



Wholphin: Issue 9

[Wholphin DVD](#) // Unrated // September 10, 2009

List Price: \$19.95

Review by [Francis Rizzo III](#) | posted September 10, 2009 | [E-mail the Author](#) | [Start a Discussion](#)

In 10 Words or Less

Another collection of excellent short-form entertainment

Reviewer's Bias*

Loves: Wholphin, Good shorts

Likes: DVD magazines, documentaries, out-there movies

Dislikes: meandering films

Hates: Getting depressed by documentaries

The Story So Far...

Wholphin, part of the McSweeney's empire, releases a quarterly DVD magazine which collects, as the subhead (which has changed back to that seen on the first four issues) says, rare and unseen short films. Eight issues have been released to date, and DVDTalk has [reviews of all eight](#).

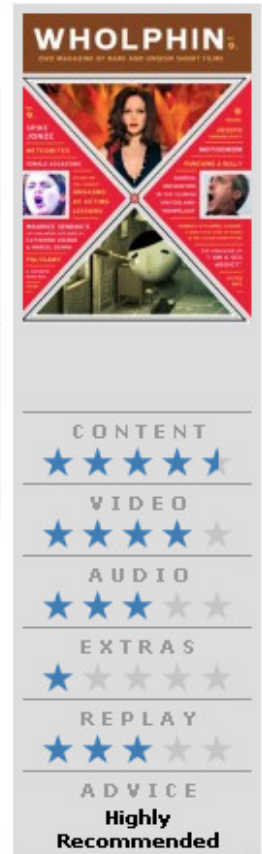
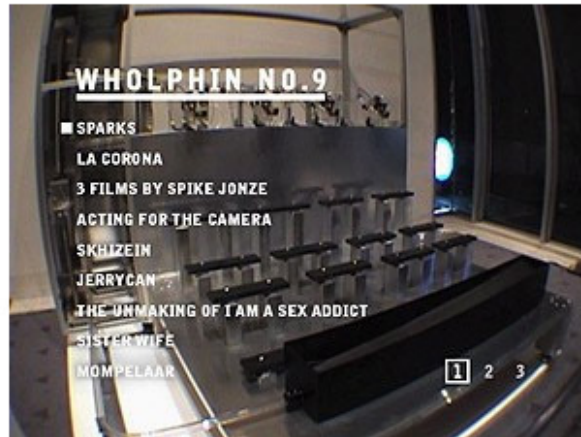
The Movies

Motodrom (9:09/Menu Film)

Motodrom is a documentary dripping in style, as it sticks solely to observing, eschewing the usual interviews and talking heads (and you won't "meet" anyone either.) Instead, you just watch, along with the transfixed audience, as stuntmen in race cars and motorcycles circle the walls of the Motodrom, a traveling carny act usually seen in a self-contained cage (the legendary Cage of Death.) Shot in high-contrast black-and-white, it's easy to think it's all staged and fictional, simply because it looks so good, with tons of in-the-moment angles (while also boasting some fantastic sound.) It's just a creative way to look at an unusual bit of reality.

Sunday, 6th April 11:42 A.M. (6:10/Menu Film)

There's definitely a story at work here, and I don't think I entirely understood it, but I don't think it really matters, because simply experiencing these six creatively-rendered minutes, narrated in beautiful Italian, is to see something special. Directed by Flatom, an artistic enclave, the entire film is presented from one consistent, unmoving perspective, high above a picturesque country hill-side. As the narrator tells you what's happening (sort of), the players are highlighted and you just watch what happens next. I'll be damned if, despite the calming sound of the narrator, there's not a sense of dread that develops, simply because from the viewer's vantage point, you take on a sense that you can't do anything to help.





Bearings Glocken (3:20/Menu Film)

Unlike *Sunday...*, there's absolutely no story here, as the footage simply shows you a "performance" by a machine designed to drop metal balls on glockenspiel keys, creating beautiful tones. The actual pacing and mechanisms of the machine are impressive, but not as notable as the sound of the keys and the consistent perfection of the ball drops. There's nothing all that great about the filming of the machine, but when you hear the music and see the smooth arcs of the bouncing balls, you'll be impressed.

