has no peer. The six films of his *Living Dead* series, from *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) through *Survival of the Dead* (2009), have become some of the most influential horror films ever produced precisely because they imagine large-scale social disintegration in such vivid and compelling ways.[1] For Romero, the work of institutions such as the family (*Night of the Living Dead*), the marketplace (*Dawn of the Dead* [1979]), the military (*Day of the Dead* [1985]), the government (*Land of the Dead* [2005]), and the media (*Diary of the Dead* [2008]) cannot be trusted to withstand the sort of existential threat to the capitalist order represented by zombies who rise from the dead to eat the living. The work Romero places more faith in, however temporarily and precariously, is the work of small groups.[2]

Makeshift bands of resourceful survivors, existing outside the institutional structures of the old capitalist system, stand more of a chance to live than those attached to yesterday's world of work. At their best, these small groups survive by incorporating the work of those social others often denied full access to the benefits of the traditional workforce: Black and brown people, women, people with addictions, people with disabilities, and queer individuals. Romero believes in the worth of the work these small groups accomplish, even if he refuses to grant them any sort of utopian status; they often unravel through the sorts of infighting that testify to residual, outmoded commitments to the old capitalist system. In other words, the small group may work in the frame of short-term survival, but it often fails to reckon adequately with the long-term demands of a new social order.

In this essay, I focus on Romero's final and underappreciated entry in his *Living Dead* film series, *Survival of the Dead*, for its ambitious attempt to shift the terms of this work of survival. In this film, the small group of