

**Randolph Lewis**



# **Emile de Antonio**

**Radical Filmmaker  
in Cold War America**

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**“Everything I learned about painting, I learned from De.”—Andy Warhol**

## 4



# Vietnam

## *In the Year of the Pig*

### From White Hawk to Vietnam

Even before he completed *Rush to Judgment*, de Antonio was filling notebooks and boxes with research notes that would sustain him through a year of shooting with 35mm color film in dozens of locations across the continental United States. In 1966 he was planning a documentary film about Native Americans and the “loss of tribal dignity, [and the] retention of tribal dignity.” His goal was to explore the conflict between Native Americans and the dominant culture and to examine “the plight of the [Native] American as a lost minority in an affluent society.”<sup>1</sup>

However, the ambitious project never quite got off the ground, even after he narrowed its scope to focus on the plight of Thomas James White Hawk, a Dakota Sioux whose murder conviction was a source of great controversy in the mid-1960s. De Antonio communicated with American Indian Movement (AIM) leaders such as Dennis Banks, as well as with the actor Robert Redford, who seemed interested enough to finance the project. But the business relationship with Redford did not work out, and after looking into the various avenues for receiving grants for the project, de Antonio abandoned it in frustration. In one letter while he was researching this topic, he later wrote: “This is how good ideas die before their time. . . . No \$.” Although he was unable to bring this project to fruition over the next few years,

he was able to make a film about another indigenous people's resistance to U.S. culture.<sup>2</sup>

Like most of his friends on the Left in the mid- to late 1960s and a growing portion of the general population, de Antonio strongly opposed the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. When the Jesuit priest and peace activist Daniel Berrigan and the other members of the "Catonsville Nine" were imprisoned for destroying draft files in 1968, de Antonio sent out dozens of letters that appealed for money, "not in the name of charity but for a revolution which will change the values that have polluted our heads and rivers." Receiving a check to help underwrite their defense was small recompense to the Catonsville Nine, who went to prison for the principles of many, he pointed out in the letter, a copy of which he mischievously sent to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover.<sup>3</sup> De Antonio was also willing to go to jail to protest the war, and in a well-publicized act of civil disobedience he was arrested with the pediatrician Benjamin Spock and the actress Candice Bergen in the foyer of the U.S. Senate in 1972.<sup>4</sup>

Actions such as these were designed to focus media attention on dissenting views on the war, which was an even greater challenge in 1967. At that time only a few journalists had countered the administration's position in a meaningful fashion, while in general their colleagues in the press had "painted an almost one-dimensional image of the Vietnamese and Vietcong as cruel, ruthless, and fanatical," as Daniel Hallin put it.<sup>5</sup> The few dissenting voices were drowned in a sea of homogenized information that flowed from television, which de Antonio recognized as a serious danger: "Power no longer resides in the universities, as it once may have, but in the television aerial."<sup>6</sup> This did not mitigate his disgust with his social peers, the middle-aged Harvard- and Yale-educated policy makers in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations—he singled out McGeorge Bundy and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., for special scorn—who "like most intellectuals when they play politics . . . were much more cruel in their capacity to treat people as abstractions."<sup>7</sup>

But television was always the great demon from de Antonio's

perspective, and he distrusted the medium's presentation of the war. "Variations on the official line" reported "in a vacuum," was how Neil Compton described the television coverage of the war, and two decades later this sentiment was echoed when the historian Bruce Cumings noted that from watching television one would think the war had no historical context, no discernible past.<sup>8</sup> In part this was by design, part of the need to maintain the uncontroversial, noncritical perspective that sponsors and sometimes even the White House demanded from the television networks.<sup>9</sup> With only a few noteworthy exceptions—CBS's *Morley Safer's Vietnam* (1967) or *Inside North Vietnam* (1968) by Englishman Felix Greene—television had tended to support the administration's position up until 1968 and more often than not thereafter.<sup>10</sup> From his pre-1968 vantage, de Antonio was especially concerned about the ubiquitous nightly news, which was sending a stream of fragments, devoid of context, into the living rooms of American households. This had the unfortunate effect of familiarizing viewers with images of war to the point of mundanity: "By making [the war] quotidian, television made it go away. I wanted to bring it back." He wanted to give the viewers "our recent history right smack in the face, like a napalm pie," as a writer for *Newsweek* later described de Antonio's film.<sup>11</sup>

The cinema had offered few improvements on this situation, as few American films—fictional or not—attempted to make sense of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. After *The Ugly American* (1963), Hollywood avoided the subject until the release of John Wayne's celebration of mindless virility in *The Green Berets* (1968), whose commercial failure forestalled other movies on the subject until the mid-1970s.<sup>12</sup> A relentlessly didactic movie that Wayne initiated and codirected, *The Green Berets* takes pains to illustrate the point that one beefy sergeant makes at the beginning of the film. "It doesn't take a lead weight to drop on my head," he says as the audience ponders this image, "to recognize what's involved here is communist domination of the world."<sup>13</sup>

This perspective was also the basis for official apologies for the war in films such as the Department of Defense's *Why Vietnam?*

(1965). Required viewing for all GIs shipping out to Vietnam, and with ten thousand prints in circulation in a variety of other contexts, it was the first documentary about Vietnam that a large number of Americans saw.<sup>14</sup> Far less popular was the U.S. Information Agency's enormous production of *Vietnam! Vietnam!* (1966), whose title sounds more like a musical than a celebration of Pax Americana. Directed by John Ford and narrated by Charlton Heston, *Vietnam! Vietnam!* sums up the rationale behind these official documentaries on the war, which was to convince people "once and for all of America's noble intentions and heroic deeds in that faraway land."<sup>15</sup> Newspapers, television, and films such as *The Green Berets* and *Why Vietnam?* worked together to reinforce the prejudice that "'they' were not like 'us,' and for that reason deserved to be ruled," as Edward Said wrote in a different context.<sup>16</sup> This sort of orientalism—a way of seeing that was implicitly violent, out of context, and reductive—was at the heart of these official representations of Vietnam.<sup>17</sup>

