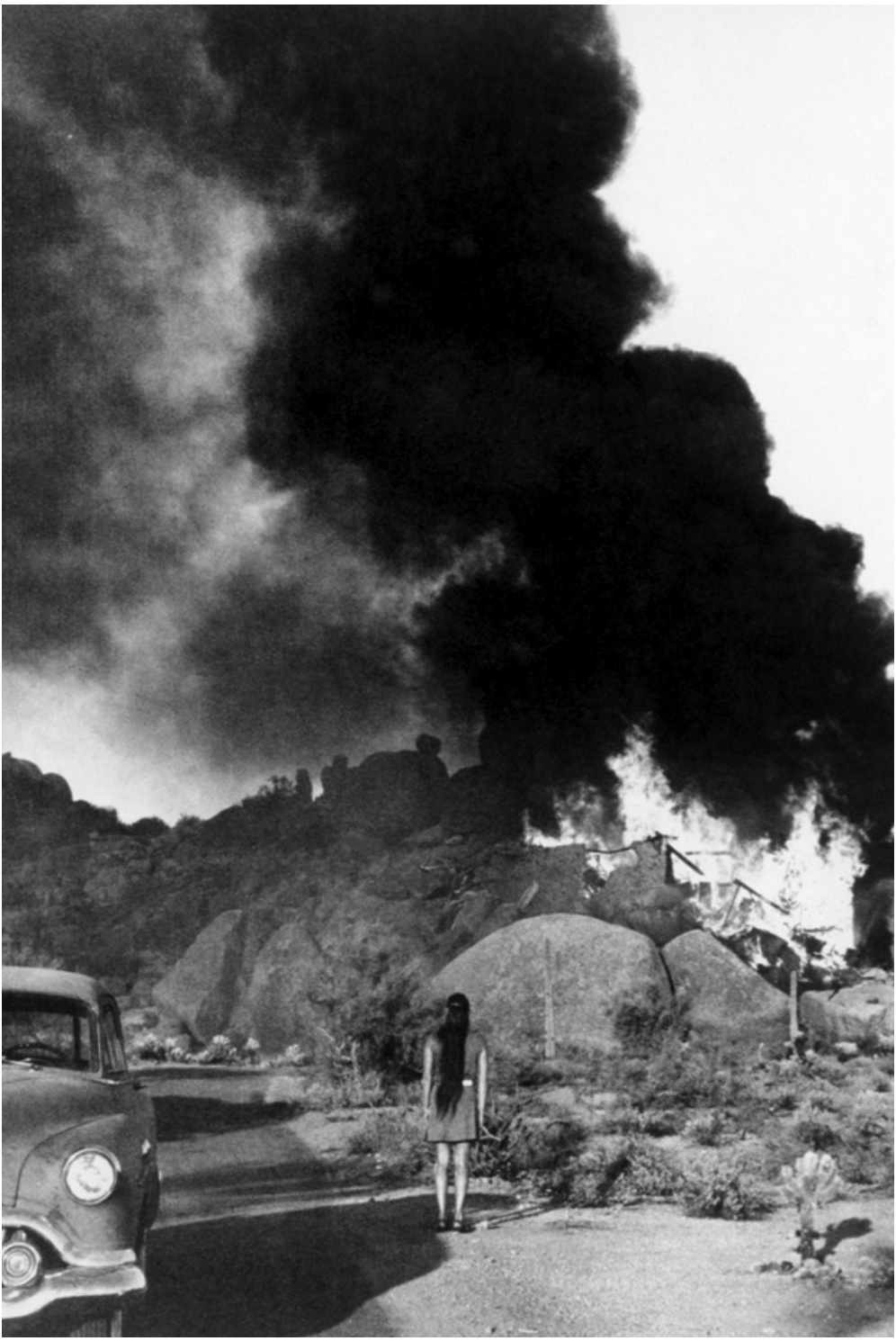

This bulletin is a mongrel reworking of two previously published pieces by Diedrich Diederichsen: "Psychedelic Critique: Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Zabriskie Point* Revisited," in *Contemporary Utopia —Musdienu utopija*, exhibition catalog (Riga: Latvian Centre of Contemporary Art, 2001), and "Veiling and Unveiling: The Culture of the Psychedelic," in Christoph Grunenberg, ed., *Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era*, exhibition catalog (London: Tate Publishing, 2005). With Diedrich's blessing, we have taken considerable liberties here, rewriting, re-translating, cutting and pasting, subtracting from and adding to his texts with abandon. We would like to emphasize our appreciation of his generosity and trust. He would like to emphasize that HE IS IN ABSOLUTELY NO WAY WHATSOEVER RESPONSIBLE FOR THE OUTCOME.