Mompelaar (21:37)

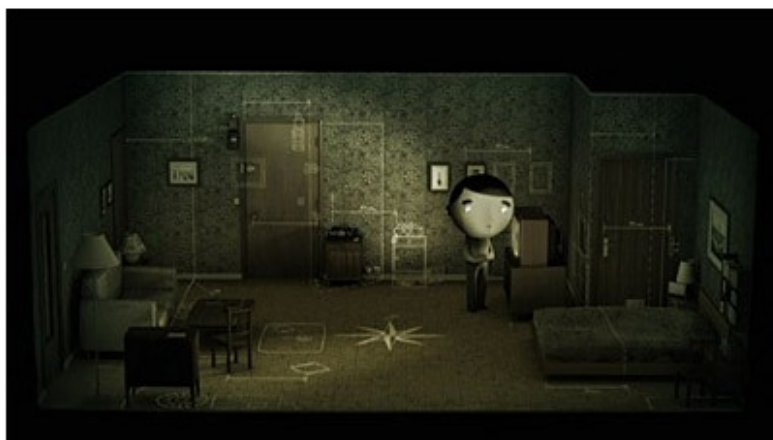
This is one wacky short film, shot with high-end style and a heightened sense of the absurd, as the Belgian Clint Howard mumbles his way through a disturbing world. The bizarre story of a man, his shopping bag and his manly mother, there's little that makes sense, yet it's not hard to get hooked right through to the end of its trippy 21 minutes of oddness. The most fascinating thing about it is the way the quiet off-kilter feel gives way to a graphically perverse violence that makes everything more immediate and discomforting, while somehow maintaining an unusual sense of humor.

The Unmaking of *I am a Sex Addict* (6:38)

The title's a touch grandiose, considering that the piece, which checks in at under seven minutes in length, hardly touches on Caveh Zahedi's very meta film about his desire for sex, but if you dig his style, or dig hearing about the difficulties of filmmaking on a budget, this is a fun little animated morsel. The audio is from a speaking appearance by Zahedi, during which he talks about how hard it is to film when someone on the set is tripping hardcore. It's an amusing story, and the low-tech animation lends it another level of comedy that's reminiscent of *Home Movies*.

Jerrycan (13:11)

Approaching this slice-of-childhood short, I wasn't sure where it was going, as the tone of the small-town Aussie trash getting bullied by other small-town Aussie trash felt a touch ominous, but it quickly sorted itself out to be a solid, sentimentality-free look at how stupid kids can be. Though you can see it coming from a mile away, the ending is a classic bit that I probably shouldn't say much about.



Skhizein (13:06)

Have you ever been beside yourself? Really beside yourself? The star of this movie understands that feeling all too well, after an asteroid strike shifts his perspective on life. A brilliant short all around, from the

technically and artistically outstanding animation to the utterly thoughtful and amusing story. There's such a dreamy, yet melancholy feel that it could have sprouted from Tim Burton's darkly fertile mind. I was curious to see how it would wrap up, and thankfully, I wasn't disappointed.

Acting for the Camera (14:24)

I love a movie that captures a moment of uncomfortably explosive emotion, and this is a great example of that, as an aspiring young actress struggles with her delivery during an acting class. That the scene she's having trouble with is the classic fake orgasm from *When Harry Met Sally* raises the tension, while the fact that most of the class has no idea they are in a movie creates the perfect atmosphere. If there's a genre called cringe cinema, this is a pioneer. Joe Urla as the teacher really sells it (and for a second I thought he was Robert Downey Jr. For a second.)

Maurice at the World's Fair (3:34)

The Creature Within (1:31)

Melbourne Years (:53)

This trio of clips is packaged under the label "Three Films by Spike Jonze," but that shouldn't get your hopes up. It's basically two short bits with Maurice Sendak (author of the basis for Jonze's upcoming *Where the Wild Things Are* adaptation) and what seems like an apology for Jonze's absence somewhere (Comic-con?), due to his work on the film. The last piece, a low-budget animation effort starring the Wild Things, is the most Jonze-ian, though *Creature* isn't too far behind, as Sendak does battle with an inner voice. The first clip is straightforward at first, as Sendak tells a story from his childhood, only to have it visualized with Jonze playing a pint-sized Sendak. It's definitely silly, and hopefully is a small example of a shared mindset between the two artists that will result in an excellent adaptation.