Some American documentarians attempted to avoid such views, though the pre-1968 list is short. Eugene Jones's *Face of War* (1967) offered a more complex, if conservative, view of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Like the documentaries from World War II, such as John Huston's *Battle of San Pietro* (1945) or NBC's *Victory at Sea* (1952–1953), *Face of War* focused on the hardship and courage of ordinary soldiers without examining the larger issues at stake and on the human cost to the GIs but not the Vietnamese.<sup>18</sup>

De Antonio found more sophisticated portraits of Vietnam in foreign documentaries. Pierre Schoendorffer, the French war photographer, captured footage that de Antonio greatly admired in *The Anderson Platoon* (1966). Joris Ivens released *The Seventeenth Parallel* and contributed to *Far from Vietnam* in 1967, a work by Chris Marker, Jean-Luc Godard, and other notable French avant-garde directors. Though he admired their motivations, de Antonio regarded the collaborative project as too vague, "a failure in structure as well as in execution."<sup>19</sup>

Although he was able to view some of these foreign films in

his research for his own work, many other films existed that he was probably unable to locate, always a problem for students of documentary film. The Canadian director Beryl Fox made three films that criticized the U.S. role in Vietnam and that predate or parallel de Antonio's film: *The Mills of the Gods* (1965), *Saigon* (1967), and *Last Reflections on a War* (1968). The Japanese filmmaker Junichi Ushiyama documented U.S. atrocities in *With a South Vietnamese Marine Battalion* (1965).<sup>20</sup> Also, the Soviets, East Germans, Cubans, and the North Vietnamese themselves had made a variety of documentaries, though they were rarely available in the United States and never aired on television. Even when U.S. Customs did not prevent the importation of such films, they were used in limited contexts, such as when NBC broadcast part of *Pilots in Pajamas* (by East Germans Walter Heynowski and Gerhard Scheumann, 1967) with the phrase "communist material" superimposed on the images. U.S. television ignored even the documentary on the antiwar movement from the BBC's *World of Action* series, which had won an award at the Cannes Film Festival.<sup>21</sup>

Because these cinematic models on the subject of Vietnam were not readily available to de Antonio on television or in theaters, his voracious reading habits proved useful for clarifying his understanding of the war and leading him into the dissenting current of U.S. historiography. Writing in the sort of critical voice that marked de Antonio's films and often aligning themselves with the New Left, younger scholars were bringing politics into the writing of history with unprecedented passion, expressing dissident views on U.S. foreign policy and tracing the roots of U.S. aggression in the Pacific.<sup>22</sup> This was a step in the right direction but still not enough for de Antonio, who complained that "our revisionist history, William Appleman Williams aside, has not been revised enough in finding the lines and history of our insane destructive actions which are bringing about the fall of our imperial structure."<sup>23</sup>

This sort of radical critique was what two professors, John Atlee and Terry Morrone, had in mind in 1967 when they called

the Museum of Modern Art with a question: who could best make a critical and intellectual film about the war in Vietnam? The museum suggested de Antonio, who was busy working on a screenplay about a desert cult in Alamogordo, but he agreed to meet the professors at the Algonquin Hotel in New York. Inspired by what they had to say, he took the project and pushed it into something far more ambitious than whatever the professors might have envisioned.<sup>24</sup>

### **Radical Scavenging: The Logistics of Antiwar Filmmaking**

As with all films, the first order of business was financial. To finance a major antiwar film without institutional support, however, requires creativity, cunning, and connections—all of which de Antonio had in abundance with his uncanny ability to stroke the egos and consciences of Left-leaning capitalists, something he had demonstrated in the courtship of Elliot Pratt's fortune for *Point of Order*. From his previous films and days in the New York art world, he had gained many connections to potential investors, and his social register was enhanced by the woman who became his executive producer, Marjorie ("Moxie") Schell, a wealthy New York activist who also had many friends among the affluent supporters of the peace movement.<sup>25</sup> They made a good team, even though raising the money required a great deal of time and effort, which would have been better spent doing research in archives or conducting interviews. De Antonio was forced to alternate filmmaking with fund-raising in a routine that he summarized as "shoot, sync up, research, travel, run out of money, another fund raising foray, and once more, more film."<sup>26</sup>

Once again he relied on the satirical entrepreneurial spirit that had kept him well fed without an ordinary job for much of his life. Sometimes his schemes were unsuccessful, such as when he called on Andy Warhol to donate one of his electric chair paintings to help finance the Vietnam project.<sup>27</sup> Undeterred by

Warhol's reluctance, de Antonio went outside his immediate circle of acquaintances in his hunt for patrons—"easy touches," he called them—which he described with the diction of Hemingway. Moxie Schell was his "guide and stalker," making the connection so that the eloquent artist could make "the kill." Once his powers of persuasion had brought the pigeon's checkbook to the table, a misfired question could result in little more than a free meal in a fancy restaurant. So with tongue-in-cheek he claimed to rely on his experience in duck blinds and skeet ranges to know when to make his pitch, and more often than not, the "great American safari team" of Schell and de Antonio tracked down the funds he needed.<sup>28</sup>

One of their biggest scores was Harold Hochschild, president and chairman of the board of American Metal Climax (now Amax, Inc.), who invited the producers to lunch in the Rainbow Room Grill. As the various courses were served, de Antonio—who even wore a tie in a rare return to the sartorial splendor of his youth—agonized over the exact moment to spring the question. Just before the coffee he realized "it had to be then, so it didn't come too late with a rush at the end." As he began to speak, he imbued his presentation with the sort of high moral tone he hoped would assuage the conscience of a very rich old man. He guessed right, for Hochschild liked what he heard and waited for him to name his amount. "Just like a wing shot. I didn't even look at Moxie," de Antonio recalled. "I said \$10,000. He didn't say anything. He pulled out a checkbook and wrote it. Right there. For him it was right, on target. \$15,000 would have brought a no. \$5,000 would have produced \$1,000."<sup>29</sup> The filmmaker seemed to take an aesthetic satisfaction from the exchange, from mastering the delicate art of withdrawing cash from a patron.