Cover image: Still from *Zabriskie Point* (1970)

Michelangelo Antonioni's 1970 film *Zabriskie Point* is remembered today for two scenes set in the desert, both of which only occur late in the second half; and it is for these two scenes alone that it attracts the epithet "utopian."

In the first, the love scene, the copulating couple of Daria Halprin ("Daria") and Marc Frechette ("Marc") are multiplied, according to psychedelia's kaleidoscopic logic of ornamentation, into an infinite number of hippie lovers making out in the dunes to the music of Jerry Garcia. In the second, the explosion scene, the newly-constructed modernist bungalow that belongs to Daria's boss—a patently commercial "lifestyle" utopia—explodes once in slow-motion before Daria's satisfied gaze, then over and over again from multiple points of view. To the strains of Pink Floyd's interminable "Careful with that Axe, Eugene," the shells and remains of myriad consumer items then follow suit—refrigerators, TV sets, cereal boxes, and items of clothing emerge like centrifugal rockets, exploding in sublime SUPER-slow motion before disintegrating into superior dirt. This psychedelic presentation of the products' violent demise puts their beauty on show for one last time.

A less obvious but equally psychedelic feature of this closing sequence is the fact that it is unclear who or what has triggered the explosion. Is it, as the synopses in film encyclopaedias generally suppose, merely a figment of Daria's imagination, despite the fact that no technical aspect other than slow-motion indicates unreality? Or, given that we have just seen her creeping through the bungalow, distraught and clearly trying to avoid being recognized, has she actually planted the bombs herself? This is how I interpreted it the first time I saw the film in my youth, despite the fact that there is equally nothing to substantiate that she might be doing anything so real and consequential at that moment. Today, though, I tend towards a third view: it is Daria's *psychedelic vision* that NOT ONLY IMAGINES this explosion of consumer culture BUT ACTUALLY SEES it.

This so-called psychedelic vision is a widely forgotten intellectual tenet of the political wing of the hippie revolt; namely, that "synthetically psychotic" LSD-users don't perceive merely another false, illusionary world, but rather an actual, true one. It was propounded by many representatives of 1960s culture, including Allen Ginsberg, minimalist artists and composers,

and various rock musicians. This was a truth apprehended not by the unworldly gaze of Timothy Leary's disciples, but the worldly one of Ken Kesey's followers, focused on consumer culture at the moment of its decline into ridicule (if by no means its collapse). Kesey's political mysticism culminates in the notion that only such a *negatively-charmed* view of consumer culture's magical objects can empower to political utopia. Beyond that lies no India, no illumination, no colorful fabrics; beyond that lies the desert, the only place where we can really make love …

But from where, or what, does this psychedelic vision grow?

TRULY FALSE OR JUST UNKNOWABLE

Psychedelic discourse recognizes two fundamental axioms that, strictly speaking, contradict each other. One axiom presumes that our world is false—though the extent and nature of its falsehood vary according to the worldview of the particular party doing the presuming. An extreme example is the Buddhist doctrine of *maya*, which claims that the entire world of the senses is illusory. The other axiom presumes that the world is unknowable—though the veil is by no means absolute; it does not cover objects and objectivity, but is rather a specifically human, subjective un-enlightenment best conceived as a technical impediment, a consequence of the limitations of our senses. Such limitations can be corrected either by stimulating or improving them, or as a result of conditioning—in other words, an ideological or manipulated state of subjectivity established in the interests of those in power, and whose abolition is therefore a political and cultural task.

My sense is that the term "psychedelia" and its associations had the mass appeal they did during the late 1960s and early 1970s precisely because these two strands could be interwoven. Indeed, interweaving them became routine, resulting in a complex of mysticism and politics that could be mixed up on a daily basis, whether deliberately or merely out of habit. Techniques aimed at emancipation blended with others intended to boost intuition, and gave rise to a culture whose aesthetic forms could easily conceal such a dual, antagonistic genealogy. In theories of manipulation, knowledge of "a true world behind the surface appearance of things" could be read

equally in political or mystical terms. It could mean "beyond the culture of exchange value and the spectacle" (i.e., profoundly political) or equally "beyond the great illusion of worldly life" (i.e., profoundly apolitical).

