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Zabriskie Point

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Intimations of Reality: Getting the Zabriskie Point Julian Jebb

THE TITLE SEQUENCE of *Zabriskie Point* is shot through a yellow filter. Young faces full of concentration or troubled passivity are talking and listening in close-up. Large areas of the frame are out of focus so that we see lips, brows, noses, golden hair, against a mist which may be someone else's shoulder. The camera pans, and the images are cut, enquiringly. Sometimes we swing, sometimes we jump from one blown-up feature to the next. Meanwhile in the early part of the sequence the soundtrack consists of virtually inaudible exchanges between young voices. The movement of the camera is a reflection of the hesitant but clearly impassioned conversation. This is gradually reduced in volume, the soundtrack is taken over by cool music, and with this substitution the faces seem to become more relaxed. Here, it seems, is *jeunesse dorée*.

But wait: the titles completed, the golden filter is removed, the reassuring music is whipped aside. We are in an echoing room at an American university filled with students arguing loudly and inarticulately about revolution. The camera continues to dash from face to face, rarely finding one which is speaking. The faces now seem more vulnerable, more aggressive, and less beautiful. The atmosphere of strain is apparent. No one is much at home with the disciplines of dialectic. There is an authoritative black girl who seems to be in the chair. One bespectacled young man, whose face betrays signs of ironic and mature intelligence, makes a sensible point or two, but these are lost in the melée of confused urgency. Another young man with a fine head and sullen eyes gets up and leaves.

At the end of the film, after we have witnessed a dozen shots of a desert house exploding in synchronised sound, music returns to reassure us. In slow motion much of the paraphernalia of domestic life—a wardrobe, a television set, a refrigerator and finally a book-case are set against a lavender cyclorama, some semi-real sky, and then blown-up in lyrical slow motion. The destruction of the book-case is the most poignant and unnerving shot in the sequence. The volumes fly slowly out towards us like white doves and then descend or climb, as if through water. The impact of the explosion has transformed these objects of human knowledge and pleasure into living organisms. It is as if, through their destruction, they are coming awkwardly to life.

Between these two sequences lie a hundred minutes or so of

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beautiful and poetic film which has excited the sort of critical response usually accorded to works of irredeemable pretentiousness. It is worth examining the charges which have been levelled against *Zabriskie Point*, less to refute them than to suggest that they are, for the most part, made about a work of art which has not been looked at in the way the director intended, nor in the way the film so richly repays.

A bright-headed, clear-writing and often penetrating critic, Pauline Kael, now of the *New Yorker*, expressed her antagonism to the film in bold mid-cult journalese: 'There is not a new idea or a good idea in the entire movie—not even a small one . . . *Zabriskie Point* is a disaster . . . a huge, jerry-built, crumbling ruin of a movie.' She bases this judgment, like many other American critics, on what she takes to be the intellectual poverty of the film, combined with an ignorance of America and a cynical exploitation of the youth market. This sense of affront, reflected in language of heated contempt, runs through the reviews in both *Time* (' . . . incredibly simple-minded and obvious') and *Newsweek* ('The burlesque is coarse, the radicalism infantile, the dialogue atrocious, and the performances are death barely warmed up . . .')

Richard Cohen, the critic of the hilariously titled newspaper *Women's Wear Daily*, is, I am told, influential. He writes most feverishly: ' . . . Antonioni has offered us his contempt. The whole film is a bag of contemptuous attitudes—contempt for the United States, contempt for actors, contempt for the American landscape, contempt for sex, contempt for his art, contempt for the audience . . . '

Many of the American critics demonstrate an acquaintance with, and in some cases an admiration for earlier Antonioni films. They also live in the country where his latest one is set and where the present writer has never been. But like them I have seen the 'protest' movies (*Easy Rider*, *Alice's Restaurant*, *Medium Cool*, etc.) which they so often drag up as sticks to beat the film with.

In England the general critical response was no less hostile, but the emphasis was different. Again the critics felt they were being conned into accepting an intellectual film, but what they couldn't bear was that it was beautiful, or (the word recurs again and again in the reviews) 'pretty'.