Sometimes the plea for funds was less than artful. Ann Peretz threw off his hustler's rhythm when she appeared in flat shoes and a worn cardigan, looking more like a graduate student or a baby-sitter to de Antonio than the heir to the Singer sewing-machine fortune. Then she surprised him by agreeing quickly to the sales pitch, cutting off "the performance . . . in the middle of



a line of blank verse,” as he recalled. The apparent cynicism of his description is misleading, for he was sincere in his conviction that he alone could make the sort of film that was needed, especially because the peace movement was “too full of tears, sobs, untutored arrogance and feelings without thought or knowledge” to do the job itself. Despite his own more tutored arrogance, his sincerity and self-confidence were not lost on Peretz, who wrote a check for \$10,000 with such nonchalance that de Antonio kicked himself for not asking for more. Now he would need to entice a slew of smaller investors, for whom Schell began to arrange dinner parties with the express purpose of selling shares in the film at \$560 a piece.<sup>30</sup>

These efforts paid off, bringing in more than \$100,000, no small sum for an independent nonfiction film production in 1967–1968. In addition to Peretz and Hochschild, investors included many celebrities: the fashion photographer Richard Avedon, comedian Steve Allen, conductor Leonard Bernstein, actors Paul Newman and Robert Ryan. As he had with *Point of Order* and would with *Millhouse*, de Antonio received the support of heirs to the Rockefeller fortune: Laura Rockefeller Case bought ten shares and Marion Rockefeller Weber bought two in what was named the Monday Film Production Co.<sup>31</sup> Curiously, de Antonio often condemned Robert Flaherty for accepting Standard Oil’s financial backing for *Louisiana Story* (1948), although de Antonio was willing to fund his own films with the same oil money when it was filtered through the hands of more progressive heirs.<sup>32</sup>

Of course no one can ascertain the personal and political reasons behind these investments, but de Antonio knew how to use U.S. tax laws to make an investment seem practical. At the end of each film he would donate to a university the footage he had collected, thereby allowing one major investor to take a large tax deduction on the value of the footage. In the case of his extensive collection of footage on Vietnam, Cornell University became the beneficiary of this manipulation of the tax code, which put the U.S. government in the ironic position of encouraging the heirs of robber barons to finance a left-wing film.<sup>33</sup>

With the money coming in, the film about Vietnam came together quickly and without serious problems—at least compared to his experiences in producing *Point of Order* and *Rush to Judgment*, not to mention his later films such as *Underground*. And as with most of his films, the making of this film involved a series of colorful and sometimes risky adventures that only a dedicated independent filmmaker would endure without the expectation of a sizable payday.

He began simply enough with books, which he read voraciously throughout the second half of 1967. Unlike many filmmakers, he conducted serious research and was willing to read nearly two hundred books on Vietnam in French and English. The next step was to line the walls of his office with nine-foot rolls of corrugated paper that he got from a friend who owned a box factory. These scrolls were perfect for constructing elaborate time lines and research notes on Vietnamese history as far back as the Han dynasty. Here on the walls of his office a vast picture of his vision of Vietnam emerged, a sort of first draft of his film based on words and still photographs.<sup>34</sup> It was the first step toward “a kind of political collage of voice,” as he called his unique style of filmmaking, one that he intended would reveal the complexity of the wars in Vietnam.<sup>35</sup>

The next step was to acquire footage that reflected his personal vision of Vietnam, and he began “radical scavenging”—his term for the process of obtaining material from diverse sources and means—in the United States.<sup>36</sup> Television outtakes, which he called “the confessions of the system,” were one of many types of footage he examined, and he acquired footage from Paramount, United Press International, and Twentieth-Century Fox.<sup>37</sup> WABC television in New York sold him material but then tried to change its mind, claiming, “We didn’t know what kind of film you were going to make.”<sup>38</sup> Sometimes he received covert assistance from sympathetic employees of the corporate media, such as the young television producer at NBC who provided stolen footage of material shot in Vietnam with the actor Raymond Burr, though little of this footage appeared in the final film.<sup>39</sup> A young

woman at the Sherman Grinberg Film Library went out of her way to alert de Antonio to the existence of a particularly damning outtake of Colonel George S. Patton III describing his men as “determined and reverent. . . . But still they’re a bloody good bunch of killers,” then grinning half-boyishly, half-maniacally.

With customary aplomb de Antonio even tried to procure footage from the Department of Defense (DOD), exchanging letters in 1968 with the chief of the Audio-Visual Branch of the Directorate for Defense Information of the office of the assistant secretary of defense whose responses were as circuitous as his title.<sup>40</sup> Of course the DOD was not interested in treating de Antonio’s project with the encouragement it showed to films that supported U.S. involvement in Vietnam; at this time, for example, it was subsidizing the production of John Wayne’s *The Green Berets* with more than \$1 million worth of equipment and technical support.<sup>41</sup> The military’s lack of cooperation was neither surprising nor serious, for de Antonio had already brought together a strong collection of visual sources on Ho Chi Minh, Richard Nixon, Lyndon Johnson, Dean Rusk, General Curtis LeMay, John Foster Dulles, and many others. Some filmmakers might have been content to make a film from this abundance of material alone, but de Antonio was adamant about locating material that had never been seen in the United States, if anywhere. So from the end of 1967 through the early months of 1968, he traveled to various archives in Europe. In East Germany and Czechoslovakia, where he was a guest of the state, he was able to obtain large selections of film from television archives, including four films made in North Vietnam by the German director Peter Ulbrich, and a Soviet film by Roman Karmen that reenacted the battle at Dien Bien Phu.<sup>42</sup> The archive in East Berlin was an ominous place guarded by barbed wire and machine guns, but the East Germans treated him with generosity, he recalled. The same was true in Prague, where representatives of the National Liberation Front provided him with footage, and a nervous American defector named David Leff interviewed him on Czech radio. De Antonio also spoke at a gathering of Czech filmmakers, including Milos Forman, who would go on to direct

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and who attacked de Antonio for his bitter criticism of the U.S. government's policy in Vietnam. Other evenings, he recalled, were reserved for drinking wine in cafes with students and admiring beautiful young women, though his rakish proclivities were held in check by the presence of a new wife, Terry Moore, who had recently become his fourth partner in marriage.<sup>43</sup>

