

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: ZABRISKIE POINT

USA, 1970. Rated R. 110 min
Cast: Mark Frechette, Daria Halprin, Paul Fix, G.D. Spradlin;
Music: Jerry Garcia, Pink Floyd;
Cinematographer: Alfio Contini;
Producer: Carlo Ponti, Harrison Starr;
Written by: Michelangelo Antonioni, Franco Rossetti, Sam Shepard, Clare Peploe; Directed by: Michelangelo Antonioni

Zabriskie Point is something of a cult classic now, but when it was released in 1970, it was not well received. By 1970 Antonioni was rightly considered one of the greatest filmmakers in the world, having directed *L'Aventura*, *La Notte* and *L'Eclisse*, as well as *Red Desert* and *Blow Up*. With *Zabriskie Point*, his first film shot in America, M.G.M. hoped Antonioni would reach a larger American audience. They were also looking for a film that focused on the youth counter culture. While the film does focus on American youth, it is primarily concerned with the environs traversed by its two young stars. M.G.M. spent \$7 million to make *Zabriskie Point*, but the film went on to gross only about \$900,000, an obvious box office failure.

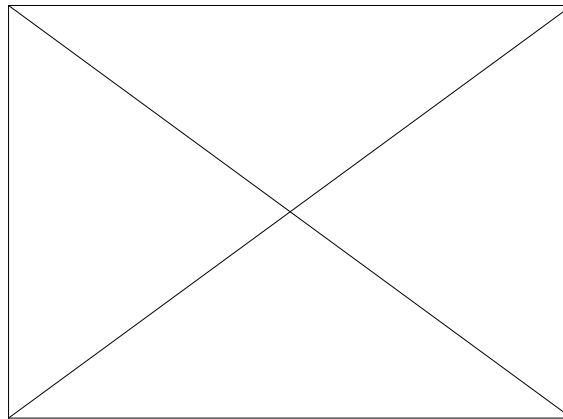
While it is not usually counted among Antonioni's best work, the film is well worth seeing, if only as a time capsule of that era. In its own way, it captures the end of 1960s America quite well. Though many of the details of American culture are overstated and simplified at times, there is the same sense of darkness and archetypal loss of innocence as can be found in a film such as the Maysles Brothers' *Gimme Shelter* (1970).

Antonioni cast two unknowns for the lead characters: Mark Frechette, who was allegedly discovered by Antonioni's scouts in Boston while he was screaming at a bus stop, and Daria Halprin, daughter of dancer Ann Halprin. Antonioni uses their real names in the film, heightening the sense of documentary.

The story focuses on Mark, a college dropout living in L.A., who plans on shooting a cop during a student protest. He proceeds to go to a rally and shoot at the police, and a policeman is in fact shot. He flees, but it is unclear whether or not Mark is actually the shooter. While on the run, he steals a plane and flies out of the city and into the desert. It is here that he meets Daria, who is working for real estate developer Lee

Allen (Rod Taylor), who is in the process of building a group of houses on undeveloped desert land. The two consummate their relationship in a hallucinatory scene in which hundreds of other couples appear out of the desert sand. Eventually Mark decides to fly the plane back and face his pursuers. After he leaves, Daria travels on to her boss's house where she stays briefly, before leaving, disillusioned and imagining the destruction of the neighborhood that is being built.

For the film's score, Antonioni enlisted an impressive array of artists, including Pink Floyd, Jerry Garcia and John Fahey. Reportedly, he was incredibly demanding of all the musicians involved, frequently asking them to rewrite portions of the music. Additionally, he was said by several of the musicians to be less than articulate about what direction he wanted them to go in. This said, the final result is, along with the loca-



tion shooting, one of the best parts of the film.

The love scene is completely over-the-top, with the aforementioned couples suddenly appearing, rolling around in the sand along with Mark and Daria. The extras were members of a theater company called The Open Theater. Jerry Garcia's solo guitar music for the love scene is among the high-points of the score. He recorded it while viewing the scene on loop, which enabled him to accompany the action in real time. John Fahey was brought into Rome to record music for the film but it was never used. There is only a brief segment of his "Dance of Death" played as Daria hears Mark's fate on her car radio while driving to Allen's house.

The explosion sequence at the end of the film is an interesting variation on Antonioni's visual/narrative method. In all of his major work, the space inhabited by

the characters plays as important a role as do the characters themselves. In *Zabriskie Point* the places we see are certainly central to the plot, and they are especially important thematically. The contrast of the crass billboards and traffic of L.A. with the unspoiled openness of the desert illustrates the major theme of the film: the search for innocence and perhaps a home of sorts by the disillusioned main characters. Allen's development in the desert represents the intrusion of the consumer culture which both Daria and Mark aspire to fight against. Whereas Mark's desire to rebel against something at the Black Panther rally seems unfocused, Daria's resentment of Allen and his construction in the desert seems far more clear.

In Antonioni's great trilogy of *L'Aventura* (1960), *La Notte* (1961), and *L'Eclisse* (1962), the main characters' interactions with the cities they live in is crucial to the narrative. In *Il Deserto Rosso* (1964), Monica Vitti's character seems nearly strangled by the factory in her town, as well as the very structure of her family's house and the machines they share it with. David Hemmings' vapid photographer in *Blow Up* (1966) interacts with the world around him only through his camera. In *Zabriskie Point*, Daria eventually interacts with her environment with outright hostility, and here Antonioni's approach is dramatically different from that of his earlier work. Daria does not feel at peace in Allen's house, but instead of being swallowed up into the world she is opposed to she decides to leave. From the road she

pauses to look back at Allen's house and imagines it exploding again and again. The explosion is shown from every possible angle until finally we see its contents shot into the sky in slow motion, with everything from the latest magazines to a television set included. With Daria we have a character who, when confronted by an environment she feels contempt for, wants to destroy it. The idea of revolution by any means possible is punctuated by the numerous explosions of the house.

While *Zabriskie Point* may not have been the breakthrough film that M.G.M. had bet on, it was definitely taken seriously by the American government. The cast and crew were reportedly trailed by F.B.I. agents throughout its production - an achievement in and of itself.

- Written by Matt Smith