

# ZABRISKIE POINT: THE METAPHYSICAL POP OF MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI

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In the final scene of *Zabriskie Point* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1970), a luxurious residence in the desert near Phoenix literally blows sky high. The moment leading up to this finale fills the landscape with a powerful emotional charge. An absolute *silence in the sky* seems to foreshadow the surprising explosion that is about to occur. What at first might seem to be an attack personally engineered by the protagonist is at once understood to be an imaginary event, an orchestrated detonation that will go on for nearly six minutes in which Antonioni uses as many as seventeen different cameras and points of view. The rage-filled mood of Daria (Daria Halprin) is expressed in a violent visual and sonic choreography that begins with a demolition and little by little draws us into symbolic territory where the beauty of destruction seems to be calling for a regeneration of our way of life and our culture. In this moment of devastation, our senses are confronted with *signifiers* and *signifieds* of the apparent reality, passing through the mind of

the confused and distraught Daria, tormented by a dramatic event. The explosion thus represents, rhetorically and symbolically, the collapse of our consumer society (Figure 1).

The successive explosions position us momentarily at ground zero,<sup>1</sup> where the form has been reduced to little pieces and tiny fragments. The various changes of shot, the slowing down of the action and the shift from the sound of the blast to the progressive rhythm of Pink Floyd's "Careful with that Axe, Eugene"<sup>2</sup> gradually help us to contemplate and reconstruct the images. Our iconographic impulse strives to give meaning to the shapeless, to impose order on the chaos and randomness, semanticising our visual perceptions through imaginary projections, identifying and imposing a figurative meaning (Gubern, 1996: 12). At the same time, our three-dimensional perception—which is never lost for a moment—extends vaguely beyond the surface of representation, that is, the screen or the canvas (Zunzunegui,

2010: 48). It could be argued that in this scene we are taken from an early work by Cy Twombly or Jackson Pollock to a Robert Rauschenberg painting, from a residual form in fragmentation to a new state in germination (Figure 2).

Antonioni's passion for painting is well known. He himself painted all his life, from childhood to old age, even after suffering a stroke in 1985. Antonioni was aware that a model of communication was possible through this fragile medium. The influence of painting would be evident in his films explicitly in the props, locations and set designs. But it would also be manifested implicitly, and even more eloquently, by analogy through his knowledge of the art form, the way the painter processes, contemplates and connects the information he or she receives from the world. The extraordinary visual expressiveness of this final scene has prompted us to analyse other details from his filmography once more. Specifically, in our observation of *Zabriskie Point* we have found a paradigmatic example of where painting and information, processed as aesthetic experience, converge in a way that is truly visionary.

### **I. ZABRISKIE POINT: INFORMATION AS AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE**

*Zabriskie Point*, along with *Blow-Up* (1966) and *The Passenger* (Professione: Reporter, 1975), belongs to Antonioni's American trilogy, a creative and commercial partnership with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) that would last ten years and meet with both great successes and no shortage of criticism. The contract signed by his producer, Carlo Ponti, stipulated that three films were to be made. With *Blow-Up*, the relationship got off to a good start, as the film was a box-office hit, but *Zabriskie Point* would not enjoy the same success. Its commercial failure and critical panning undermined MGM's confidence in and appreciation of Antonioni's



Figure 1. *Zabriskie Point* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1970).



Figure 2. *Zabriskie Point* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1970).

work. As a result, during shooting for *The Passenger*, very few concessions would be made to the creative demands of the director.

