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Antonioni's Orgy

Lucretius, who was certainly one of the greatest poets who ever lived, once said: "Nothing appears as it should in a world where nothing is certain. The only thing certain is the existence of a secret violence that makes everything uncertain". Think about this for a moment. What Lucretius said of his time is still a disturbing reality, for it seems to me this uncertainty is very much a part of our own time. But this is unquestionably a philosophical matter. Now you don't really expect me to resolve such problems or to propose any solutions?

Michelangelo Antonioni

A Talk with Michelangelo Antonioni – answering questions at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia of Rome on March 16, 1961. It originally appeared in the school's monthly periodical Bianco e Nero with the title "La Malattia dei Sentimenti" and is anthologized in Antonioni's writings in *The Architecture of Vision* by Michelangelo Antonioni - Marsilio Publishers New York 1995

The new DVD release of *Zabriskie Point* in May 2009, finally in its correct aspect ratio, is a welcome time to reassess the film, its effects on the public who first saw it at the beginning of the seventies, and to assess the qualifications of the film's detractors over the years. *Zabriskie Point* was made in 1969 and can be seen as the uneasy middle film in a "desert trilogy" of films about literal or figurative deserts alongside *Red Desert* (1964) that takes place in the industrial city of Ravenna Italy, and *The Passenger* (1972) which was filmed partially in North Africa. All three films are about couples who attempt, each in their own way, to adapt to the society they find themselves in and this adaptation, or more to the point the failure to achieve it, is what ultimately fascinates Antonioni. *Red Desert* concerns a woman played by Monica Vitti who tries to adapt to the industrial, polluted wasteland that she is forced to endure as it is the landscape of her husband's job: an engineer in a power plant. The man, played by Richard Harris wants to help his wife but seems to be oblivious to the bizarre dystopia he has helped to create and to the resultant alienation his wife is experiencing. After suffering a nervous breakdown she learns slowly to adapt to the industrial environment and to help her young son do the same. In *The Passenger* the woman played by Maria Schneider is a young would be architect who is just beginning to play out her passion for architecture by studying the work of Gaudi. The man, played by Jack Nicholson, is a middle aged reporter, starting to burn out from his

job, his passion dissipated, drifting along where his job takes him with little of the enthusiasm that propelled him to want to be a reporter – that is – to uncover the “truth” – in the first place. He attempts to forge a new identity in the shifting world of post industrial, post colonial tribal allegiances and international gun running. He succeeds only too well. As the relationship with the young woman architect is on the verge of succeeding because of who he is he is killed for who he is presumed to be. His character is in the right place and the right time (for love) and the wrong place at the wrong time (for death) at precisely the same moment. In that sense he shares much with Film-Noir anti-heroes such as those in *Out of the Past* and *The Blue Dahlia*. In *Red Desert* Monica Vitti can be said to achieve a grudging success in her adaptation to the wasteland around her albeit tempered by a certain pathos and melancholy at a world that man has created that is grotesque in comparison to the paradise that he was given – a paradise that Antonioni gives us in a brief dream sequence. In *The Passenger* the reporter can cross all class and regional boundaries but feels – perhaps for this very reason - removed and alienated from the world that he is being paid to describe. *Zabriskie Point* – considering that it sits squarely between these two films – is also about a man and a woman played by Mark Frechette and Daria Halprin (significantly their real as well as their fictional names) who attempt in their own ways to adapt to their environment – the United States in 1969. The woman succeeds to a degree and the man fails and is killed. What is this adaptation about and how does it work in the plot developed by Sam Shepard, Franco Ressetti, Toninno Guerra, Clare Peploe and Antonioni? How does it fit into this “desert trilogy”? Does the use of non professional actors in the two lead roles (as opposed to the other two films which used professional actors) wreck the film as some have suggested or was this a conscious decision that bears re-assessment as part of the film’s thematic ends? And if so what are those ends?

