

LANDSCAPE AND FILM



EDITED BY

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thirteen

the cinematic void

desert iconographies in michelangelo

antonioni's *zabriskie point*

matthew gandy

The mode of expression in the cinema of Antonioni is characterized by a layering of mystery and indeterminacy in which there is a blurring of any distinction between objective and subjective dimensions to visual perception.

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introduction

On a warm summer evening in Berlin one can occasionally see a vast desert landscape shimmering beneath the blinking lights of the Alexanderplatz Fernsehturm on the city's skyline. The *Freiluftkino*, or "open-air cinema," has now become something of a shrine to one of the oddest yet most enduring movies to emerge from the late 1960s, bathing its mildly intoxicated audience in a visual phantasmagoria of billboards, bodies, and

bleached gypsum. The release of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970) was met with a mix of adulation, incredulity, and outright animosity, not least because of the enormous expense and mystery surrounding its production. The Italian filmmaker's excoriating yet obtuse critique of American society has subsequently acquired something of a cult status in its guise as existential desert drama rather than in its originally intended role as counter-cultural representation of impending social and political revolution. Part psychedelic passion play and part neo-Marxian road movie, the film *Zabriskie Point* is mostly set in the extraordinary desert landscapes of Arizona and southern California.

One of the most distinctive features of Antonioni's cinema is the depiction of a "dialogue" between the actor and the landscape in which the representation of space is of equal if not greater significance than the presence of the human figure.² This dialogue is in no sense a cultural ecology of place, as articulated within the traditional idioms of landscape studies, but is an emphasis on the experience of landscape in human consciousness. The modern idea of landscape that Raymond Williams succinctly characterized as one of "separation and observation" has in the cinematic space of Antonioni been reunited within the psycho-geographic realm of his cinematic protagonists.³ Antonioni's engagement with the power of modern spaces to provoke fear, anxiety, and disorientation has become significant within philosophical attempts to delineate (or unbound) our understanding of place as a corporeal experience that cannot easily be contained or categorized within modernist conceptions of rationality or spatial order. The most powerful of these interactions between the human figure and the landscape is provided by Antonioni's fascination with those desolate spaces that have the power to evoke deep unease or catharsis. Even his earliest and now largely destroyed documentary film *Del gente del Po* (1943/1947), which explores the landscape and people of the Po estuary in northern Italy, contains many of the distinctive elements of an "Antonionian landscape": the use of slow and lingering tracking shots; the deployment of cloud, mist, and other natural elements to add complexity to the *mise en scène*; and the exquisite attention to aesthetic detail.⁴ We can trace a shift within Antonioni's films from the neorealist "urban deserts" portrayed in earlier features such as *La notte* (1960) and *L'eclisse* (1962) toward a gradual engagement with real deserts as powerful metaphors for social and cultural redemption in *Zabriskie Point* (1969) and *The Passenger* (1975) (Figure 13.1).⁵ The desert is for Antonioni not only a concrete space to be conveyed in all its aesthetic complexity but also an allegorical and metaphorical realm through which we can explore different facets of human consciousness and experience. Such a formulation is, as we shall see, deeply flawed in its largely nondialectical and universalist conceptions of relations between nature and culture, but it is nonetheless

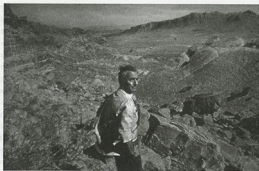


Figure 13.1
Production still from *Zabriskie Point*.

a powerful tableau for the enactment of a particular form of cultural critique framed within the teleological discourses of modernist thought.

Despite the classic insights of film critics such as Béla Balázs, André Bazin, and Siegfried Kracauer, the cinematic landscape remains an under-explored and somewhat enigmatic dimension of modern culture. This may in part be due to the perpetual uncertainty surrounding the relationship between abstract and allegorical representations of space within the development of popular culture. In recent years, however, the neglect of the cinematic landscape may also have been underpinned by a theoretical distrust of the visual tableau associated with the emergence of modern cinema. The very idea of the cinematic landscape as an object of critical inquiry consequently faces a degree of "dislocation" in which the cultural and historical coordinates behind the production of film may be occluded from critical analysis or theoretical discussion. This chapter attempts to redress this balance through a close engagement with the cinematic landscape as a cultural artefact which is deeply embedded in wider social and cultural processes but which is not in the final instance reducible to these external influences. In relation to *Zabriskie Point*, for example, the desert landscape introduces a medley of intersecting themes ranging from the role of nature in modernist conceptions of space to the cultural resonance of "primitivism" as an implicit riposte to the perceived artificiality of the urban landscape. Yet, as this chapter seeks to show, Antonioni's use of these arid landscapes as a political metaphor reveals a series of limitations to the director's attempt to use ideological motifs drawn from nature in order to articulate a wider critique of American society.