Shortly after *Blow-Up* was released, Antonioni read a story in a newspaper about a young man in the United States who had stolen a light aircraft and was gunned down at Phoenix Airport when he had tried to return it. This news story would become the inspiration for his next film, set during a period of upheaval and protest on university campuses in the late 1960s. In the manner of a news documentary, the film begins with a heated discussion between students at a meeting to determine how to defend their civil rights and move forward in their battle with the Establishment. In an atmosphere charged with a kind of intellectual aggression, Mark (Mark Frechette) appears, an individualist sceptic who doesn't seem to support anyone or anything. After this scene, the action moves outside to the urban setting: its streets, its industry, its advertising, its slogans. A protest on a university campus leads to the death of a police officer. Although he was not the killer, news reports identify Mark as a possible suspect, prompting him to steal a small aircraft on an impulse and flee the city. Meanwhile, a large corporation

named Sunny Dunes is considering the possibility of a major real estate investment outside the city of Phoenix. A young woman named Daria, who works for the company, decides to travel on her own in an old Buick to the meeting scheduled outside the city, taking a strangely circuitous journey around the state of Arizona. While Mark is flying away from the city and looking down on the vast, imposing urban sprawl and the desert beyond it, he happens to catch sight of Daria. The two youths hit it off and embark on a short trip together in search of fuel for the aeroplane. Along the way they come to an even more extreme location, Zabriskie Point, where the bizarre landscape and the hallucinatory effects of drugs leads them to experience a wild erotic fantasy. After this, they part ways and Mark decides to face his fate in Los Angeles, while Daria continues on her search for the location where her company is going to seal its big real estate deal. By the time she finally finds the place she has already heard on the local radio news that a young man has been shot dead at Los Angeles Airport. After this shocking news, a devastated Daria sees in the place she has come to everything she despises and believes she could destroy and change.

The film is set on the US West Coast in the states of California and Arizona, specifically between Los Angeles, Death Valley, and the outskirts of Phoenix<sup>3</sup>. In the triangle created by these three locations are various settings: the big city, the architecture, the social upheavals, and the absolute void of the desert. For Antonioni, *Zabriskie Point* was the perfect counterpoint to the sophisticated urban concentration of Los Angeles, where part of this apparently simple yet thematically complex story takes place.

The commercial failure of *Zabriskie Point* and the model of visual and critical experimentation used in it have resulted in its marginalisation in Antonioni's filmography and its conversion into a cult film. There are various reasons for this failure and the lack of understanding with which the film was met by most audiences and critics. Why a studio like MGM would have taken on such a project is itself an interesting question. Román Gubern's opinion on this point is clear: "[t]he pressure from independent studios in New York and California has been a decisive factor in the changes of direction taken by the Hollywood movie industry. The new, aggressively political attitude—*Ice* (1969) by Robert Kramer—and the sexual freedom of Warhol's films, praised even in Europe, explain why the conservative Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer would have hired Antonioni and given him *carte blanche* to shoot *Zabriskie Point* (1969) in their country. The 'granny consciousness' of the Hollywood film tradition was crashing down and the big studios didn't hesitate for a moment to finance or distribute the solemn attacks on the 'American way of life' that young people wanted to see on the screen" (Gubern, 2014: 389). Moreover, the film premièred in the United States in February 1970, only three years after the Hays Code<sup>4</sup> had ceased to be applied to American film productions. For thirty-three years the censorship system promoted by the Republican politician William H. Hays had laid down the rules for what could and could not be seen in American film theatres, a set of

restrictions that had changed the way of making and consuming cinema. As a result, certain European and independent films were banned from US screens. In many cases, the restrictions did not prevent American films from being bold and suggestive, but they did shape and in a way standardise the tastes of mainstream audiences.

Towards the middle of the 1960s, the euphoria of the post-war economic boom and the social transformation characterised by the influential "American way of life", which had repercussions on every level of society for nearly two decades, gave rise to the so-called "counterculture", a social movement that rejected mainstream values and lifestyles. This new American ideology would represent a turning point, an especially critical parenthesis in opposition to the ageing morality that would also have its expression in Europe, coinciding with the events of May 1968 in France. The movement was not without its controversy thanks to its much-acclaimed sexual freedom, LSD use and the impassioned hippie rebellion which, added to the pacifist factor, would give people a lot to talk about. And although many young Americans were dying at this time on tours of duty in the Vietnam War (1955-1975), the tone of protest had its *de facto* expression in the streets with huge demonstrations by students and other members of society in support of civil rights, the fight for freedom of expression and the end of racial segregation. Immersed in this process of change, young people saw their living conditions improve, experiencing a qualitative leap that would promote a rise in consumption. Through their main forms of expression (music and fashion) they would experience an expansion of the senses. This gave rise to a truly productive period in creative terms, as the pop art that first emerged in post-war London would be proclaimed as the new dominant trend in the art market. This new movement proved easy for the United States to contribute to, thanks to its own popular figures of film and television and the identity conveyed by their popular adver-