The film was perceived upon its release to be an attack on capitalist America that was sympathetic to the far left in its program of confrontation with a surging corporate state – what Allen Ginsberg described as “Machine America”. Despite the brilliance of the images in *Zabriskie Point*, that are generally acknowledged as belonging to Antonioni’s best work, the narrative and the acting, particularly by the two stars of the film are often derided both when the film came out in 1970 and

subsequently as unnatural, artificial and detrimental to the overall success of the film. Seymour Chatman in his fine book on Antonioni writes: "...the film is hard to read except as a portrayal of the American scene, as a defense of revolutionary youth and as an attack on a materialism that finds its ripest head in Southern California. Despite certain marvelous details there are many mistakes in Antonioni's reconstruction of Sunbelt people and preoccupations."¹ For Chatman and for many critics of the film the problems begin at the beginning. While the student meeting that opens the film, while the credits roll, between the members of the Black Panther Party and a Student Union is beautifully shot it was made clear by many who understood the various factions within the left that there was little or no contact (in real life) between the student movement and the Black Panther Party. The former was essentially a white phenomenon and restricted to the anti-war movement and was working – with perhaps more sentiment than any kind of clear agenda - toward a more European or Socialist model of society. The Black Panther Party was a revolutionary movement with a quasi Marxist agenda filtered through radical anti-slavery movements of the past and civil rights movements of the present and dedicated to the taking of political power. The two distrusted each other and in many cases were openly antagonistic and contemptuous. Was Antonioni oblivious to this chasm or did he consciously create this "fiction" – this meeting of blacks and whites for some other purpose? And if so what might that be?

Certainly Antonioni was not adverse to creating a fictional reality that bore little resemblance to "reality" when making a film. When he made *Blow-Up* (1966) more than one person involved in the making of the film – including the guitarist Jimmy Page – made the observation that when the Yardbirds played in clubs people danced like mad for hours while Antonioni famously had his club goers listening to the music in a coma like state of inertia looking blandly on as the group played in an obvious state of delight. The audience come to life only after Page breaks his guitar in two – in the manner of Pete Townsend of the Who – and throws the neck of the guitar into the audience creating pandemonium as everyone fights for the prized broken guitar neck. The zombified audience who

¹ *Antonioni or, the Surface of the World* by Seymour Chatman University of California Press 1985

occasionally look at the camera with indifference seem to haunt the film in a peculiar way that is disturbing, enigmatic and psychologically powerful. The way the audience go from total inertia to a hysterical mob in a matter of seconds is also disturbing. What are we to make of it? Antonioni on more than one occasion said that what he was after was in fact not to capture reality with his camera but what lay underneath reality. "We know that under the revealed image there is another one which is more faithful to reality, and under this one there is yet another, and again another under this last one, down to the true image of that absolute, mysterious reality that nobody will ever see."² In this effort he literally painted the industrial machinery in *Red Desert* (primary colors) and the trees in the park in *Blow-Up* (purple). Antonioni in that sense can be said to be if not a metaphysical filmmaker like Tarkovsky at least someone whose work is concerned with exploring that aspect of reality in depth. Tarkovsky also sought the "real reality underneath the one we see" and so did one of Antonioni's favorite directors: Carl Dryer. For such artists of course merely conveying metaphysics through washed out or out of focus visuals (as was commonplace then and now) is not acceptable. Reality itself must be present and yield this window to other realities – then and only then does the metaphysics carry any weight. Films such as *The Holy Mountain* by Alejandro Jodorowski and *The Bible* by John Huston despite their radical differences in style are good examples of filmmaking that does not make any effort to earn the gravitas of their own metaphysics but seek simply to illustrate an *idea* about metaphysics.

When we see the young audience for the Yardbirds we do not see indifference but rather a willful almost religious absence of emotion. It is as if they were performing some rite in a religious sect whose rules are unknown to us. They are in that sense not passive at all but fully expressing their inner state. For surely this is Antonioni's point – that the technocracy and rationalism of the west that had replaced the relatively stable mystical and religious world that preceded it had created an overwhelming and insuperable spiritual passivity – a passivity that is now a way of being. The audience for the Yardbirds only come alive when an object is introduced in the mix that they can

² Preface to "Six Films". *The Architecture of Vision* Michelangelo Antonioni

possess: a religious relic touched by the chosen stars. The religious metaphor is not lost as the guitar neck, like the chunks of the cross that were fought over in an older age, is a magic talisman that can link its owner to the world of the divine. For Antonioni (and for Tarkovsky as well) the idea that one could have a material link of this sort, through an actual object, is absurd and comical. The divine for both artists is something that one apprehends by contemplation and reflection – not by possessions – regardless of their religious aura. In effect the audience for the Yardbirds is emotionally and spiritually inert and this inertia is made all the more palatable by the very fact that the most advanced dance music of the time is being played live before them. That is why their inertia is both comical and disturbing.

