

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

ZABRISKIE POINT 1970

Michelangelo Antonioni

OVERVIEW

In California in 1966, Antonioni saw a short newspaper article about a young man who had stolen an aircraft and was killed when he tried to return it. From this core, the director spun a tale that combines documentary social realism with fantasy surrealism, inspired by the ancient landscape around Zabriskie Point, near Death Valley in the Mojave Desert. As with all his films, Antonioni is less interested in the details of the politics than in emotional interiors and the environment, both man-made and natural, which reflect those inner states. In juxtaposing the counter-culture against the establishment, the film sides with the young radicals, although it does not glorify them or their ideals. The scene with dozens of naked youth playing sex games in the desert brought the film to the attention of the FBI and state officials, but it evaded the censors because it was not explicit. Despite its tragic end, the final image of the film shows the primal force of the sun. The *ennui* that dominated the director's films about post-war Italy did not survive the bright light of southern California.

SYNOPSIS

Mark, a disaffected student radical, gets involved in a clash with police at a student strike in 1970 Los Angeles. In the confusion and fear, a policeman is shot and killed. Mark, who might have shot him, flees. But not on foot. He steals a plane and flies over the Mojave Desert, where young hippie Daria is cruising along toward Phoenix to meet Lee, her boss and (probably) her lover. Mark runs out of fuel, lands and meets Daria. The attraction is mutual and is consummated in the dusty terrain below Zabriskie Point. Mark flies the stolen plane back to LA, aware that he might get arrested but not expecting a massive police presence. He is shot before he leaves the cockpit. When Daria hears this on her car radio, her pacifist temperament boils with anger and later explodes when she witnesses the capitalist mindset of Lee and his colleagues who are planning a large housing development in the desert.

PEOPLE

Mark	Mark is a young student in Los Angeles.
Daria	Daria is a young woman, temporarily working as a secretary.
Lee	Lee is a successful real-estate executive.

SCENES

Revolutionary tactics As white and black students at a university in Los Angeles debate tactics for an impending strike, the key question is whether whites are ready for direct action. The dramatic point arises when one black student says that the only thing the 'pigs' understand is the power of the gun, and a white student asks if he is willing to die. 'Black people are already dying all over this country,' the black student answers. Suddenly a white student named Mark stands up and declares that he, too, 'is willing to die, but not out of boredom.'

Daria Daria, a pretty young woman, tries to get past a security guard in a modern office-block. The guard won't budge until a handsome real-estate executive, Lee Allen, enters the reception. Daria tell him that she's working temporarily as a secretary but says, 'It's not something I dig. But I need the bread.'

Arrest Mark goes to a police station to bail his roommate who has been arrested along with others for preventing access to university buildings. Mark is told to wait while the protestors, some of them badly injured, are processed. When he is insolent, he is violently manhandled and arrested.

Firearms When Mark and a friend are released from jail, they buy guns, claiming that they need them for 'self-defence...to protect our women.' As they leave the store, with pistols and rifles, a salesman says, 'You can protect your house. So, if you shoot anyone outside, be sure you drag him inside.'

Sunny Dunes Lee Allen sits in his office in downtown LA with his colleagues watching a test-run of a television commercial for a new housing development in the desert. 'Sunny Dunes,' as it is called, offers everything a young couple could wish for—clean air, leisure facilities and modern kitchens.

Fatalities When Mark goes to the campus, he gets caught up in confrontation between protestors and police that turns violent. Students are tear-gassed and beaten with truncheons until a small group holes up in a building. Armed police warn them to evacuate or face the consequences. A smoke bomb is tossed inside, and the students come out, but in the confusion and smoke the police shoot dead one student. Watching from a distance, Mark reaches for his pistol. A policeman is shot and fatally wounded, but it's not clear by whom.

Flight Mark flees, jumps on a bus and learns that he has been caught on television footage of the incident. Frightened he will be arrested, Mark walks to a small municipal airport and (without any planning or trouble) hijacks a private aircraft as if it were a stolen car. Flying high above LA, he steers the plane to the Mojave Desert.

Mystery place Below him, Daria is cruising along in a car on her way to Phoenix to meet Lee, the real-estate executive, who is now her boss and possibly her lover. She stops at a café and asks directions to a place where a man named Jimmy takes care of emotionally disturbed kids from LA. She's told that 'this is the place.'

Feral kids Leaving the roadside café, she finds a gang of feral young kids living in a rundown shack. When she asks for Jimmy, a little boy answers, 'Can we have a piece of ass?' Taunting her, they tug at her short skirt and force her to run back to her car.