tising images (Lippard, 1993: 139). The attitudes of opposition to the prevailing system, from an artistic and creative perspective, sought to evoke unique experiences through synaesthesia, the alteration of time perception, the sense of identity, empathy, etc. In short, the psychedelic experience<sup>5</sup> would become one of the most notable expressions of the counterculture, offering a means of escape from the limitations imposed upon the public consciousness by capitalism. Although by the beginning of the 1970s it would lose this notoriety to be displaced by other cultural movements, its influence continues to be visible today in numerous contemporary manifestations, being particularly obvious in advertising, video clips, underground music, and film (Aldás and Mestre, 2014: 35).

While in the acclaimed *Blow-Up* Antonioni questioned *reality* through the camera lens of a successful photographer in the European capital of pop art, in *Zabriskie Point* he configures the gaze through the prism of sarcasm and the irony of fate. It is the point of view of two youths dissatisfied with the capitalist way of life.

It is obvious that the pictorial tradition since the Enlightenment has been increasingly influenced by the subjectivity of the artist, but also by technological progress and quite directly by news information and the emergent mass media. The use of information in art is complex, especially because today it encompasses the media reality and the perceived world as well as the remembered world; in other words, a very clear convergence of perception, memory, and reason (Damasio, 2009: 101). The processing of all this neural machinery determines the different languages to which art, and specifically painting or cinema, has accustomed us. However, it is important to highlight that the concept of information, and above all of communication, does not have for these art forms the same pragmatic meaning that it has for other areas in a conventional sense, which does not mean that they do not aim for a formal effectiveness in their productions. Art knows that infor-

mation can be a system of control, a set of rules in which one is supposed to believe (Deleuze, 1987) and which it may therefore accept or react against, manifesting itself as a means of expression and of personal reflection. Art in many cases is an act of resistance, a usage model that runs counter to consensually agreed information. Information is always expanded through the convergence within it of data with different emotional origins. Through artistic expression it is possible to order and guide the emotions, all those stimuli that come from the perception of the environment. It will be the author's intellectual process and judgement that will determine the hierarchy of the form in his or her work that gives meaning to an idea (Dondis: 1998: 167). It is precisely the awareness of this decision-making process that gives the author a particular satisfaction.

Several decades after its production, *Zabriskie Point* confirms the preference for visual processing that information and culture have today, and how revealing it can prove to be as an aesthetic experience and artistic expression. The immersion in the American context and culture by an *auteur* shaped by Europe's memory, in the Italy of the inter-war period, born in Ferrara, the city identified as the most metaphysical by avant-garde painters like De Pisis, De Chirico, Savinio and Carrà (Sáenz, 1990: 23; Calvesi, 1990: 105), make Michelangelo Antonioni a most unique analyst of the information conveyed in *Zabriskie Point*. Stepping out of his usual environment and context allowed him to identify visual aspects of American culture more clearly and intensely, finding values and analogies that go further than their mere representation. For Antonioni, America was not just one of the most interesting countries in the world, but the most interesting of all, a place where some of the most obvious paradoxes of our times could be observed in their pure state. He knew America well, but he wanted to see it with his own eyes, not as a mere traveller but as an artist, as a creator (Antonioni, 1970).

