

## REVIEW

## Docs for docs: Online with the NFB

The National Film Board of Canada has opened a “screening room” online, where viewers can catch, free of charge, more than 600 of the 13 000 or so films the institution has produced over its 70-year history. More are being added by the month, ranging from arty little animations to feature-length documentaries, some of which might be of special interest to medical professionals.

One of the gems in the collection is *Bethune*, Donald Brittain’s elegant 1964 documentary on Canada’s original doctor without borders, Norman Bethune — medical innovator, artist, adventurer, poet, *bon vivant*, communist, secular saint.<sup>1</sup> The film blends archival film footage and photographs, interviews with friends and contemporaries, and some plummy narration by Lister Sinclair to document Bethune’s medical training at the University of Toronto, his experiences as a stretcher bearer during the early days of World War I, his wounding, and subsequent return to duty as a surgeon with the Royal Navy.

In the 1920s, Bethune develops tuberculosis and insists on undergoing a risky pneumothoracic procedure. These early personal and professional experiences serve to radicalize him. “There is a rich man’s tuberculosis and a poor man’s tuberculosis,” he observes. “The rich man gets better, the poor man dies.” During the Depression, he joins the Communist Party and advocates for socialized medicine, but is again distracted by events in Europe. In 1936, he travels to Spain to fight against fascism, an ideology he imagines as a disease of sorts. (His friend, the poet and political activist, Frank Scott, sees Bethune’s revolutionary zeal as deriving from the same impulse that drives the surgeon, namely, the desire to cut away the bad for the sake of the whole.)



National Film Board of Canada

This archival image from 1939 of Norman Bethune performing surgery in an unused Buddhist temple in Cental Hopei, China, is featured in *Bethune* (1964).

In 1939, Bethune is drawn to China, where Mao’s ragtag army is attempting to repulse the Japanese invasion. During one 69-hour stretch of the fighting, he performs 115 operations in the field. Twenty months after arriving in China, Norman Bethune is dead of “blood poisoning” contracted from a scalpel wound.

For a snapshot of the kind of conditions Bethune might have encountered in Europe in 1914, we turn to *Nurses at the Front*, an 8-minute excerpt from director Claude Guilmain’s feature documentary *Front Lines* (2008). Employing excerpts from veterans’ letters home, the film examines the role of “nursing sisters,” such as 31-year-old Katherine Macdonald. Killed in France on May 19, 1918, she is one of 39 Canadian nurses who died in the Great War. Surely, there is a much longer film to be made about Canadian medical personnel in the world wars

If there is a contemporary equivalent of Norman Bethune, it might be James Orbinski, a Toronto physician who has worked with Doctors without Borders in Rwanda, Somalia and Congo, and who now, through his organization Dignitas International, champions assistance to regions ravaged by HIV/AIDS. In Patrick Reed’s 2007 documentary, *Triage: Dr. James Orbinski’s Humanitarian Dilemma*, we witness Orbinski’s struggle to channel the rage he feels when confronted with the carnage inflicted on innocent people in modern war zones.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, only short excerpts from the film are currently available on the NFB site.

Director Ian McLeod’s documentary *House Calls* (2004) examines the concerns of another physician/advocate, Toronto’s Mark Nowaczynski, who photographs his vulnerable, elderly patients in their own homes to draw



National Film Board of Canada

In *House Calls* (2004), Joe gets a check-up from Dr. Mark Nowaczynski, who photographs his vulnerable, elderly patients to draw attention to the lack of home care services.

attention to a lack of available home care services.<sup>3</sup> He is a compassionate medical practitioner and an excellent photographer, but a less than charismatic screen presence. The film itself moves at about the pace of its elderly subjects, which perhaps lends it a certain dignity, but makes for less than riveting viewing.

In the medical curio category is an episode from film No. 40 in the NFB's *Eye Witness* series, a collection of short, newsreel-style productions from the 1940s and 1950s. *Modern Miracle: Surgery is Safe* follows apocryphal patient Henry Brown through an appendectomy. The message to Henry: Relax, you're in good hands — hey, they even count the sponges before they sew you up!

Another theme that gets a workout in the NFB catalogue is the unintended consequences of Western affluence on the human body. For the first time in history, more people are dying of over-nutrition than undernutrition. Glynis Whiting's 2003 documentary *The Weight of the World*, produced by NFB and the CBC's *The Nature of Things*, in partnership with the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada and Physical and Health Education Canada, is a lively examination of that expanding reality.

