



WHAT HAPPENED TO HER

A film by Kristy Guevara-Flanagan

TRT: 15 mins

WHAT HAPPENED TO HER is a forensic exploration of our cultural obsession with images of the dead woman on screen. Interspersing found footage from films and police procedural television shows and one actor's experience of playing the part of a corpse, the film offers a meditative critique on the trope of the dead female body.

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Synopsis

WHAT HAPPENED TO HER is a forensic exploration of our cultural obsession with images of the dead woman on screen. Interspersing found footage from films and police procedural television shows and one actor's experience of playing the part of a corpse, the film offers a meditative critique on the trope of the dead female body.

The visual narrative of the genre, one reinforced through its intense and pervasive repetition, is revealed as a highly structured pageant. Concurrently, the experience of physical invasion and exploitation voiced by the actor pierce the fabric of the screened fantasy. The result is recurring and magnetic film cliché laid bare.



Director's Statement



WHAT HAPPENED TO HER began with a long percolating series of observations. I started to notice a trend in films of scenes of dead women floating in water, so many that I found myself ticking them off in my head, a tally that grew at an alarming rate. Compared to the violence enacted upon living celluloid women, the cast-offness of these bodies was often even more disturbing. There seemed to be a clear message equating these bodies with flotsam and jetsam, the detritus of a culture that gave them little value. At some point this becomes a trope—nothing signals the dark turn of a society more than a white, nubile female body found stripped, violated and discarded in its midst.

There are numerous serials that take a mysteriously killed woman (or women) as a starting point—*Twin Peaks*, or more recently, *True Detective* are popular examples. A female corpse is presented and *the truth* must both figuratively and literally be extracted from her passive, silent body. It doesn't take long to see a macabre and somewhat sadistic narrative at work. A kind of pseudo-sexual re-violation.

This film is the result of a concentrated investigation into that oft-repeated narrative. Making it involved gathering and cataloging hundreds of hours of found footage, itself reminiscent of a forensic dissection. From this, I generated a library of sequences with which I constructed the film.

You can see from the results a similar arc across a wide body of film and television work: First, the female corpse is found (floating, near water, in dirt, in sand, on the street, in bed, in a car trunk.) Second, she is probed for forensic detail (fingernails cleaned, hair shaved, vagina swabbed). Ultimately, she is left behind (mostly tagged and then pushed into a morgue drawer). It's a process in which the forensics of death become a highly sexualized pageant.

Juxtaposed with this sequence is the voice of the actor, Danyi Deats, strangled to death (off-screen) and then left to decompose (on-screen) for the remainder of the film, *The River's Edge*. The intention is for her voice to give dimension to an on-screen formula so commonplace as to be routine: the parade of almost ritually murdered, dissected, and discarded female bodies.

WHAT HAPPENED TO HER is the first of a planned triptych of investigations. The subsequent installments will first explore images of pregnancy and labor in the horror genre, and, finally, female stunt doubles used in sex scenes.

Cast & Credits

| | |
|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Kristy Guevara-Flanagan | director & editor |
| Danyi Deats | voice |
| Jing Niu | additional editing |
| Jesse James Malings | sound re-recorder |

Bio

Kristy Guevara-Flanagan, Director. Kristy Guevara-Flanagan's first feature-length film was an acclaimed documentary covering four years in the lives of four adolescent girls. GOING ON 13 was an official selection of Tribeca, Silverdocs, and many other film festivals worldwide. It received funding from ITVS and was broadcast on public television in 2009. Kristy has also produced and directed several short films, including EL CORRIDO DE CECILIA RIOS, winner of the Golden Gate Award for Best Bay Area Short Documentary at the San Francisco International Film Festival, a chronicle of the violent death of 15-year-old Cecilia Rios. It was an official selection of the Sundance Film Festival and subsequently broadcast on the Sundance Channel. Her most recent feature, WONDER WOMEN! THE UNTOLD STORY OF AMERICAN SUPERHEROINES, traces the evolution and legacy of the comic book hero Wonder Woman as a way to reflect on society's anxieties about women's liberation. The film garnered numerous awards, premiered at the South by Southwest Film Festival in 2012 and was broadcast on PBS's Independent Lens series in 2013. Now an assistant professor at UCLA, Kristy holds a MFA in Cinema from San Francisco State University. WHAT HAPPENED TO HER continues her exploration on the themes of gender and representation.