Back in 1887, Oscar Wilde very astutely asserted that “[t]he true unity of the arts is to be found not in any resemblance of one art to another, but in the fact that to the really artistic nature all the arts have the same message and speak the same language though with different tongues” (Wilde, 2013: 33). It is sometimes difficult to understand how images “speak”. To explain the image is certainly a complicated challenge even for the most experienced specialists, who are aware of the difficulty of using verbal or written language to express in words the full dimension of the visual occurrence, and that the existence of various codes can make its meaning even more complex.<sup>6</sup> In *Zabriskie Point*, Antonioni achieves a combination of information, emotions, and memory through a syntax unique to cinema and painting.

## **2. EXPLICIT PAINTING**

Antonioni’s immersion in the American scene and national culture results in an explicit painting model that is very different from what we had become used to in films prior to *Zabriskie Point*. Antonioni often acknowledged his debt to the great painters and architects of the Italian artistic tradition (Moure, 2016: 145). Without looking too far, we can find a clear expression of this in his artistic references in *The Night* (*La notte*, 1961), such as the small still-life by Giorgio Morandi in the office of the film’s protagonist, the writer Giovanni Pontano (Marcello Mastroianni), or the Massimo Campigli in the hall, or the huge work by Mario Sironi, a seven-foot tall oil painting called “*La notte*” or “*La caduta*”, painted in 1937-1938. In *Blow-Up*, the story is clearly dominated by fashion photography and imagery; nevertheless, painting appears explicitly, albeit rather incidentally, always as a counterpoint or contrast. Examples include the fleeting appearance of a very colourful Expressionist painting on one of the walls of the studio, or the presence of Bill (John Castle), a painter friend of Thomas (David Hemmings) who is shown great

respect by the protagonist. Very rarely does Thomas, the stylish photographer, reveal the degree of fragility we see in the scene in which Bill talks about one of his old paintings in the Cubist tradition: “they don’t mean anything when I do them, just a mess. Afterwards I find something to hang on to (like that leg)... then it sorts itself out... it adds up... it’s like finding a clue in a detective story” (Aldás and Mestre, 2014: 22). Indeed, the main theme of *Blow-Up* for Antonioni is “to see or not to see the exact value of things” (Antonioni, 2002: 133). Antonioni confirms that his films are always detective work: “my work is like digging; it’s an archaeological excavation into the dull matter of our times. That’s how I started my first film and that is what I’m still doing” (Antonioni, 1970).

Also in *Blow-Up* there is an explicit reference to painting and a sense of searching and immersion in the image through which he sought to move from the evidence towards a more abstract and profound meaning of that evidence. In 1965, the British artist Richard Hamilton began working on his new series, *People*.<sup>7</sup> Taking images from panoramic shots of bathers on the beach, he enlarged each image successively until its appearance was distorted, reinforcing the effect with the pictorial intervention of gouache. What Hamilton put into practice was in a way a similar procedure to what we would see Antonioni employ a little later in *Blow-Up*, and even in the series of water colours that the filmmaker himself painted under the title *The Enchanted Mountains*.

Following along these lines and in relation to the treatment of colour in *Zabriskie Point*, it is particularly interesting to consider his film *Red Desert* (*Il deserto rosso*, 1964), where painting, but above all colour, is presented in a more abstract, psychological way. Obviously, as this was his first colour film Antonioni gave special attention to this basic element of visual communication. Paradoxically, the theme of this film is in fact the absence of communication, yet it makes use of colour as a communicative element. In this film, Antonioni plays

with a strategy of visual syntax which in principle is quite basic. Over the cloudy grey background of the industrial port city of Ravenna—as barren as Death Valley itself—he introduces a contrast between two complementary colours: red and green (Figure 3). Antonioni uses red in many of his locations, deliberately drawing out or emphasizing the existing colour, or painting it in order to maintain the chromatic discourse. Consider, for example, the tanks and pipes that stand out amidst a monochrome grey, or in the clothes of the characters in the scene: an overcoat, an object, a wall; or the portable toilets in *Zabriskie Point*, or the corporate colours of the car rental company in *The Passenger*. Subliminally, there is a litany of colour as a fundamental part of the filmic discourse that accompanies us throughout the film on a level of which we are never fully conscious.

