



A man with a cracked, metallic face lies in a stainless steel sink. The sink has multiple faucets and handles. The man's face is the central focus, showing a dark, cracked texture that looks like dried mud or a metallic alloy. His eyes are closed, and his expression is neutral. The background is the metallic surface of the sink, which has some circular holes. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures of the man's face and the sink.

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CAST

Shane Carruth Daniel Forrester
Poorna Jagannathan Sarah Grey
Jeremy Childs John Doe
Bill Feehely Edward Graham
Rachel Agee Anne
J. Thomas Bailey Travis
Bridget Berger Nurse Franklin
Quinn Cooke Parker
Josh Croft Ward Janitor
Felix Eckhardt Dr. Morgan
Reegus Flenory Officer Davis
Dean Hall Detective Lawson

CREW

Written and Directed by **Billy Senese**
Produced by **Shane Carruth, Denis Deck, Jonathan Rogers, Billy Senese**
Director of Photography **Andy Duensing**
Edited by **Derek Pearson, Jonathan Rogers**
Music by **Jordan Lehning**
Art Director **Aaron Crossley**
Production Designer **Ashley Amezcua**
Costume Designer **Jena Moody**



WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

GROUNDING THE SUPERNATURAL IN SCIENCE AND SOLIDITY

by Jamie Graham

When discussing his third feature, *The Dead Center*, writer-director Billy Senese is fond of adopting the Stephen King quote, “We make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones.”

The real horror, in this instance, was Senese losing a good friend to an overdose, the culmination of a debilitating battle with mental illness. “Leading up to his death, he was making all kinds of self-destructive choices,” Senese told *Eye For Film*. “I knew he was teetering on the edge, and I kept trying to help him, but it just got worse and worse. Then I got the call, and I wasn’t prepared for how much it affected me.”

In an effort to make sense of his grief and confusion, Senese wrote and directed a 26-minute found-footage short, *The Suicide Tapes* (2010), in which psychiatrist Dr. Lynn Forester (Jenny Littleton) interviews a patient, John Clarke (Jeremy Childs), who claims to have taken his own life and returned. “I believe I can’t die,” Clarke states, relating how he slit his wrists in a motel bathtub only to awaken submerged in cold, bloody water with both his long-term memory and the cuts on his wrists erased. There is something inside of him that is stealing his identity, he insists, and though he is talking of a monster or an alien or perhaps demonic possession, it is as good a description of mental illness as you are likely to find. *The Suicide Tapes* won Best International Short at the Fantasia Film Festival.



The Dead Center grew out of *The Suicide Tapes*, maintaining the core concept – the returning Childs once more commits suicide in a motel bathtub, only to jolt awake minus marks and memories – but developing the plot(s) and introducing detailed, meticulously researched world-building. Gone is the found-footage format, replaced by a bipartite structure. The principal plot focuses on Daniel Forrester (Shane Carruth), a stressed, driven psychiatrist who discovers a John Doe, by turns catatonic and violent, in one of his hospital beds, and sets about piercing his new patient’s amnesia in an effort to restore his identity and tranquility. Meanwhile, medical examiner Edward Graham (Bill Feehely) investigates how this same John Doe came to take his own life in a motel bathroom and just what has become of the body that has mysteriously disappeared from the morgue. For the viewer, suspense is derived from the knowledge that these two strands must come together – entwining, you might say, at the dead center of the film.

Paramount to *The Dead Center*’s success is its colliding of reality and fantasy, the rational and irrational, the external and the internal. Senese’s influences, as he has himself testified, are the magical-realist literature of Japanese author Haruki Murakami, which takes the mundane and renders it otherworldly, and the American cinema of the 1970s: “All of those dark dramas,” he explained to *Influx Magazine*. “The paranoid thrillers, I really love: *The Conversation* (1974), *All the President’s Men* (1976), *The Parallax View* (1974)... and *Chinatown* (1974).”

Like those films, *The Dead Center* embeds its genre thrills in an unvarnished, authentic-feeling milieu. Senese’s quest for realism runs from the casting – Carruth, best known for directing *Primer* (2004) and *Upstream Color* (2013), was chosen for his “natural quality... honest and unaffected,” as Senese told *Sci-Fi Now* – to the artfully plain lensing and desaturated palette. Adding to the credibility is the decision to shoot in an abandoned 1960s/1970s Tennessee hospital, in June, without air con. The sweaty desperation is palpable.

