

ART REVIEW

Films for health

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Filmmaker-in-Residence: The Complete Collection

Katerina Cizek

National Film Board of Canada; 2009.

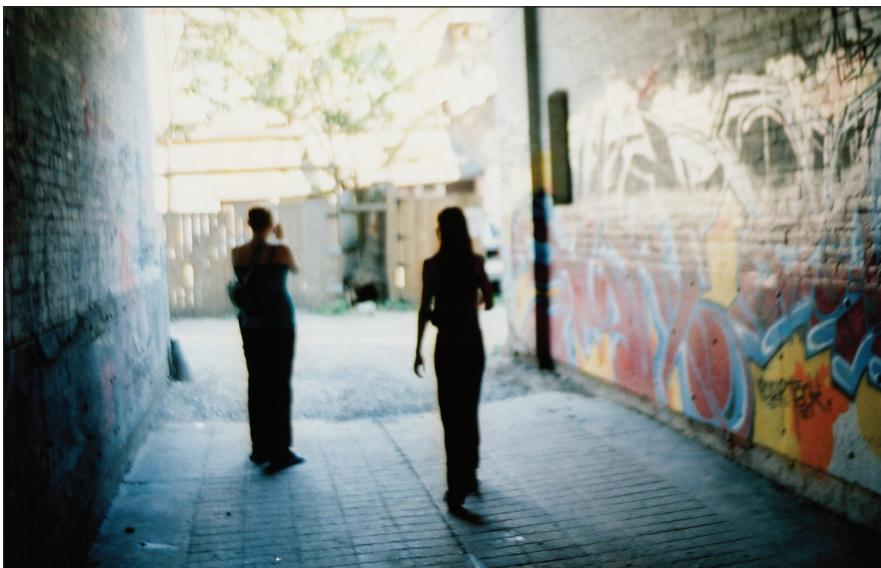
Four documentaries; \$44.95

Do filmmakers and other artists have a role to play in improving the delivery of health care? It's a proposition two venerable institutions, the National Film Board (NFB) of Canada and St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto, Ontario, have spent the past five years probing with a groundbreaking experiment.

In 2004, the NFB "embedded" filmmaker Katerina Cizek at St. Mike's, where she worked with hospital staff and clients to create a series of multimedia projects exploring various issues of health care (<http://filmmakerinresidence.nfb.ca/>). The resulting, much acclaimed, collaboration, *Filmmaker-in-Residence (FIR)*, is now available in a three-disc DVD and CD-ROM set.

According to Cizek, *FIR* is an attempt to reinvent the NFB's pioneering Challenge for Change initiative for

David Nemeroff ©2009 National Film Board of Canada



Hand-held is a frank depiction, through photographs, audio narratives and short videos of the experience of homelessness.

depicted in them. Residents of Fogo Island, Newfoundland, for example, took part in a series of short films that ultimately convinced Joey Smallwood's provincial government of the long-term viability of their community. (The set includes an excellent one-hour documentary on the Challenge for Change series, 1968–80, by writer-director Christina Pchmursky.)

Cizek kicks off *Filmmaker-in-*

national, whose president, Dr. James Orbinski, the former head of Médecins sans Frontières, practises clinical medicine at St. Mike's. The result is *The Bicycle: Fighting AIDS with Community Medicine* (2006), a slight but affecting 16 1/2-minute documentary that just manages to penetrate the dusty surface of Chingawale's sad and neglected corner of the world.

Cizek's second effort, *The Interventionists: Chronicles of a Mental Health Crisis Team* (2006), follows a St. Mike's psychiatric nurse and a world-weary young cop who respond as a team to mental health crises on the streets of Toronto. Their goal is to keep the mentally ill from being swallowed up in the criminal justice system. In the activist spirit of Challenge for Change, this eye-opening half-hour helps persuade the Toronto Police Services Board to approve the deployment of additional mobile crisis-intervention teams.