Just as the Yardbirds playing is put on not to showcase the Yardbirds but to delve into a spiritual malaise so with the meeting of radicals that opens *Zabriskie Point*. Their talk is banal: essentially planning a demonstration, the possible responses by the police and the best ways to preemptively manage the confrontation. What the film shows is a war room in action and that is the critically important aspect of this scene. The United States was at war in various fronts in 1969 – the most famous of these is obviously Vietnam – but there were several wars going on at home: there was the war of the corporate classes against the surging youth culture that mistrusted it, of poor blacks and third world immigrants against middle and upper class whites fighting for the meager available wealth, of women against the presumed authority and power of an outmoded patriarchy, and of the intellectual classes against the already established orders of power within academic institutions. What Antonioni does is consolidate those wars into one. He lucidly brings all of these groups into one room to air their grievances as if they had been doing it for years because he is after the truth underlying their divisions. He shoots the meeting with the fluid motions of a hand held 16mm documentary camera but the format and grain tell us that it is a large and heavy Panavision camera – a piece of equipment impossible to carry – so the “hand-held” aspect is a fiction - the meeting never happened. The fictional aspect is emphasized by the use of colored gels as in Godard’s *Contempt* and *Pierrot Le Fou* that were also shot with a Panavision camera. Antonioni’s cinematographer Alfio Contini at certain moments throughout the film, not just at the opening scene, uses his large format

camera in the manner of a hand held 16mm camera – normally associated with documentary films – and at times even Super-8 – normally associated with home movies. He does this by brilliantly mimicking their conventions. For example the shots of Los Angeles seen from the inside of Mark's truck beautifully reproduces the effects of the popular zoom feature in Super-8 cameras that compresses space and creates a sense of abstraction and dislocation.

Zabriskie Point is the lowest point in the North American continent – a desert that is a part of Death Valley – a baking land mass of 3,000 square miles that covers parts of California and Nevada. It is both symbolically and literally a place “under the radar” - a kind of limbo in which participants tired of urban hells of one kind or another can come and experience a landscape that by its very nature puts the brevity of human life and the relative significance of social responsibilities into perspective. In *Zabriskie Point* there is a brief film within a film, a short advertising for “Sunny Dunes Estates”, a real estate development company, that puts the desert in a very different perspective. This hilarious film insists with a voice over done by a “professional” sounding radio voice that Death Valley is the place where one can retire to hunt, play golf, water one's garden and lounge with no urban cares or worries. Of course the Sunny Dunes film advertising –one of the most brilliant parts of the film - uses a simulated “nature” to represent Nature. The estates are obviously another form of hell – different in kind only from the urban environment from which people are seeking escape. The sequence has a happy couple – a male and female mannequin that mimic Mark and Daria - but now seen as a “happy suburban couple” – modern pioneers - who are on the fringes of civilization and bring its most advanced component - rationalist modernism - with them. What the developers casually ignore is that it's called Death Valley for a reason, and the project known as “Civilization” - at least as it is understood by a European of Mr. Antonioni's education and temperament - is about to crash and burn somewhere over this forbidding inhuman landscape. This is after all where the American Air Force – the most advanced war machine on earth - test experimental aircraft and rockets. The point being that if something goes wrong the casualties are minimal. The sequence captures the encroachment of Los Angeles into the desert and has a strongly ironic component that is brought dramatically to the foreground, but unlike academic exercises that attempt this kind of irony

Antonioni never lets the rhetorical aspect take control. On the contrary, he invents brilliant points from which to shoot the film within a film and he captures the surfaces of plastic and glass, playing them off against the faux natural surfaces of sand and desert plants – all of course fake. The color palette is tan, brown and orange – a conscious choice that serves to highlight the artificiality of the Sunny Dunes homes while playing them off against the cooler grays of the people sitting around a conference table smoking with a funereal seriousness while watching the commercial. It is as if someone had told them that only half the people in the room are going to get out alive and they must now decide which half. In effect this is more or less the situation. The stakes are very high and the violence under the surface is palpable. The Sunny Dunes commercial has a fake bird being held aloft by wires that the mannequin man shoots with a toy gun. The sequence both mimics the realistic violence that ends the film with the shooting of Mark and parallels the absurd frozen chicken that later in the film floats through space in slow motion. The female mannequin cooks (of course) in a modernist kitchen overlooking the desert while the male mannequin waters his garden with a hose (of course) with plentiful water available for all. This is the water problem depicted brilliantly in *Chinatown* turned into a farce by corporate advertising. The Sunny Dunes short film describes a fantasy that is being sold – literally by the square foot – as reality – and the overall effect is grotesquely comical. It is one of the most brilliant set pieces that Antonioni ever accomplished and remains to this day one of the most stunning criticisms of the corporate world and its relation to consumerism and media control. The fact that those very corporate values would be incorporated and internalized by the culture at large in subsequent years only highlights the prescient insights that Antonioni is able to show us in a sequence that lasts 1 minute and 20 seconds.