Following the resounding critical and commercial success of *Blow-Up* (1967), set amid the vibrant cultural scene of 1960s London, Antonioni secured an unprecedented degree of financial and artistic freedom from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios for the making of his first American feature, *Zabriskie Point* (1970), named after a remote desert outcrop in Death Valley, California. His strong bargaining position emerged at a unique juncture in the history of U.S. cinema when many of the top grossing films were being made outside of the Hollywood studio system. This combination of circumstances allowed Antonioni to bring in key personnel, such as the cinematographer Alfio Contini from Italy, to the chagrin of the Hollywood studio unions. No editing was to be carried out in the United States (an unprecedented departure from the usual Hollywood practice), and the two lead roles were to be filled by unknown nonprofessional actors. Location shoots were consistently used in preference to MGM's own studios: for a five-minute sequence, an extra floor was added to the Mobil Oil headquarters in Los Angeles, for example, to be used instead of a cheaper studio simulacrum; major logistical challenges were posed by the extended location shooting in remote, arid, and inhospitable desert environments; and for the explosion sequence at the end of the film an elaborate building complex, constructed in the American modernist style of architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Bruce Goff, was built on a desert hillside surrounded by 17 cameras in specially prepared concrete silos.⁶

The eagerly awaited *Zabriskie Point* became increasingly pivotal to MGM's attempt to reverse its dwindling profits through the establishment of a successful foothold in the growing market for youth culture.⁷ In his occasional interviews Antonioni declined to give any clear indication of what the film would be about, yet MGM had already committed over \$3 million dollars to the project (a figure which would be quickly exceeded as production dragged on). Antonioni suggested somewhat obliquely that the film would be "tied to current events" and emphasized his fascination with the dominance of billboards in the American landscape. "The story I want to tell," declared Antonioni, "is typically American, not only in its setting and atmosphere, but also in its deeper psychological and sociological meaning."⁸ "*Zabriskie Point*," explained Antonioni, "was not intended as a documentary about America, even though several of the basic incidents were taken from actual events."⁹ Antonioni certainly strived toward some measure of cultural authenticity through, for example, the deployment of Sam Shepard (the up and coming young playwright) and Fred Gardner (the former *Ramparts* editor) to assist with the screenplay and perhaps also to act as counterfoils to accusations of an establishment sellout through his contract with MGM.

When *Zabriskie Point* was finally released in early 1970, the level of critical hostility incurred was unlike anything Antonioni had experienced since

L'Aventura was booed at Cannes in 1960. A number of leading U.S. critics clearly resented Antonioni's attempt to represent the contemporary cultural and political upheaval facing American society. Elliot Morgenstern of *Newsweek*, for example, considered that the film was "bad enough to give anti-Americanism a bad name"; Pauline Kael in the *New Yorker* lambasted the film as "a crumbling ruin of a movie"; and Vincent Canby, writing in the *New York Times*, derided the film's "stunning superficiality."¹⁰ Parts of the underground press were also hostile to *Zabriskie Point*, along with a spate of other general release political films appearing in 1970 such as *The Activist*, *Getting Straight*, and *The Strawberry Statement*: it was felt that these films failed to deliver any coherent or credible political message (Bodroghkozy, 2002). But other U.S. reviewers revelled in the film's structural complexity and technical excellence (the vivid landscape photography, for example, was enhanced by Antonioni's first use of Panavision). Larry Cohen, for instance, writing in *The Hollywood Reporter*, found Contini's photography to be "uniformly brilliant" and defended the unorthodox use of nonprofessional actors.¹¹ Outside the United States the representation of landscape featured far more prominently in the film's critical reception but there was a lingering unease over the beguiling aesthetic power of the film and the clumsy handling of political themes.¹²

Part of the awkward complexity of *Zabriskie Point* is derived from Antonioni's attempt to convey so many different aspects of American society simultaneously: the political dynamics of the American youth movement; the economic realities of American capitalism; the iconographies of the American landscape; and the psychological experiences of his main protagonists as they struggle to make sense of their situation. The tense interplay among these different elements is underpinned by, for example, the intermingling of real and fictitious events within the narrative structure of the film, the use of real historical figures to play themselves within the context of dramatized reconstructions, and the use of historical footage of incidents such as civil unrest interspersed with imaginary representations of these events. Though the political import of *Zabriskie Point* and its associated critical opprobrium have waned since the early 1970s, the film remains a significant point of departure for the exploration of allegorical portrayals of the American landscape.