Also in *Red Desert*, we can discern a highly synthetic and sharp use of colour, from the framing of some scenes to the colours that Giuliana (Monica Vitti) tries out on the walls of what is to become her new business. It is thus no accident that Antonioni would be attracted to the work of the American painter Mark Rothko, with whom he maintained a brief correspondence at one time. In one of the visits the Italian filmmaker made to Rothko's studio in New York, Antonioni remarked to him: “[y]ou and I do the same thing; you paint nothingness, and I film nothingness.” Enrica Fico, Antonioni's wife from 1986 until his death in 2007, recalls that “colours, shapes and space would introduce him into an extraordinary dimension that nourished him: greens, yellows, and above all abstraction, was healing for him” (Galván, 2015).

A few years later, in the shooting of *Zabriskie Point* we find ourselves in a new context and a new culture. Even within the United States certain differences are evident. US East Coast pop was clearly distinguishable from that of the West Coast; while the art in New York made more references to the object and the image of advertising

appropriation, in California painting would have a quality that was more scenographic and more closely linked to architecture, to the big dimensions of billboards. In the film *Zabriskie Point* the conventional format of explicit painting in the style of a canvas that so characterises his European films disappears, expressed instead in a way that is more cultural and urban, but also poetic and psychological. For example, Antonioni seeks out and emphasises the painting of the façades of an industrial development in Los Angeles, scenes where sometimes the sleight of hand or the narrative intention goes even further to bring out the subliminal nature of certain messages. An assault and a violence that is still more evident through the advertising, the company emblems and logos that remind us of the model of society in which we find ourselves: industrialised (steel

Figure 3. *Zabriskie Point* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1970).



factories), capitalist (banks), and bourgeois (travel and real estate agencies); although others refer more benignly to carefree figurative images that recall Alex Katz or Norman Rockwell (Figure 4).

It was precisely this idea of advertising as a medium of artistic expression that Marshall McLuhan had posited back in the early 1950s in his legendary book *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), an attractive medium in which sex and technology converge in an always happy world (McLuhan, 1998: 38). Artists like Eduardo Paolozzi had

already explored this medium as early as the late 1940s, in a more experimental manner in parallel with McLuhan's work, leading to a new artistic movement that would reach its peak in the 1960s. In a context of heightened social and cultural activism, British and, subsequently, American pop art were influenced by interference of all kinds and with different strains, including psychedelia, identified as a growing trend of creative freedom that would produce a truly innovative style, making a huge leap in the communication and the

Figure 4. *Zabriskie Point* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1970).







Figure 5. *Zabriskie Point* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1970).

reception of the advertising message. The union and synthesis of different art forms as a concept of interference (Dorfles, 1954: 30) added other basic assumptions consistent with communicative discourse, including the development of ideas like appropriation, decontextualisation, fragmentation, superposition, juxtaposition, and concepts of seriality and repetition.

By the end of the 1960s, pop culture was firmly entrenched, and its psychedelic and conceptual art strains had not entirely distorted its appropriationist nature as a strategy, or formal synthesis and colour saturation as obvious techniques of its visual expression. The influence of Art Nouveau and symbolism gave psychedelic art a spellbinding effect not only for its viewers but also for its creators. Juxtaposing words, protest messages, saturated colours, symbols, natural motifs, and residual images from a previously developed medium was peculiarly stunning. It is this

same aesthetic that appears explicitly in *Zabriskie Point*, in the scene in which Mark, Daria, and a local painter turn the stolen aeroplane into a flying piece of art, and when Mark suggests: “They might not even think that it’s a plane, but a strange prehistoric bird spotted over the Mojave Desert with its genitals out” (Figure 5).

### 3. IMPLICIT PAINTING

The implicit painting in *Zabriskie Point* is undoubtedly the most eloquent. Antonioni’s films are filled with visual effects and strategies drawn from painting. Here he also aligns himself with an aesthetic concern that takes risks in its formal and associative experimentation. In this film, Antonioni takes up his established creative constants, but in a new context and with new referential elements.

