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Roundup: Movies not to miss

Which is worse: The Lyme disease coverup, the devastation of global fisheries or undead Nazis in Norway?

Andrew O'Hehir

Jun. 20, 2009 |



Courtesy The Fish Film, Open Eye Pictures, IFC Films

Images from "The End of the Line," left, "Under Our Skin," and "Dead Snow."

Gone are the days when advocacy documentaries -- films aimed at rallying public support around a controversial or little-known issue -- were grainy, boxy videotapes full of earnest people talking. In the wake of Michael Moore and "Inconvenient Truth," issue-oriented docs have to look and feel cinematic, and follow a rigorous formula: two-thirds rage and despair, one-third inspiration. We've got two sterling examples this week, and they're handsomely reported and photographed works, easy to watch and emotionally engaging even if you're not personally involved with the topic. (See also the excellent "[Food Inc.](#)," now in theaters.)

But does this more polished delivery system actually make movies like "The End of the Line" (which is about the overfishing crisis) or "Under Our Skin" (about the controversy surrounding Lyme disease) more effective? I think the jury's out on that one. Both are worth seeing -- but doesn't the simultaneous release of two well-crafted movies that see the end of the world approaching from different directions risk audience fatigue or apocalypse overload? These films convinced me that I should care about the fate of the bluefin tuna and about the suffering of people with misdiagnosed Lyme disease, but they didn't leave me any more able to hold those things in my head amid the infoglut of our civilization.

Amid the fjords and mountains of Norway's Arctic northlands, they've got a different apocalyptic problem, apparently: undead Nazis. Maybe the horror film "Dead Snow" is about the end of the world too, in a more allegorical fashion. Or maybe it's about undead Nazis.

"Under Our Skin" When we first see Mandy Hughes, one of the main subjects in Andy Abrahams Wilson's dizzying and dramatic documentary, she's a study in almost unbelievable contrasts. On one hand, she's almost a stereotypical Florida blonde, tan, fit and attractive, with perfect dental work and a handsome husband. On the other hand, at age 26 Hughes has severe symptoms of neurological disorder, reminiscent of someone with multiple sclerosis or cerebral palsy. She is nearly unable to walk, speak or pick up a glass. Plagued by chronic pain, recurrent seizures and worsening "brain fog," she seems to be sinking into permanent disability.

According to most of the doctors Hughes has seen in the previous seven years, she is suffering from something unrelated to the tick-borne Lyme disease she contracted at age 19. Maybe she has M.S. or chronic fatigue syndrome or lupus -- all diagnoses that embody some degree of ambiguity, and disorders whose underlying cause is poorly understood. Maybe she is suffering from a psychosomatic or psychiatric disorder. One physician tells her, "You're an attractive girl. Maybe you think you're not getting enough attention."

When she goes to see [Dr. Joseph Jemsek](#), a controversial "Lyme-literate" physician in North Carolina, he diagnoses her with late-stage Lyme disease and begins to treat her with massive doses of intravenous antibiotics, which contravenes mainstream medical advice in several different ways. At first Hughes gets much worse -- as Jemsek warns she may -- and then gets rapidly and dramatically better. After 15 months of grueling treatment she can walk and speak normally and her pain has returned to manageable dimensions. But under threat of losing his license and facing a \$100 million lawsuit from insurance companies, Jemsek must declare bankruptcy and closes his medical practice.

There are many other stories of patients, doctors and medical researchers in "Under Our Skin," but the Hughes case sums up its central quandary nicely. At least some of the 20,000 new cases of Lyme disease reported every year in the United States -- not to mention the undetected cases, which the Centers for Disease Control suggests could be 100,000 or more -- end up in murky Mandy Hughes territory. Most doctors and insurance companies treat Lyme as an acute illness, brief in duration and easily controlled. A tick bites you, you feel crappy, you take antibiotics for two or three weeks, it's gone. End of story. But as Wilson's film captures, there's a growing movement of patients, health activists, renegade doctors and research scientists who see Lyme as an insidious, long-term disorder that is profoundly debilitating, difficult to diagnose and expensive to treat.

