Grizzly Man, the most extraordinary documentary of 2005 (yes, better than the penguins), tells the story of a gifted man caught in the grip of a reckless certainty who ventures into a moral wilderness and almost loses sight of his humanity. I refer, of course, to the film's director, Werner Herzog. Though his film is ostensibly about Timothy Treadwell, who spent thirteen summers living among wild grizzlies in Alaska before being killed and eaten by one of them in the fall of 2003, in the end it is also about Herzog himself--something that will come as no surprise to those familiar with his work. In his indispensable The New Biographical Dictionary of Film, David Thomson writes that the German-born filmmaker "is not the ideal documentarian. You feel he has made his mind up about so many things." This is particularly true of Grizzly Man, which treats Treadwell not only as a subject but as a kind of friendly philosophical adversary. At its most revealing moments, the film takes the form of an argument, between Treadwell's heedless conviction and Herzog's rationalist cynicism, over the nature of nature and the nature of man.

Grizzly Man is constructed primarily from snippets of the more than 100 hours of video shot by Treadwell himself during his last several summers with the bears. Herzog, who narrates the film in his endearingly...
idiosyncratic, accented English, explains early on that in the unedited footage "lay dormant a story of astonishing beauty and depth." It is hard to disagree. Treadwell, a fortysomething surfer with a blond, Prince Valiant haircut, develops an almost mystical attachment to the grizzlies, whom he's given names such as "Rowdy" and "Mr. Chocolate." He talks to them in a soothing singsong, at one point allowing one to nuzzle his hand. When a bear shows signs of being aggressive, Treadwell puffs his chest and stands his ground, sharply lecturing "Don't you do that" until the animal backs off. When speaking to the camera, he alternates between passionately professing his love for the animals and gleefully describing the horrible death they will inflict upon him if he ever makes a wrong move.

A former alcoholic and failed actor--he claimed to have narrowly missed being cast in the Woody Harrelson role on "Cheers"--Treadwell found meaning and purpose with the grizzlies. In his off-months, he ran a nonprofit group called Grizzly People and traveled to schools to introduce children to his bear-friendly message. But more than an activist or educator, he imagined himself as the guardian of his summer grizzlies, a "kind warrior" who protected them from the depredations of the human world. (In fact, the animals live in a protected habitat, and the worst threat to them that he records is a boatload of obnoxious tourists.) His summer expeditions consisted of stays at two locations, an open plain he called the Sanctuary and a dense, forested thicket by a lake he dubbed the Grizzly Maze. The latter site, where one could stumble upon a bear unexpectedly (or vice versa) was by far the more dangerous; it was there that Treadwell and his girlfriend, Amie Huguenard, were ultimately killed. Herzog explains, "As if there was a desire in him to leave the confines of his humanness and bond with the bears, Treadwell reached out seeking a primordial encounter. But in doing so, he crossed an invisible borderline."
This is the story Herzog intends to tell, the clear-eyed realist's view of a
good-natured but emotionally disturbed dreamer whose naive belief in the
beauty and harmony of nature led to his death. The film is arranged
accordingly: The early footage captures Treadwell's easy connection with
the wild--his assured interactions with the grizzlies, his playful romps with
a few foxes whom he essentially adopts. But these Disneyesque moments
gradually give way to a darker vision. Herzog uses scenes in which
Treadwell laments the deaths of a fox and a young bear as evidence of the
essential cruelty of the natural world. The portrait of Treadwell himself
becomes less flattering as well. On camera he veers wildly from
grandiosity to paranoia and self-pity, ranting obscenely against poachers,
the park service--any human taint that might intrude upon his Eden. Near
the very end, Herzog supplies interview footage with the local coroner, a
fascinatingly theatrical character who offers a graphic description of how
Treadwell and his girlfriend met their ends.

Ultimately, those deaths are the key for Herzog; they supply the tragic
resonance and cautionary moral of his film. To underline his point, he
includes interviews with a few experts (a biologist, a Native American
curator) who argue that it's not possible to cross the line between man and
nature and live among wild grizzlies. But Herzog and his experts seem to
miss the most relevant fact: Treadwell did exactly that, for large chunks of
13 years. What made him a remarkable figure is not the one day when he
was attacked by a bear, but the many hundreds of days when he wasn't.

Indeed, if anything, the particulars of Treadwell's death suggest he had
found a sustainable way to coexist with his bears; what killed him was an
enforced deviation from his usual routine. That summer he had as always
left the Grizzly Maze in September to fly back to California. But after a
fight at the airport over the validity of his ticket, he and Huguenard
returned to the wilderness, where they stayed into October, considerably
later than ever before. By then, the bears familiar to him had gone into hibernation. The animal that killed him was one that had emerged, probably starving, from farther inland. The fatal "borderline" Treadwell crossed, in other words, might not have been between species but between months.

Herzog believes that Treadwell's death among the bears renders his life among the bears a kind of bleak joke. But arguably the opposite is true, that his life gave meaning to his death. While Huguenard's killing was a tragedy, it is not so clear that Treadwell's was. This is the way he wanted to die, in the wild with his beloved grizzlies. (As one friend notes, his only regret would have been that the bear that ate him was subsequently shot by the park service.) In an eerily prescient bit of video, Treadwell even muses that being killed by a grizzly might be the best way to get his pro-bear "message" to a broader public.

None of which is to say that Treadwell wanted to die. He took too much care and survived far too long to be someone in the grip of a conventional death wish. Rather, what Treadwell was seeking was transcendence, a chance to touch something purer, simpler, more divine. Watching his footage, it's clear that he found this with the bears. His comfort in the wild is complete, his sense of purpose absolute. He can barely contain his ecstatic confessions. Even in the final scene of his last video, recorded just hours before his death, he twice exults, "It's the only thing I know. It's the only thing I want to know."