Daria on her road trip comes upon a bar in the middle of the desert in which old timers, including the middle weight champion of the world from a bygone era, is having a beer. She drinks with them casually and then goes outside where some children are playing. They all gravitate toward a stage that stands baking in the desert along with a broken piano that a boy plays by strumming the gutted strings creating an atonal sonata that is appropriately disturbing and otherworldly. The boys are uneasily balanced between some feral clan and a rural country gang, somewhat bored and quite

obviously with no direction home. They are perhaps the sons from the commune that Daria has been asking about which would explain their openly asking her if they “can have a piece of ass”. Daria asks them with some trepidation if they would know what to do with it. At that point the boys begin to push and shove and Daria makes a run for it. As she makes her way back on the road the camera – instead of following her escape as would happen in a conventional film – slowly and lovingly pans forward to the window of the bar as we see the old champ sipping his beer to the sound of Patti Page’s *Tennessee Waltz*. It’s a brief and beautiful farewell to another era – one that American directors themselves were too busy to express in the excitement of the time but that Antonioni just managed to pull off – using veteran actors from an older Hollywood that was soon to be replaced by a more efficient corporate model – along the lines of the commercial for Sunny Dunes Estates.

Daria has been summoned to the desert by her boss who is attempting to sell Sunny Dunes lots to developers in a modernist mansion in the middle of the desert that resembles a ship that has landed on a lifeless planet. The desert mansion is being used to house all the participants in the sale. As one would expect the boss seeks to turn the event into a vacation weekend with his assistant that he hopes will become his mistress while he finalizes the deal with the developers. While traveling in the desert Daria meets Mark who is escaping from the police for being the lone suspect in a police killing during a student demonstration in a university. Mark flies a stolen private plane and Daria drives a car. They meet in the desert and Mark literally swoops down on her. They become, albeit for a very brief time, a couple. Already their very manner of traveling and flirting – air and land – state differences – as do their method: Mark’s plane is pink and feminine, Daria’s car belongs, significantly, to the era of Film-Noir and is large weather-beaten and masculine. Their banter – forced and self-conscious - is often delivered in a hesitant monotone. The effect is of course to make us conscious of watching acting but not in the Brechtian sense or even in Fassbinder’s, Pasolini’s or Godard’s use of Brechtian distancing devices in more recent work. Rather the film seems to document uneasiness, uncertainty, and a willful integrity that *refuses to act*, that is at odds with anything artificial including cinematic conventions of acting themselves. It is in this refusal that the actors in *Zabriskie Point* collide with narrative expectations. They are a romantic couple in a road movie and the genre –

already well trodden in 1969 – has conventions and expectations built into it. The interiority of the lead actors – the reasons for this refusal - is something Antonioni cannot capture with his camera. The desire is there but not the result. Nevertheless the actors are in their way speaking truth to power in the most candid manner possible: in front of a camera that picks up every nuance of action – or lack of it - and every sound and silence. To see Mark and Daria “act” is to witness an arm wrestling match between Antonioni and his actors in which neither side can claim victory. In a culture that is heading headlong into an abyss of “Entertainment Reality”- the margins of which were clearly visible even then - they say no. That in itself is extraordinary. But there is another area where Mark and Daria can communicate. It is in their physical contact with each other and with the landscape around them that they are most forcefully open, relaxed and exuberant. It is no accident that words get in the way. Mark paints “No Words” on the side of his stolen plane. Antonioni himself expressed doubts: “Someone once said that words, more than anything else, serve to hide our thoughts.”³

The actor’s relation to the landscape is a healthy one of respect, admiration and play. They don’t fuck but rather make love in the desert – an important distinction that implies an element of play and of childlike fun. Antonioni depicts the lovemaking in slow close-up pans of their bodies in the sand to the music of Jerry Garcia’s improvisations on guitar. Garcia is a composer and musician – a founding member of the San Francisco group The Grateful Dead – whose music is most associated with a meandering psychedelia free of the rationalist impulses found in traditional western music. Its closest antecedents are perhaps Middle-Eastern music and medieval drones. Other contemporaneous groups – most famously The Beatles – were of course working along similar lines. Garcia makes the perfect soundscape for the transition from Daria and Mark’s lovemaking to the orgy of young people in the desert that follows. That lovemaking which seems to spring from Daria and Marks’ coupling is not really lovemaking in the traditional sense at all so perhaps the term orgy itself is misleading. The professional dancers – members of Joe Chaikin’s Open Theater - mime a ballet of