La Corona (40:03)

The longest entry this issue is a unique documentary that takes you inside a Columbian women's prison to see the institution's beauty pageant. Split between the actual show and profiles of the women involved, it's one of the more humanizing looks behind bars, as you meet a wide range of convicts and hear how they landed in prison, while also seeing them prepare and compete for the crown. Sure, one might say, why are criminals getting to enjoy themselves when they are supposed to be punished, but when you realize this is the only bright spot in their lives and it probably makes the rest of the year even worse by comparison, maybe you let them have this one shank-free moment. Either way, Amanda Micheli and Isabel Vega did a fantastic job of bringing the audience deep into a dangerous world and exposing an extremely intriguing story.

Sparks (24:01)

Here's the main event. Ever since enjoying him in *Mysterious Skin* (well, maybe enjoying is the wrong word) I've been intrigued by what Joseph Gordon Levitt's career would be like, and when my good friend Matthew J. McCue lent me *Brick*, it confirmed for me that he's a true talent. While *G.I. Joe* did nothing but pad his bank account, *Sparks*, on the other hand, announced he's a talent in front of and behind the camera, as he wrote and directed this stylish Elmore Leonard adaptation, lending a creative visual touch to Leonard's darkly-comic tale of insurance investigation. Carla Gugino and Eric Stoltz play the lead roles like they are second-nature, while the "hand-crafted" special effects punctuate the humor and pace the story effectively. It's just about a perfect movie representation of an Leonard story.

The DVD

Like last time, we received a very early screener copy, but one can once again assume that Wholphin No. 9 will be packaged in the same cleanly-designed digipak as the other issues, with a tray on the left side and a 39-page booklet glued into the right inside panel, while a content breakdown is on the back cover. The disc features animated menus (anamorphic widescreen) with a list of content, but it's not your usual menu animation. What's in the background is the beginning of one of the shorts, which will keep playing if you don't select an option. This issue has three menu films, which can be chosen from a list in the lower right of the screen. There are no audio options, no subtitles and no closed captioning.

The Quality

The presentation of the content in Wholphin is always the one thing that makes me pause in my effusive response to it. For some reason, and I assume, based on the overall quality of the magazine, that it's because of the source materials, but there's no consistency to how the video is presented. It's all quite solid, with films like *Sparks* and *Skhizein* looking fantastic and others, like *Bearings Glocken*, looking like the grainy video they are, but (other than the full-frame pieces) some are presented in anamorphic widescreen, others are letterboxed, and one, *The Unmaking...*, is pillarboxed. If it looked like any of the visual quality was less than optimal, this would be a bigger deal,

The mixes have also been a bit of a sore point, as, though they sound nice and clear, without any obvious problems, every one is presented in Dolby Digital 2.0 tracks. This is fine for stuff like *Sister Wife* or the Spike Jonze bits, but one can't help but think *Motordrom* and *Sparks* would benefit from a full surround mix.

The Extras

As is usually the case with *Wholphin*, the only extra is the excellent booklet, with an essay from editor Brent Hoff and interviews for each film in the issue.



The Bottom Line

Nine issues in, there is simply no doubt: If you enjoy film--the concept, the possibilities, the power--you need to subscribe to *Wholphin*. There is no easier-to-access, better-curated and diverse film festival out there, and this one you can attend in your underwear. The ninth entry has a little bit of everything, from polished mini-films to excellent documentaries to outstanding animation, along with bits and pieces from all over the spectrum of movies. This is one of the most impressive line-ups yet, without a weak point to be found.

Francis Rizzo III is a native Long Islander, where he works in academia. In his spare time, he enjoys watching hockey, writing and spending time with his wife, daughter and Schnoodle.

[Check out 1106 - A Moment in Fictional Time](#)

**The Reviewer's Bias section is an attempt to help readers use the review to its best effect. By knowing where the reviewer's biases lie on the film's subject matter, one can read the review with the right mindset.*