the logic of disintegration

The title sequence for *Zabriskie Point*, like Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1964), uses a series of out-of-focus images to signal a kind of aesthetic and political disorientation. The blurred faces, yellow filter, and fragments of dialogue are accompanied by ethereal psychedelic music to induce a trip-like feel to the beginning of the film before we fade into a raucous student meeting. The frame now fixes on individual faces caught in the midst of debate to evoke a documentary *cinéma vérité* style in stark contrast with the diffuse

and abstract opening sequence. The political poignancy of the film is signalled from the start by Kathleen Cleaver, the wife of the Black Panthers leader Eldridge Cleaver, shown at the centre of a tense gathering of radical student activists (Figure 13.2).¹³ Cleaver and the few other Black activists attending the meeting mock the revolutionary pretensions of their white comrades. Amid demands to close down the university, a middle-class female student asks what "would make white people revolutionary," but Cleaver warns that "the whole point is that the enemy are invisible." The discussion turns to the question of direct action and the risk of death for the student activists. We encounter one of the film's principal protagonists, Mark (played by Mark Frechette), who has been standing listening to the discussion all along and suddenly announces that he is willing to die too. The crowd turns toward him, and he leaves the room. His exit provokes an angry reproach from another student who dismisses Mark's utterance as "nonsense" and adds that if he wants to be a revolutionary then "he has to learn to work with other people." But anger and confusion quickly turn to farce as another student quips laconically to scattered laughter that he remains "resolute in his struggle against bourgeois individualism." The American political stage of the late 1960s is presented

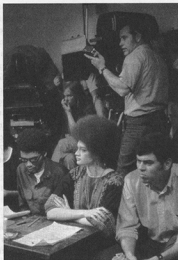


Figure 13.2
Production still from *Zabriskie Point*.

as a fractured and chaotic melee of differing opinions in which no clear course of action can be discerned.

In the next sequence Mark embarks on a brief tour of Los Angeles in a red pickup truck. Our first encounter with the world outside the university is marked by a series of immense roadside billboards painted with idealized landscapes of the American Southwest. Beyond these imaginary landscapes the real city is depicted as an alienating jumble of office buildings, factories, and advertising boardings set to discordant electronic music. This "jarring of the senses" denotes a Simmelian reading of the urban landscape as one that is dominated by commerce, abstract human relations, and, of course, a "blasé" outlook. Perhaps in a reference to his earlier depiction of industrial Ravenna in *Red Desert*, we are confronted by a sequence of red signs set to the clanking reverberations of mechanical music. "The billboards are an obsession of Los Angeles," reflects Antonioni. "To us the billboards are so contrary, but for the people who live there they are nothing—they don't even see them."¹⁴ The visual representation of Los Angeles as a threatening and alienating city is interwoven with social and political themes derived from the urban crisis of the 1960s. In one understated yet powerful sequence, Mark and a colleague buy a gun from a firearms store. They manage to obtain a weapon without a license on the pretext that they live in a "borderline" neighbourhood. As they leave the premises the proprietor reminds them to drag anyone they shoot into the house. An implicit urban topography of fear and racism is clearly evoked where the use of extreme violence can be casually justified in the defence of property.

Another crucial dimension to the early part of the film is the role of a real estate company in the unfolding drama. We first encounter the film's other principal protagonist Daria (played by Daria Halprin) by the security desk of what is represented as a dynamic property company in downtown Los Angeles. We see her adopting a somewhat coquettish demeanour with her new boss, the successful real estate attorney Lee Allen (played by Rod Taylor), in the air-conditioned sterility of the company's reception area. In a later scene we find Allen promoting his scheme for a luxury desert development complex called "Sunny Dunes" to a room of potential investors. The promotional films for the project depict an array of water features in a clear intimation of the centrality of water to wealth and power in southern California. Grinning mannequins populate a synthetic utopia of model golf courses, manicured lawns, and state-of-the-art kitchens.

In the final scene, which takes place on the university campus, violence erupts between large crowds of students and heavily armed police during which Antonioni intersperses some documentary footage of campus unrest at Berkeley.¹⁵ Mark witnesses a situation in which an unarmed Black student is shot; moments later the police officer who carried out the

fatal shooting is also shot. Mark reaches for his own gun after the incident in an ambiguous moment which leaves us unsure who shot the police officer before he flees into the city. After "borrowing" a light plane from a Los Angeles airfield, he takes off over the city and heads east. Mark's aerial ascent provides a succession of exhilarating panoramas which play on the technological vistas associated with Italian Futurist traditions: first, we encounter a seemingly endless expanse of homes, swimming pools, and parking lots; then, as we gain altitude, we observe vast freeway intersections set against the LA skyline; and finally, the city dissolves into the distant haze of the desert beyond.