Dive bomber Noticing her below on the road, Mark dive bombs her several times until she is so frightened that she hides in the sand. Mark drops a red security vest, which she picks up and waves at him with a smile.

Meeting She continues driving but stops when she sees the plane on the ground. 'Thanks for the nightie,' she says, approaching Mark, 'but I don't think I can use it.' She agrees to drive him to a gas station to get petrol for his plane. Speeding along together, they share jokes and enjoy each other's company.

Zabriskie Point They stop at Zabriskie Point, a high promontory from where they can see an ancient lake, which is now a depression surrounded by strange hills and peaks. Looking out at the hauntingly beautiful landscape, he delights her with a witty summary of his student antics, including reprogramming the dean's computer, which 'made all the engineers take art courses.'

Sex As they explore the dry river bed, they share ideas about politics. She says that she heard on the radio that a cop was killed by a white student at the student protest. She is full of joy, while he is more pensive, but eventually they end up making love in the dust.

Suspicion Back at the parking area on top of the valley, a highway patrol officer questions Daria, while Mark hides behind a portable toilet. When Mark aims his pistol at the officer, Daria steps between them to save the man's life. After the patrol car leaves, Daria interrogates Mark about the policeman killed during the LA campus protest. He claims that he wanted shoot him but 'someone else got there first.'

Dead on arrival Returning with fuel to the plane, they camouflage it with bright paint and political slogans. Daria warns him not to return to LA, but he says he must even if it's risky. He flies the psychedelic-looking plane back and lands at the same airport, where the police and media are

waiting. Seeing them, Mark steers the plane onto a grassy patch between the runways, where he is shot dead by a policeman.

Corporate life-style Hearing about Mark's death on the car radio, Daria is disturbed but drives on to meet Lee at his expensive home outside Phoenix. Unobserved, she walks into the pool area, where several young women are sunbathing. Through a huge glass window, she watches Lee trying to sell the Sunny Dunes project to potential investors. Lee notices Daria and greets her with considerable interest. She goes to the bedroom he has arranged for her downstairs but doesn't enter.

Explosion Leaving the house, she drives a short distance and looks back. The camera switches to the meeting inside, where the men discuss water and money. Suddenly, the house is blown apart and destroyed in a billowing tower of smoke and flames.

THEMES

1. SOCIETY

a) *youth culture* Shooting for this film began in 1968, at the height of the 1960's protest culture, which included the anti-Vietnam War movement, the Black Liberation movement and the pacifist Hippie movement. The film features all three of these cultural strands, with the two lead characters embodying the first and last. Whatever the limitations of the film, it cannot be faulted for its depiction of this critical moment in American cultural history.

b) *students* The film begins in a meeting among student activists who debate tactics for an upcoming strike at their college. Chaired by real-life black revolutionary leader Kathleen Cleaver (wife of the even more famous Eldridge Cleaver), the debate is a realistic reflection of the issues discussed at such meetings all across the country at that time. Much of the discussion centres on how to inspire white students to take revolutionary action, and it takes a dramatic turn when a black student says you have to 'talk to the man [police] in his own language...guns.' All the words that the middle-class students have been spouting, all the hours of debate, the heated arguments and the considered comments—all of it is dismissed by the call to arms. As the black student says, the students must use guns to 'talk.' The only words that matter are those that come from the barrel of a gun. This scene is significant because we see that Mark, the main character, is listening with increasing frustration at these 'armchair revolutionaries.' Later, he becomes another victim of gun violence.

c) *police* Throughout the film, the police are portrayed as nasty characters, especially in the crucial scene when they confront the student protestors on campus. It begins with a closeup of an officer wearing a riot helmet and face-mask, which makes him look like a science-fiction villain. As the police mass in numbers, they are anonymous, faces obscured by helmets and visors, dressed in dark uniforms and standing in the unlit foreground. Behind them, in the sunshine, are the brightly dressed students, whose faces we can see. One officer beats a student with his heavy truncheon. Blood drips from the heads of several others. Armed police arrive and surround the building occupied by the students. The inevitable happens when a scared white policeman thinks a black student has a gun and kills him with a single bullet to the head. Again, like the student debate, this is a frighteningly accurate picture of the times. In May 1970, four unarmed student protestors were shot dead by police at a college in Ohio.

d) *hippies* The hippie movement, which developed alongside the radical political movement, is also represented in the film. In fact, its message of peace and love, not violence and war, is articulated by both the lead characters, though more explicitly by Daria. The most spectacular illustration of the zany aspect of the hippie movement occurs in the scene when Mark and Daria paint the stolen plane before he flies it back to LA. Covered in bright green, orange and yellow, with anti-war slogans, it looks more like a toy than a plane. 'They might not even think it's a plane,' Mark suggests. 'Maybe a strange, prehistoric bird flying in from the Mojave Desert.' Daria thinks it's too risky, but Mark replies that it would be wrong to take someone's plane for a joyride and never come back to express your thanks. His flippant comment perfectly captures the flightiness of the hippie movement of the times.

