



Kate Plays Christine

Robert Greene

Producer Douglas Tirola, Susan Bedusa, Danielle Rosen, Bennet Elliott. **Production companies** 4th Row Films (New York, USA), Faliro House Productions (Athens, Greece). **Director** Robert Greene. **Director of photography** Sean Price Williams. **Editor** Robert Greene. **Music** Keegan Dewitt. **With** Kate Lyn Sheil (Kate/Christine).

DCP, colour. 113 min. English.

Premiere 24 January 2016, Sundance Film Festival

Kate Lyn Sheil is a young New York actress on the cusp of true fame. Christine Chubbuck was a 29-year-old news reporter, her own fame a result of her decision to shoot herself live on air in July 1974. Kate is to play Christine in a film and goes to Sarasota, Florida to research the part. She scans microfiches for articles about the incident, speaks to a local historian, has a wig fitted, visits the store where Christine once bought a gun. She talks to the people she meets, she talks to herself, it's hard playing someone who's no longer there, it's hard to grasp the ungraspable. Christine's problems are now problems for Kate too. She begins to wander around Sarasota in character: brown contact lenses, a shooting range, the swirling sea, more questions. Reconstruction and preparation soon run in parallel and Kate and Christine's frustrations begin to merge, a film and its making, hand in hand. But whoever said that Kate was just playing Christine anyway? Perhaps she's playing herself too, an actor playing an actor playing a role, layer upon layer upon layer. And let's not forget the other big mystery: we know how the story ends, but how exactly will it be performed?

James Lattimer

The staged and the real self

I've been trying to make a film about Christine Chubbuck for nearly a decade, but I could never imagine a traditional documentary portrait. I never wanted to make a straightforward film about a woman who committed suicide on live television because she was lonely and unable to have children. That was simply a film that I didn't believe should be made. But after my last movie *Actress* (2014), with which I found some success working in the invitingly murky waters between performance and documentary, I discovered a way into the story and a way to try to understand that unknowable quality of Christine Chubbuck's actions without resorting to easy answers.

The film we made was an attempt to capture the impossibility of making a movie about this kind of tragic suicide. It's a film about the relationships between staged and real selves and how staring deep into that gulf can conjure the emptiness of depression that can lead someone to make the fateful decisions Christine made. It's also about whether these kinds of stories need to be told at all, or whether they are simply sensationalist and inherently sexist and feed into the very thing that Christine was protesting against with her final words about 'blood and guts television.'

To explore these complex thoughts and feelings, I wanted to make a film that almost falls apart as you watch. It becomes a kind of 'productive' failure. This was done in two ways. First, the re-enactment scenes are purposely artificial, full of soap opera-like melodramatic performances that serve to illustrate the inevitable difficulty and ultimate meaninglessness in trying to tell Christine's tale and in trying to 'understand' her in a conventional way. Second, the documentary process itself was made frustrating for Kate – we purposely went to Sarasota without an ending, for example, in order to 'find' the film as we went, which put immense pressure on Kate (a pressure she agreed to take on, as it was the concept of the film from the beginning). Both the scripted, 'controlled' aspect of the production and the less-controlled documentary aspect eventually pushed Kate to reject the film itself, to turn against us in a legitimate way and to script her own final scene based on her true feelings about Christine.

I wanted to make a meditation on the moral and ethical questions that arise when we try to tell certain kinds of stories. We tend to fetishise the 'crazy woman'; or maybe even worse – like in the film *Network* [US 1976, dir. Sidney Lumet, -ed.], which was based on Christine's story – we sometimes do things like transform complex depressed women into male characters. I wanted to explore what it meant to make a film that shouldn't be made. Every scene, I hope, bristles with this strange energy that pushes past standard notions of fiction/nonfiction hybridity. In the end, it is Kate who offers the final rebuke. I believe this method of mixing purposely 'bad' scenes with authentic drama allowed us to explore these complex ethical and emotional questions in a new way.

Robert Greene



Robert Greene was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, USA in 1976. Along with his work as a filmmaker, he is a regular contributor to cinema magazines, including *Sight & Sound* and *Filmmaker Magazine*. Robert Greene has edited numerous fiction and non-fiction features. He is currently the filmmaker-in-chief at the Murray Center for Documentary Journalism at the University of Missouri.

Robert Green's first book, *Present Tense: Notes On American Nonfiction Cinema 1980–2013* is set for publication in 2016.

Films

2009: *Owning the Weather* (93 min.). 2010: *Kati with an I* (86 min.). 2012: *Fake It So Real* (94 min.). 2014: *Actress* (88 min.). 2016: *Kate Plays Christine*.