

Nevertheless, She Resisted: The Body as a Site of Resistance in *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* Salem Horror Festival, August 2018.

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Nevertheless, She Resisted:
The Body as a Site of Resistance in *The Autopsy of Jane Doe*

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If horror is a medium for exploring political, social, and personal anxieties, it is no surprise that violence against women is a recurrent theme in the genre. Yet portraying misogyny and violence – especially sexual violence – on screen without replicating the messages that perpetuate these complex issues (such as that women’s bodies are objects for male pleasure, or that female sexual agency is deviant), is a tricky line for filmmakers to tread. Women’s bodies are often used as a site for horror, with bloody wounds interspersed with bare skin and sexualised scenarios and the complications of combining terror and titillation are still debated today. However, women’s bodies can also capture the horrific realities of violence and are therefore a site of resistance in film.

Despite societal myths that cast women as passive creatures, we are expected to do everything we can to physically resist violence, even though this is an area where women are usually at a disadvantage to men and a natural response to threat is to freeze. Otherwise, we are likely to be disbelieved, unsupported and even blamed for our victimisation. Feminists have explored the many varied ways that women oppose and survive violence, yet there is still an assumption that rape is not ‘real’ unless the victim fights back and has visible injuries to prove it. Although fighting back definitely features in horror - think of any final girl picking up the knife - so do other forms of resistance.

Horror often focuses on the plight of the individual; we see lone girls stalked by (often male) monsters one by one. Yet violence is a very social act, as structural inequalities around gender, sexuality, race and class denote women as lesser than men and thus justify violence against them. Some films have explored the systemic ways that women are oppressed in society: through religious fanaticism and superstition (*Silent Hill, Martyrs*); expectations of purity and submission (*Audition*); the ‘risk’ of female sexuality (*It Follows, Teeth*); commodification of women during conflict (*28 Days Later...*); the discrediting of women’s experiences (*Paranormal Activity*), to name a few. One recent film uses the female body to illustrate an entire history of misogyny: *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (2016).

The film focuses on the dissection of a young woman, as pathologists Tommy and Austin try to decipher the mystery of her death. Their initial observations reflect the gamut of societal violence that is enacted against women: her wrists and ankles have been fractured (to control her and prevent escape), her tongue has been torn out (to silence her), she has been burned and buried (to eliminate her existence), her waist is shrunken

from corsets (to mould her into societal body expectations) and her genitals have been mutilated (yet are still swabbed for ‘proof’ of sexual violence). The initial assumption that Doe was a victim of prostitution or trafficking rather than a random deranged killer highlights the structural pathways that lead to the systematic abuse and erasure of women.

In reviewing her injuries, Tommy observes “imagine if all this internal trauma was reflected externally... what would she look like?”. As a genre known for creativity and boundary-pushing, horror often chooses to show us what she would look like in full, visceral detail. Yet rape is rarely synonymous with injury or other visible markers, even when women are able to physically resist; the trauma is internal, unknown and unseen unless the victim chooses to speak out. As with most victims of violence, we do not know Doe’s history by her outward appearance and she chooses to speak out in other ways.

Doe is revealed to be a victim of the Witch Trials, one of the most well-known incidents of mass misogyny in Western culture. Tommy concludes that (like all accused witches) she was innocent and the tortures enacted upon her created the evil so feared by the community. At this point, Doe becomes the film’s antagonist and enacts revenge on her dissectors; some would argue that this complicates her status as an ‘innocent’ victim yet reality is rarely as simplistic and such notions of innocence lead to victim-blaming and exoneration of perpetrators. We are used to seeing women pay for the actions of others and the film turns this expectation on its head by making the men the ‘innocent’ victims. Tommy and Austin are sympathetic characters who treat Doe with respect, yet their father-son business is a microcosm of the capitalist, patriarchal society that so often disadvantages women. Their job is to determine what did (or didn’t) happen to her, as police, courts and media often dictate and control victim’s experiences today. Doe’s revenge is to tell her story through *their* bodies as well as her own. It is not enough to witness, they have to experience what was done to her in order to truly know her history and with each wound she inflicts, we see her body heal as if the trauma is able to resolve itself through its telling.

For a film centred around a naked young woman, Doe is never sexualised. Director Øvredal succeeds in exploring vulnerability and body horror without lapsing into the exploitative male gaze so favoured by the genre and his message is much more powerful because of it. The sad reality is that many women do not survive violence and their experiences are rarely reflected in horror outside of creative kills or vengeful supernatural villains. Doe is portrayed as victim *and* antagonist and her story of death *and* resistance is more interesting than the simplistic binaries of victimisation so often presented by the media.

The beauty of horror lies in its ability to tell the stories not usually told. Hopefully, in the era of #MeToo and speaking out, we will continue to see films that tell these stories in creative and compelling ways and thus contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gendered violence, victimisation, and resistance.