The film then cuts abruptly to a ground level view of the rolling dunes and ridges of the desert as seen through the window of Daria's green Buick. While she heads for Phoenix through the desert landscape, the film returns us briefly to the real estate office in Los Angeles where the development project is being negotiated over large-scale maps and plans with talk of "water table deficiencies" and "contingencies." These scenes powerfully juxtapose the serenity of Daria's encounter with the real desert and the remote commodification of land and nature being undertaken in downtown Los Angeles. She interrupts her journey through the desert with a stop-off in a godforsaken place called Ballister where she meets some elderly men reminiscing over the past. The dusty town is a locale of fading memories where intensified "small town values" hold out against the combined threats of displacement and redevelopment. The main street is littered with the debris of former prosperity. Rusted upturned cars lie lifelessly under the full glare of the mid-day sun as if to emphasize the sense of a redundant community facing both social and physical disintegration. Daria later abandons a stroll through the poverty-stricken town after being pestered by a gang of street kids and hurries back to her car. We are left with a final image of a lone man in profile sitting at an empty bar; the sense of torpor is emphasized by cigarette smoke curling languidly toward the ceiling.

the beautiful void

The flight from the city into the desert marks a turning point in the film away from the overt political conflict depicted in Los Angeles toward an exploration of more abstract themes. In this sense *Zabriskie Point* marks a continuity with Antonioni's earlier explorations of spatial voids, wastelands, and landscapes of estrangement, which he developed in films such as *L'avventura* (1959) and *Red Desert* (1964). As we leave the last vestiges of human settlement behind, the American desert landscape unfolds into a "decentred" or unbounded space in which any distinction between real and imaginary perceptions of place becomes progressively eroded.

Recent philosophical explorations of unusual spatial forms have played a significant role in reinterpreting the critical legacy of Antonioni

and moving beyond narrowly formalist or one-dimensional responses to his work. Gilles Deleuze, for example, has identified the changing landscapes of Antonioni between the 1960s and 1970s as emblematic of a shift in cinematic space from the "movement-image" to the "time-image."¹⁵ Deleuze attempts to break free from the Metzian legacy of structuralist cinematic theory by exploring the emergence of cultural forms or images within the medium of cinema that do not correspond with any *a priori* conceptual schema. He is not interested in the identification of any putative visual syntax but in an engagement with filmmaking as a form of philosophical and cultural innovation.¹⁷ It is difficult, however, to subsume Antonioni's intellectual project within a poststructuralist philosophical framework because his cinematic vision originates within a largely teleological, dualistic, and hierarchical conception of modern culture.¹⁸ His depiction of relations between nature and culture, for example, remains resolutely nondialectical in its neoromantic emphasis on primal origins that lie outside of history.¹⁹ During the production of the film, Antonioni referred to the landscapes of *Zabriskie Point* as "primitive" in a clear intimation of his search for a primordial aesthetic to juxtapose with the perceived artificiality of modern urban culture (1968/69, 29).

The German cultural critic Tom Holert has recently suggested that Antonioni's desert landscapes share important similarities with the development of North American Land Art exemplified by the work of artists such as Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Walter De Maria.²⁰ Whilst Holert is right to identify the late 1960s and early 1970s as a crucial juncture in the development of desert iconography and its extensive appropriation within popular culture, he tends to elide different strands of landscape aesthetics by overextending his analysis of the intellectual complexity behind Land Art. He treats it as if it corresponded with the kind of increasingly abstract desert vision articulated by Antonioni. The critical difference between Antonioni's representation of nature and leading Land Artists such as Robert Smithson is that in Antonioni's conception of primal or "first nature" relations between nature and culture remain essentially pre-given rather than socially constructed. While Antonioni and Smithson both enjoyed an ambivalent relationship with contemporary forms of social and ecological critique, they nonetheless stem from very different intellectual traditions: the presence of nature in the work of Smithson, for example, has a distinctively dialectical quality, whereas for Antonioni, the perceived antinomy between nature and culture is never seriously challenged. In this sense, Antonioni's depiction of the American landscape does not form part of the rupture in modernist cultural practice that art historians such as Rosalind Krauss have ascribed to the emergence of Land Art in the late 1960s.²¹ Antonioni uses "nature" in *Zabriskie Point* in its broadest sense as a metaphor for something that resides outside

of "history": something which is unchanging and ever-present as a deeper layer of human consciousness and experience. Yet within this discourse of historical erasure lurks the "ghost of colonialism" in which pre-European influences are either erased or elided with the imaginary projections of Western culture.²² This is reflected, for instance, in Antonioni's use of Native American motifs such as Daria's buckskin clothes at the close of the film to indicate his attachment to a highly romanticized conception of cultural authenticity in the American desert. Antonioni's engagement with the creative energies of nature lies closer to teleological conceptions of modernist abstraction than the dialectical impulses of North American Land Art.²³ The role of nature within the development of abstract expressionism, for example, emerged within the critical discourses of "high modernism" as a twentieth-century extension to the romantic sublime and as an effective means to convey pure aesthetic experience. The issue, then, is the relationship between cinematic abstraction and the history of cultural modernism within which the postwar move toward abstraction played a significant yet historically specific role.