³ A Talk With Michelangelo Antonioni and His Work originally seen in Film Culture Reader Spring 1962 *The Architecture of Vision* Michelangelo Antonioni

males and females playing with each other, exploring each other, mimicking the play of children but with adult bodies and an adult sexuality. The two are not separate as in the traditional rationalist model – wherein one leaves behind the creative play of childhood to assume adult sexuality, adult responsibilities and adult ambitions. The mime troop express a pantheistic holistic philosophy that is – or tries to be – at one with nature as we find it. The Open Theater group were carefully rehearsed by Antonioni who showed them physically exactly the motions he wanted, at times by acting them out himself. Antonioni's original intention was to have a cast of thousands in the desert but could only come with the two dozen that make up the troop. In some respects this worked in his favor as a group that large would have been somewhat anonymous and surreal while the actors he ends up with are both professional enough to mime this adult play effectively and their relatively small number allow us to see details that would have gotten lost in the crowd. The intertwining bodies catch the sparkling desert sand on their bodies and faces creating sculptural tableaux that are reminiscent of European friezes but whose gestures and expressions are far from the heroic and "timeless" poses of a bygone Classicism. On the contrary the gestures encased in the "sand sculptures" in *Zabriskie Point* depict everyday transitory pleasures and nuanced movements suggesting unselfconscious physical and emotional intimacy and a holistic communion with nature. The episode in effect has a similar function to the paradise sequence from *Red Desert* – it allows us to catch a glimpse of the world that the characters might want to make or might have made under different circumstances – but one that of course will never be. The hippie ethos that is not so much explored as given a voice through Joe Chaikin's theater group allows us to see with greater clarity the contrary position of the Sunny Dunes aesthetic announced with guns blazing (literally) in their promotional film. The hippie aesthetic, if one has to reduce something so disparate and heterogeneous to a brief summation would be the acquisition of self-knowledge, the promotion of meditation, sexual frankness and the insistence that there must be a fundamental social change that would bring a society of peaceful agrarian co-existence for all. Antonioni ends the scene with a slow pan of the depopulated desert, the sand sculpted in such a way that we see the imprint of human bodies that were once there, playing and making love, but are no longer present. Nature trumps philosophies in Antonioni's world regardless of how benign or insufferably egocentric. In that sense

both Sunny Dunes and the hippie orgy are merely very small and very temporary marks in a desert that will far outlive the traces that humans leave on it.

Mark returns to Los Angeles with his stolen plane – now painted with various slogans of the time including “No Words”. The police are ready upon his return and shoot him dead. Antonioni films the line of police wearing protective gear in the manner of Goya’s executioner’s: anonymous agents of the state doing a job. Daria returns to the modernist mansion where the men are trying without much success to finish a deal while their women lounge poolside and chat. She momentarily stops by a decorative waterfall – the ultimate desert luxury – and cries. Antonioni’s contempt for this group of vacationing business people is palpably brought home by having the only woman to acknowledge Daria’s presence be the American Indian maid who is cleaning the bedrooms. They are in a sense both invisible women. Antonioni has always been keenly sensitive to the interior lives of women and to their emotional responses to changing social conditions. Daria goes into a glass box that serves as a modernist stairwell and looks very much like a caged animal – an image that links her to previous Antonioni heroines such as Monica Vitti in another modernist cage in *The Eclipse*. This re-states one of Antonioni’s principal themes: that Modernism - which was to have liberated mankind from the heavy ornamentation and repression of the previous century – is simply another kind of trap.

Daria comes to the realization that she must leave – obviously emotional rather than ideological – but the two as we have seen from the beginning are intertwined. On the way back to her car she turns to look at the house and in a series of shots from various angles – shot with a telephoto lens – the house blows up. The reverse shot of Daria’s face – looking pleased and at peace – makes it clear that it is some form of wish fulfillment. The exploding modernist house resembles the ideal house in the Sunny Dunes advertising film seen earlier and is in some sense an inversion of the Sunny Dunes Estates advertising film. Moreover I would say that it explodes not simply as the wish fulfillment of Daria but of everyone in the film including the developers themselves – at least subconsciously. This I think is made clear by having various shots repeat, most famously the floating duck in the Sunny Dunes advertising returning as a floating frozen chicken in the blow-up sequence. There are other parallels: the modernist furniture, the fancy refrigerator, the patio furniture that makes it’s