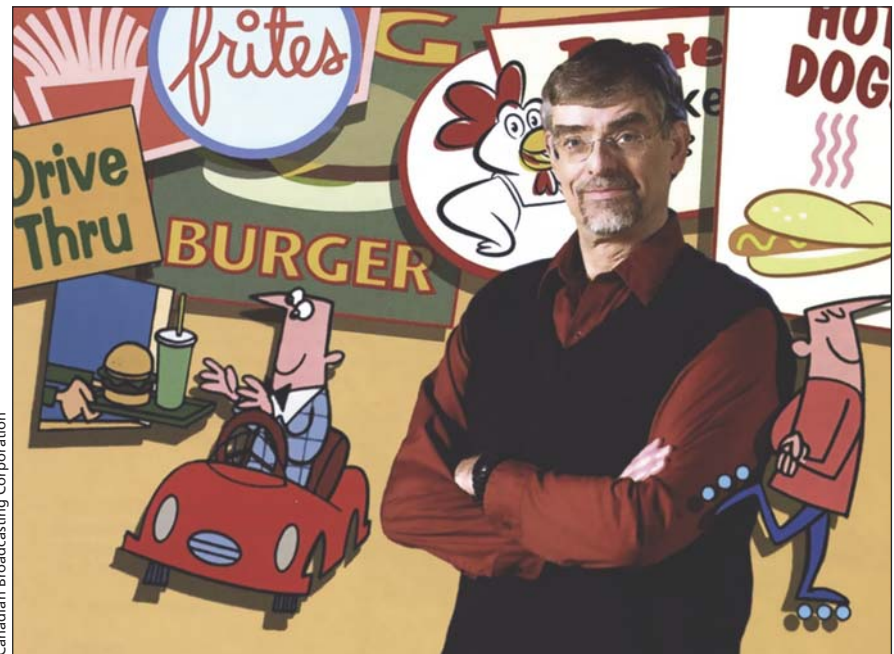
David Suzuki narrates, as experts from Canada, Sweden, the Netherlands and elsewhere point fingers — and toss

figures — at the usual suspects: super-sized meals and the megasized advertising budgets that promote them, car- and school bus-dominated urban sprawl, sedentary occupations. Even garage-door openers, golf carts and portable telephones come under scrutiny. The result is a culture where adults burn one-third the energy in the

course of an ordinary day than did their forebears a century ago, where a growing population of obese children reports the same level of unhappiness as those living with cancer, where many medical practitioners still treat fat as a problem of willpower. And it's all spreading outward from its North American centre. There are now about 300 million obese adults in the world, 100 million of them in developing countries.

Accompanying the hour-long film is a number of "extras" — mini-docs examining, among other topics, the measures taken by the residents of Sandy Lake, Manitoba, a First Nations community with the unenviable distinction of having the third-highest rate of type 2 diabetes of any subpopulation in the world, to regain the health of the community — everything from creating a network of walking paths to bulking up the fruit-and-vegetable section of the local supermarket.

In the *plus ça change* category, Wolf Koenig's 1960 short, *I Was a Ninety-pound Weakling*, takes a slightly tongue-in-cheek look at the struggles of some Montréalers to control their weight and stay fit in an age of ease and abundance — or at least what passed for ease and abundance a half century ago,



Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

The supersized documentary, *The Weight of the World* (2003), looks at everything from megasized advertising budgets to garage-door openers, to explain the current obesity epidemic.



before we got *really* good at it. “Many of us indeed are trapped by a combination of easy gluttony, which loads on the pounds, and gadgetry, which consolidates them,” says the narrator, succinctly. “Every time a machine robs us of the work a muscle used to do, we get a minute fraction weaker.” A YMCA physical education director warns that our sedentary lifestyle is even infecting our children. “We seem to be afraid to do anything that would exert a person nowadays,” he says ruefully.

It seems little has changed in the intervening decades, except perhaps our attitudes toward what is appropriate exercise for the sexes. While the men in *Ninety-pound Weakling* get sweaty wrestling, pumping iron and doing calisthenics, the women indulge mainly in “passive exercise” regimes, where the pounds are allegedly jiggled away by that ironic ultimate in labour-saving devices, the vibrating exercise machine — kind of a cocktail shaker for the human body. “The fat cells melt,” claims one exercise pundit.