The juxtaposition of desert landscape with a "primal" conception of nature is most strikingly evoked in *Zabriske Point* by the eroticization of landscape. This is gradually developed in the film by the powerfully anthropomorphic representation of the arid landscape as a series of undulating flesh-coloured human forms. When we eventually arrive at the remote desert promontory after which the film is named, we are confronted by an expanse of deeply dissected and folded hills bathed in a luminous rosy light. The framing of the two figures in the landscape induces a sense of aesthetic rapture in which the landscape itself seems to acquire its own agency. In one sequence, Daria runs out of the frame, but the camera hovers over the "empty" space and draws back to depict the hillside in stunning clarity and detail. The bleached landscape appears to listen and respond to the human figures, creating its own echo of spatial intimation. The culmination of this depiction of "corporeal space" is reached with the love scene between Daria and Mark that develops into a panoramic expanse of lovers across the arid hillside (played by members of Joe Chaikin's Open Theatre). The desert orgy sequence is clearly an imaginary projection of Daria—like the film's violent finale—and can be interpreted as a means to represent her sexual pleasure through a temporary loss of identity. The scene of desert ecstasy can be read as a play on the pastoral theme of an "earthly paradise," yet transposed without irony to the arid badlands of Death Valley. However, the bleached colouration of the desert sex scene (in contrast with the vivid pink hues deployed on the arrival of Mark and Daria in the desert) also implies a morbid juxtaposition of eroticism with death. As Mark and Daria make love there is a momentary depiction of Daria's sleeping yet very pale face so that her orgasm is represented as a kind of *petite mort*. The use of the

desert as the locus for a modern fable of love and death, a cinematic combination of *eros* and *thanatos*, shares parallels with the synthesis of Marxian and Freudian ideas developed by social theorists such as Herbert Marcuse in the 1960s who sought to interpret sexual freedom as a form of political action.²⁴ But Antonioni's representation of sexuality is more ambiguous than this since the expression of sexual desire in *Zabriskie Point* is suffused with a deep sense of melancholy. This is suggested by the abrupt representation of an empty expanse of rocks at the end of the love scene in which the sound of music is replaced by the roar of a jet engine overhead and the slamming of a car door to invoke a sudden disenchantment of the desert landscape.

spectacle and denouement

After the desert love scene Mark returns the now gaudily painted plane to the airfield in Los Angeles and is quickly surrounded by armed police. Moments later we see his body slumped across the control panel of the aircraft. Daria continues her journey to meet her boss at an elaborate meeting complex in the Arizona desert and hears of Mark's death on the car radio (Figure 13.3). In a moment of forlorn contemplation, she stands by her parked car as if to abandon her journey but resolves to continue. The imposing desert building provides a striking contrast with the dissected and frangible landscapes of *Zabriskie Point*: its gleaming angular structure abuts the arid hillside in defiance of nature. Daria enters the landscaped atrium of the building complex with its elaborate water features and presses her body against a water-covered rock in a moment of grief and heightened awareness of her physical surroundings. The camera pans back to depict the entire complex with its intricate patterns of reflections accompanied by the sound of wind chimes in the desert breeze. We can observe Allen and his business associates debating over the details of the planned real estate scheme through large plate glass windows: only



Figure 13.3

Still from *Zabriskie Point*.

momentary segments of dialogue are audible but the faces are closely depicted in their intense negotiations. After briefly meeting with her boss, who appears surprised yet delighted at her arrival, Daria wanders through the strange building. She encounters a Native American domestic servant in a stairwell, and they exchange knowing glances in a clear intimation of her political awakening. She then flees the building and runs back to her car. She drives a short distance away, gets out of the car and stands with her back toward us so that we face the desert real estate complex with her (Figure 13.4). The camera pans back to the building. The pages of a copy of *National Geographic* flutter in the breeze; an abandoned cigarette slowly burns; Allen and his business associates discuss a model of the planned development (their faces oddly refracted through a glass table top). The camera pans back again repeatedly to our shared vantage point with Daria, and there is a momentary stillness. Then the entire building explodes; not once, but repeatedly, and from different angles. A fiery mushroom cloud extends far above the hillside with burning debris thrown in every direction.