An example of this is the American flag when on some occasions we see it waving proudly and haughtily through the window of Lee Taylor’s (Rod Taylor) office at Sunny Dunes, and on others when it appears crumpled and stained in red as a background element in Mark’s student dorm. His search for contrasts and polarities with different strategies enhances the visual discourse. We refer especially here to the deserts and the cities, and to the combination of iconic and saturated scenes with others that are completely distorted. From the beginning of *Zabriskie Point*, Antonioni uses images resulting from rapid camera movements, soft focus, and depth of field. Right from the student meeting or the first drive through the city in the van, Antonioni employs a glitch, a technical error or defect as a visual strategy that allows us to disengage from the main action and rest our gaze on specific shapes and objects. Antonioni was probably familiar with the experimental work of American filmmakers like Stan Brakhage, Harry Smith, Shirley Clarke, or Paul Sharits, all renowned for their abstract experimentation with sound and images, who were filming their best work in those years (Barroso, 2006: 241). In

a sense, these are psychedelic strategies that are also reminiscent of *The Swimmer* (Frank Perry, 1968), a film starring Burt Lancaster based on the story of John Cheever, which explores emotions and visual elements with a varied range of colours, from scenes in velvet hues to *psychedelic* strategies more typical of television than film: soft focus, flashes, and geometric decomposition of light (Mestre, 2007: 81). Painting once again enters the scene, as Antonioni plays with chance and a certain level of improvisation, as streaks of colour and random reflections of the surroundings are captured and alternated with extremely iconic images (Figure 6).

The use of Cinemascope reinforces the horizontality of the landscape, the starring feature of this film. Antonioni demands a format capable of capturing the pleasure of getting lost and wandering both when characters are present and when there is nothing happening at all. As Starobinski suggests, “it is not so much the action of seeing that is inherent to the gaze, but of waiting; it is precisely in this obstinate oscillation between seeing and waiting for the desertification of the scene that one opens up to the character’s epiphany.” Indeed, any piece of landscape is useful to convey this idea of the country and underscore the psychology of an issue that so obsessed him: the absence of communication and the fragility of human feelings (Mancini and Perella, 1987: 75). We see this in the climax in the desert enclave in *Zabriskie Point*, a place that disrupts the consciousness of the protagonists and inspires the sensory introspection that brings out their innermost emotions. The setting is turned into a silent and open witness to the free expression of the senses; an ideal place for the playful performance of love, blurring into the rhythmic movements of a contemporary dance: “the use of elements of nature to externalise the drama of the characters is an Expressionist device which cinema, with differing degrees of refinement, from

Murnau to Antonioni, will now never relinquish” (Wenders, 2016: 141).

Contrast as a strategy continues to be used very clearly through the rationalist architecture and nature in an organic way, with representations of overcrowding on the one hand and emptiness on the other. While architecture and urban development were already referential elements of primary importance in Antonioni’s films, in *Zabriskie Point* they are reinforced through the use of violent perspectives and aerial views.



Figure 6. *Zabriskie Point* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1970).

The map and the scale model constructed *ad hoc* for the film story become fundamental elements as simulacra of reality, along with the plastic mannequins for the Sunny Dunes advertising campaign, the natural life depicted by artificial means (Figure 7). It is precisely in the use of these models that we find influences of the style and poetics of metaphysical art. The Italian paintings of this avant-garde movement offer a classical testimony to the modern city, influenced as they were by the Quattrocento, projecting a wistful and unsettling illusion be-

yond their purely urban subject matter. Architecture is at times shown to us as a hostile and destabilizing constraint for the characters, while at other times it offers a friendly and protective environment.