The relative political successes of hippie culture in comparison to other, more patently politicized countercultures was in no small measure thanks to a form of quasi-physical knowledge gained through profound experiences and not just intellectual insights. According to hippie wisdom, all that was necessary was to *turn on* the politicians, adults, and other powers-that-be, and they would suddenly see the error of their ways. LSD in the drinking water—the classic power fantasy of psychedelia's adherents—was supposed to bring salvation through perception. "We believe LSD is a cosmic truth serum," declared Rock Scully, long-time manager of the Grateful Dead who, according to a number of reports, tested the character of their business partners by slipping them acid. Here too the unspoken assumption was that the insight gained through psychedelic experiences would positively affect them *as human beings*—spiritually and metaphysically on the one hand, and morally and politically on the other.

Drug experiences offered the models: hallucinogens like LSD and mescaline, for sure, but also the sort of strong hashish taken by the likes of Walter Benjamin and Charles Baudelaire. The classic accounts of these trips and states always speak of changes in the perception of time, sometimes even its complete loss, and often of an altered perception of space (the floor disappearing from under one's feet, etc.) Yet these elite testimonials don't get us very far because they are formulated rather summarily and usually determined to some extent by the psychological disposition of the author. Of greater interest are the reports that derive from what we might call the "folklore" of drug experience; that is, from the oral culture of college campuses, dining halls and nightclubs, the language, customs, and practices of which are familiar to anyone who has compared notes on hallucinogenics from the 1960s on. In addition to the classic self-observations, which usually involve great amusement at—and often sarcastic distance from—the place of the world's objects in the fine-meshed context of the quotidian and its symbolic order, such accounts almost always include hallucinations. And if we analyze these hallucinations systematically, we discover yet another cocktail of two seemingly contradictory phenomena: on the one hand, ADDITIONS to our regular,

impoverished picture of the world, and on the other, the WITHDRAWAL of those structural, symbolic elements that, usually unmarked and unobserved, grant objects their place in it.

The first of these two experiences consists of a surplus of visibility typically channeled or represented by ornamental images. The second takes something away, or places a detail of reality in a light so bright and vivid —flooding all contexts—that the dense backdrop of the everyday itself appears to be withdrawn. Both experiences co-exist in *Zabriskie Point*: the former in the ornamental repetition of those hippies making love, the latter in those closing explosions, a particularly sharp and violent elimination of structures and symbols. In this way the movie sticks close to the psychedelic script, which always involves two or more mutually-excluding elements at the same time. This is the schizophrenic simultaneity that organizes psychedelic space around it—always one thing AND its other; always, at the very least, black AND white.

Perhaps there is a case to be made, then, that *Zabriskie Point* can be RE-considered an exemplary instance of the dynamic contradictions inherent in the psychedelic vision—and that Daria's experience is thus an embedded allusion to Antonioni's overarching one, a *mise-en-abyme* fully in accordance with the laws that govern the psychedelic calculus of images. This would be the (in the proper sense of the word) *obscene* nature of the psychedelic vision, as the vision has no frame, and no stage to contain it. The psychedelic vision is many. It exceeds any single mode of representation, and within this *mise-en-abyme* is perhaps where Antonioni's film allegorically turns on itself in all its suspect materiality, as celluloid that will ultimately itself be burnt through by Daria's vision.

FURTHUR CONTRADICTIONS

Antonioni's film has often been reproached by its critics for not telling its story properly, and "not properly" has variously meant telling too many stories, disconnected stories, contradictory stories, stories that are not worked out, stories which are told too quickly, or stories which are told too slowly. If we disregard whether this impropriety is either down to the director's shortcomings or his carefully considered intentions, we can

perhaps ask a couple more promising questions: why did these multifarious stories come together in the first place; and why could they only come together in the form that they did?

