

THE CURRENT CINEMA

LONERS

By David Denby

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Bill Murray has strong cheekbones, a lordly crest of hair, and thin lips that he presses together in an act that suggests self-containment more than disapproval. In Jim Jarmusch's new "Broken Flowers," as in "Rushmore" and the recent "Lost in Translation," the teasing ironist-clown of twenty years ago has vanished. At the age of fifty-four, Murray has become rather imposing—he holds the camera with little flickers of amusement in his eyes and tiny changes of emphasis and color in his voice. He's now a major actor, but in a specialized way: he doesn't extend himself much, and it's initially hard to imagine him as what he's supposed to be in "Broken Flowers," an indomitable Don Juan who leaves dozens of disappointed girls in his wake. In America, it's usually the smiling, eager fellows, the guys who never stop asking, who become successful mashers, but Murray, as he comes off here, has too much pride to ask. His character, called Don Johnston, is a loner who says very little. When his latest girlfriend (Julie Delpy) walks out on him, he sits silently on a leather couch in his big living room, topples over, and goes to sleep. As far as we can see, he doesn't want a girl; he doesn't want anything.

Murray's linking up with Jim Jarmusch is a case of Mr. Cool meeting Mr. Cool, and the result is intriguing and elegant, but not quite satisfying. Certainly, "Broken Flowers" is the best thing Jarmusch has done since his early deadpan comedies, "Stranger Than Paradise" (1984) and "Down by Law" (1986). But Jarmusch still works out of a minimalist aesthetic in which the arbitrary and the unexplained rule the screen. We're not meant to ask such things as why a retired computer entrepreneur like Don Johnston would live in what appears to be a forlorn upstate New York town; or why he has no interests or friends except for a chattering, good-hearted busybody, Winston (Jeffrey Wright), who lives next door. In conventional Hollywood terms, Don has no backstory—the swirl of life around and inside him that would make his actions credible. He's a hollow man, neutered, disconnected from everything. That, of course, is the point, but Jarmusch and Murray have combined to make him empty without establishing the reasons for the desert in his soul. How much of this movie is devoted to a freshly imagined fictional character, and how much is the product of both men's disengagement from the world?

On the same day that Don's latest flame leaves him, he receives an anonymous letter from someone who says that she is an old girlfriend, informing him that she conceived a son with him almost twenty years ago. Who's the old girlfriend? Is there really a son? Winston, an amateur sleuth, sends Don out on the road in search of the four women he was dating two decades earlier. Since the letter was written on pink stationery, Winston tells Don he must take the women pink flowers and look for pink in their houses. It's a very strange quest, and, as Don tools around, half curious to see the women again, half embarrassed by what he has to ask them, the movie turns into an absurdist travelogue. We see Don looking at maps, sleeping on airplanes, driving through rural and suburban landscapes in a rented car—"a stalker in a Taurus," he calls himself—but the travel scenes are purely formal, like the chorus of a ballad. Don is stuck in Jarmusch's depressed version of America: the women's homes—a lower-middle-class bungalow, a sterile McMansion, an austerely modernist house in the suburbs, and a backwoods shack

—are equally unappealing, drained of life. The cinematographer, Frederick Elmes, produces an even, gray light, which is quite handsome, in a neutralizing way, but also sobering, almost punitive—it says that this banal American stuff is all that there is.

Jarmusch's women, who don't suffer the burden of trying to be cool, have always been more alive than his men. Ellen Barkin threw a memorable fit in "Down by Law," and in one of the sketches in "Coffee and Cigarettes" Cate Blanchett, playing two roles—an obnoxious star and her envious cousin—briefly smacked some life into that remote exercise. Jarmusch has made Don's old lovers vastly different from one another, and some of the actresses do extremely well in their brief appearances, especially Sharon Stone as a hard-luck blonde who doesn't demand too much from life, and Jessica Lange as an iron-willed fraud who "talks to animals." Creating hollows of silence and embarrassment, a hushed expectation in which anything can happen, Jarmusch is good at the awkwardness of lost love, the sadness of diminished expectations: the women are getting by, but they're not happy or creative, and Don's encounters with them are either bittersweet or just plain bitter. They all have a fondness for pink—any one of them could be the mother of his child. But Don makes no more than a gesture at connection, and as the movie ends we're left wondering: is Jarmusch's cool really a kind of fear equal to Don's fear of life? "Broken Flowers" is all of a piece; it's maliciously observed, and it has a neat formal style. But it's an art object without the energy or courage to be a work of art.