Screenings

- Hot Docs Documentary Film Festival, Canada (April 2016) – *World Premiere, Honorable Mention - Best Short Documentary Award*
- DocuWest International Film Festival, Colorado (May 2016) – **West Coast Premiere**
- San Francisco Documentary Film Festival, California (June 2016)
- Traverse City Film Festival (July 2016)
- London Feminist Film Festival, UK (August 2016) – **International Premiere**
- Hamptons International Film Festival, New York (October 2016)
- Mill Valley Film Festival, California (October 2016)
- New York Film Festival, New York (October 2016) – **East Coast Premiere**
- Antimatter, Media Art Film Festival, Canada (October 2016)
- DOK Leipzig, Germany (November 2016)
- Le Cinema Club, an online theatre that selects one film to screen each week (Oct/Nov 2016)
- Monster Fest, Australia (November 2016) – **Best Director in the Short Film Category**
- International Film Festival Rotterdam (January 2017)
- Big Muddy Film Festival (February 2017)
- "Moonlight Shorties" at Zebra Kino in Constance, Germany (February 2017)
- Sarasota Film Festival (April 2017)
- Dallas International Film Festival, Texas (April 2017) – **Short Grand Jury Prize**
- Dead by Dawn, Scotland's International Horror Film Festival (April 2017)
- Iowa City International Documentary Film Festival (April 2017) – **Honorable Mention**

- Stranger With My Face International Film Festival, Tasmania, Australia (May 2017)

Press Excerpts

“There is no denying the visual power of the film’s catalogue of images of female corpses in varying degrees of undress and decay, again compiled from dozens of cinematic sources, while Deats talks about the somewhat traumatizing experience of playing dead. What Happened to Her looks at what transpires behind the scenes to create such imagery, and how its violence can be self-perpetuating if the actresses in service to the art do not have their own boundaries respected.

Through the tag team of interview and imagery we are confronted with the manipulation of women’s bodies into unnatural poses, both physically and through emotional coercion. The bodies are mangled, dangled and waterlogged – and yet they come off as strangely beautiful despite the horrific implications.”

– **Janisse, Kier-La.** (2016). *Horror is Never Far Away: "Fear Itself" & "What Happened to Her"*. Spectacular Optical.

“Kristy Guevara-Flanagan’s *What Happened to Her* zooms in on the gory details of female naked bodies portraying corpses in TV shows and films; these scenes theoretically reflect on women’s vulnerability and hint at society’s responsibility to protect them, but actually contain an undeniable erotic element: the ‘corpses’ are invariably young, beautiful and shot in erotic poses, always discovered by men who take note of the violent and often sexual circumstances of their death.

The filmmaker includes in voice-over a behind the scenes testimony of the direction actresses get when appearing in these roles. By making us reflect on women’s humiliating experience while posing as TV crime show corpses, and through the mere quantity of young ‘dead’ female bodies that it brings together, *What Happened to Her* exposes the underlying misogyny of the brainy, assumingly asexual narrative thread of crime investigation.”

–**Irina Trocan.** (2016). *Cinea*, Flemish Service for Film Culture

“The documentary presents a seemingly endless montage of dead women’s bodies from various film and television programmes, alongside actress Danyi Deats discussing her experience as a female corpse in *River’s Edge* (Tim Hunter, 1986). Whilst audiences are subjected to a stream of nameless lifeless bodies, Deats provides an honest account of her uncomfortable, humiliating experience. She explains the extensive hours of make-up to painstakingly create authenticity, the continual prodding of her anatomy by crew members, the expectation of pushing her body to unnerving limits and the deeply unsettling feeling of recreating a violence against women.

