

SIGHT AND SOUND

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ZABRISKIE POINT

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ANTONIONI MAKING his first American film in Los Angeles, centre of the young radicals of the new left. For a leftist film critic who lives in L.A., it sounded too good to be true. By the time I could manage to arrange an interview, Antonioni had gone to shoot on location in Death Valley, which is three hundred miles away. In Los Angeles there was



PHOTOGRAPH BY BRUCE DAVIDSON. MAGNUM PHOTOS.

very little official information available on the film; M-G-M had not yet released any advance publicity. What was the film about? Unknown. Who was in it? Rod Taylor and no one else whom anyone had heard of. What was it called? *Zabriskie Point*—a local rock formation in Death Valley. Where was it being shot? Los Angeles, Death Valley and perhaps elsewhere. Yet the rumours were flying round L.A., and Antonioni's film began to enter my life in unexpected ways.

A friend, who is a maths professor at Valley State College, just happened to be the draft counsellor who was asked to counsel the male lead in the film. The day before leaving for

Death Valley, I was in a restaurant talking about 'the movement' with a friend, when a young man joined our conversation. He was a graduate student in history at UCLA and a member of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), and it turned out that he had just played a bit part in *Zabriskie Point*. Antonioni was appearing everywhere—on the UCLA campus, at demonstrations, at SDS meetings. In Los Angeles he was shooting stores full of outsize objects, car lots full of automobiles with huge price tags, and the billboards that pervade the city.

When I arrived in Death Valley, it was clear that M-G-M was still concerned about releasing too much information about the film. But I had come to talk to Antonioni. Despite his natural reserve and his extremely busy schedule, he was quite accessible and quite willing to talk about his film. At times his reserve could be mistaken for formality, but actually he was good-humoured and open. For example, I had heard that at his recent appearance at the San Francisco Film Festival, which paid tribute to Antonioni with a retrospective of his films, some people in the audience were disappointed by his cool reserve. But his own impressions of the event were quite different.

"San Francisco, it seems to me, is the freest town in America. It was strange, but the reception that I had at the Festival was very formal. The audience was very warm and quite young. They were very pleasant, very nice. They asked me a lot of questions. This dialogue between a director on the stage and the audience is very difficult for me because I can't tell them everything I would like to tell them. If we were a few in a room, I could talk differently. I could open myself more; but I couldn't do this in front of these people. Talking in English is difficult for me. I joked a bit."

Antonioni's sympathy with the young radicals was very apparent. When I asked him what kind of a reception he had received from them, he replied:

"They didn't trust me at the beginning, and they were right. First of all, I walked in and said I was working for M-G-M, for the establishment. But after many, many meetings, and after I had started working with Fred Gardner, who is one of them, and after he explained to them what I was trying to do, they became much more open. And they allowed me to use the initials of their group, SDS, which is important."