His most dangerous act of radical scavenging took place in France. In the course of researching the film he had become acquainted with Paul Mus, a professor of Buddhism at Yale University who had negotiated with Ho Chi Minh for the French in the forties. Mus wrote his friend Pierre Messmer, then the French minister of defense, on de Antonio's behalf, requesting permission for him to become the first foreigner to examine the film stored in the French military archives at Fort d'Ivry. Never before available to an American filmmaker, the footage was extraordinary, the work of many gifted cameramen who had documented more than fifty years of the French involvement in Vietnam.<sup>44</sup> For several days de Antonio perused the archival material with astonishment, but the opportunity was too good to be true. His access to the archive was suddenly canceled without explanation—de Antonio suspected that someone, perhaps the CIA, notified the French authorities about his radical plans for the material. On his last day in the tantalizingly rich archive, faced with the possibility of getting nothing at all, he chose to steal the one shot he wanted most, a telling image of Ho tossing a cigarette from the gangplank of a French battleship in 1945 after his negotiations with the French broke down. It was a subtle gesture of frustration that, to de Antonio, exuded “dignity, wit, intelligence in every gesture.” Asking the sympathetic young guard to leave the room for a moment, he cut the shot from film, stuck it in his raincoat pocket, and walked boldly past the gates, never to return. Risking what he suspected might be several years in a French prison, he obtained no other material from the French military archive.<sup>45</sup>

Ironically, getting material from sources closer to where the war was being fought was less dangerous. Peace groups in Tokyo

sent him footage, and initially he intended to travel to Japan, pick up a Japanese film crew, and fly to Vietnam.<sup>46</sup> Though the trip to Vietnam never materialized, Mai Van Bho, Hanoi's ambassador in Paris, assisted de Antonio when the two men met in Paris. Permitted to make a negative of *The Life of Ho Chi Minh*, an official film biography, de Antonio went through legal channels to import the negative into the United States, which required a shipping agent and an application with the Federal Reserve Bank that listed every investor in the film and promised that he was not trading with the enemy by offering payment.<sup>47</sup> After a three-week delay de Antonio was pleasantly surprised to have the importation approved, because his material from East Germany—9,774 feet of 35mm negative—had been detained for almost two months.<sup>48</sup>

Throughout the process of accumulating archival footage, he was also arranging for and shooting interviews. In the United States he interviewed the peace activist and Jesuit priest Dan Berrigan, who had just returned from meeting with Pham Van Dong, the prime minister of North Vietnam; Roger Hilsman, who had been director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department until 1963 when he became assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern Affairs; David Halberstam, the former *New York Times* correspondent in Saigon; and a remarkably candid senator, Thruston B. Morton, Republican of Kentucky. Other interviewees included a Green Beret deserter named John Towler and academics such as David Wurfel, a professor of political science.

In France he interviewed Philippe Devillers, who had served in Vietnam and edited a journal about Southeast Asia, and Jean Lacouture, who had written a biography of Ho Chi Minh. Finally, in England he nearly interviewed Anthony Eden (now Lord Avon), the former prime minister of England whom the filmmaker had charmed at a small dinner party in New York. Lord Avon said that he and his wife had twice watched *Point of Order* and voiced his opposition to the U.S. policy in Vietnam. When de Antonio described the film he was then assembling and requested an interview, Lord Avon responded with generosity, inviting him to

his country home in England and arranging for his camera crew to lodge at a nearby pub. Before the scheduled date, however, Lord Avon wrote a short note to cancel the interview on the advice of his doctors—though de Antonio suspected he was acting on the advice of Washington, especially when he learned that the earl was well enough to be interviewed for Marcel Ophuls's documentary on the Holocaust, *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1970), not long afterward.<sup>49</sup> In general, though, de Antonio could not complain about the quality or quantity of interviews he had managed to conduct, for he had enough voices from the establishment to deflect any criticism that the film was simply radical propaganda.

With archival and interview material piling up in his office, de Antonio could begin the monumental task of editing more than forty hours of material. Every piece of film was time coded and edge numbered as it arrived in New York, but the sheer mass of material was still daunting. In June 1968 he wrote to his friend, the film historian Jay Leyda, about reaching the critical point of deciding the length of the film: "Do I go for a four hour film and say screw everybody or do I trim sail and shoot for a reasonable 1 hour 52 minutes?" His fascination with obscure images of Ho Chi Minh and others made it difficult to edit the film—"I can't let go of a single frame . . . and every foot cut out hurts. *C'est ça*."<sup>50</sup> Every time he made an important edit, he did so with the entire film in mind, which meant viewing it from start to finish to see how the change affected the whole.<sup>51</sup> He agonized about the ending of the film in particular. At first he thought of using some old footage of the Viet Minh charging at the camera on a deserted road, but he dropped it in favor of what he considered a more American ending, a more "suitable ending, a politically coherent ending."<sup>52</sup> As de Antonio later described it, he sought to relate the Vietnam conflict to U.S. history, in particular the American Civil War.

The final dilemma was about the title. Although he had initially considered *The Vietnam Wars*, which clearly reflected the film's emphasis on continuity between the French and U.S. involvements, he decided on the confusing but rhetorically powerful *In the Year of the Pig*. A play on the Chinese calendar, which has



Emile de Antonio, late 1960s, probably during the production of *In the Year of the Pig* (Monday Films, 1969). Courtesy Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research.

no year of the pig, it was chosen before Mayor Richard Daley and his Chicago police were known as pigs to the counterculture and was more about politics than police: “In this film ‘pig’ means French colonialism and American intervention,” he said.<sup>53</sup> The title, which the film does not clarify, was the source of some confusion, and the filmmaker never fully explained why he chose the phrase, which had a certain resonance when an influential underground newspaper was dubbing 1968 “The Year of the Cop” or “The Year of the Barricade.”<sup>54</sup> He shed some light on the nature of the pig in his journal in 1978, writing about Vietnam and the legacy of the U.S. involvement there: “stunted, permanently stunted forests, the dead fields, how long dead, can they be brought back to life? . . . The pig has gone and what he has left is ruin of soul and country. . . . The USSR[, ] much as I hate its prisons[, ] serves a hypocrisy less mean than ours.”<sup>55</sup> Violence and hypocrisy—that was the pig, according to de Antonio. Whether Americans would go to the theater to see it in action was another question.