Featuring no mention of her role as Jamie in *River’s Edge* throughout her monologue, Deats remains anonymous until the film’s closing credits. The recollection of her experience on set could easily relate to any one of the excerpts on screen, with nothing differentiating the collection of actresses from Deats. Almost every single female body in the film is naked and the camera glazes over their torsos from a position of power to create a disturbing sexualisation of each corpse.

Here, *What Happened to Her* reveals the horrid reality of how female bodies in film and television are merely interchangeable plot pieces and how the same form of violence has been repeated through decades worth of popular movies and TV shows.

Furthermore, the actresses’ account reveals how other forms of violence are committed through showcasing dead women’s bodies on screen: the real-life female victim *River’s Edge* is based upon is recreated as entertainment, the violence towards Deats’ body as she prepares for

her role (prodded, contorted and forced into uncomfortable situations) and the complicit nature of viewers who consume the images on screen. The last point is the most difficult to knowingly

admit; that consuming images of violence towards women makes every single one of us accountable. There's no denying any one of us will have recognised one, if not many, of the images relayed by Guevara-Flanagan."

—**Carpenter, Jessie.** (2016). [LFFF: Women's Bodies as Sites – What Happened to Her. A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night.](#)

Full Interview

Krishnan, Manisha. (2016). [We Talked to a Director About the Cultural Obsession with Hot Murdered White Women.](#) *VICE.*

"A few years ago, Hollywood director Kristy Guevara-Flanagan made a documentary examining the roots and legacy of Wonder Woman. Called *Wonder Women! The Untold Story of American Superheroines*, it was meant to be a celebration of feminist icons in pop culture. "It was sort like 'rah, rah, go get 'em gal,'" Guevara-Flanagan told *VICE*. But afterward, she said her cynicism about how women are represented in the media and the dearth of opportunities for females in the film industry refused to wane, "so I turned to a darker perspective on it."

The result is *What Happened To Her*, a documentary about how murdered women are depicted on screen. Currently showing at Hot Docs film festival in Toronto, the movie is a montage of clips taken from films and TV shows in which a female character is killed. It's only 15 minutes long, and that's probably a good thing considering the graphic nature of the content.

"It's so hard to watch," Guevara-Flanagan said. As the scenes roll, former actress Danyi Deats recalls her experience playing a dead girl in '80s cult classic *River's Edge*. Guevara-Flanagan said fictional female murder victims are a trope—a symbol of the most fucked up thing that can happen to a community. "She's the ultimate passive female figure, she has no voice, she cannot speak for herself or represent herself in any capacity."

VICE asked Guevara-Flanagan to explain her thought process behind the doc, and why she thinks society is so obsessed with attractive, dead (mostly white) women:

VICE: What drew you to this subject?

Kristy Guevara-Flanagan: It's something that has been brewing for a long time for me as a filmmaker and artist; gender has always been central to all of my work. I feel like I've been making the film in my head just by ticking off all dead bodies I've seen throughout the years. And then I started collecting the images and that was what the main bulk of the edit was, was looking for films

How did you go about putting together the montage of dead women?

I was definitely interested in the films because the whole narrative tends to revolve around this dead female body and the mystery enshrouding that death or some of the quintessential series like *Twin Peaks* and *True Detective*. There was kind of a body of films that that was the heart of the entire narrative and I really wanted to look at those closely. And then simultaneously I started scanning all the TV shows and organizing the material by the way in which they were filmed or

found. So I had river bodies and earth bodies and aerial shots of very long, disturbing morgue sections. I wanted there to be a little bit of a chronology so that you build up to the morgue

section which is what I always found to be probably the most disturbing aspect.