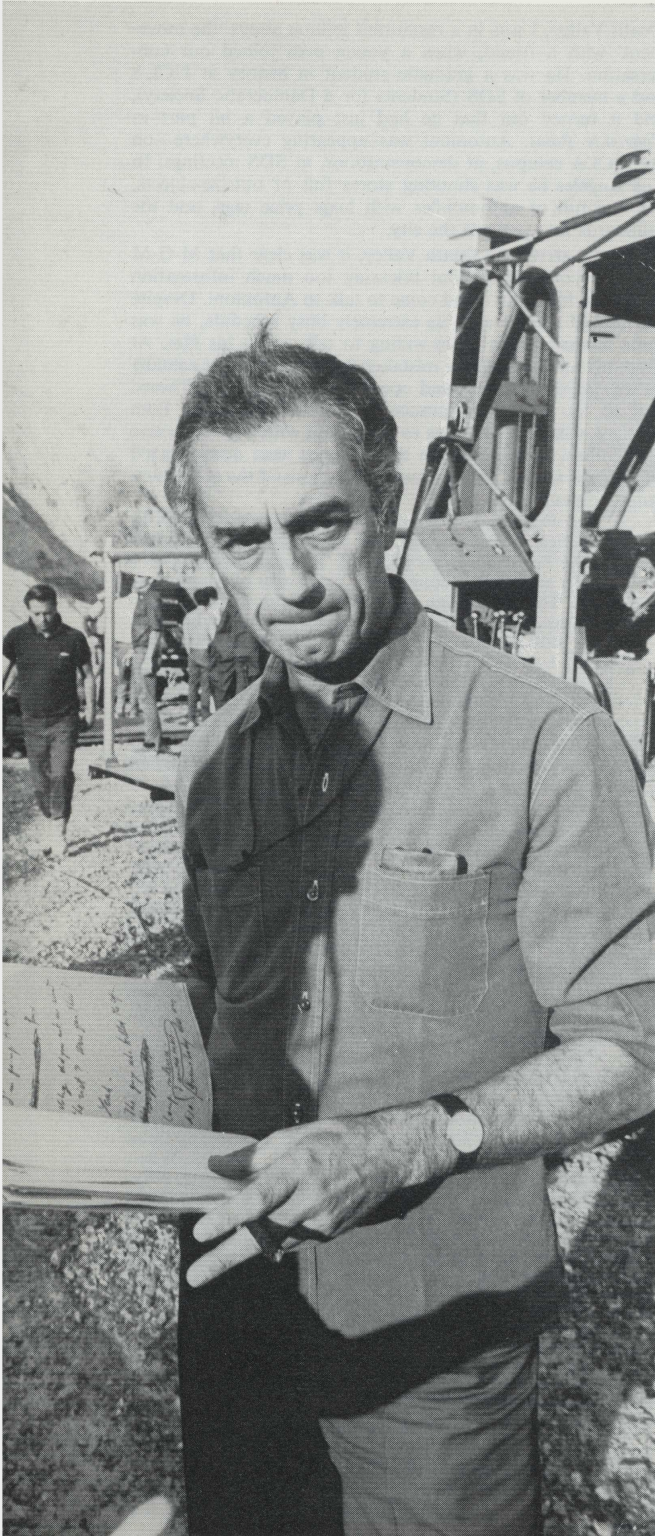
But this sympathy does not mean that he is uncritical of the movement or unaware of the problems it faces. He seemed very sensitive to the differences between student radicals in America and elsewhere.

"The student movement in America is different because they are less together. There are many, many groups. They can't work together yet. You know, this country is so big, so contradictory, that it is more difficult here for them to do something important. When something happens in Paris, it is happening in France. When something happens in Rome, it is happening in Italy. And the same thing for Berlin in Germany. Not here. When something happens in Los Angeles, it doesn't matter for New York—it has nothing to do with New York. What happened at Columbia University was important here, but as an echo. They don't have any relationship. They get in touch sometimes, but they don't work together. At least, that is what they themselves admit."

It would be misleading to over-emphasise the political aspects of this film. Despite rumour, Antonioni sees it as a film about interior feelings.

"I think that this film is about what two young people feel. It is an interior film. Of course, a character always has his background. . . ."

The contemporary context, the young central characters and the setting all seem crucial. I wondered which came first and how he had decided to make this particular film.



MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI

"I took two trips to America (the first in the spring of 1967 and the second in autumn). I had this idea to do a film here because I wanted to get out of Italy and Europe. Nothing was started in Europe yet, I mean this movement of youth. When I came to America, the first thing that interested me was this sort of reaction to the society as it is now—not just to the society, but to the morality, the mentality, the psychology of old America. I wrote some notes, and when I came back I wanted to know if what I had written down, the intuition, was true or not. My experience taught me that when an intuition is beautiful, it is also true. When I came back I realised that what I had in mind *was* true. I decided on this story when I came to Zabriskie Point. I found that this particular place was exactly what I was looking for. I like to know where the story is placed. I have to see it somewhere to write something. I want a relationship between the characters and the place; I can't separate them from their milieu."

But their milieu was not Antonioni's. I wondered whether he could really feel comfortable in making a film about this world which was essentially foreign to him and in a foreign language.