It is the fervor of Treadwell's belief, more than the particulars of his circumstances, that seems to fascinate and perplex Herzog, the cultured European rationalist. For him, nature is cruel and cold and desolate. Surveying a gorgeous glacier near Treadwell's site, Herzog muses, "This gigantic complexity of tumbling ice and abysses separated Treadwell from the world out there. And more so, it seems to me that this landscape in
turmoil is a metaphor of his soul." Responding to Treadwell's "sentimentalized view" of nature after the discovery of the dead fox, Herzog declares, "I believe the common denominator of the universe is not harmony, but chaos, hostility, and murder." (Whose soul is supposed to be in turmoil here?) Near the very end of the film, he confesses, "And what haunts me is that in all the faces of all the bears that Treadwell ever filmed, I discover no kinship, no understanding, no mercy. I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature." This conflict between Treadwell and Herzog, between delirious belief and cultivated nihilism, is at the core of *Grizzly Man*.

It is not, however, an argument Herzog seems much interested in winning. To begin with, it's hard to tell how devoutly he believes his own existential denunciations: His vehement language--"chaos, hostility, and murder"--seems at odds with his placid delivery. Moreover, the film itself is emphatically humane, its portrayal of Treadwell affectionate and even admiring. It's as if Herzog yearns to be persuaded he is wrong--and on an emotional level perhaps senses he already has been.

There is a very peculiar scene in the film in which Herzog has in his hands viscerally compelling evidence of his view that nature is cruel and violent but declines to share it. Moments before the fatal grizzly attack, either Treadwell or Huguenard had turned on the video camera but had not had time to remove the lens cap. The result is an audio recording, several minutes long, of their agonized deaths--the screaming, the pleading, the desperate, unsuccessful efforts to drive the bear away. We first learn of the tape from the coroner, who offers a detailed description of its contents. In the very next scene, Herzog is with Jewel Palovak, a close colleague and former girlfriend of Treadwell. Using headphones, Herzog listens to the tape. He does not allow Jewel, who's never heard it, or the audience to listen in. He then tells her, "You must never listen to this. And you must
never look at the photos that I've seen at the coroner's office. ... I think you should not keep [the tape]. You should destroy it. I think that's what you should do because it will be the white elephant in your room all your life."

The scene has no ordinary narrative purpose: It tells us nothing we did not already know about the tape or the attack or Treadwell. What it tells us about is Herzog. He does not want Jewel (or us) to share his pitiless vision of the universe, whether because he himself has doubts or because he thinks a comforting lie is preferable to the horrible truth. He is an anti-evangelist for his own nihilism.

At the end of the film, Herzog advises, "Treadwell is gone. The argument how wrong or how right he was disappears into a distance, into a fog. What remains is his footage. And while we watch the animals in their joys of being, in their grace and ferociousness"--look how far we've come already from the "overwhelming indifference of nature"--"a thought becomes more and more clear. It is not so much a look at wild nature as it is an insight into ourselves, our nature. And that for me, beyond his mission, gives meaning to his life and to his death." The very last shot of the film, as the cowboy dirge "Coyotes" plays in the background, is of Treadwell walking alongside a stream with two bears following docilely close behind, like pets.

It's not quite an explicit philosophical surrender for Herzog. But it is a recognition that, the recklessness of his life and violence of his death notwithstanding, Timothy Treadwell had something to teach us about man's ability to coexist with nature. And regardless of what he says, Werner Herzog seems to have learned it.

**The Home Movies List: Unreliable Narrators**

*Bladerunner (1982).* "Unreliable" doesn't begin to do justice to
the studio-mandated voiceover of the theatrical release, which flattened and dulled the film to the point of sabotage. Thankfully, the director's cut does away with it and the equally insipid tacked-on happy ending, restoring the dark, ambiguous vision of Ridley Scott (and Philip K. Dick).

*The Usual Suspects* (1995). The unreliable narrator has a deep affinity for film noir, but in this otherwise stylish thriller screenwriter Christopher McQuarrie and director Bryan Singer overplay their hand. By placing the entire story in the mouth of a liar they subvert not merely the identity of Keyser Soze but everything that has come before. Instead of the resolution to a clever puzzle, the film's ending becomes the functional equivalent of "It was all a dream."

*Lolita* (1997). By contrast, Adrian Lyne's appallingly misconceived adaptation features far too reliable a narrator. Instead of allowing Humbert Humbert to introduce himself (falsely) as a brilliant, debonair man of the world, it opens with him as the pitiable creature Nabokov only slowly revealed him to be. In so doing, it loses all of the master's dark wit and reduces one of literature's great characters to a pathological diagnosis. Though less true to the text of the novel, Kubrick's 1962 rendering captures its spirit far better (and includes a memorably witty cameo by Peter Sellers).

*The Opposite of Sex* (1998). Now here's a film Nabokov might have enjoyed, a mordant black comedy that gradually unfolds into something more. It also includes the best work to date by the wonderful Christina Ricci. More like this one, please.
**Memento (2000).** A magnificently clever and dextrous narrative puzzle. My only complaint (and it is a small one) is that the ingenuity of its gimmick obscures the film's considerable tragic dimensions.

**Tarnation (2003).** There is no subject on which a documentarian is less likely to be reliable than his own life, and Jonathan Caouette's *creepily fascinating self-portrait* is no exception. Flattering to those in a position to dispute it (though often not those who aren't) and full of undisclosed re-creations, it is a useful reminder that we can't always believe our eyes.

*This post originally appeared at TNR.com.*

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