appearance in the advertising short only to be blown up in the set piece that ends the film. The sequence itself is I think the most brilliant Antonioni ever filmed. The slow motion film has objects floating dreamily through space to the music of Pink Floyd in a manner that suggests Kubrick's utopian waltz between a spaceship and an orbiting station in *2001: a Space Odyssey* set to the music of Strauss – but now made absurd by having frozen food and patio furniture floating upward from the force of an explosion. Strauss' upper class dance music is replaced by Pink Floyd's democratic drug induced dreaminess. It is impossible to see this footage now without thinking about terrorism and the implications of those explosions in human terms. What Antonioni does is turn them into an absurd ballet of flying meat. It is both painfully horrific and playfully absurd – and it is meant to be. The most iconic shot in this sequence is perhaps the floating bag of Wonder Bread, one of the great shots in Antonioni's body of work. The exploding television has a man's face – the proverbial “talking head” – but we don't hear what he's saying. The exploding bookcase filled with books brings the “No Words” theme to its logical endgame.

The “dream” of the sixties (if there can be said to be such a thing) at least from the point of view of the youth culture that lived it was surely the peaceful coexistence of people in a society that is fundamentally in touch with Nature – both as a life force and as a death force – and is able to live alongside all animals without having to control them or kill them. That dream most certainly ends at the Sunny Dunes project but it is not wholly the fault of greedy developers. Daria and Mark share that responsibility as they never make plans, they never express their emotional needs and reservations, they never talk about their ideas, they never speak in anything other than mating clichés that were already clichés in their time. Mark's inertness is very close to the sleepwalking saints in Bresson's films but in *Zabriskie Point* his very refusal to have a clearly defined persona – or to put it in entertainment terms – his refusal to do shtick – is his principal characteristic in the film. In short Mark is about this refusal to go along with the program and he takes that refusal to its logical conclusion: suicide. In terms of acting that refusal is expressed with an acerbic shrug that is peculiarly American. We see traces of it in Alan Ladd's emotional withdrawal in *This Gun for Hire*, in Shirley Knight's awkward silent smiles in *The Rain People*, in Jack Nicholson's screaming fits in *Five*

Easy Pieces and in Henry Fonda's bitter silences in *The Grapes of Wrath*. It's a failure to connect. Daria has a more complex relationship to both Sunny Dunes and the man in charge of it. Her hippie demeanor, the hapless search for a commune in the desert that never materializes, the affairs with two very different men who also fail ultimately to connect or mature in any meaningful way express a failure that she herself is unable to articulate. And that is where we come to the fact that their real names and their fictional names are the same. It is no coincidence that in real life Mark Frechette died in prison in 1975 after a failed back robbery and that Daria Halprin went on to a career as a therapist using dance and movement as forms of healing. Antonioni understood his actors perhaps better than was understood at the time.

The down the road ending of *Zabriskie Point* is a re-staging of Chaplin's *Modern Times* that rings hollow, even without the absurdly romantic song that is tagged on as a coda during the closing credits, as surely there is nowhere for Daria to go. Antonioni would like to be sympathetic because he believes, like them, that as Ian Macdonald so well put it in his book about the sixties that "...the hippies' unfashionable perception that we can change the world only by changing ourselves looks in retrospect like a last gasp of the Western soul."⁴ David Lynch understood the nihilistic gravitas that is to be found in the West after that last gasp – what is called in American vernacular "the end of the line" - and created his own version of the Western and its discontents in the brilliant *Lost Highway* (1997). For Antonioni in the early 70's the road would lead to Morocco and Africa and a meeting with Maria Schneider and Jack Nicholson where the ending finally comes out right in perhaps the most brilliant tracking shot in film history in *The Passenger*. *Zabriskie Point* is a different matter.

Antonioni's film has a dramatic power, an intellectual subtlety and a pictorial intelligence that is sublime and undimmed by the passage of time. The authenticity of the film – enhanced by the difficult acting of the leads – takes hold of the imagination by means of an emotional integrity that is integral to the work as a whole. The film was much maligned upon its release and was until recently

⁴ *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the Sixties* – Ian Macdonald

only available as a washed out pan-and-scan video print. The new release encourages a new look at Antonioni's dark vision of American capitalism, the pragmatic architects of its consumer society and an unruly minority of individualists who wanted for a brief moment in time to go in a different direction- all meeting at a crossroads.

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