In the first instance, the film tells of two different political struggles—that of the Black Panthers, the African-American revolutionary socialist movement active in the U.S. from 1966 on, and the more general, predominantly "white" youth and student revolt. In the film these two groups are portrayed in intimate conjunction, yet even if the Black Panthers had in many ways assumed the function of role models for the politicized segment of the wider youth revolt, they were essentially coming from somewhere else altogether, and could call upon a quite different relationship to their surroundings. From today's perspective, both movements stand in particular cultural and political trajectories that have gone on developing since those incendiary moments in the late 1960s, though it's unlikely that anyone today would consider the two historical movements comparable or closely related. Let's take them separately, then.

The African-American struggle for political rights as a basis for better economic prospects and cultural representation followed in the wake of the anti- and post-colonial movements that had overthrown the imperial division of the world within only a few decades (from the independence of India in 1947, to the collapse of the Portugal's empire in the 1970s). The Black Panther movement arose, in part, because of the yawning gulf between the constant and progressive, if hesitant, granting of formal civil rights to African-Americans on the one hand, and the crass denial of these rights by systematic police brutality, daily racism, and cultural censorship on the other. Evidently these rights were worthless, or merely fighting for them was not enough.

By contrast, the struggle of the general youth and student revolt was more against a regime of discipline, and in focusing on the universities the movement had a target of high symbolic value if a relatively low potential for repression; it was thus a fight fought more often by Oedipus than the Deserter. In the context of a Fordist post-war society organized and cemented by institutions of discipline, the younger generation sensed that this discipline had been carried too far—a feeling exacerbated when the military, perhaps the most retrograde and repressive of these institutions,

called upon the already-anachronistic universal draft when the war in Vietnam broke out. The new generation had grown up under more relaxed conditions than their parents, the product of a middle class that had expanded as a result of Fordist compromise, and was now accustomed to think of its actions as both *meaningful* and *consequential.* The Vietnam War, which on the face of it was not greatly different in moral terms from other interventions made by the U.S. drive for world domination during the Cold War era (from Guatemala to Chile, from the Bay of Pigs to Grenada) was placed in a different light precisely because the others had been fought without drafting civilians. In the wake of the potential and actual participation of the general population, particularly the young, the war came in for widespread criticism. This criticism grew to be one of the entire society and culture, and was consequently used by the younger generation to secure its hold on the world.

One one side of the cultural divide in the 1960s were those who saw unrestrained development, the relaxation of morals, and the dissolution of traditional institutions as part and parcel of an expansion and reorganization of capitalist productive power. In trends such as the loosening of the disciplinary regime, sexual liberation, and the liberalization of the universities, this sector saw no break with the system, but rather its logical extension. This the point of view of Daria's liberal boss in *Zabriskie Point*. On the other side were those for whom the maintenance of the disciplinary regime now seemed the only way of sustaining Western political and economic systems. Suddenly the movements towards relaxation already detectable in the 1950s (albeit in forms that absolutely conformed with the system—rock'n'roll, for example) were, once carried forward by a new generation, seen to stand IN FUNDAMENTAL OPPOSITION to that very same system. Furthermore, these youth movements saw themselves as not only detached from the liberal establishment, but as revolutionary too. And so they began to seek alliances with those groups that had every direct economic reason to challenge the basis of the system. Think: *This system that is prepared to send me to my death so sensitizes me that I now see all the other death threats, even if they are not directed against me, as emanating from the same source.* Such alliances, and the conditions that brought them about, are *Zabriskie Point*'s point of departure.

The opening scene's quasi-documentary college discussion, filmed at the University of Berkeley, includes actual representatives of the Black Panthers, whose "characters" also retain their real names. We recognize one of the speakers as Kathleen Cleaver, still active today, and at that time wife of Eldridge Cleaver, the leader of the radical wing. The radical position she adopts in the discussion along with other African-Americans is not only more obviously extreme than that of the white students, it is also more obviously appropriate to a situation of direct confrontation with the powers of the state. For the Panthers, the decisive factor is that the university authorities, here as in other places, have decided to call in the police—and as was repeatedly and painfully demonstrated in Los Angeles during the late 1960s (latterly at the Watts riots of 1965), the police were corrupt, racist, and a law unto themselves. For most white students, though—including those who had had negative experiences with the law—the word "police" was not at all synonymous with such "arbitrary justice" in the same way. To them the police still generally represented an ultimately reasonable rule of law, and a police force that acts at the behest of the university authorities is merely an extension of the long arm of their parents. Revolting against this authority implies a short, sharp, and possibly irreconcilable conflict, but by no means one that leads to physical annihilation of one of the parties. In spite of everything, the white students still want to complete their courses somehow.