e) *corporate culture* If California was the hub of radical student politics, it was also the site of an avaricious real-estate industry. In fact, the money-grabbing despoliation of the land was one of many causes for the rise of radical movements. Southern California, with its booming and increasing

affluent population, was a dreamland for land development investment. Antonioni filmed his story in a clever way, so that the Sunny Dunes project, Lee and his colleagues (money-led environmental destruction) are juxtaposed with Zabriskie Point, Daria and Mark (ancient landscape and its admirers). The explosion at the end is the culmination of that confrontation.

TV advertisement The artificiality of the real-estate boom in California is depicted in the scene where Lee and his colleagues review a commercial for their Sunny Dunes development in the desert. Using dioramas of three-dimensional, miniature figures, we see happy people by the pool, playing golf and hunting with guns. The narration promotes other features of the location: 'Breathe in the fresh desert air, drink fresh mountain water. Become an independent man...like the pioneers of old who moulded the West.' The camera shifts back and forth from these dioramas to the executive in a fancy office, smoking and staring at the screen. After a while, it becomes difficult to distinguish the fake from the real people.

Lee's house Another illustration of the soulless real-estate business occurs at the very end of the movie. Lee has invited potential investors in his Sunny Dunes development to his house in the desert. We see the businessmen through Daria's eyes as she observes them through an enormous pane of plate glass. The lack of words or any ambient sound highlights the artificiality of their gestures and the insincerity of their facial expressions. Then the camera goes inside and we hear voices discussing the project, which is represented in miniature on a large glass board. Houses are little red markers, shops are in blue and leisure facilities in white, with the lake a blank space in the middle. This is the essence of development schemes, in which land becomes space on an architect's board, reduced to convenient dimensions and packaged for sale to the highest bidder. Because this scene comes soon after the extended sequence at Zabriskie Point, the contrast could not be sharper. The ancient landscape of this desert has a reality that the executives cannot understand.

2. Love

Mark and Daria

attraction That unnerving scene (described above) is later followed by the only genuine sexual scene in this movie about peace and love. It is part of the long-drawn out sequence of Mark and Daria exploring the landscape below Zabriskie Point. Having met in the oddest way, with him dive bombing her car, they are immediately attracted to each other and the sequence unfolds in a gradual progression of their growing intimacy. First, they race to the bottom of dry riverbed like children. Then they talk seriously about student activism, in which she dismisses his radical talk as a misguided division into 'good and bad guys.' She responds to the peacefulness of the desert and points out the plants that grow despite the climate. Next, they run around again, skipping and jumping until they are covered with dust.

sexuality Soon, the youthful play evolves into adult sex. Lying down in the dust, they kiss. 'Would you like to go with me?' he asks. 'Where?' she asks. 'Wherever I'm going?' 'Are you really asking?' He moves his finger up her thigh, and they undress and make love. The entire sequence is slow and gentle, with more laughter than panting. As they make love, the camera shows dozens of other couples, and sometimes threesomes, rolling naked in the desert and engaging in erotic play. The suggestion is that Mark and Daria's peaceful love-making has released a powerful sexual energy, reflecting reflects the geological forces that formed the landscape itself.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Mark Mark is a confident young man who shares the ideals of the radical movement but is too much of an individual to join it. He is surly, sarcastic and reckless, but also fun-loving, affectionate and serious, all at the same time.

Sarcastic Part of Mark's radical student personality is his sarcasm toward everything and everyone, a quality that adults would probably describe as 'smart-aleck.' The most dramatic example of his cynicism occurs in the opening sequence covering the debate about tactics for the campus strike. When one of the young black students says that they need guns, a white student asks if he is willing to die. After he answers that black people are already dying, white student Mark stands up and announces, 'I'm willing to die, too.' There is pin-drop silence and all heads turn to look at this daring young man. With his audience eagerly waiting for him to explain, he says, 'But not of boredom.' He gives a wry smile and leaves. This is vintage Mark. He's too smart to die and too bored of empty political debate to waste any more time on it.