There's wilder stuff than that here too. One of Wilson's central figures is independent medical researcher Alan Macdonald, who believes he has discovered how the Lyme bacterium hides in the body after initial treatment and also suspects that the Lyme spirochete (*Borrelia burgdorferi*, a distant cousin to the syphilis bug) may be sexually transmitted as well as tick-borne -- and could be implicated in Parkinson's, ALS,

lupus, Alzheimer's and other neurological disorders. Of course, the problem with a film like "Under Our Skin" is that there's really no way for you and I and other disinterested viewers to measure Macdonald's hypotheses against the mainstream views of, say, Eugene Shapiro, a Yale researcher and Lyme expert who believes the disease is well understood and easily managed, and sees "post-Lyme syndrome" as an autoimmune or psychosomatic disorder (that is, either as a disease where the mind is attacking the body or one where the body is attacking itself).

Is it possible that Mandy Hughes was suffering from just such a disorder, and that Jemsek's intervention somehow rebooted her system? Well, sure it is. But whatever happened, she got better. Wilson's movie is motivated by rage (his twin sister was ill for years with later-stage Lyme, he says), and he ferociously advocates for the position that late-stage Lyme patients and their doctors have been unfairly persecuted by the medical establishment and the gatekeepers of managed care. But you don't have to reach a medical conclusion about the case of Hughes or California park ranger Jordan Fisher Smith or U2 tour producer Dana Walsh or Connecticut mom Elise Brady-Moe to grasp Wilson's central point. These people were diagnosed and treated in a manner that was all about controlling costs and declaring closure, and not at all about understanding their illness and helping them get better, and something is deeply wrong with a medical system that works that way. (Now playing at the IFC Center in New York. Opens June 26 in Los Angeles, San Diego, Santa Cruz, Calif., and Washington; July 10 in Hartford, Conn.; July 20 in Waterville, Maine; July 24 in Rhinebeck, N.Y., and San Luis Obispo, Calif.; Aug. 6 in Boston; and Aug. 7 in Newburyport, Mass., with more cities to follow.)

"The End of the Line" Traveling from the tuna markets of Tokyo -- where some wholesalers reportedly have tons of that delicious red meat frozen against future shortages -- to the streets of London, the straits of Gibraltar and the coast of Senegal, British director Rupert Murray paints a dire but colorful portrait of the global overfishing crisis. Unlike the other umpty-gazillion ecological crises we face, almost nobody pretends this one isn't real. Even the most ardent supporters of the fishing industry agree that worldwide stocks of large game fish (i.e., the most popular seafood entrees) have declined by 70 percent. Independent researchers put the decline closer to 90 percent.

Either way, it's clear that the industrial harvesting of the world's oceans over the last half-century have almost exhausted a resource that, for all of human history to this point, seemed literally limitless. It's not like we didn't see it coming: In the early '90s, the Atlantic cod fishery that had sustained Canada's maritime provinces for generations collapsed completely (those fish are now believed almost extinct). By that time, the Chesapeake Bay's once-plentiful oyster population had already collapsed, and its blue crabs were declining. More recently, a perfect storm has combined to decimate many species of oceanic life: Rising populations and widespread poverty in the developing world, coupled with the rising popularity of seafood in the metropolitan West and the explosion of high-tech methods for finding and catching ever more fish.

Murray's film is largely based on the pioneering work of charming, laconic London author and journalist **Charles Clover**, a Daily Telegraph reporter who delights in making life miserable for high-end chefs, dysfunctional Euro-bureaucrats and trawler operators who flout the rules. Clover explains that as a young man he once caught a 23-pound salmon in a Welsh river -- the last big fish anyone ever caught there -- and has been trying to do penance ever since. It isn't individual anglers like Clover, of course, who are dredging thousands of tons of food fish from the oceans every year, using profoundly destructive methods that devastate the sea bass and kill whales, dolphins, sea turtles and smaller fish by the millions. Those things are the work of international policy, government subsidy and the operations of the market, all of which we have the power to control.

Clover and various scientists in the film make the point that in the case of the fishing crisis -- unlike, say,