"I wrote this story, the story is mine. I called in Tonino Guerra, whom I have worked with before; but he doesn't speak English and it was difficult for him to help me get in touch with people, so Tonino went back. When the script was in the synopsis stage (without dialogue or an indication of dialogue), I started to look for someone else because I could not write dialogue in Italian. You can't translate dialogue. An American answers in a different way from an Italian or Frenchman. I wanted to write the dialogue in English. I started to read a lot of plays and books, and I found Sam Sheppard, who started to work on the dialogue for the film. I did the first version of the script with him. I did many versions of the script, and then I got in touch with Fred Gardner, who is one of these young people and very co-operative. The last version of the script was written with him, but I am still changing as I am shooting."

The process of change was very apparent on location. For example it had been reported that the following week Antonioni was importing hundreds of people from San Francisco, Salt Lake City and Las Vegas to shoot a love-in, but on the day of the interview he changed his mind.

"It was just an idea, but I never saw this idea as something real. I didn't have the image, I couldn't find the key to doing it. I saw lots of love-ins in America—with groups playing and people smoking or dancing or doing nothing, just lying on the ground. But I was looking for something different—something which was more related to the special character of Zabriskie Point, and I couldn't find this relationship. I'm going to put it in the film anyway, but in a different way—just a few people and the background almost empty."

Last-minute changes have always been an essential part of Antonioni's method of working. He has never been tied to a script before, and this film is no exception. When asked how he decided a change had to be made, he replied:

"A film is not one thing after another, everything in it is related. I know immediately when something is wrong. And if something is wrong here, the consequence is that it is also wrong later in the script. So if I have to change something here, I have to change something else. I can't judge a line until I hear the line said by the actor at the moment of shooting. Sometimes I shoot two versions of the same scene. I did this on one of the Mobil scenes. I shot one version and wasn't quite happy. I wanted something more ironic so I did another version of the scene. Maybe you hear a suggestion, you see a particular place, or going to the set in the morning you have an idea and you have to explore it."

The Mobil scene to which he referred is a sequence that takes

place in Los Angeles. Antonioni constructed an expensive set high up atop the Mobil Building in downtown Los Angeles, which is supposed to be the plush offices of the Sunny Dunes Real Estate Company. In one shot he simultaneously has in focus a TV commercial for these land developers, the action inside the office, and the view of downtown L.A. outside the window.

When asked about his impressions of Los Angeles, Antonioni commented on the billboards:

"The billboards are an obsession of Los Angeles. They are so strong that you can't avoid them. Of course, there is the danger of seeing Los Angeles as a stranger. To us the billboards are so contrary, but for people who live there they are nothing—they don't even see them. I am going to show them in the film, but I don't yet know how."

Apparently, he chose Los Angeles as a location because of its proximity to Death Valley.

"This story should start in a city that is not so far from the desert. It is easy for someone from Los Angeles to come here. The desert is something very familiar to people who live in Los Angeles."

Yet there seemed to be a more meaningful connection between the two sites. When we were on location in Lone Pine looking at the dry lake bed below Mount Whitney, Antonioni observed that it had been drained because Los Angeles needed the water. It occurred to me that this was another example of Los Angeles as the consumer society. Los Angeles forces upon you an awareness of the materialistic culture; you are constantly confronted with objects to be desired, pursued and replaced. It is both physically and emotionally draining. But Death Valley with its stark beauty merely exists without forcing anything upon you.

When I first heard that Antonioni was shooting in Death Valley, I immediately thought of the settings in *Il Grido*, *L'Avventura* and *Red Desert* and assumed it would be linked to sterility. But once I got there and observed its beauty, I began to suspect that he might not fulfil these conventional expectations, that it might be used in a more complex way. In Lone Pine he casually remarked that Death Valley contains both the highest and lowest points in the United States. It is vast, cosmic and varied. When I asked him specifically how he intended to treat Death Valley, he answered:

"When I came here, I had these two young people in mind. It seemed to me the best place to have them out of their milieu—to be free. Zabriskie Point was perfect; it was so primitive, like the moon. I'm not going to explore this landscape in the film in the same way that you see it when you come here. I want to put it in the background because otherwise it would be too strong."