The most serious misjudgments of the film came, in my view, from two well-established critics, each writing regularly for influential papers: John Coleman in the *New Statesman* and John Russell Taylor in *The Times*.

Mr. Coleman can write wittily and is often illuminating about films with an elaborate intellectual framework, or about others which are centred on an ironic or sophisticated attitude to human relations—but his response to films, that is images and sounds projected, becomes increasingly impoverished. What films say rather than how they look is the criterion for Mr. Coleman, as for so many of his colleagues. He finds *Zabriskie Point* 'incredibly fatigued and silly beneath its pretty surface . . .'

The opening sequence, which I described at the beginning of this article, is seen (perhaps noticed would be a better word) by him as: 'a *fairly* freeform student discussion . . . [it] is tarted up, orange-yellow behind the credits *and so on*.' (My italics.) A jaundiced view, one might say. The metaphoric implications of the yellow filter are not even for a moment *considered* by Mr. Coleman. He betrays fatally his refusal to look, and having looked to consider the intentions of what is there. He has, of course, every right to reject the hypothesis that the exchange of ideas is dead for the young; but there is no evidence that he bothered to see if such a question was being posed.

Although less contemptuous than Mr. Coleman, the critic of *The Times* is equally perverse. Beneath a 'no-nonsense'

style he finds the same difficulty in looking; the fear of being victimised by pretentiousness in the work he is reviewing leads him into a revealing statement: 'Antonioni is a problem because, as a film-maker at least, he is undoubtedly an intellectual, but does not seem to be particularly intelligent . . . [The] ideas remain self-contained capsules, repeated, decorated, but never deepened, enriched, given surprising resonances.'

My own view is almost diametrically opposed to this. Antonioni is an artist whose intelligence informs every move he makes, whose power to evoke emotion is contained first within individual frames of film, then within sequences and finally within the body of the film itself. Later I shall try to demonstrate how this works in *Zabriskie Point* itself.

From these reviews Antonioni emerges as a shifty, sycophantic poseur, a man driving his own bandwagon (not even hitched to a star) arrogantly through terrains of ignorance, peopled by zombies; a desert where fear, disappointment and rage are the only emotions; where ideas are as archaic as the gypsum dust in Death Valley; where the surface of the images, whether muted or gleaming, is suspectly fine. The complexities of an anxious society are reduced to crude embellishments unendowed with either irony or pity. Antonioni is a fraud.

Antonioni has himself said something about his intentions in an interview with an American journalist, Guy Flatley:

> 'I wasn't trying to explain America—a film is not a social analysis after all. I was trying to feel something about the country, to gain an intuition . . . my film touches on just a few themes, a few places. Somebody can say this is missing, or that is missing. Well, of course it is. The story is certainly a simple one. None the less, the content is actually very complex. It is not so much a question of reading between the lines, as of reading between the images.'

A question, in fact, of looking. One may take an example of the thematic richness of the imagery which runs through the film. The real-estate man for whom Daria, the heroine (Daria Halprin), works is supervising a scheme to convert part of the desert into a luxury holiday ground, Sunny Dunes. We see him at work in his penthouse office with his colleagues, viewing a commercial for the reclaimed land, which is peopled by pleasure-busy plastic dummies, playing golf, gardening, cooking. In the advertisement, water, the source of wealth and the magic by which the desert will be transformed, drips and sprays. The businessmen watch the advertisement with intentness. It is the projection of what is still a fantasy since its realisation depends on capital investment.

Meanwhile down in the streets Mark, the hero, buys a gun, joins in a university rebellion, fails to shoot a policeman, is refused a sandwich in a delicatessen because he cannot pay for it. He moves through a chaos of commerce: the billboards with their fantasy promises, blow-ups of enforced dreams, surround him. The pressures on him either towards violence or inertia are everywhere 'between the images'. He steals a plane, flies through the smog-encircled city out into the pure air of the desert and proceeds to flirt with Daria, who is speeding in an old car to meet her boss. The low and the high, car and plane, earthbound and air-free meet in a beautiful, comic, urgent courtship.

