

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph. D.

The Wild Blue Yonder 2005

Werner Herzog 1942-

OVERVIEW

Assembly. *The Wild Blue Yonder*—‘Here we go, into the wild blue yonder’ is the opening phrase of the song ‘The U.S. Air Force’—is a film built up in stages, and rooting in expressive experiments Herzog was tracking as early as, say, *Fitzcarraldo*, where he had introduced a postmodern element in the presentation of the stages of making itself. We can feel the present film being assembled around us, starting with Herzog’s sense for desolate, semi apocalyptic American landscapes—think of Stroszek’s Wisconsin—then tossing in Herzog’s ear for the intergalactic buzzfeed of our time, around the issues of space travel, NASA missions, aliens, and, in our very moment (June 2019), renewed talk of UFO’s—and toss on top of that a generous helping of underwater film sequences taken below the surface of the Ross Shelf Ice, and NASA shots of lacustrine microorganisms; do all of that salad and you have a film short of character, short on plot, but oddly relevant to being here now, and both musically and visually stunning.

Method. We complete our experience fully compliant to Herzog’s own observation, that ‘I do not trust facts so much as I trust human ecstasies...’ We also buy into Herzog’s personal style of discovering ecstasy through the chance of facts; as, for instance, in the manner in which the space capsule return, from Andromeda to earth, feeds off Herzog’s watching and learning from the files Herzog lengthily perused, from the Pasadena Jet Propulsion Lab. Only years later Herzog watched under-ice video taken by Henry Kaiser, his sound track producer for *Grizzly Man*, and realized how to fit those underwater sequences into the galactic space of *The Wild Blue Yonder*. The same can be said for the non-method method by which Herzog discovered that NASA’s microorganism shots would ‘complement’ the Ross Shelf Ice videos of Henry Kaiser.

The film was presented at the 62nd Venice film Festival, where it won the FIPRESCI prize. It also won special mention at the Sitges Film Festival.

STORY

Story? Is there a story, or are there several stories, and are they even ‘stories.’ Are they perhaps just visual-aural interludes? Anyway we can start there, with the visual-aural. They are certainly parts of the story. We will appreciate this sensuous immediate dimension of tale telling with particular clarity, if we have tracked through Herzog’s ‘experiments with documentation,’ which have been building since *The Land of Silence and Darkness* (1971), ‘interviews with the blind,’ or *Lessons of Darkness*. The way the film sounds and looks, the color and tone of it, are powerful determinants.

Sensual. From the get-go we are in the intra galactic keenings of the Dutch Reijssenger and the Malian Mela Sylla, makers of music spiritual as the spheres, and we are never far from this element of ‘story,’ the accent mark on the whole presentation. Nor are we for long distant from the recontextualized visual images, of planetary flares and ice fields, of NASA filmed microorganisms, or of underwater jungles taken from twenty feet below the Ross Shelf Ice by Herzog’s cameraman, Henry Kaiser, on a research diving assignment ‘unrelated to the present film.’

Decay. Bathed in the moods of this aural-visual setting, what there is of story, here, unfolds before you can pin it down. Brad Dourif, of *Exorcist* fame, appears before us as an alien descendant—many decades removed-- from the planet Andromeda, which had long previously frozen over and proven uninhabitable. He is a distant descendant of the original settlers from Andromeda, who had made it their aim to set up a new culture on earth, with all the institutions and physical structures—capitol building, Pentagon,

government buildings—that we associate with the American government, but in fact all of that has gone to waste—aliens suck, cannot maintain things, deserve nothing.

Background. The Alien, who is addressing us, looks like an Okie from Muskogee, speaking to us in an aw schucks twang in front of some weathered farm buildings that look profoundly Oklahoma, and informs us that while working for the CIA he had been involved in recovering the wreckage from the Roswell New Mexico alien invasion (late fifties), as a result of which a number of space scientists believed they had become ill with some cosmically transmitted disease. Dourif recounts the decision of those scientists, to send a probe to Andromeda, to check out the feasibility of establishing a new culture there.

Disease. The next stage of the tale involves the NASA project to Andromeda, in search—of course fruitlessly, for the planet is dead—of a new inhabitable spot in the galaxy, and of the mysterious disease which is claiming scientists' lives; but having failing to find an answer, to these challenges, the Andromeda project space ship-- which seems to bleed in and out of a typical NASA space project and the suicidal NASA Galileo probe (2003)-- makes the unbelievably lengthy 820 year return journey to planet Earth, the launching point. What they find, upon return, is that planet Earth has been abandoned. Not in vain, though, will have been the thought-enrichment of this infinitely prolonged return.