In "Grizzly Man," which opens August 12th, the indefatigable Werner Herzog has made a brilliant documentary about an American saint and fool—a man who understands everything about nature except death. This innocent is one Timothy Treadwell, a college athlete from Long Island who dropped out of school after an injury, failed as an actor, and became a California surfer who drank too much. He was a routine product of American dislocation—a washout, even—until the moment in 1989 when he had an epiphany in Alaska. Up there in the wilds,

Treadwell fell in love with the enormous grizzlies that come down from the mountains in the warm weather, when the salmon are running. Starting in 1992, and for a dozen summers after that, he lived among the animals in the Katmai National Park and Preserve, almost always alone, and always without a weapon. His special province was a densely shrubbed plot of land—the Grizzly Maze, he called it—which he turned into a private petting zoo. He gave the animals—many of them weighing seven or eight hundred pounds, and outfitted with claws like yellow scythes—such names as Mr. Chocolate and Aunt Melissa, stroked their noses with his hand, and reigned in this peaceable kingdom as a kind of benevolent god. In his own eyes, he was protecting the bears from poachers and from the indifference of the park service. Treadwell was a fearless man, who could face down an enraged animal with a pointed finger and the words “Don’t you do that. I love you.” He was also an implacable cornball and sentimentalist, a celebrator of nature and of himself, who was capable of rhapsodizing over a steaming pile of bear droppings, which he insisted on calling poop. His Dr. Doolittle act worked extremely well, right up to the moment when it stopped working at all. In October, 2003, Treadwell and his girlfriend, Amie Huguenard, were attacked and devoured by a hungry long-nosed grizzly that either came down from the mountains late or lingered after the other bears had left.

We know all this because Treadwell, a media-type guy, had a digital video camera with him during his last five summers in Alaska and shot a hundred hours of footage, which, after he died, fell into the eager hands of Werner Herzog. The great German filmmaker interviewed some of Treadwell’s adoring friends and ex-girlfriends; he also talked to a variety of local naturalists and park-service officers, most of whom thought that Treadwell “stepped over the line” that separates humans from animals. Herzog then wove the “found” footage into a startling meditation on innocence and nature. Narrating in his extraordinary German-accented English, Herzog is fair-minded and properly respectful of Treadwell’s manic self-invention. He even praises Treadwell as a filmmaker: as Treadwell

stands talking in the foreground of the frame, the bears play behind him or scoop up salmon in sparkling water; in other shots, a couple of foxes leap across the grass in the middle of a Treadwell monologue. The footage is full of stunning incidental beauties.

In a way, “Grizzly Man” is the ultimate nature documentary, for it chronicles the nature of man as well as the nature of animals. Herzog, investigating Treadwell’s earlier life, interprets him as a spiritually chaotic outcast from civilization, an impatient misfit who relieved his misanthropy with neurotic protestations of love in the wilderness. As Herzog frames it, the entire movie is a very dark joke. Yet there’s an element in the comedy which Herzog may not have intended: the contrast between the self-dramatizing American, with his naïve egotism and optimism, and the hyper-cultivated European, who brings his own burden of despair to nature. Whereas the tormented Treadwell longs for harmony and doesn’t seem to understand that death is at the center of any ecological balance, Herzog sees *nothing* but death. Looking into the eyes of a bear that comes close to Treadwell’s camera, he discerns cruelty and mercilessness rather than hunger. Neither man, it seems, is willing to admit that a bear is a bear is a bear. ♦

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