He finished the film in the fall of 1968, but deciding on the next step raised new problems. The initial showing in Boston was dependent on the good graces of a New York stockbroker whose antiwar views led him to put up the \$15,000 necessary for the occasion.<sup>56</sup> Even a distribution deal with Pathé-Contemporary films, a division of McGraw-Hill, was troublesome enough to require threats of legal action from de Antonio’s attorneys.<sup>57</sup> Presumably, the distribution company put up the money for subsequent openings in a few other major cities, though the film still had difficulty finding theaters willing to screen it. As a result of such problems, *In the Year of the Pig* premiered in Boston on February 26, 1969, and opened in other cities over the course of the next ten months, finding the bulk of its audience in the students and faculty of universities.

As early as October 1968, de Antonio’s production company sent a form letter to campus leaders to promote the film. The letter explained the nature of the film as “a new kind of political theatre” and noted de Antonio’s willingness to appear on campuses in



conjunction with it, something that would increasingly become a part of his efforts to promote his work.<sup>58</sup> By November 1969 the film had been shown at a variety of colleges, including Harvard, Hobart, Yale, Wesleyan, and Dartmouth, and on the day of the first antiwar moratorium, October 15, 1969, it played in at least twenty theaters across the country. Though de Antonio could not appear personally at every one of these showings, he was a tireless and eloquent lecturer on behalf of his beliefs.

*In the Year of the Pig* was more readily accepted outside the United States, playing in theaters in London and Paris for eight weeks and on television in other European countries. U.S. television continued its customary indifference to de Antonio's films, but programmers in Finland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Belgium, Holland, East Germany, and Hungary were eager to broadcast the film. When it finally came to Greece several years later, it became "an enormous hit," as de Antonio put it, with five theaters in Athens sharing three reels of film, using motorcycles to shuttle the reels back and forth throughout the evening.<sup>59</sup>

Overseas distribution was often arranged in an informal manner that allowed de Antonio to exercise his prejudice against distributors with purely commercial motivations, those who "would be equally interested if the film were about fucking in Borneo." For example, he wrote to a political activist named John Percy with a simple business proposal: if he would advance \$500 to de Antonio for the rights to promote and distribute the film in Australia, the two men would split the earnings equally after repayment of the first \$500. De Antonio also encouraged Percy to attempt to sell the film to Australian television, for which he suggested a nightlong debate much like the one the BBC had created around *Rush to Judgment*, though little came of these grandiose plans for Australia.<sup>60</sup>

Putting politics first resulted in meager profits despite good notices. After *In the Year of the Pig* had been in theaters for more than two years, its distributor reported that it had earned back less than a quarter of the initial investment.<sup>61</sup> Yet in public de Antonio claimed the film had done "fantastically well" for its

distributor, that it had played fifty theaters during the moratorium when the real number was about twenty. One can only speculate that these exaggerations were for the benefit of future investors who might read financial trouble as a sign that the film was not reaching an audience.<sup>62</sup> Another strategy would have been to present his inability to make money as a virtue, casting himself as a martyr and his film as too dangerous to attract a mainstream audience. Such an assertion would not have been unfounded, because part of the problem with the film's earnings can be traced to various forms of censorship.

In fact, censorship of the most primitive variety plagued *In the Year of the Pig*. The night before the film was to open in Los Angeles, someone broke into the theater and vandalized the screen, spray painting a peace symbol and hammer and sickle above large letters that read "TRAITORS" and "PROLONG THE WAR YOU SLOBS KILLED 40,000 GOOD MEN!" The theater used a photograph of the graffiti in an advertisement with the caption: "IF WHAT YOU DID TO OUR SCREEN = YOUR INTOLERANCE OF DISSENT, THEN WE ARE INDEED IN THE YEAR OF THE PIG." De Antonio reported that, in an Orwellian twist, the employee who had booked the film was fired for having done so.<sup>63</sup>

Bomb threats hampered the opening night in Chicago, where *pig* seems to have been misinterpreted as a reference to the local police force.<sup>64</sup> An art house in Houston was afraid to show the film, forcing it to move first to the Jewish Community Center, which also changed its mind, then to Rice University, where the film was shown despite the threat of fire bombing.<sup>65</sup> Other forms of censorship were less barbaric but equally effective, such as when a theater in de Antonio's hometown of Scranton, Pennsylvania, canceled the film's appearance without explanation, quietly replacing it with Ali MacGraw and Ryan O'Neal in *Love Story*.<sup>66</sup> And as late as 1971 the film had not played in Washington, D.C., where "the good 'liberal' theater-owners have refused to show it," as de Antonio claimed, because it was "un-American."<sup>67</sup> Despite these problems, the film was seen in enough urban and college theaters to receive a small pile of glowing reviews.

De Antonio's press release for the film quoted Noam Chomsky and Dr. Benjamin Spock as pronouncing the film "Magnificent!" in unison. An editorial in the *Boston Globe* declared "it should be seen," while the reviewer for the *New York Times* called it "stinging, graphic and often frighteningly penetrating." The *Washington Post* claimed it would be worth seeing even after the war, so much did it reveal about the nature of U.S. power, while the *Harvard Crimson* called it "more than a collage of poignant footage. It is a document of what is happening this minute in our heads and someplace not so far away." Writing in the *New Yorker*, Pauline Kael called the film "remarkably persuasive," and even mainstream periodicals such as *Newsweek* echoed this praise. Dwight Macdonald praised its rare combination of "solid scholarship with technical brilliance." Even the right-wing *National Review* made no attempt to refute the film's charges, choosing instead to comment absurdly on how the premiere of the film revealed the essential similarity between Hanoi and New York City in 1969.<sup>68</sup> The contemporary critics' point of view was summed up in a 1994 book: "Without a doubt, in any other war but Vietnam, [*In the Year of the Pig*] would have been considered sedition rather than being praised by the film community and the viewing public."<sup>69</sup>

Perhaps the strangest accolade came from the Academy of Motion Picture Sciences, which nominated *In the Year of the Pig* for an Academy Award, one of the only radical films so honored in the history of that institution. In his introduction of the various nominees for best documentary, the dancer and actor Fred Astaire appeared embarrassed to read the film's name, or at least de Antonio thought so.<sup>70</sup> The film was competing against more standard documentary fare: films about wolf men, the Mexico City Olympics, one by the Office of Economic Opportunity, and a winner that Astaire could proudly announce, *Arthur Rubinstein—The Love of Life* (Bernard Chevry, 1969).