It was crucial to Senese to faithfully depict an underfunded, overloaded psychiatric ward, from the machines and medicines to the staff and patients. The

writer-director has previous experience when it comes to seeking authenticity in a workplace dedicated to science, with his last film, *Closer to God* (a.k.a. *A Frankenstein Story*, 2014), an update of Mary Shelly’s tale of a monomaniacal man and his monster to the modern world of cloning. Appreciating that *Closer to God* was, at heart, a B science-fiction movie, Senese was aware that “this could be Nicolas Roeg or [it could be] Roger Corman,” as he said to *Influx Magazine*. He aspired to make it like the former, inviting philosophical debate into the script and stressing, “I was just making sure that I kept everything grounded.”

Likewise, realism was key to *The Dead Center*. “I started with this book called *Danger to Self* (2009), by Dr. Paul Linde,” Senese informed *Sci-Fi Alert*. “This book went into real accounts of Dr. Linde’s work in an emergency psychiatric unit in San Francisco. I reached out to him, and he agreed to be a consultant on the script. Paul would read through the script, give me notes, and help me make it more authentic.”

Within this naturalistic world, the supernatural creeps in, insidiously taking over the picture much like the body snatchers invaded a small American town in Don Siegel’s 1956 classic. An influence, surely – or perhaps Philip Kaufman’s 1978 take was more on Senese’s mind given his fondness of the paranoid thrillers of the 1970s. The stealth-factor is further enhanced by committing to ambiguity for the majority of *The Dead Center*’s runtime.

This ambiguity is there from the start, even before the blooming of the opening image, as a chorus of babbling, overlapping voices spills from the black screen. Growing in urgency, escalating to a deafening crescendo, the fractured, fractious utterances at once evoke schizophrenia and demonic possession. Both readings are available through most of the film, with Senese applying the is-it-internal-or-external dilemma at the crux of so many ghost movies (*The Innocents* [1961], *The Haunting* [1963], *The Shining* [1980], *The Orphanage* [2007]) to a monster/possession movie. Doubt is often a factor in the possession sub-genre too, of course – much of *The Exorcist* (1973) is dedicated to physicians and psychiatrists



before a rite of exorcism is performed by a Jesuit priest – but Senese blurs the lines with uncommon subtlety and skill, playing the mental illness angle with considerable delicacy. This is partly to thicken the air of mystery and suspense, with the writer-director attesting, “The less you say, the more cinematically elevated it is, the more you say, the dumber it is.” But it is also in an effort to maintain verisimilitude and to treat the subject of mental health with the gravitas and respect it deserves.

Too often in the horror genre, filmmakers plunge to the furthest end of the spectrum, bypassing sensitivity and sympathy in favor of serving up unhinged psychos wielding big axes and bigger grins. Senese dials things down, finding great empathy for his “monster,” John Doe, a man who is losing his mind and autonomy to an invader. Additionally, Senese refuses to tilt Dr. Forrester in the direction of that genre staple the “mad scientist,” even as our protagonist’s single-minded pursuit of the truth leads him to flout all protocol until he is hurried and harried and coming undone at the seams.

Whether thrusting viewers into the dissonant headspace of John Doe or into the increasingly disturbed mind of Dr. Forrester, Senese makes tremendous use of sound design, as you might expect of someone who made seven 30-minute radio plays between his debut feature, *Tucked Away* (a.k.a. *Dark Awakening*, 2007), and his sophomore effort, *Closer to God*. Crunching, crackling pine cones, racing heartbeats, a recorded-for-real “death rattle” of lungs collapsing as they offer up a final breath – these are just some of the noises that bleed into Jordan Lehning’s minimalist score, an ominous medley of bass, cello, flute and clarinet that rumbles, pulses and occasionally sharpens into a needle-thin ringing that threatens the viewer’s own sanity.

“This [is] a psychological horror film that takes place in an emergency psychiatric ward,” Senese told *Eye For Film*. “How could I not take advantage of sound to get into people’s heads?”