This particular setting will undoubtedly affect Antonioni's use of colour, for he seemed to use it quite differently in *Red Desert* and in *Blow-Up*.

"In *Red Desert* it was subjective. For the most part of the film, the reality was seen from the view of the woman who was neurotic, so that's why I changed the colour of the backgrounds, the streets, everything. In *Blow-Up* my problem was completely different. I knew London because I had shot there before on one of the episodes in my second film. But when I went back to London, I found it so different. When I am visiting a town I have thousands of impressions and images. The problem for *Blow-Up* was that I had just a few exterior scenes of London, and I had to concentrate all my impressions in these few scenes. So I had to decide, more or less, what was the colour of London—not for others, but for me. I changed the colours of the streets according to the story, not according to the real London. For *Blow-Up* it wasn't really London, it was something like London. But I didn't change the colours very much. In this new film I don't change colours; I try to exploit the colours that I have."

The changes in style are not limited to the use of colour. Antonioni predicted there would be many changes, mainly because he is working in Panavision for the first time.

"The technique for this film is different from *Blow-Up*. I am shooting in order to have the possibilities for choosing a style at the end in the cutting stage. I am shooting in different ways. I am talking primarily about the use of lenses. This is the first time I am shooting in Panavision, and Panavision forces you to use different techniques because the lenses are different. As soon as you get familiar with them, you have to exploit this difference. For example, I am using the sides much more than I did before because in this way you have a stronger relationship between the character and the background."

Since one of the main stylistic changes in *Blow-Up* was the faster pace, I wondered whether this trend would continue in *Zabriskie Point*.

"In *Blow-Up* it was fast, very fast, because the character was lively and needed this sort of pace. I don't know here. In this film the plot is not so precise. In *Blow-Up* there was a beginning, and then something happens, and then you go straight to the end. Not here. The plot is much less strong in this film. The beginning of this film will be almost documentary. No plot at all at the beginning—but a mosaic of many things. And then the characters come out from this mosaic. So I don't know yet how fast the pace or beat will be. While I'm shooting I never think of that."

Since this is Antonioni's first experience of working in America, I was curious to discover whether there were any problems, especially in his relationship with M-G-M. Although he did not feel any restrictions on his autonomy, he did express uneasiness about problems connected with the budget.

MARK FRECHETTE AND DARIA HALPRIN. PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRUCE DAVIDSON. MAGNUM PHOTOS.



"My autonomy, I would say, is complete. They leave me free to do what I want. The only thing now is that they are starting to be worried about the budget. They ask me why the film is so expensive, but that's what I'm going to ask them. I don't know why it's so expensive, I really don't know. I have a crew that is only half the size of what is usual in America because I don't want a big crew."

It was clear that he considered the fact that they were over-budget the fault of the Americans and not his. In fact, he was horrified by the American tendency to waste money.

"It seems to me I'm seeing such a waste of money. It seems to be almost immoral. I feel bad sometimes. For instance, they threw away a piece of gelatine that we used and the piece was still new. There is also a waste of film. If I am shooting with two or three cameras and I need this camera only in the middle of the scene, in Italy I would start with that camera just at that moment. Not here. They start from the beginning. It is a waste of film! They are consumers. They are used to wasting something—goods, materials, food, everything. And I'm not used to this."

Ironically, this tendency towards conspicuous consumption and waste seems to be one of the American characteristics under attack in *Zabriskie Point*.

Antonioni's crew was unusual not only because it was small, but also because it was surprisingly young for a Hollywood film. For many this was their first assignment on a feature, and most of them were very enthusiastic about working with Antonioni. The first assistant director, Bob Rubin, is only twenty-seven and his only experience is in television. Although Harrison Starr was associate producer on *Rachel, Rachel*, this was his first assignment as an executive producer. The still photographs on the set were being shot by Bruce Davidson, a talented and noted artist in his own right. The press agent, Beverly Walker, who is very knowledgeable about cinema, came right from a job with the New York Film Festival. One of the electricians, Jerry Upton, is an avid film buff who has seen most of Antonioni's films several times. Since this kind of crew is unusual in Hollywood, I wondered whether Antonioni had selected it purposely. He admitted that he had tried to get as many young crew members as possible, but added:

"I have some elements of this crew who are not so young—some older people who worked, for instance, on the first film of Greta Garbo, on the first *Ben Hur*, on Stroheim's *Greed*. It's very amusing to talk to them about these things."