Very close to the city of Phoenix, the Boulder Reign residence designed by Hiram Hudson Benedict for Carl Hovgaard served as the setting for *Zabriskie Point*'s final scene.<sup>8</sup> The house was used as a shooting location and as a model for the replica that was destroyed in the film's finale. Benedict was familiar with the work of the architect Paolo Soleri<sup>9</sup> and the models established by Frank Lloyd Wright. At the same time as the peak of the hippie movement we find the emergence

of this elitist architecture, nature subdued in the name of sophistication and to suit man's needs, a perverse point of contact between the former and the latter. The desert around Phoenix today is filled with one suburb after another, but what Rod Taylor glimpses from the terrace of Boulder Reign is merely a mirage, a *memory of the future*. Today, a brief virtual tour on Google Earth around these coordinates confirms that this location has turned into just what the Sunny Dunes company had dreamed of.

It is here that the film's denouement takes place, or at least one of them, as just as in painting there is not only one focus of attention. The explosion thus represents, rhetorically and symbolically, the destruction of consumer society. The house and each of its part is a symbol, a field of action, part of a larger mural. "[W]e see what we know, not what is there; the way that our culture is constructed, that our accumulated experiences are organised, makes us reconstruct and even construct meaning out of everything we imagine with our senses" (Calabrese, 2014: 51). The arrangement of this demolition recalls the intensity of the abstract drip paintings of American painter Jackson Pollock. Their importance in the development of art would represent not only the birth of abstract Expressionism or "action painting", considered the first genuinely American art movement of the twentieth century, but also the development of a new technique. Pollock's work is no longer a *window* open on the outside world, but rather, a volcanic explosion of energy. In his construction of the final scene, Antonioni locates the spectator, as Pollock does, *literally inside the frame*. The frame for construction of the image thus reveals the tremendous expressive force of his art and the virtue of the message. It elicits an abundance of emotional tension, which through its *repetition* from different angles recalls the process of mechanical instrumentation of the cliché used in the silkscreen prints of Andy Warhol. It seems impossible to be sure whether it is the perception

Figure 7. *Zabriskie Point* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1970).





Figure 8. *Zabriskie Point* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1970).

that is at the basis of its signification or whether the inverse is true. The correspondence between *representation* and *reality* may be illusory, but the figurative scheme of the real gives this image the quality of an encoded action that precludes any idea of ingenuous, arbitrary or whimsical vision. It is precisely in this quality that the final, cathartic apotheosis is unleashed.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Nothing in cinema is natural; everything is pure artifice. Antonioni draws his language from his imagination and from memory, two sides of the same brain activity, where the images of the recent history of painting play a determining role. Although *Zabriskie Point* is a poetic meditation on an American dream in a state of crisis, its discourse moves between the geographical and social documentary landscape and abstraction. Characters adrift and in dialogue with the environment, sometimes uninhibited, other times greedy, cut off or marginalised. This brief study points to an interesting conclusion: that there is more painting in

Antonioni's films than in his paintings. The psychological consistency between ideas, material and technique confirms that painting was for Antonioni a key element in the conceptual and expressive process of many of his films, sometimes rationalised, other times by chance. It is a model of thinking that Antonioni applied more to his camera than to his screenplays (Rosenbaum, 1984).

It is interesting to note the continued currency of the theories of Marshall McLuhan as a theorist on pop,<sup>10</sup> as some contemporary painters continue to use an *appropriationist* strategy that looks to photography and the sophisticated use of the media message and image. Antonioni's immersion in the American context to create *Zabriskie Point* combines elements of European culture, and specifically the poetics of Italian metaphysical art, with features of American pop art. As we have seen, Antonioni implicitly references the metaphysical paintings of Carlo Carrà, in works like "The Metaphysical Muse" (1917) or Giorgio De Chirico in "The Disquieting Muses" (1917), either using decontextualised or fictional objects like maps or mannequins in indoor sce-

nes, or, like Mario Sironi in “Urban Landscape with Truck” (1920) or “Landscape with Pedestrian” (1929), using streets and perspectives of the industrial town (Figure 8). Recent studies of post-conceptual figuration in painting show that this path of convergence between metaphysical painting and pop art continues to hold currency (De la Torre, 2013: 513). ■

