

WHOLE**Rating: ★★★★★ (out of 5 stars)****Director: Melody Gilbert****Producer: Melody Gilbert****Director of Photography: Melody Gilbert****[More 2003 LA Film Festival reviews.](#)**Review by: [Warren Curry](#)

6/22/03

If one were to need any further proof of the enigmatic nature of the human mind then Melody Gilbert's fascinating documentary, *Whole*, serves as that proof. The subjects in Gilbert's film are people who suffer from an affliction that sounds plainly preposterous -- human beings who intensely believe that one of their limbs is not meant to be attached to their body. These people spend their days in a state of perpetual anguish, adamant that the unwanted limb be removed, but acutely aware of the societal norms which severely condemn/restrict such actions. It seems so unbelievable on the surface, but the superbly structured *Whole* makes us realize that for an extremely alienated minority this issue is all too real.

The movie's journey is that of the director's. *Whole* introduces into the world of the amputee "wannabe" on an elemental level -- information is relayed via brief title cards (a very welcome substitute for narration) and through talking heads interviews with medical professionals and also several of the wannabes. We watch wannabes tape the, what they feel to be, extraneous limb (in all cases here, it is the left leg, below the knee) to their backside, and hear from a man who claims that one of the few ways he can derive comfort is to look at a computer enhanced photo of himself sans limb. We learn that this is mainly a male affliction, and while a support network exists for these people, the medical establishment is reticent to officially recognize the matter. It's a delicate introduction, and the first half of the film unfolds quietly and methodically, an apparently conscious decision on Gilbert's part to convey that no traces of sensationalism will be found in her film.

Whole becomes most involving in its second half when the emotional burden of being a wannabe is presented front and center. We learn of the horrifying incident where George Boyer, an older man from Florida, takes a shotgun to his leg and lays waste to the limb, thankfully surviving the self-inflicted damage when his landlord comes across his fallen body. Another wannabe must choose between amputating his leg and his wife -- the woman making it explicitly clear that if he goes through with the surgery she will leave in an instant. In a particularly moving scene, the mother of a Dutch wannabe named Kees explains that her support and love for her son is absolute,

yet this re-assurance seems able only to blunt the man's pain. It is in these moments of complete exposure where the film is utterly captivating.

What Melody Gilbert does so well in the film's charged sections is to remain an observer. I've stated it umpteen times in previous reviews, but it bears repeating: if a filmmaker really wants to connect with a viewer emotionally -- in a way that will have a lasting impact -- give that viewer space. As the director, Gilbert assembles the story, but she lets the subjects tell it. Given the devastating nature of some of the interviewee's testimony, many of who admit to harboring suicidal feelings, it's to the director's immense credit that she resists every impulse to manipulate the content for either tear-jerking or shocking effect. She keenly understands that ultimately her film is less about the affliction and much more so about the human beings who suffer from it.

The film brings up an abundance of questions, many of which have no convenient answers. Parallels with our culture's body image obsession can be gleaned, and also an examination of the slippery definition of "normal" in our society. Gilbert employs a straight-ahead, somewhat curiously matter-of-fact approach, which the movie's mounting grip reveals to be a wise one.

Clocking in around the 60-minute mark, *Whole* doesn't feel incomplete but it certainly does leave you wanting the exploration to continue further. Melody Gilbert tackles considerably tough subject matter here, and is able to treat it with a delicate touch that is equally as provocative as it is sensitive.

(Screened at the 2003 Los Angeles Film Festival)

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