When they arrive at the panorama above Zabriskie Point they are at first a little wary of each other—they talk disjointedly and self-consciously of their past lives. This is in fact the most naturalistic scene in the film—it is quite real that they should address each other in tentative, self-regarding phrases—though it must be said that Mark Frechette, who plays Mark, does not have sufficient histrionic range in some other scenes to suggest more than sullen wilfulness or disappointment.

After their exchanges on the Point, Mark hurtles down an immense cleft and lies for a moment flirtatiously miming death on the dusty ground. Daria reaches him and they are at ease with each other. They talk across the immense deserted places, at the bottom of a canyon—way below street-level, as it were. Before they start to make love, Daria has smoked a little pot: she conveys the intensity of her love and abandonment by every gesture of hand, mouth, and especially eye. One may see clearly the effects of her happiness and of the drug working simultaneously. Mark and Daria lie diagonally across the frame. The camera cuts to the top of a hill and tilts down slowly, glamorously, revealing a long dried up river bed in crystal clear detail. It halts to show us for a second Mark and Daria covered in dust, Pompeian lovers frozen by the accidents of nature. There follows a scene in which groups of two, three and four make love in the valley. This is, most pointedly, intercut with the real love-making of Daria and Mark: we are in no doubt that the other lovers are a fantasy of Daria's. This is her vision of how the desert might best be inhabited, in direct contrast to the business dream of the commercial earlier.

So to the final sequence, after Daria has heard of Mark's death at the hands of the police when he has flown the plane back to Los Angeles.

She is tranced with grief (the only time in the film when she reminds us of Monica Vitti in the earlier Antonioni films). She arrives at the mountain penthouse where she is to meet her boss. There are a few smart women sunning by the blue pool. In another room the boss (Rod Taylor) is trying to pull off a deal. The talk is of money; the businessmen's faces are reflected in the model of a marina. Daria leans against a rock down which drips the precious water. Her boss finds her, is solicitous, shepherds her down to find her room. But instead she leaves, walks away from the building down towards her car. She turns to look at the building. There is a shot of the circling balcony; in the foreground a copy of the *National Geographic Magazine* flaps on a chair, suggesting that the place is deserted. We cut back to Daria outside the car, below the house. She looks at it with great intensity, and there begins the extraordinary ballet of explosions. Again there is no suggestion that this is anything but Daria's fantasy, for at the end she climbs back into her car and drives down the hill, away, while a vast sun sets on the desert horizon and the soundtrack howls with galvanic music.

The metaphor of water for wealth, the play with various physical levels, the indications of a subjective imagination at work, are all firmly handled, but with such artistry that they are never obtrusive. The more you search for a message, the more obstinately will the structure and the poetry of the film elude you.

The sympathetic—I would say the understanding—reviews of *Zabriskie Point* have seen first, that the film is not a parable, but a vision. That it is not an illustrated catalogue of concepts, but a movie of wonderfully related intimations. As Antonioni says, it is a simple story but the content is very complex. For example Daria is consistently searching: we first see her asking about a book she has left on the roof of her office building; she goes to the desert in search of a teacher whom she fails to find; when she finds love she celebrates it both with her body and her imagination. When she loses love, she sees the world that has stolen it from her as destroyed. It is not though, because she drives on. To reverse the thesis of the psychedelic Beatles song: *Everything* is real.

The hostility of many professional film viewers is more understandable than I have allowed. Most of them, educated in a largely verbal culture but in love with the freedom of visual imagery, balk at a film which embraces ideas but suggests that its two chief characters have no time for intelligent or sensitive discussion of these ideas. The extreme beauty of the surface of the film—the colour and the processing, the composition within the frame, the rhythm of the editing—are all further evidence to them of corruption. The 'reality trip', which Mark claims to be on, looks to them like escape. They will accept the simplicities of *Easy Rider*, the narrative passion of *Z*, the irony and charm of *Alice's Restaurant*, the honesty of *Medium Cool*, because each of them is a polemical film in one way or another; and *Zabriskie Point* is offensive precisely because it is not polemical and yet suspect because it is intelligent and beautiful. It is poetry—that is the gathering together and shaping of carefully selected images to convey a unity of thought and feeling. It is not intended to be a prophetic film, but I suspect it will prove revolutionary in the history of the cinema.