## NOTES

- 1 Following Daniel Buren, the image needs to be approached using a very basic syntax and system of codes, from the limitations of the medium to the referential models, in an effort to place them all together in one possible and apparently incomplete scene.
- 2 Pink Floyd’s keyboard player Richard Wright composed the piece “The Violent Sequence” for the film, but after it was rejected he changed the title to “Us and Them” (included on their landmark LP *The Dark Side of the Moon* in 1973). Antonioni had Pink Floyd synchronise and re-record “Careful with that Axe, Eugene” (originally the B-side to their 1968 single “Point Me at the Sky”, and also appearing in a live version on the LP *Ummagumma* in 1969), which, unlike Wright’s original piece, provided just the right instrumental accompaniment, enhanced by the blood-curdling scream of bassist and vocalist Roger Waters.
- 3 Zabriskie Point forms part of the Amargosa Range, located to the east of Death Valley National Park in California. The terrain is composed of the sediments from a lake that dried up five million years ago, long before the formation of the valley. It took its name from Christian Brevoort Zabriskie, owner of the mining operation that extracted borax from the region until 1933. Borax has various commercial applications, including as an ingredient in detergents and pesticides, and in the production of glass and paints.
- 4 <https://goo.gl/3Uuras> [consulted: 2017/02/25].
- 5 The term *psychedelia* is a neologism formed from the combination of the Greek words ψυχή (soul) and δῆλομαι (manifest). The word “psychedelic” was invented by the British psychologist Humphry Osmond (1917-2004) and means “that which manifests the soul”, i.e., everything

related to the manifestation of psychic elements which under normal conditions are concealed or referring to the intense stimulation of psychic powers. As such, psychedelia is characterized by the extreme excitation of the senses, stimulated by hallucinogenic drugs, loud music, flashing coloured lights, etc.

- 6 In his book *Modern Painters*, Vol. III, Section III, Chapter XII, the British humanist writer John Ruskin remarks: “It is quite true that in all qualities involving sensation, there may be a doubt whether different people receive the same sensation from the same thing [...]; but, though this makes such facts not distinctly explicable, it does not alter the facts themselves” (Ruskin, 1879: 60).
- 7 <https://goo.gl/Uf8tr9> [consulted: 2017/02/25].
- 8 <https://goo.gl/ZAoKLx> [consulted: 2017/02/25].
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## ZABRISKIE POINT: THE METAPHYSICAL POP OF MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI

### Abstract

The presence of painting in Michelangelo Antonioni's films is well known, both explicitly as part of their props and set designs, and implicitly, through their locations, frames and structural elements of the visual syntax of the image. In both cases, the film *Zabriskie Point* (1970) constitutes an interesting paradigm in which American pop art and elements of the poetics of the Italian metaphysical art tradition converge. His immersion in the American social and cultural context in the late 1960s offered Antonioni the opportunity to work with new models of reference. Information as aesthetic experience results in a discourse that brings together intuition, memory, and reasoning, a sophisticated coding system that suggests certain analogies with contemporary painting.

### Key words

Painting, Cinema, Architecture, Contemporary society, Mass media, Information, Aesthetics.

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## ZABRISKIE POINT. EL POP METAFÍSICO DE MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI

### Abstract

La presencia de la pintura en el cine de Michelangelo Antonioni es bien conocida, tanto de forma explícita formando parte del atrezzo y decoración de interiores, como de forma implícita a través de sus localizaciones, encuadres y elementos estructurales de la sintaxis visual de la imagen. En ambos casos, la película *Zabriskie point* (1970) muestra un interesante paradigma en el que convergen el Pop Art americano y elementos de la tradición poética metafísica italiana. Su inmersión en el contexto social y cultural norteamericano de finales de los años sesenta le ofrecieron a Antonioni la oportunidad de gestionar nuevos modelos referenciales. La información como experiencia estética desemboca en un discurso donde tienen lugar la intuición, la memoria y el razonamiento, una sofisticada codificación que señala ciertas analogías con la pintura actual.

### Palabras clave

Pintura, cine, arquitectura, sociedad contemporánea, mass media, información, estética.

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