*In the Year of the Pig* also received excellent reviews and sizable crowds in Europe. De Antonio happily reported the "good and great reviews in London," and the film was soon voted the

Emile de Antonio's

"Blessed  
are the  
peace makers"



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Publicity material for *In the Year of the Pig* (Monday Films, 1969). Courtesy Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research.

“most important film” at Festival dei Popoli, Florence, with lesser awards at the Leipzig Film Festival and the Cannes Film Festival.<sup>71</sup> It was one of the few American films on Vietnam that was seen all over the world.

Perhaps more important than the praise the film received was its efficacy as an organizing tool, for in addition to lecturing with the film on dozens of campuses in the United States, de Antonio donated showings to raise consciousness as well as money. It was shown in 1969 at the Conference of Concerned Asian Scholars in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and at a special screening for the staff of *Time*.<sup>72</sup> It was also screened for the International Board of the Methodist Church, the Society of Friends, and the American Friends Service Committee, and at a benefit for the Catonsville Nine; an antiwar group, Clergy and Laymen Concerned, presented it at benefits in churches in nearly twenty cities. At one time it was playing twenty-four hours a day in a coffeehouse near Fort Dix, New Jersey.<sup>73</sup>

Always willing to put politics above profits, de Antonio was glad to donate a showing of the film to a good cause. In November 1969 he turned the film's opening night in Chicago into a benefit for the Chicago Seven defendants, who included Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, Dave Dellinger, and Tom Hayden. Four police cars, their red lights flashing, were parked in front of the Three Penny Cinema when de Antonio arrived, and he noticed the tension between the police and the peacenik crowd, as contemporary writers might have dubbed it. Inside the atmosphere was far different, almost triumphant, as people cheered the film, elating the director. Afterward he went to a party thrown in honor of him and his film. He was accompanied by the oral historian Studs Terkel, who admired *In the Year of the Pig* so much he hoped de Antonio would make a film out of his book *Division Street*.<sup>74</sup>

This politically charged atmosphere was also present when the film appeared in Paris for eight weeks. The French newspapers gave the film generous reviews, despite the occasional act of vandalism in which “stink bombs” were thrown into the theater—“one of the sincere forms of criticism which has followed my

work,” wrote de Antonio with some amusement.<sup>75</sup> No such criticism was present on opening night, however. Behind the French radicals and American expatriates in the audience of the Cinéma Git-Le-Coeur were three quiet Vietnamese who said nothing as the last reel ended and the press began to ask questions. After some time one of the Vietnamese pressed forward and spoke to de Antonio alone. Presenting a card that identified him as Nguyen Thanh Le, the director of information for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam’s negotiating team and someone with whom de Antonio had exchanged letters, he praised *In the Year of the Pig* as the best he had seen on Vietnam. In appreciation of de Antonio’s efforts, Nguyen presented him with a ring made from the metal of a downed U.S. plane; de Antonio gave it to Moxie Schell when he returned to New York. The ring was too big for her finger, so she had Tiffany’s line it with silver to create a small token of radical chic.<sup>76</sup> Perhaps his youthful desire to be a pilot made de Antonio uncomfortable with the idea of wearing the wreckage of a U.S. plane as a trophy.

But de Antonio was comfortable in developing a relationship with the Vietnamese, as he had been doing since early 1969 when he began exchanging letters with Nguyen. Throughout 1969 he requested various books and articles from Hanoi, such as works on Ho Chi Minh that were unavailable in the United States at the time: Turong Chinh’s *The August Revolution* and Vo Nguyen Giap’s *A Heroic People*.<sup>77</sup> In June 1969 he also made plans with Nguyen for another film on Vietnam that would include thirty minutes each of Ho Chi Minh, former premier Pham Van Dong, and Vo Nguyen Giap, who had been the commander of the Viet Minh in the victory over the French at Dienbienphu in 1954. Each would offer statements rather than interviews, with Ho speaking in English for the first time to an American audience. He would also be shown informally—smoking, talking, drinking tea—which “would be a very great psychological contrast to the rigidity of the U.S. presidential addresses,” de Antonio promised.<sup>78</sup>

The letter received a cautious but favorable response from the Vietnamese, but the project was soon derailed by those he

called the “incompetent, pot befuddled filmers of the New Left,” de Antonio’s slur against those whom the Vietnamese trusted to approve the project in the United States. These included members of the radical film collective Newsreel and a leading antiwar activist, Dave Dellinger, who insisted on making the film a collective venture. To de Antonio this was absurd in that it presupposed an equality of talent and ideas that could never exist—at least when he was in the room. Arguing in the offices of Dellinger’s *Liberation* magazine on Beekman Street in New York City late in the summer of 1969, de Antonio wanted control over the project, which meant choosing his own cameraman—Ed Emschwiller, who later shot much of *Painters Painting*. None of his suggestions were acceptable to Dellinger and company, forcing de Antonio to give up his hopes for the project. Only posthumously would Ho have a chance to speak in English to audiences in American theaters with the release of de Antonio’s 1976 film, *Underground*, which included footage of Ho speaking to a Vietnamese camera crew.<sup>79</sup>