One thing that struck me was how often they tend to be naked. Is there a sexual element involved?

Definitely. The women have a certain physical type, they tend to be attractive and thin and they're just given a lot of screen time whereas the male corpses are not. And in film, you never see dead men. Whether they're in clothes or not, they're always posed in a provocative way and they're lingered on as well in a cinematic way. Even when they're horrifically violated or mutilated, I feel like there's always a sexual element to the way in which they are seen and that's really disturbing because they're all generally victims of violent crime. Particularly for films and series like *Twin Peaks* and *True Detective*, that violation symbolizes the worst thing that can happen in the community and yet there's this tension because we're glorifying their death and violation.

Do you think that's a reflection of society?

My kind of interest in this area really grew when I was an editor for the news and there were all these missing girls and they were usually white girls, at least those were the ones that got the media attention. It's just this weird fascination and almost that interest in those kidnappings and often time something really awful had happened to them or they were killed, it regenerates that happening over and over again. What's the worst thing someone can do, is violate a young girl? What's the worst thing that can happen to a community is their virgins are taken away and violated.

Another thing I noticed is the characters are overwhelmingly white.

It wasn't until I started watching *CSI Miami* and [*CSI*] *New York* that there was more diversity. It sort of harkens back to *The Birth of a Nation* where it's like the white woman, if you're going to violate the community, you violate her. Ironically, it's not about her, she's a symbol of the community but it's not about her as a human and I think that's something I was trying to get at as well. There's very few women of colour and the few that I did find I put in there.

Do you think we value white women more?

Symbolically, yes. And the message there is when a black woman is killed it's not a big deal. And I would say in terms of the real world we hear about that much less, it's less newsworthy attention.

Why did you choose to keep the film so short?

I wanted it to really be a very narrow reflection on how these bodies are portrayed and anything else was expanding on the argument but also letting it slip away, my first anger really about these kinds of images. I kept getting it shorter and shorter because it's very hard to watch, I didn't want to add to the glorification and titillation of these kinds of bodies.

What were you angry about?

When you start to look at this over and over and over again and see the patterns it's really disturbing. Particularly for me in the morgue sections, there's this whole second violation of these already violated bodies. They're probing them and penetrating them and it's super graphic. And it's about how it's OK to just mutilate women's bodies for some kind of horrific narrative. I think it

demonstrates our disregard for women's bodies and for women. You literally just have usually men over these bodies and playing with them.

Was Danyi Deats the only actress you ended up interviewing?

I didn't need to interview anybody else. Her experience just mirrored all that I was hoping and expecting to get. She is never alive and she's dead on screen for maybe just 35 percent of the film, her body is there, people are gathered around her as she rots naked. The thing I liked about her story too is it just mirrors a young actor's vulnerability in the industry. Not knowing what she was getting into and being asked to do more and more. She was 19 at the time, no acting experience.

Did she have any regrets?

It definitely changed her in that it made her realize she did not want to be in front of a camera. And she was sort of willfully naïve about the process and what would happen. You Google her name and all these images of her as a naked dead body come up but she has family now, she's got kids and she doesn't want them to see that.

How have people reacted to the movie?

It's really hard to watch is what they always say and that they don't want to watch it again."

Press Links

- Bendel, Joe. (2016). [NYFF '16: Genre Shorts. J.B. Spins.](#)
- Carpenter, Jessie. (2016). [LFFF: Women's Bodies as Sites – What Happened to Her. A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night.](#)
- Janisse, Kier-La. (2016). [Horror is Never Far Away: "Fear Itself" & "What Happened to Her". Spectacular Optical.](#)
- Krishnan, Manisha. (2016). [We Talked to a Director About the Cultural Obsession with Hot Murdered White Women. VICE.](#)
- Manzoli, Serena. (2016). [A Hollywood Tutorial on Female Corpses. Art Sitter.](#)

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