For *Hand-held (Young Parents No Fixed Address)* (2009), the most ambitious instalment in the *Filmmaker-in-Residence* project, Cizek recruits a group of young single mothers, all of whom at

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the digital age. In 1968, hard as it might be to imagine in these politically cautious times, Lester Pearson's federal government gave the board \$1.6 million to make films expressly intended to "provoke social change." The challenge initiative turned the traditional relationship of filmmaker and subject on its head by giving editorial control of its productions to the people

Residence about as far from Toronto — or Fogo Island — as you can get. She visits Malawi, where she follows retired accountant Pax Chingawale as he bicycles from village to village trying to help rural residents suffering from HIV/AIDS. Chingawale himself is HIV-positive, but appears in robust health thanks to antiretroviral drugs made available through Dignitas Inter-

some point have spent time on the streets. (A more accurate subtitle might be *Young Mothers Formerly of No Fixed Address*.) All are smart, articulate and insightful. How representative they are, even of their particular subpopulation of the formerly homeless, is difficult to say. One suspects not very, which is a distinction the film fails to address.

For one segment of *Hand-held*, Cizek records the often less than complimentary impressions these young women and their healthcare providers have of each other and plays them back to each camp. For another, she trains her protégés to conduct interviews and has professional photographer Davida Nemeroff teach them the basics of portraiture. Armed with their new media skills, the women collect material for a segment called *Street Health Stories*, which examines healthcare problems faced by the indigent. Out of this process came a photo blog and an exhibit at Toronto's City Hall.

The portraits of the homeless are striking, but their uniform neo-Karsh

aesthetic is about as far from street gritty as you can get. In a project touted as encouraging young women to find their own voices, it's a questionable decision to have them document their former world in such a formalized way.

In *Drawing from Life* (2008), Cizek follows a group of men and women, all of whom at some point have tried to kill themselves, through 20 weeks of therapy with a "suicide intervention consultant." The material is dramatic enough on its own, but Cizek, living up to her project's multimedia billing, enlists some animation students to tart up the video footage. Thus, when we see a patient describe her feeling of metaphorically getting her quills up, we actually see her sprout some crudely drawn quills. The animation is well executed, but in this context it is both presumptuous and unnecessary.

Even more distracting is the director's propensity for sticking herself and her professional superiors on camera to hype *Filmmaker-in-Residence*'s importance and originality. Cizek, who gives herself as much face time in this collection as

most of her subjects, is fond of highfalutin banalities such as: "There are so many things that we've put in place as human beings that are supposedly separating us ... borders. And I think what this film does ... is really tear those borders down and make us all think about the meaning of life." Meanwhile, her bosses, such as Tom Perlmutter — chummily identified only as "TOM film commissioner [nfb]" — make grandiloquent declarations, like: "It's about the revisioning of the world imaginatively. ... And I think that's what Kat [Cizek] did, bring the power of imagination through creative work and opening up realms and allowing us to see the world differently."

If you can wade through the self-serving claptrap and a number of superfluous DVD "extras," there are four solid documentaries here, each examining a different piece of the health care puzzle.

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CREATIVE WORKS

Windows to the mind

A longer version is available at www.cmaj.ca

Increasingly, artists are using various types of diagnostic imaging to create art. Consider Elizabeth Jameson's use of magnetic resonance imaging as the basis for solarplate etchings and silk paintings. Or take a look at Dr. Kai-hung Fung's "What lies behind our nose?" computed tomography scan, a winner in the 2007 International Science and Engineering Visualization Challenge. Unquestionably, the message may be dire, but the medium is often exquisitely beautiful.

A newcomer to the scene is a group of six medical students at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia — which is internationally recognized for its strong support of the arts in medicine through its Humanities in Medicine program.

In December 2008, second-year medical student Kate Kelly was nearing



"Migraine with visual field aura, occipitoparietal cortex ischemia," a stained glass panel by Chelsey Ricketts.

the end of her brain and behaviour (neurology and psychiatry) unit while at the same time completing an introductory stained glass course through the local community art college when inspiration struck. Design in mind and approval from Dean of Medicine Harold Cook in hand, Kelly recruited the help of friends

and fellow second-year students Mandy Emms, Chelsey Ricketts, Morgan MacKenzie, Heather Thompson and Sarah Dobrowloski, along with guidance from local stained glass artist and instructor Terry Smith-Lamothe, to construct a medically themed stained glass window for Dalhousie's medical school.

Windows to the Mind, a 1.8 × 0.6 metre stained glass window completed in May 2009 is composed of 12 stained glass panels, each 13 centimetres square, depicting positron emission tomography scans of the brain in various states of health and disease. It now graces the University Avenue entrance to the Clinical Research Building. It's all part of the visual art of medicine.

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