Following the dramatic and repeated representation of the exploding building, there is an extraordinary shift in tempo toward the elegiac depiction of floating debris. Slowed down images of exploding items such as a television set, rows of bookshelves, a clothes rail, and a fully stocked refrigerator are shown. The clothes move through space like jellyfish pulsating beneath the water, unable to determine their trajectory. The screen is filled with a spray of pieces of white electrical goods set against a pale blue sky followed by an array of undamaged objects such as apples, fish, sausages, whole cuts of meat, and black balloons. The strange assortment



Figure 13.4

Still from *Zabriskie Point*.

of moving objects resembles a drop of pond water or some other microscopic world magnified many times to reveal a menagerie of unfamiliar organisms. The drifting detritus of consumer culture is reminiscent of the garbage-strewn industrial landscapes in *Red Desert* and represents not just a disavowal of avaricious consumption but also suggests the release of things from the "prison of their existence."²⁵ The meaning of waste is a recurring preoccupation in Antonioni's cinema that we can trace back to his striking documentary, *Nettezza urbana* (1948), about the street sweepers of Rome. Antonioni is clearly fascinated by the "ornate wastefulness" of bourgeois society and its casual disregard for everyday objects.²⁶ He builds on a well-established critique of American society developed, for example, in F. Scott Fitzgerald's depiction of the decadence and transitory gratification of the "roaring twenties" before the Great Crash and the emerging postwar critique of mass production and built-in obsolescence developed by Vance Packard. Waste is for Antonioni not simply a question of material loss but is also a complex aesthetic and philosophical problem integral to the experience of modernity and the perpetual forces of entropy and disintegration.

It is clear, however, that the explosion only occurs in the mind of Daria. Her destructive fantasy is both a political mirage and also an imaginary attempt to avenge the death of her lover. It can also be read as a symbol of her politicization driven by a new awareness of the interconnections between the different events she has experienced. The splintering debris of the modernist citadel marks a simultaneous coalescence of abstract ideas around the need to act and brings the narrative back to the opening student debate. As with any utopian discourse, however, the new political form must be imagined within the context of existing reality: hence the cathartic aspect of the film as a repudiation of American society in the face of the death of her lover and the wider injustices alluded to during the duration of the film. At one level, the fantasy of violent retribution for Mark's death also represents a confrontation with the rapacious transformation of the semi-arid landscapes of Arizona and southern California. The explosion can be read as a disavowal of the violence that is implicit not only in the cultural and political origins of commodities but also in their effect on society. "In *Zabriskie Point*," suggests Antonioni, "the material wealth of America, which we see in advertisements and on billboards along the roads, is itself a violent influence, perhaps even the root of violence" (1970). At another level, however, the eschatological theme also connects with the menace of cold war nuclear destruction, the centrality of desert space to the testing and development of military hardware and the idea of a redemptive "industrial-technological apocalypse." The explosion of the real estate complex is an apposite metaphor for the intersection between cinematic space and the development of military spectacle.²⁷ The compound-like structure of the desert building edifice

certainly shares some similarities with the kind of cell-like architectural spaces associated with the U.S. atomic testing program with its mixed emphasis on defence and observation. Desert space emerges in *Zabriskie Point* as an apex of technological, political, and aesthetic extremes through which new kinds of landscapes are created and destroyed. Yet the desert retains an "intact silence" in the words of Jean Baudrillard, even after its complex geological structures have encountered human violence.²⁸

conclusion

By the early 1970s, the cinematic desert had become a kind of *tabula rasa* around which countercultural discourses could develop in opposition to the perceived hegemony and cultural inauthenticity of industrial capitalism. In the case of European and North American cinema the shifting relationship between landscape and popular culture combined with the cinematic legacy of the classic western to produce a new sensitivity toward the philosophical and political possibilities of desert space as a locus for cultural critique.²⁹ The desert represented a kind of cinematic frontier that could enable the exploration of new kinds of imaginary spaces. Consider, for example, Werner Herzog's ghostly depiction of the Sahara in *Fata Morgana* (1971), Nicolas Roeg's mystical evocation of the Australian outback in *Walkabout* (1970), or Pier Paolo Pasolini's use of location shoots in Yemen to represent a mythical precapitalist realm in *Arabian Nights* (1974).³⁰ In these and other exemplars, desert space serves as a dramatic stage for cultural redemption through a confrontation between different belief systems either explicitly presented within the films themselves or implicitly, as in the case of Pasolini's search for different forms of premodern cultural "authenticity." For Antonioni, however, the desert motif is deployed not simply to assert the continuing cultural salience of the premodern but to explore the existential dilemmas that underpin modernity itself through the confrontation between his cinematic protagonists and the looming emptiness or incomprehensibility of these extraordinary landscapes. As we move from the city to the desert, the depiction of landscape becomes an exploration of pure form as roads, vapour trails, and rock formations become part of a larger canvas: there is a double movement here as Antonioni blurs nature and human artifice, thereby lending an anthropomorphic quality to the eerie stillness of the desert. At the same time, he retains a profound sense of an underlying "nature" buried beneath the complex stratification of modern culture. The mysterious qualities of the American desert are deployed to reveal a preexisting symbolic realm that has been obscured by utilitarian rationalism and the advance of consumer capitalism. Yet Antonioni's neoromantic attachment to the human subject is belied by his framing of the human figure within the landscape to produce an intense confrontation between human consciousness and the indifference of inanimate nature. Many critical responses to his cin-