History. Noteworthy is the commentary of the Alien—whose voice is intermittently the directorial force of the trip-account—that the spaceship's return through time to the present of planet Earth, takes it through the historical-evolutionary stages of the development of mankind, to what was, at the departure of the spaceship, the modern world. Those stages, from the Neolithic to modern technocracy, are as it were narrated from deep time to the present, giving us as it were a standpoint in thought from which to embrace the consciousness that backlights this entire journey in mind. Nowhere does the dependence of the Alien's whole tale, on mind, assert itself so clearly as in the colloquies of three NASA mathematicians, who are contextualized into the 'narrative,' as glosses on the spaceship's return from frozen Andromeda.

Outlook. The film does not end at any definable point, but rather merges into the wild blue yonder as does Herzog's *Heart of Glass*, in which the cosmic prophecies of the shepherd, Hlas, foresee a benign future for a cosmos without the human in it. This is the perspective of Herzog facing the unfathomable jungle, feeling both its terror and its grandeur, in the interviews with Les Blank, in the frightening documentary, *Burden of Dreams*.

CHARACTERS

The Alien (Brad Dourif). The alien is our aw shucks narrator from the start of the film. Middle aged farm boyish, the Alien—who is himself wild-eyed and wild-haired--is down on aliens, willingly tells us his background, where he came from and how he fled, and shows us the pile of crap left from the failure of his tribe to construct a new society on planet earth. A former CIA employee, the Alien must have integrated with earth society, yet he keeps his background in our face.

NASA scientists. Three NASA mathematician-scientists acquire a few minutes footage, and display their academic and fascinating faces at work at the chalkboard, addressing algorithms pertinent to the navigation routes of jet propelled space ships.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

ALIEN

Character. Brad Dourif (the Alien)—formerly starring in *The Exorcist*—tells us from the start his background as the descendant of an alien line that settled generations before on Planet Earth, but which has subsequently accomplished nothing in their new home. As an employee of the CIA in the late fifties—a role which is our only clue to the actual ID of the alien—Brad was involved with analyzing the Roswell New Mexico alien spaceship crash, and is thus able to provide us with his only clue to the interface between alien culture and the earth-dominant culture the aliens encountered at the end of their refugee flight.

Explanatory In his first appearance, to open the film, Brad Dourif, starts in the most matter of fact way to tell us his background, as an alien from Andromeda. He makes no drama about being an alien intruder, and writes himself off as basically a nobody, like the rest of the aliens, who are no damned good.

Autobiographical Brad expatiates, in a latter address to the audience, on his involvement with the Roswell crash. For him, it seems, this is a critical event, linking his earth-presence to his former ancestors' existence on Andromeda.

Historical Later—and Brad (like Hlas in Heart of Glass) continues to intervene with commentary, throughout the film—Brad elaborates on his initial idea, that aliens are worthless. He explains that it had been their intention to found a real society, with government buildings and their institutions, on planet earth—but that they had screwed everything up and left a mess.

THEMES

Chance. Chance is built into Herzog's 'method' of discovering this 'scientific' document film. The way Herzog fits NASA's space capsule footage together with sequences of microorganisms, and then recontextualizes both of those elements into Henry Kaiser's shots of under ice swimming in the Antarctic—all that is building chance discoveries into compelling structure.

Desolation. The film opens onto a scene of desolation, as the Alien tells us who he is and how he got there, against a background of weathered farm buildings, old sheds, and abandoned tractors. That is the desolation of the planet earth. Then there is the desolation of the empty spaces, the frozen surface of Andromeda, the cobalt intergalactic sky. Nothing blossoms or grows in these places.

Time. The space ship returning to earth after its exploratory probe of Andromeda, requires 820 years to make the journey. Rather a long trip? The film is infused with a sense of vast space which constantly converts into vast time. This time is hardly human, wristwatch time. It is the time where quantity turns into quality.

Iciness. The planet Andromeda, from which the Alien is a refugee, whose ancestors fled several generations earlier, eventually turned to ice, and drove away its citizens. We see multiple shots of iced over planets, galactic emptinesses in which the only element is icy air. Planet Earth seems marked for the same extinction.