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At times in Werner Herzog's docu-drama The Wild Blue Yonder, as the glittering-eyed Brad Dourif rants at the camera, audiences could be forgiven for thinking that they are being buttonholed by an extra-planetary version of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Ancient Mariner.

Dourif plays an alien from Andromeda who has been stranded on Earth for years. A grizzled, febrile presence, he is in the grand tradition of Herzog's outsiders, with the intensity of a Klaus Kinski and the vulnerability of a Bruno S. The irony is that he is speaking sense: Herzog uses him as a commentator, pouring scorn on humankind's faltering attempts to create a new community in space.

The Wild Blue Yonder defies easy categorisation. It's partly an eco-fable, warning us of how we are destroying our planet. With its references to the CIA and the Roswell Experiment, it has elements of the political thriller. The shots of the astronauts look as if they're taken from some NASA documentary. (Herzog thanks NASA on the credits "for its sense of poetry.")

The footage of seascapes and mountains is reminiscent of upscale natural history documentaries. The many scenes in which scientists and mathematicians babble on about saving humankind have a satirical undertow. Dourif is always on hand to remind us these eggheads are spouting nonsense.

But there is also a strong strain of Herzog's trademark romanticism here. It is quite possible to ignore whatever points the film is making about space travel and environmental damage and to delight in the awesomely beautiful imagery.

This is accompanied by some equally striking music. The soundtrack combines the work of Dutch composer and jazz cellist, Ernest Reijseger, Senegalese singer Mola Sylla and a Sardinian shepherd's choir with old recordings from Handel's opera Xerxes.

With its essayistic structure and strange lurches in tone, the docu-drama may also leave some spectators scratching their heads. Nonetheless, The Wild Blue Yonder (warmly received by critics at its screening in official selection in Venice) serves as a reminder that Herzog remains a formidable and challenging film-maker.

Theatrical prospects for Herzog's "science-fiction fantasy" (as he styles it) may be hampered by the fact it has already appeared on TV in several territories and already received such widespread exposure.

Combined with his recent documentary Grizzly Man (recently released in the US), the film could even pique the curiosity of a new generation of filmgoers who don't simply know him for his past glories. In its more inspired moments, it combines music and imagery with a grace reminiscent of passages in Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey.

There is a pathos and comedy to the storytelling too. Dourif is an alien in blue-collar guise: an inhabitant of what seems to be a ghost town. The streets are empty. The mall is closed down. (In some ways, the scenes are reminiscent of Herzog's equally eerie 1977 documentary La Soufriere, in which he and his crew visited the island of Guadeloupe after the entire population has been evacuated to avoid a volcano eruption.)

>From this shabby backdrop he explains how humankind's attempts to find a new home

in space is bound to fail. Earth may be becoming uninhabitable (whether due to war or disease is never quite clear), but so is The Wild Blue Yonder. The astronauts arrive at this distant, underwater planet, unaware that its inhabitants have gone on the reverse journey for precisely the same reasons.

The film's message is clear: space travel is useless - what we need to do is clean up and preserve our own planet.

Production companies
Werner Herzog FilmProduktion
West Park Pictures
Tetra Media

International sales
Werner Herzog Film

Executive producers
Lucki Stipetic
Christine Le Goff

Producer
Andre Singer

Cinematography
Tanya Koop
Henry Kaiser
The astronauts of STS-34
Klaus Scheurich

Editor
Joe Bini

Music
Ernst Reijseger

Main cast
Brad Dourif
The astronauts:
Capt Donald Williams
Dr Ellen Baker
Franklin Chang-Diaz
Shannon Lucid
Michael McCulley
The mathematicians:
Roger Diehl
Ted Sweester
Martin Lo

Linda Blackaby
Director of Programming
San Francisco International Film Festival