Serious Although Mark leaves the meeting and is not part of 'the movement,' he later reveals that he is committed to radical politics. He's driving a friend to the police station to bail out his roommate, who has been arrested. His friend, sitting next to him in the car, starts to write on a piece of paper. It's a police form that permits someone to be released early if filled out in advance. 'Be prepared, is that your slogan?' Mark asks with mockery. 'Got to be realistic,' his friend says. 'The day you are realistic is the day I'll join the movement,' Mark says. His friend points out that joining is not a matter of choice and that for some 'it's a matter of survival.' Mark replies that he can't wait for student debates. 'I'm tired of it, man,' he says. 'Kids talking about violence, and cops doing it. I need to act.' Mark values his personal independence too much to blend into a mass movement. Confident and angry, he prefers to act on his own.

Daring Nothing expresses the 1960's *zeitgeist* better than Mark's audacious theft of the airplane. He is on the run, having probably just shot a policeman during the violent clash on campus. He has no money and no plans, until he sees a small plane buzz above him. Minutes later, he enters a small suburban airport, strolls along the line of parked private aircraft and sees an open door. He looks in, scrutinises the control panel, checks that no one is watching and climbs in. After another half minute of examining the dials and switches, he turns the key and the propellers rotate. As he taxis down the runway, a mechanic runs over and we think Mark's joyride is over. But the man just wants to know where he's going. Mark gives him a destination and then he's off. It is bold, it is reckless but it is also comic and expresses the spirit of the age.

Doomed Despite his bold exterior, Mark is frightened. He is wanted by the police for killing one of their fellow officers and his photograph is everywhere. His desperation is revealed in a scene that occurs just after their sensual love-making. When Daria is being questioned by a highway patrolman, Mark hides behind a portable toilet. A second later, he pulls out his gun is about to shoot when Daria prevents this by stepping in front of the cop. When the patrol car leaves, she confronts Mark about what happened at the campus riot. 'I wanted to [kill him], but someone else got there first,' he says. 'I never got off a shot.' His denial carries little credibility when he says the gun is empty and then empties the bullets into the gravel. Daria is quick to point out that he's going to need the bullets if he expects the police to believe him. 'I'm not going to try,' he says, with his face twisted into an angry scowl. He knows that he is doomed. He did kill the policeman and, after his fling in the desert, his life is coming to an end.

Daria Daria is a spirited and optimistic young woman, an embodiment of the hippie movement of the times. She is vivacious, playful and sympathetic, but not naïve. She has a strong sense of herself, expresses her ideas clearly and, above all, responds to the peacefulness of the landscape at Zabriskie Point.

Playful Daria's carefree attitude is illustrated in the scene when she meets Mark, after he has dive-bombed her car on the highway. In fact, he nearly killed her when he got so close she had to lie down flat on the desert floor. But when he throws her a red security vest, she runs over and picks it up with a giggle. Now, she participates in his little game by waving the vest at him, like a man guiding an airplane to land. He flies off and she gets back in her car. A moment later, she sees the plane on the ground and goes over to meet the crazy pilot with a playful smile. 'Thanks for the nightie,' she says, echoing Mark's mocking voice, 'but I don't think I can use it.' Coming closer, she holds it up to his chest, as if seeing if it fits him. If Mark can be outrageous with his flying machine, she can play along in the same spirit.

Pacifist Daria is the hippie of the pair. She wears her hair long, her skirts short and she smokes marijuana. Her pacifist mentality is revealed in the scene she has with Mark in the riverbed below Zabriskie Point. When they have a serious discussion about radical politics, he says that, in the end, you have to choose one side or the other. She corrects him, saying, 'There are a thousand sides. Not just heroes and villains.' Then she stares out at the austere landscape and says, 'Don't you feel at home here? It's peaceful.' When he says 'it's dead,' she taunts him. 'Ok,' she says, 'so let's play a death game. You start at one end of the valley and I'll start at the other. And we'll see who can kill the most. Lizards, snakes and rabbits. At the end, we'll count up and see how many deaths we have. And the winner gets to kill the loser!' Daria has taught Mark a lesson by exposing the stupidity of his morbid talk. The pacifist finds love and peace even in a place that is close to Death Valley.

Vengeful Daria's peaceful nature is challenged at the very end of the story, when Mark is shot dead by police back at the airport in LA. As Daria hears this on her car radio, her cheerful face collapses in despair, but she drives on to Lee's expensive house in the desert. Once there, she is a silent witness

to the real-estate investors planning to desecrate the landscape that she has just found to be beautiful. Lee wants to fold her into his culture of affluence, power and, eventually, sex (there are several young women sunning themselves in bikinis by the pool). But this is a changed Daria. Not speaking a word, but registering the true nature of Lee's world, she leaves and then, in the final sensational shot, she sees the house destroyed in a fiery explosion. She stares at the house with such intense hate that we think her inner fury has blown it up.



(Daria and Mark)



(The explosion at the end)