The visuals are similarly lo-fi and low-key, with director of photography Andy Duensing moving from static set-ups to increasingly mobile, erratic shots as the action escalates and the protagonists’ minds disintegrate. *The Dead Center* is not a film entirely devoid of computer augmentation – CGI flies were added to the blood-splattered motel bathroom, for example – but, for the most part, the effects are pleasingly practical, once more exhibiting the dedication to keeping things real. Senese and Duensing make effective use of shallow focus throughout to create a claustrophobic effect, and a series of glasses were placed over the lens to smudge areas of the frame. This is particularly noticeable in the scenes where John Doe sucks the life out of people – the distortion was provided by a \$2.50 tumbler from Walmart that the filmmakers affectionately referred to as the “hero glass.”

These shots of John Doe clasp his victims’ heads in both hands and consuming their life force until they crumple to the ground, mouth fixed open in a perpetual scream, have the appearance of a vortex, and spirals appear throughout the film, etched on the body of John Doe when he is found in the bathtub and scratched onto surfaces at crime scenes. Does it suggest a descent into madness? A spiral into nothingness? Perhaps the clue is in the scene when Dr. Forrester hypnotizes John Doe in order to learn more of his forgotten background.

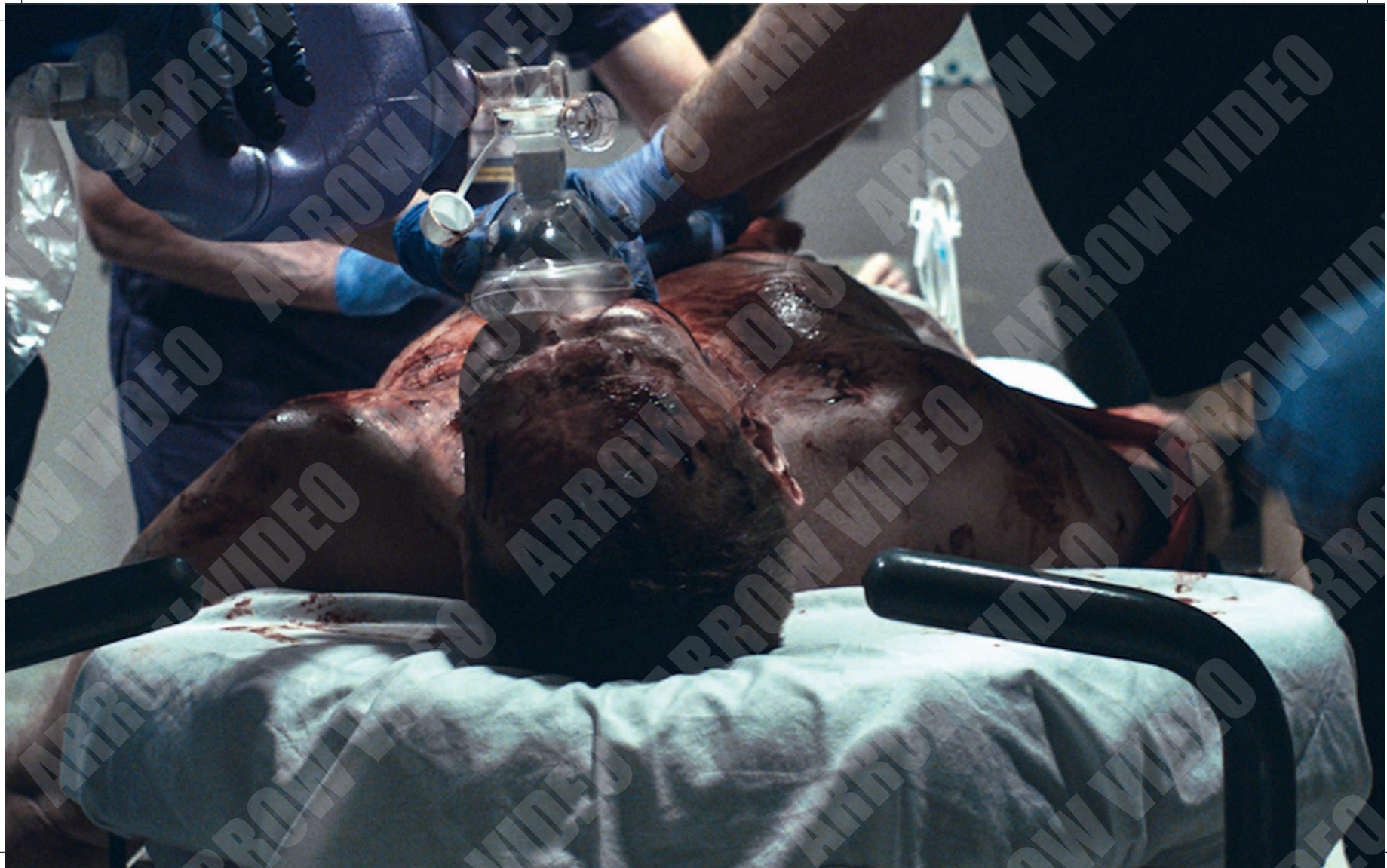
“I died and I came back,” intones John Doe. “It wasn’t the first time. I can’t kill it. It wanted into this world... it’s inside me now. I can’t stop it.”