His problems were not limited to age; they also involved the unions. For one thing, he had tried to hire some black cameramen to shoot a sequence that takes place in a Negro ghetto but was unsuccessful because he couldn't find any black men in the union. Some of the problems with the unions were also linked with age.

"I had a lot of problems with the unions, and in Hollywood this is much more difficult than in New York. The unions are so strong. There are lots of old people. You can't find what you are looking for. I needed some cameramen and some assistant cameramen—some young people used to shooting in the modern way, people who can zoom without your having to tell them the exact distance from the actors to the camera, people who can make changes on their own and who can sometimes do what they want. I want them to do that, to do something different from the script, maybe. At that critical moment, the assistant cameraman has to make the decision, but the American cameraman can't do this. That's why I was forced to bring some people from Italy."

Antonioni links these difficulties not only to the unions, but

also to the national character. He finds it much more difficult to work in America than in England.

"I don't know why, but English people are much more familiar to me. At the time I was making *Blow-Up*, at least, they were so mad—in a positive and very pleasant way—that they were almost Neapolitan (that's a joke). I like them, I like English people much more than Americans. I mean I find myself closer to them. The Americans are so cool sometimes. They need to know exactly what they are doing. Sometimes they are like Germans—fastidious, precise. This makes me upset because I like to have people around me who are more spontaneous."

This difficulty did not seem to apply to his relationship with his two leading actors—Mark Frechette, a 20-year-old carpenter from Boston who is interested in founding an underground newspaper and who has never worked in a film before; and Daria Halprin, the 19-year-old daughter of Ann Halprin, head of the experimental San Francisco Dance Workshop. Daria is an anthropology major at Berkeley. She reminded me of a miniature Sophia Loren, with plenty of vitality, warmth and guts. In the particular sequence I watched them shoot, Daria was in a car being buzzed by a plane (supposedly flown by Mark). The stunt pilot came so close in one pass that the plane scraped the radio antenna of the car. In the next shot the plane chased Daria as she was running across the desert and came within five feet of her head. She was scared but kept her cool.

Antonioni seemed to select these non-professionals for their naturalness and spontaneity, which he couldn't find among actors.

"I saw a lot of young people—actors and students in acting school, but I couldn't find the right people. And so I started to look for them out of the schools—out of the usual milieu of young actors. And I saw Daria in a film. She wasn't acting. There was a ballet in this film, and Daria was one of the girls dancing. I saw this face coming out from the back, and I was impressed. We made a test, and she was extraordinary. She has the best qualities for an actress. She is so sincere, she can communicate anything, everything. Finding Mark was much more difficult because I made a lot of tests of young people, students and actors before I could find anyone. One of these tests was Mark's."

He felt it was particularly fitting to use non-professionals like Mark and Daria for this film "because this story could have happened to them. They use their own names—first names and family names—in the film because the story is about them." In an attempt to preserve their naturalness, Antonioni is not allowing them to be interviewed or to see the rushes; which is probably a wise decision. The one time I saw Mark and Daria ruffled was when they read their first publicity. At first they were excited to see their names and pictures in print, but when they read the article they were angered by what was said. The writer didn't understand their respect for Antonioni, their attitude towards the film, or their sense of humour. Starring in a movie has not yet destroyed their 'authenticity'. And they know they are not just in any movie, but a movie by Antonioni (although Mark Frechette had never heard of Antonioni when he was first offered the part). They seem to be aware of why he chose them for their roles. Thus, they appear casual on the set while at the same time realise the implications of what it means to be acting in this film. They probably both will become stars, but this will probably be the highpoint of their careers.

And for Antonioni *Zabriskie Point* looks as though it will also be a highpoint. For it deals with some of the most vital contemporary issues, it is visually exciting, and it continues his experimentation with the medium.