An interesting companion piece is *Shredded*, a 2005 documentary by Richard Gaudio and Douglas C. Taplin, which suggests that the flabbier we’ve allowed our bodies to get, the more obsessive we’ve become about them. Here we meet a group of teenage males obsessed with transforming as much of their body fat as possible into Popeye arms and 6-pack abs. One

## To his street friends, sobriety is the ultimate in betrayal and repudiation.

insightful young man recognizes a strong similarity between his own workout compulsion and anorexia, but continues to pine for the kind of ripped body he sees on the cover of such oxymoronically titled magazines as *Men’s Health*. Gradually, it dawns on these gym rats that the only way to achieve their Schwarzeneggerian ideal is with the aid of black market pharmaceuticals. With this somber realization, some come to terms with their disappointment, some, presumably, don’t.

There is a similar dilemma at the heart of Ann Shin’s *Western Eyes*



A scene from *Through a Blue Lens* (1999), which documents life in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside.

(2000), a documentary about 2 young Asian-Canadian women contemplating cosmetic surgery as a way to blend in better in a Eurocentric society. The participants, sounding like any number of characters from the TV melodrama *Nip/Tuck*, proclaim, “I want to get it done because I want to feel better” and “Life is about self-improvement.”<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, Sharon, a Korean-Canadian, undergoes a barely discernible Westernization of her eyelids. Afterward, she notes an improvement in her confi-

dence, while at the same time acknowledging the destructive aspects of her own narcissism. Shin recognizes the fundamental pain behind it all, but offers no easy remedies.

Pain, some of it almost unbearable to witness, is also at the centre of a number of NFB documentaries dealing with alcohol and drug abuse. Gil Cardinal’s *Children of Alcohol* (1984), for one, follows a group of adolescents on a horseback trip in the Rockies, where they discuss the impact on their lives of their parents’ drinking. The horses and the scenery are distracting, but the kids

are articulate and insightful beyond their years.

Janice Brown’s documentary, *The Agony of Jimmy Quinlan* (1978), is the story of a homeless Montréal man — he’s 38 but looks a hard 60 — who had been drinking up to 10 bottles of cheap sherry a day for 12 years before deciding to go cold turkey. If getting off the bottle isn’t physiologically daunting enough, Jimmy must also face the prospect of becoming a pariah in the only world he knows. To his street friends, sobriety is the ultimate in betrayal and repudiation.

Viewed back to back, a pair of documentaries about efforts to police Vancouver’s street drug scene offers a fascinating reminder of the intractability of the problem — at least in our chosen approaches to it. *Whistling Smith* (1975), directed by Michael Scott and narrated by Donald Marrin Canell, and narrated by Donald Brittain, is a portrait of an edgy street cop, Sergeant Bernie “Whistling” Smith, who rules his turf with a hands-on tough love unlikely to satisfy civil libertarians, addiction treatment professionals or nervous police chiefs. Smith brags of a 57 per cent drop in crime on his beat, but it’s mostly achieved by insisting that those he views as potential criminals take their act somewhere else, presumably into some other cop’s jurisdiction.

Fast forward a quarter century. The kindly police officers in Veronica Alice Mannix's *Through a Blue Lens* (1999) patrol the streets of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, even sadder now than in Whistling Smith's day. They are armed not only with nightsticks, but with video cameras they used to document the lives of the regulars on their beat. They hope the misery they capture on tape can be used to help dissuade others from ending up here. But, much like the notion that financial markets are governed by enlightened self-interest, it's a dubious assumption at best.

While police strategies over the years have evolved from strong-armed enforcement to compassionate containment, none appears to have had the slightest impact on the demand for heroin and other drugs we deem criminal. Perhaps, as these films suggest, it's because we've saddled law enforcement personnel with the responsibility of managing what remains fundamentally a public health problem.

**David McDonald**  
Writer/filmmaker  
Ottawa, Ont.

---

#### REFERENCES

1. Howard AW. Bethune: consummate humanitarian and man of action. *CMAJ* 2009;180:1334.
2. Sibbald B. Human being. *CMAJ* 2008;178:1191-2.
3. Brett-McLean P. The elderly patient: in situ. *CMAJ* 2007;175(11):1617
4. McDonald F. *Nip/Tuck* well past its best before. *CMAJ* 2009;180:1039-40.

Get your free ticket to the National Film Board of Canada viewing room at <http://www.nfb.ca/>

David McDonald's most recent documentary, *Cereal Thriller*, is about the unintended consequences of a 1955 cereal-box promotion.