BEYOND THE CODE

Over the course of *Zabriskie Point*, Marc's realization that the battle for a fundamental relaxation of discipline will be mercilessly persecuted in line with the degree to which the *status quo* is opposed, leads him neither to continue the fight in a less confrontational form, nor to become fully radicalized by joining the Panthers. Instead he opts for a third way, a synthesis: he stays with the white "lifestyle" revolt (highways, desert, adventure) but remains intent on working out its revolutionary character. He does this by trying to reconstruct the confrontation from the apolitical, even system-friendly movement towards social relaxation. And yet the fact remains that Marc was only ever really involved—in a truly ACTIVE sense—when he sided on campus with the Panthers against the police; which is to say, only when he sided with the "black" revolt.

The desert and the open highway became ciphers for anti-state anarchism in many films of the subsequent decade, and the road movie genre that celebrated it was thoroughly political from the outset. With the benefit of hindsight, we now know how close this "anarchism" was to an individualist logic of adventure that had long been taken up by cigarette advertising and executive lifestyles. This flexibility of interpretation was both the strength and weakness of "the open road." But back in *Zabriskie Point*'s 1967 (a couple of years before *Easy Rider*) the desert's highways were still the province of staunchly apolitical macho bikers. This is the road Marc takes to at several points in the film—and at the end he flies over it—but for him the highway is never considered an end in itself.

In the desert he finds something else instead. The direction he chooses to follow with Daria is not merely an escape from civilization, but rather a means of escaping *the coded landscape.* It's a way out of the city, certainly, but equally an attempt to get beyond the fetishized, idyllic conception of nature. This is the truly psychedelic aspect of Marc's revolt—his own psychedelic vision—launched against the all-pervasive code of consumerism. The psychedelic paranoiac knew, not entirely wrongly, that all messages in the code, or relating to coded matters always boiled down to one thing: Buy! Buy, and get a life!

And yet Antonioni's desert remains idyllic. He demonstrates this for starters by choosing to cast two ideal, hippie-type beautiful people, offered as a model couple for a better humanity. Similarly, the psychedelic belief in an anti-capitalist truth beyond the code never quite broke free from sublime aesthetics: a great unlimited space was supposed to open up if only the price-tags and logos would disappear and the code dissolve. The trouble was, the code came from childhood, from the first wave of extravagant consumer culture of the post-war years, from precisely those economic conditions that were, in the final analysis, the foundation of Antonioni's (and Marc's) own middle-class consciousness, and which, in an equally final analysis, paradoxically leads to the sensibility that wants to negate that code.

Ultimately, then, for Antonioni (or Marc) to explode the code is at the same time to annihilate HIMSELF a little … and this betokens a much greater desert still, a much blacker void: death, the absolute beyond the

code. The road of both protagonists in *Zabriskie Point* leads precisely to this point: Marc loses his life, while Daria *with seeing eyes* perceives in the explosion of the utopian house the absolute beyond the code.

As in turned out, the film's semi-documentary principle fulfilled itself in a weird fashion. Antonioni had originally discovered Marc at a bus stop taking on the might of the state—he was arguing with a cop. Daria was the daughter of Anna Halprin, the soon-to-be figurehead of a family of progressive dancers who were then busy regenerating the scene. When the film was done the fictional couple became a real one, went on the road, and became involved with various radical political groups. Marc joined the Lyman Family, a notorious Boston-based cult with marked similarities to the Manson Family, and Daria's family began to fear for her life. After they broke up, Daria married Dennis Hopper, another hippie hero and highway liberator; today she teaches dance at various colleges and has invented her own breathing technique. Marc ended up in prison and was killed by guards in circumstances that have never been cleared up.

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They say that while he was at Berkeley in the 1970s Michel Foucault wanted to try LSD too, and insisted to his friends that this had to be done at the real Zabriskie Point. Presumably they sensibly explained to him that the point of LSD is precisely access to the absolute BEYOND the code, leaving all stories and illusions behind—even idyllic, utopian ones like *Zabriskie Point*. However, Foucault was not to be deterred, and took the trip anyway, later writing that LSD induces "an accelerated thinking that no sooner eliminates the supremacy of categories than it tears away the ground of its indifference and disintegrates the gloomy dumbshow of stupidity …"