

The invisible character maps of 'Broken Flowers'

MORTON MARCUS - Sentinel CORRESPONDENT
 Article Launched: 08/19/2005 3:00:00 AM PDT

"Broken Flowers" is writer/director Jim Jarmusch's most accessible film to date. The story of a bored, middle-aged, wealthy bachelor who goes in search of the teenage son he never knew he had by looking up four old girlfriends has all the requisites of a romantic comedy. With Bill Murray as the hapless protagonist, it promises two hours of satisfying entertainment.

But like other Jarmusch films, "Broken Flowers" may leave the viewer cold, thinking that the lack of development and open-ended conclusion mark the film as scattered and meaningless.

The difficulty here is viewer expectations. As in his other films, Jarmusch plays with film genres but doesn't follow their formula plots. In this case, the viewer expects the happy ending of romantic comedy but doesn't get it.

That's because "Broken Flowers" isn't really a romantic comedy per se, but an exploration of America as a place of dreams that have not come true and promises that have not been fulfilled. And that fulfillment is what the protagonists at the start of each of Jarmusch's six major films, whether they know it or not, have stopped searching for.

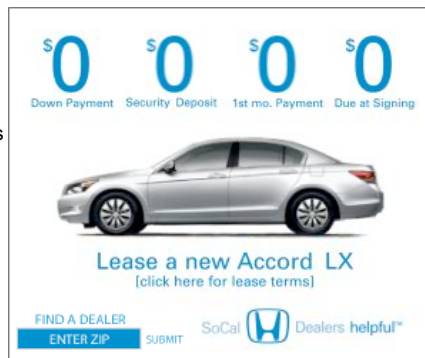
The films I'm referring to are "Stranger Than Paradise" (1984), "Down By Law" (1986), "Mystery Train" (1989), "Dead Man" (1995), "Ghost Dog" (1999) and now "Broken Flowers."

Over the years, I've drawn an invisible map that charts the landscape of Jarmusch's major films and serves as a guide to understand his characters — and by extension explains the underlying meanings of his films to the filmgoer.

In all six films, the protagonists are emotionless, alienated beings who go about their lives in a destroyed landscape, which is the seamy reality under the glitzy surface we like to imagine that America is — and which advertisers and politicians try to convince us it is. In Jarmusch's films, the landscape is as much cultural as physical, and the emotionally crippled protagonists are products of it.


In all the films, the protagonists are on seemingly aimless odysseys through the damaged landscape and come across characters that serve as either wisdom figures or catalysts who wrench them from their robotic existences.

In "Stranger," it's a 16-year-old Hungarian girl traveling in Ohio and Florida. In "Down By Law," it's an Italian tourist in Louisiana who speaks almost no English (the irrepressible Roberto Benigni of "Life Is Beautiful"). In "Mystery Train," it's two Japanese tourists looking for the essence of America in Elvis's Memphis.



\$0 Down Payment \$0 Security Deposit \$0 1st mo. Payment \$0 Due at Signing

Lease a new Accord LX
[\[click here for lease terms\]](#)

[FIND A DEALER](#) [ENTER ZIP](#) [SUBMIT](#) SoCal  Dealers helpful™

In "Dead Man," it's a Native American mystic named Nobody in the old West. And in "Ghost Dog," it's the little girl and the Haitian ice cream seller who speaks no English at all in New York City.

It is interesting to note how many of these catalytic characters are foreigners, as if their beliefs in what America is serves as a stimulus that activates the impassive protagonists. In "Broken Flowers," the catalyst is represented by the protagonist's African-American neighbor who urges him to go in search of his son, and even draws up an itinerary (a map?) for him to follow.

In all these films, the camera, shooting through train windows and car windshields, shows an America of industrial wastelands and flea-bag hotels that was once a pristine landscape of rivers and forests. In "Broken Flowers," the protagonist's odyssey takes him through an endless landscape of identical freeways and airports that cut through the last vestiges of the American wilderness.

But whereas the other films focus on alienated drifters and unemployed slackers, "Broken Flowers" is concerned with members of the middle class, and Jarmusch uses Murray's odyssey to examine different strata of American society.

In this case, Murray's four old girlfriends represent different contemporary lifestyles as much as different social classes. By showing these women's present lives and at the same time looking into their pasts, Jarmusch is able to provide a picture of youthful dreams gone unfulfilled.



Looked at in this way, "Broken Flowers" is a picture of America at a crossroads, in this case the beginning of the new millennium. The film looks back in order to point the way forward, because it is more than a picture of a middle-aged man searching his past for meaning. It is a vision of the future we have bequeathed to our children.

For in the way they behave and the values with which they enter adulthood because of the world their parents have given them, children are, in the end, what "Broken Flowers" is all about. Over and over, from

the next-door neighbor's children to the teenage Lolita and finally to the hitchhiking boy who may or may not be the protagonist's lost son, the film shows us what children are becoming because of the choices their parents made or didn't make.

Pick up the films I've mentioned at your local video store. As a set, they provide a sobering yet darkly humorous view of America and its culture. Like John Sayles' cinematic examinations of the nation, Jarmusch explores different regions of the country in his films, and the maps he produces lead to the tarnished treasure of our national psyche.

Morton Marcus is co-host of the TV film review program "Cinema Scene" on channel 27 every Thursday and Sunday at 8:30 p.m. This Saturday, he will lead a discussion of "Grizzly Man" at the Nickelodeon theater at 1:20 p.m.

Contact Us | Subscriber Services | Site Map | RSS   | MNG
Corporate Site Map

Copyright © 2008 - Santa Cruz Sentinel

MediaNews Group - Northern California Network

Featured Links

Marketplace

- Find a Rental
- Find a Business
- Find Stuff
- Get Grocery Coupons

Special Sections

- Newspaper in Education
- SantaCruz PHOTOGALLERY
- Sentinel Triathlon
- Santa Cruz Live
- TV Schedule

Sponsored Links

- Alternative Cancer Treatment Clinic
- Attorney Finder Lawyer Search
- Aupairs & nannies available
- Bridesmaid Dresses
- Cellit Mobile Marketing
- Chrysler
- corporate awards
- Debt Management
- Diamond Rings
- Internet Auctions
- Magic Love Spells
- Moving Companies, Movers
- Personal Loan
- Reverse Osmosis Water Softener
- Vacation Home Rentals
- yellow pages
- Stem Cell Medicine
- Alternative Cancer Treatment
- Sea Logix Pharmaceutical Grade Fish Oil
- Support our Troops
- Credit Help Resource
- Santa Cruz Real Estate
- Free on-line dating: Deception services
- Moving Companies
- Online Degrees
- Isagenix
- 2009 Calendars
- Property South France
- Apartment Amsterdam
- Property Provence
- Property Provence

[Privacy Policy](#) | [MNG Corporate Site Map](#) | [Copyright](#)