



The Media Evolutionist

The National Film Board of Canada's filmmaker-in-residence, Katerina Cizek

KATERINA CIZEK HAS nailed the National Film Board of Canada's founding philosophy, "art is a hammer." Her documentaries have helped forge policies for the International Organization for Migration helped launch criminal investigations and influenced an International Criminal Tribunal ruling. As the NFB's first filmmaker-in-residence, Cizek is embracing the digital age to change the face of documentary—how it's made and how it's used—and to return to the NFB's roots.

"I want to help subjects, participants and

audiences take action, which really is nothing new for the NFB," she says. "Using film and media as a tool for social innovation is part of the Film Board's DNA."

This year, the NFB celebrates 70 years as Canada's public film producer and distributor, with Cizek at the forefront of a new wave of digital media-making that is sweeping the organization, expanding the vocabulary of 21st Century cinema and breaking new ground in form and content. As part of Cizek's "virtual residency on the Web," she's created a feature-length, immersive online

documentary about her experiences at Toronto's St. Michael's Hospital.

Already, her website has racked up its share of accolades: a Canadian New Media Award for excellence in news and information, the Montréal Prix Boomerang and a 2008 Webby award, the Oscars of the Internet (nfb.ca/filmmakerinresidence).

With a compilation DVD of her recent work released this month, Cizek tells us how she's paired media with medicine by collaborating with doctors, nurses and patients to fuel social action and change lives.

“My goal is to make media *with* people, rather than merely *about* people”

You use the term “interventionist media” to describe your work. What do you mean?

The idea came from “intervention research” at St. Mike’s—a specific approach to medical research that directly and immediately impacts the community you work with. I could see the symbiosis with Challenge for Change¹. My goal is to make media *with* people, rather than merely *about* people; media that can be used as a tool to advance, enhance and achieve their distinct goals.

Who did you work with at St. Mike’s Hospital?

One day I hear that Dr. James Orbinski is in the house—he [accepted] the Nobel Peace Prize for *Médecins Sans Frontières* [Doctors Without Borders]. This connection took me to Malawi [in Africa], where I created my first project as filmmaker-in-residence: *The Bicycle*, a short doc on AIDS. That project really extended the notion of community-based care—not just beyond the walls of the hospital and to the inner city, but beyond country borders, directly addressing the globality of health.

Orbinski and his team were starting up Dignitas International [dignitasinternational.org], working with communities in developing countries to slow down the spread of AIDS. The film, where I follow a Malawian named Pax—a Dignitas volunteer who bikes around to surrounding villages to educate his neighbours on AIDS—ended up being a big hit, screening on CBC and Showtime in the U.S., and as an NFB top-seller to high schools. But most importantly, it’s being used by Dignitas to move whoever sees it to action, in terms of getting involved. That is the power of interventionist media.

Your innovation is how you acquire and disseminate the story. How do you make documentary work for you?

I call myself “media agnostic.” I’m not dedicated to any one form of media. Whatever it takes, that’s the driving force.

I was shocked to learn that 300 Toronto women give birth each year with no fixed address, many at St. Mike’s. We put digital cameras into the hands of several young mothers who have experienced homelessness to document their lives through photo-blogging [online picture diaries]. We then hired these same participants to create another media intervention, *Street Health Stories*, where they documented 28 homeless men and women through audio recordings and portrait photography.²

National Film Board of Canada

¹ Challenge for Change was a “participatory” filmmaking program run from 1966 until 1980 by NFB filmmakers who took cameras into marginalized communities to shed light on social problems.

² The exhibit was part of Hot Docs Film Festival last year, and also accompanied a huge report and conference on street health, which made headlines across Canada.



See for yourself

The NFB is releasing a “behind the scenes” compilation DVD of Katerina Cizek’s seven media interventions this month, including two recent creations (*from \$45; nfb.ca*). *Drawing From Life* follows participants through a suicide-intervention therapy group. *Unexpected* features a provocative dialogue between young mothers who have experienced homelessness and the health care professionals who deliver babies. You’ll also see the filmmaker-in-residence sit down with her partners on the front lines of health care to reflect upon their multiple collaborations—both the process and the impact.

This is the irony of my “filmmaker” title; it really is multimedia. Clearly, documentary finds its roots in film, but in many respects, they are liberated from the shackles of traditional narrative. This is what is exciting about it for me: the evolving nature of technology. It’s like language; it keeps shifting and transforming.

And there are so many ways the end product can live in the world—with both mass and niche audiences. Not just on TV and at festivals, but also places where it will really make a difference. In boardrooms, community forums, police conferences, doctors’ offices and certainly on the Web. Like this collaborative project at St. Mike’s—seven media interventions altogether, fusing full-screen video, photos, audio and text-based narrative, resulting in one of the world’s first feature-length online documentaries.

In your acceptance speech at the Webbies you said, “The Internet is a documentary.” Can you elaborate?

The NFB’s John Grierson defined documentary as, “the creative interpretation of reality.” This is what people are doing on the Web: telling their own stories, representing themselves, whether it be through YouTube, blogging, an avatar or Facebook. It’s all about creating bridges between each other. Really, the Internet has invigorated the possibility of documentary.



The NFB turns 70

To celebrate its birthday, the National Film Board of Canada has amped up its own commitment to connecting people through ideas. *The Screening Room* is an archival collection of more than 700 NFB productions that can be viewed online for free, including 10 Oscar winners (nfb.ca). This month’s 2009 HotDocs International Documentary Festival in Toronto will also feature a NFB retrospective (hotdocs.ca).