ematic legacy have tended to take these universalist themes at face value and not sought to disentangle Antonioni's cinematic abstraction from its cultural and historical context. Or, more recently, his work has been simplistically appropriated within a putative postmodern cinematic canon on account of its complexity and indeterminacy, thereby flattening and truncating any cogent historiography of cultural modernism and its cinematic expression.³⁰ In contrast, this chapter has sought to engage with the cinematic landscape in *Zabriskie Point* as a distinctive historical moment reflected in the disparate encounters between different strands of environmentalist and political critique ranging from the Marcusean repudiation of consumer capitalism to the contemporary "rediscovery" of non-European and premodern cultural forms.

The film *Zabriskie Point* seeks to evoke a vivid sense of place—the specific cultural and political milieu of Vietnam-era America—and at the same time develop a more abstract experience of space through the juxtaposition of Los Angeles with the vast desert landscapes lying beyond the urban fringe. Antonioni uses the American landscape as a powerful metaphor for intellectual uncertainty by indicating a different rhythm of time, a geological space outside of modernity, and also as a means to develop a "primitivist" critique of the perceived artificiality of consumer capitalism. In this sense, the film signals a far more ambitious intellectual project than his depiction of London in *Blow-Up* (1967) because he tries to convey both an accurate portrait of late 1960s America and also uncover a "structural truth" about the nature of reality.³² The sharp if somewhat caricatured political delineations of *Zabriskie Point* are in part reflective of the deep political schisms of postwar Italy which characterized the development of Italian cinema even if Antonioni had himself moved further away from neorealism than many of his Italian contemporaries. In this sense, the mixed reception experienced by the film testifies to the different cultures of political filmmaking which developed in Italy during the 1950s as distinct from those in the United States where the political legacy of McCarthyism served to suppress the direct cinematic representation of class antagonisms. Though widely regarded as a failure, *Zabriskie Point* remains one of the most interesting attempts to explore the allegorical and aesthetic power of desert landscapes within the specific context of the social and political upheaval facing 1960s America. For Antonioni political themes are often played out in terms of individual psychological dramas rather than straightforward allusions to political movements or ideas; in *Zabriskie Point* we encounter a mix of representational strategies ranging from the documentary style of the opening to the destructive fantasy sequence that closes the film. The significance of cinema for modern conceptions of landscape stems from the malleability of the cinematic medium as a locus for changing interpretations of space in which the relationships between inside and outside, between film and audience,

and between cinema and the wider development of philosophical ideas are engaged in a perpetual process of renegotiation and reformulation. It is within this fluid context that the cinematic legacy of Antonioni allows so many different conceptual vantage points from which to explore the changing relations between space and modern culture.

notes

1. Céline Scemama-Heard, *Antonioni: le désert figuré* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), 83. My translation.
2. See, for example, "Michelangelo Antonioni: Interview with Charles Thomas Samuels" in *Film Heritage* 5, no. 3 (1970): 1–12.
3. See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973).
4. See Noa Steimatsky, "From the Air: The Genealogy of Antonioni's Modernism" in *Camera Obscura Camera Lucida: Essays in Honor of Annette Michelson*, eds. Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 183–214.
5. See Nuria Bou, "Deserts, Deserts Urbans" in *El Segle del Cinema*, ed. J. Balló (Barcelona: Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, 1995), 88–92.
6. Bruce Davidson, "Antonioni v. Hollywood," *Sunday Times* (25 January 1970).
7. Aniko Bodroghkozy, "Reel Revolutionaries: An Examination of Hollywood's Cycle of 1960s Youth Rebellion Films," *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 3 (2002), 38–58; hereafter cited in text.
8. Michelangelo Antonioni, quoted in Robert Joseph, "Billboards, Bears and Beads," *Cinema* 4, no. 4 (December 1968).
9. Michelangelo Antonioni, quoted in Guy Flatley, "I Love this country: Antonioni Defends *Zabriskie Point*," *New York Times* (February 1, 1970); cited hereafter in text as *Antonioni/Flatley*.
10. See Vincent Canby, "Screen: Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*," *New York Times* (February 1970); Vincent Canby, "No Life in Antonioni's Death Valley," *New York Times* (February 1970); Joseph Morgenstern, "Death Valley Days," *Newsweek* (February 16, 1970).
11. Larry Cohen, "MGM's *Zabriskie Point* Fine Artistic, Commercial Film," *The Hollywood Reporter* (February 10, 1970). See also Stephen Handzo, "Michelangelo in Disneyland," *Film Heritage* 6, no. 1 (1970): 7–24.
12. See, for example, Guido Aristarco, "Il mestiere del critico: evoluzione di Antonioni in *Zabriskie Point*," *Cinema nuovo* 23, no. 205 (May/June 1970): 205–210; Jean-Louis Bory, "Le vol d'Icare," *Le Nouvel observateur* (27 April 1970); Michel Capdenac, "Faire sauter la baraque," *Lettres françaises* (22 April 1970); Wolf Donner, "Visionen vom schlimmen Amerika," *Die Zeit* (11 September, 1970); Else Goelz, "Antonioni entdeckt Amerika," *Stuttgarter Zeitung* (18 September 1970); Julian Jebb, "Intimations of Reality: Getting the *Zabriskie Point*," *Sight and Sound* 39, no. 3 (1970): 124–126; Derek Malcolm, "Uneasy Rider," *The Guardian* (12 March 1970); David Robinson, "Antonioni's America," *The Financial Times* (13 March 1970); Marie Seton, "Antonioni Excels Himself," *Film World* (India) 6, no. 4 (August/September 1970): 14–15; Giulio Schmidt "Zabriskie Point," *Rivista del Cinematografo* 11 (November 1970): 574–576; and Philip Strick, "Zabriskie Point," *Monthly Film Bulletin* 37, no. 436 (1970): 102.