De Antonio would have relished the opportunity the film would have provided to meet with the Vietnamese leader. Praising Ho’s “extraordinary combination of poetry and courage” after his death in September 1969, de Antonio wistfully agreed with Paul Mus’s assessment of Ho in *In the Year of the Pig*—“In the history of this century, he will be the great patriot”—and de Antonio’s only consolation was the approval that the Vietnamese delegation in Paris had shown his film.<sup>80</sup> Yet as much as the warmth of the Vietnamese response heartened him, he had not made the film for them but for his own people, “to show Ho Chi Minh as a Marxist hero, to reveal how we betrayed those honorable moments of our own past.”<sup>81</sup>

With frustration he wished his film could change public opinion and government policy: “How can a film be nominated for the Academy Award, be the subject of major newspaper editorials, be very well reviewed and still be unknown to most of the American people?” The film, he believed, had exposed the real history of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam two years before the revelations of the Pentagon Papers, which the public clamored to read. So in

1971 he wrote to U.S. Representative Philip Burton, Democrat of California, to request a special screening of *In the Year of the Pig* in Congress. Burton was unable to accommodate this bold request, probably aware that most of his colleagues would have little interest in a Marxist critique of the war in Vietnam.<sup>82</sup>

### “Deconstructing” Vietnam

*In the Year of the Pig* begins with an eerie silence. Half the screen is black; the other half shows the face of a Civil War casualty, a private from the 149th Pennsylvania Infantry immortalized in stone. After several seconds the title appears on screen, accompanied on the soundtrack by a crescendo of a roaring engine that suddenly sputters as if it had run out of fuel. Roar, sputter, silence is the rhythm of the soundtrack as the picture alternates between black leader and a series of images: a gravestone of an American Revolutionary soldier with the inscription “When I heard of the revolution, my heart enlisted”; a GI in Vietnam with “Make love, not war” painted on his helmet; an old Vietnamese man bowing in deference as he runs from the cameras.

Then the soundtrack changes, and instead of the engines we hear a hypnotic, almost sickening, whine. Difficult to identify, it is a recording of several helicopter rotors whose metallic whirling forms the basis of a new crescendo that reaches a peak so loud that projectionists rush to turn down the volume. While this sound continues unabated, as if to blast extraneous thoughts and preconceptions from the mind, a series of images slowly appears on screen.

First is a monument from World War II. Then the screen goes black. Then we see the self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc.<sup>83</sup> Black screen. A still photo of a gunner weighted down with grenades. Black screen. A still photo of a small Vietnamese child smoking a cigarette. Black screen. Then Augustus Saint-Gaudens’s memorial to Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the black troops of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Infantry. Black screen.



Then silence as Vice President Hubert Humphrey quotes from Scripture: “Blessed are the peace-makers.”

Once again we hear the hissing of helicopter rotors, this time in accompaniment to John Foster Dulles’s spinning a globe aimlessly. Then silence as Humphrey describes the necessity of making peace and President Johnson points out that the American people “never had it so good.” Black screen. Then the title of the film appears for the second time, marking the end of the film’s introductory montage, a mysterious foreshadowing of the themes of the film. After this point begins a more conventional history of Vietnam in the early part of the twentieth century: the film identifies speakers and follows a chronology.

This bleak and powerful narrative starts with images of French colonialism before the Second World War. We see a revealing sequence of white-suited French officials berating their rickshaw pullers—a scene the filmmaker called “the equivalent of a couple of chapters of dense writing about the meaning of colonialism.”<sup>84</sup> Then, as if in contrast, comes a film hagiography of Ho Chi Minh—the George Washington of his country, as Senator Morton acknowledges to the camera. The next sixteen minutes examine the French fight to regain control of Vietnam after the Japanese occupation, a period in which, as Paul Mus, the professor of Buddhism at Yale, explains, “every time Ho trusted us, we betrayed him.” We also see a Soviet reenactment of the battle of Dienbienphu—from Roman Karmen’s *Vietnam* (1955)—that is offered as documentary footage.

The next twenty-three minutes cover the transition from French to U.S. involvement and continue through the U.S. support of Ngo Dinh Diem from 1954 to 1963. John Foster Dulles puts forth the domino theory, and Senator Joseph McCarthy warns, “If we lose Indochina, we’ll lose the Pacific and become an island in a communist sea.” Various observers discuss the origins of the National Liberation Front (NLF), emphasizing its legitimacy and autonomy in contrast to the evident corruption of the Diem regime. After covering the fall of Diem, de Antonio spends seventeen minutes on the debate among policy makers in

the United States that culminated in full-scale U.S. intervention circa 1965.

Throughout the film de Antonio shows the official version of events in a skeptical light. For example, he juxtaposes conflicting accounts of the Tonkin Gulf episode: as U.S. officials defend their response to the “attack,” a Navy sonar operator from the U.S.S. *Maddox* offers another story, one that supports the assertion of Senator Wayne Morse, the Oregon Democrat, that the American bombing of North Vietnam is outright aggression. In another juxtaposition General William Westmoreland defends the treatment of prisoners by U.S. military personnel, just before a former private in Vietnam testifies that “prisoners were executed in our outfit as a standard policy.”

The next section (fifteen minutes) examines the violence done to the Vietnamese peasants and countryside as the U.S. involvement escalates. This is one of the many sequences that function as an antidote to films such as *The Green Berets*, also completed in 1968.<sup>85</sup> De Antonio’s film implicitly scrutinizes the racism of John Wayne’s epic by using footage of U.S. soldiers on a Vietnamese beach complaining about the local women—“they’re slant eyes, gooks; they’re no good.” General Mark Clark describes his military opponents as “willing to die readily, as all Orientals are. . . . I wouldn’t trade one dead American for fifty dead Chinamen.” A machine-gun-wielding helicopter pilot blithely grins and announces the ominous name of his ship: “Birth Control.” Although the film illustrates how the U.S. military has dehumanized its opponents, de Antonio did not want to do the same thing to the U.S. soldiers fighting there.

