

ON DVD

Indie film news, reviews, commentary, interviews, podcasts and more, updated throughout the week.

Swimming With Wholphins

By Michael Atkinson on 02/02/2010



A scene from "The Astronomer's Dream," from Wholphin No. 10, McSweeney's, 2010

It's time again to note the landing of a new *Wholphin*, number ten this time in the biannual subscription series from Dave Eggers' *McSweeney's* mill, and now more than ever it seems a vital project, even as our free time becomes increasingly consumed by watching and sharing viral "shorts" on YouTube.

Actually, what often spurs YouTube popularity isn't so far from the aesthetic-ironic rationales employed by *Wholphin* -- aside from newsworthiness and blooper moments and stupid people tricks, the genuine viral videos that catch on can have an odd, otherworldly sense of amazement to them, showing you something real that you never thought you'd see. *Wholphin* does better than that, of course, curating with not only the OMG factor in mind, but also duration, real wit and the

amazement that can come with new visual perspectives. But there's also a rabid hunger at work for what's brand new not only in filmmaking but in science, in design and in conceptual performance art. Nothing is off the table -- in past editions, multiple dubbing options are common, and in every issue, pieces of odd footage or sometimes entire films are used as rotating menu screens.

Building since 2005, the back library (which can be bought online) includes, amidst eye-popping nature footage (trap-jaw ants, drunk bees, etc.), redubbed Russian sitcoms and excerpts from idiosyncratic features, some of the most spectacular and vital shorts of the last few years (Anthony Lucas' "[The Mysterious Geographic Explorations of Jasper Morello](#)," Bill Morrison's re-edited lost film "The Mesmerist," Ray Tintori's junkyard-Oz neo-myth "[Death to the Tinman](#)," and so on).

No. 10 is paradigmatic -- the rotating menu-movies run the gamut from microscopic images of bizarre aquatic lifeforms to the chronicle of a handmade contraption that allows a windblown kite to manufacture its own very distinctive artwork. A segment from Michael Jacobs' doc "[Audience of One](#)," in which a Pentecostal preacher who devotes the resources of his megachurch to shooting the science fiction movie God told him to make, seems superfluous (it's out on DVD in its entirety), but Spencer Susser's "[I Love Sarah Jane](#)" is the *McSweeney's*-impish Aussie zombie film we've been waiting for, if we're not just done with zombies altogether.



It's easier to love Malcolm Sutherland's "[The Astronomer's Dream](#)," a hand-drawn/computer-animated freakout that irrationally recalls early Métal Hurlant comics (*Who/phin* can always be depended upon to rope in whatever new flabbergasting animation style appear in the short-film festival void), and Eric Flanagan's "Teleglobal Dreamin'," which conjoins a young Singaporean telemarketer and the ugly American consultant/ex-actor she has to escort, eventually getting him mistaken for Brendan Fraser by the entirety of Singapore, including some whimsical death squads.



An episode from Jonathan Demme's doc series about post-Katrina New Orleans, "Right to Return," is eloquent if unsurprising, but the pearl might be the only vintage film on the docket: [Mary Hestand's "He Was Once,"](#) from 1989, a fascinating post-punk reimagining of the old Lutheran animated TV show "Davey & Goliath," only semi-animating real but post-dubbed actors (including producer Todd Haynes, right after "Superstar") wearing giant clay hairdos and addressing real dramatic issues, like child abuse. Performed with that voguing, absurd semi-conviction that typified New Wave bands, in a kitschy style that both alienates and destroys distance, the film is hilarious and distressing at

exactly the same time. You'd never see it anywhere else.

Swimming With Wholphins, continued

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SHARE



Monte Blue and Raquel Torres in "White Shadows in the South Seas," Warner Bros., 1928

Another paradigm that's been lurking under the radar a bit: the [Warner Archives](#), Warner's "DVD on demand" campaign, which presses discs only when they're ordered, and with no frills whatsoever. The releases are strictly semi-forgotten library titles that no one in Burbank figured could turn a dime in any other way, which of course means they're obscure, too-little-seen packets of cinephilic swooniness, even if, as in last season's release of several old Marie Dressler comedies, the films weren't much to crow about in the end.

This month it's a prize, the much-rumored, Oscar-awarded aberration "**White Shadows in the South Seas**" (1928), directed by industry journeyman "one-shot" W.S. Van Dyke on location in Tahiti. Listed by both David Lean (sure) and Luis Buñuel (what?) among

their Top Ten favorite films, this gauzy parable of Western civilization -- the shadows of the title -- corrupting and ruining the indigenous island peoples of the Pacific is a political knot, at once idealizing and simplifying the gorgeous Islanders just as Murnau's "Tabu" did three years later, but also making no bones about the poisonous impact of American commerce, greed and "progress" to a degree that makes perfect go-green, eat-local sense today.

Ignore the preachy intertitles, and the authentic jungle imagery shines the way not only for Murnau but Maya Deren (in Haiti), Straub/Huillet and Herzog. The story is simple and corny (a drunken doctor finds love and purpose once he's shipwrecked and accepted into a Marquesan tribe), but the textures are continually surprising -- for one thing, the film could hardly be sexier, thick with soft-focus maidens cavorting in a waterfall, and a sigh-worthy silhouetted scene in which the virgin at the story's center (Raquel Torres) stands in a canoe, undresses, and uses her sarong as a sail.

Gold-tinted as if it were caught under a perpetual harvest moon, Van Dyke's movie (which is credited as "a camera record" of a bestseller, "compiled" by two writers) is an escapist daydream, and gloats as much about tropical cuisine as it does about sex (the roast octopuses, lobsters and sea turtle!). But, thanks to the corpulent white slobs willing to kill for a freshly-dived pearl, and the shadows they've cast across native peoples in the more than 80 years since, it's also terminally sad.

"Wholphin, No. 10" (McSweeney's) and "White Shadows in the South Seas" (Warner Bros.) are now available on DVD.