13. The involvement of the Black Panthers and other radical groups in the making of *Zabriskie Point* involved complex negotiations over how their participation might assist in their political aims. See Soren Agenoux, Interview by Sam Shepard, *Inter/view* 1, no. 3 (1969): 6–7.
14. Michelangelo Antonioni, Interview by Marsha Kinder, *Sight and Sound* 38, no. 1 (Winter 1968/1969): 26–30; hereafter cited in text.
15. Documentary footage is also used to striking effect in *The Passenger* (1975), where we see jarring images of the military execution of political opponents in Nigeria.
16. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: the Time Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta (London: Athlone, 1989 [1985]). See also Tom Holert, "Strudel und Wüsten des Politischen: 'Zabriskie Point', 'Spiral Jetty' und die Grammatik der Entgrenzung" in *Jahresring 48: Jahrbuch für moderne Kunst. Kunst / Kino*, ed. Gregor Stemmerich (Köln: Oktagon, 2001), 94–119.
17. See John Rajchman, *The Deleuze Connection* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).
18. See Matthew Gandy, "Landscapes of Deliquescence in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert*," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 19, no. 2 (2003): 218–237.
19. See Matthew Gandy, "The Heretical Landscape of the Body: Pier Paolo Pasolini and the Scopic Regime of European Cinema," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14, no. 3 (1996): 293–310.
20. See, for example, Holert, *op. cit.*
21. See Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983). See also the interesting commentary provided by Emily Scott in her M.A. thesis, *The Birth of the Atomic Desert* (Los Angeles, University of California, 2003).
22. Patrick Werkner, *Land Art USA* (München: Prestel, 1992).
23. See Matthew Gandy, "The Heretical Landscape of the Body: Pier Paolo Pasolini and the Scopic Regime of European Cinema," *op. cit.*
24. Alberto Moravia, "È esplosa pure l'arte di Antonioni," in *Zabriskie Point*, Michelangelo Antonioni (Cappelli Editore, 1970), 11–16.
25. Michael Althen, "Zabriskie Point: carte blanche," in *Antonioni: die Kunst der Veränderung*, ed. Rolf Schüler (Berlin: Berliner Filmkunsthaus Babylon, 1993), 70.
26. Michelangelo Antonioni, quoted in Philip Strick, *Michelangelo Antonioni* (London: Motion Publications, 1963), 8.
27. See, for example, Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: the Logistics of Perception* (London, New York: Verso, 1989).
28. Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (London, New York: Verso, 1988), 123.
29. See Holert, *op. cit.* On the cultural resonance of desert landscapes in modern culture see also Reyner Banham, *Scenes in America Deserts* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1982) and David Jasper, ed., *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art, and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).
30. See, for example, Gandy, *op. cit.*
31. Critics who seek to enlist the work of Antonioni within a post-structuralist or post-modern cinematic canon include Peter Brunette, *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Angelo Restivo, *The Cinema of Economic Miracles: Visuality and Modernization in*

the Italian Art Film (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); and Sam Rohdie, *Antonioni* (London: British Film Institute, 1990).

32. On Antonioni's privileging of his depiction of "structural truth" over "naturalistic truth" in *Blow-Up* see Restivo, *op. cit.*