“What is it that’s inside of you?” asks Forrester.

“Blackness. Spinning, spinning.”

Is this the *Dead Center* of the title?

The words “blackness” and “dead” certainly fit the film, for like many of the 70s movies that Senese so admires, *The Dead Center* is startlingly bleak. In its



final scene, Forrester charges from house to house in a suburban close, crashing through yawning front doors to find dead families within. When Forrester finally catches up with the rampaging John Doe, his own life is almost extinguished, sucked out of him until he manages to rally and bludgeon John Doe's skull with a tire iron.

John Doe is dead, but the look in Forrester's eyes as he is taken away in the back of an ambulance tells us that things are far from over. He has seen enough to believe that John Doe will rise again. Or perhaps whatever was inside of John Doe, that spiraling blackness, has found a new host – the closing shot catches a creeping blackness in the capillaries of Forrester's shell-shocked face. Either way, the climax of this psychodrama feels so genuinely apocalyptic as to match Kiyoshi Kurosawa's devastating *Pulse* (*Kairo*, 2001). J-horror is as much an influence on *The Dead Center* as those American thrillers of the 1970s, with the genre's lank-haired ghosts conjured by the grainy, gloomy visuals, the clicks and clacks of the sound design, and by having middle-aged protagonists compulsively investigate a supernatural mystery. The spiral symbol, meanwhile, summons Higuchinsky's 2000 tale of obsession and possession, *Spiral* (*Uzumaki*).

Come the shattering finale, Dr Forrester, a benevolent, committed professional who communicates a whiff of flower power in his defiance of bureaucracy, his tousled hair, his beard and loose ties, realizes there is not one jot of hope.

"Usually, when you talk about evil and you talk about good, you're living in that world of opposites," said Senese to *The Moveable Fest*. "We live in that world of life and death and God or whatever you might call that. I see this thing as a black hole. It doesn't have those emotions or it doesn't live in that world. It just is."

Is *The Dead Center*, then, set in a world without God? But what are we to make of the plentiful eye-in-the-sky shots that pepper the film? The opening shot, after that cacophony of competing voices, looks down upon an ambulance as it races along a freeway, and in the rare instances when the action moves outdoors,

scenarios are viewed from high above. This is true also of the climactic chase through the suburban close, with Forrester's crisscrossing charge from house to house chronicled by a dazzling overhead shot.

Is it simply a technique to maximize dread, familiar from the films of Hitchcock and De Palma? Or does it signify a higher, omniscient presence? The pulse of nauseating fear provided by the soundtrack suggests the former, and the "God's-eye" camera renders humans ant-like – bugs, liable to be squished one by one. Or sucked into a black hole at the dead center of the universe.

Jamie Graham is a film journalist, and the deputy editor of Total Film.



ABOUT THE TRANSFER

The Dead Center is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with 5.1 audio. The film was supplied in 4K by LC Pictures.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **James Flower**

Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**

Associate Producer **Mike Hewitt**

Technical Producer **James White**

QC **Nora Mehenni, Alan Simmons**

Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**

Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**

Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

**Alex Agran, Denis Deck, Nate Eggert, Jamie Graham, Jonathan Rogers,
Billy Senese, Travis Yetton**

NO. _____
Name **John Doe** Print Name
Hospital **St. Mary's** Print Hospital
City **Atlanta** Print City
Time **10:30** Print Time
Expired **10/31** Print Expired
Meticulous **Good** Print Meticulous

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