As someone who had spent time in the armed forces during the Second World War, he had a great deal of sympathy for the soldiers of all ranks in Vietnam, a quality not universally shared by his peers on the Left. Even Colonel George S. Patton III, who refers to his men as “a bloody good bunch of killers” in the film, seemed to de Antonio a basically “good guy” with whom he would enjoy socializing in other circumstances, though de Antonio believed Patton’s comment dramatized “how totally

irrelevant we are to a decent world.”<sup>86</sup> This hints at the complexity of de Antonio’s position, which makes his film more than a simple inversion of *The Green Berets* in which one should applaud the downing of U.S. planes, as one Columbia University audience did to his dismay.<sup>87</sup> Instead of inversion, de Antonio sought to “deconstruct” the fragile logic that supported these attitudes and policies. Though he had little interest in deconstruction as a critical practice, one he dubbed “arcane” a decade after its emergence in the late 1960s, he later claimed to be “wholly aware of the various structures and deconstructures” in his film on Vietnam: “I deconstructed the accepted images [of the war] to create a positive result, a pro-Vietnamese construction. . . . The deconstruction of those images was effected by placement, by sound or music and, for example, the images of officers of the French Foreign Legion in Saigon in 1934 which were seen in U.S. and French newsreels and had a deconstructive meaning in 1967.”<sup>88</sup>

Did de Antonio make a “deconstructive” film in the Derridian sense? The literary scholar Barbara Correll argues that he did. In an article entitled “Rem(a)inders of G(l)ory: Monuments and Bodies in *Glory* and *In the Year of the Pig*,” Correll homes in on the deconstructive aspect of de Antonio’s film, using Edward Zwick’s movie about the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts in the Civil War as a counterpoint.<sup>89</sup> She argues that rather than reproducing the “reality effects” of official historical discourse, *In the Year of the Pig* “both exposes the construction of an official history and reflects upon that construction.” This allows viewers to study the “stuttering” of power and the link between “violence and metaphysics in which the Self exists at the expense of the other.” De Antonio presents the viewer with new possibilities for interpreting old events and reminds the viewer of the “heterogeneity, difference, and violence” in the discourse and reality of Vietnam. This forces the viewer to overcome the selective remembering that has characterized debates about the war.

Although Correll made a good case for seeing *In the Year of the Pig* as a model of deconstructive filmmaking, de Antonio’s

approach has more in common with Marxist ideological criticism than a Derridian project. Looking for inconsistencies between official utterances and the truth is an old-fashioned muckraking technique, not an example of deconstructive effort to unveil multiple truths, and perhaps it is in his quest for *the truth* that de Antonio is at his most Marxist, most modernist, and least deconstructive. This important distinction is lost in Correll's article, although she alludes to it in a footnote: "While irony, juxtaposition and disjuncture do not necessarily add up to a 'deconstructive meaning,' I argue (not immodestly) for attention to de Antonio's post-structuralist leanings or affinities. . . . It is, of course, profoundly ironic, given the current history of their debates, that Marxist and post-structuralist positions are reductively collapsed in neo-humanist polemics."<sup>90</sup> Correll sought to locate the "points of affinity" between these positions without effacing the differences between them, yet the effect of reading her "neo-humanist polemic" is to lose sight of de Antonio's Marxism.

Certainly, we should not dismiss the possibility of nonfiction films in a deconstructive mode. The critic Brooke Jacobson and the filmmaker Jill Godmilow have located "deconstruction" in documentary films that undermine the appearance of objectivity and leave us with ambiguous "open text" that demands interpretation, something that could certainly be said of de Antonio's films.<sup>91</sup> Without a narrator's guidance the viewer of *In the Year of the Pig* must connect the cinematic dots in a pattern that the film only suggests. Moreover, the film includes many instances of self-reflexive techniques, such as when we hear the filmmaker's voice as he conducts an interview, or when interviewees look into the camera without discomfort, contributing to the sense that de Antonio does not want to hide the seams of the argument he is constructing.

As the historian Bruce Cumings has argued, "De Antonio, 'mere' filmmaker, intuited the position of 'metahistorians' like Michel de Certeau and Dominick LaCapra," who have emphasized the fictional and ideological influences on the construction of historical "truth."<sup>92</sup> Such points are interesting to consider,

but I believe Cumings may be overstating the philosophical self-awareness of the filmmaker. Though de Antonio may have thrown around *deconstruction* in his later description of *In the Year of the Pig*, I would suggest that he was using the term more loosely—even inaccurately—as a metaphor for Marxist ideological criticism in particular, if not radical critique generally. Ascribing too much significance to de Antonio’s films is as problematic as ascribing too little. De Antonio was more of a muckraker than a theorist, and his tools tended to be old-fashioned rather than philosophically au courant. For example, one of his most effective tools was humor, which he used to mock the powerful, a technique as old as Aristophanes.

The humor in *In the Year of the Pig* is the grim jesting of a satirist aimed at the official logic of the war. After the fifteen-minute section on the damage done to the people and land of Vietnam during the escalation of U.S. troop presence, the film includes a short Department of Defense propaganda film under the title “Communist Guerrilla Becomes U.S. Ally.” This campy charade, the short story of a defecting North Vietnamese soldier who turns in his ignoble past for the American way of life, cannot help but elicit a guffaw from more cynical viewers—especially with a lush Mahler symphony pouring from the soundtrack. Generally, the black humor of *In the Year of the Pig* is more subtle, as in the next section, a seven-minute discussion of the 1967 election. In an Orwellian turn of phrase, Premier Nguyen Cao Ky defends his suppression of freedom of speech and of the press as necessary to prevent “confusion and division,” as several commentators and images that suggest otherwise call into question the legitimacy of his statement.

The final section (seventeen minutes) examines the situation in the late 1960s and the prospects for the future. Harrison Salisbury of the *New York Times* describes the ravages of the war on the civilian population and observes that a multitude of North Vietnamese civilians have died in bombing raids on “military” targets. Pushing his romanticized and heroic portrait of the North Vietnamese, de Antonio goes on to emphasize their fortitude in

its various manifestations, from their will to fight for as long as necessary to their ability to function as a society despite the interminable bombing. Daniel Berrigan sums up the situation as symptomatic of “the last days of Superman,” as the United States is unable to achieve victory or to understand what it is losing. Then Paul Mus explains to the American audience: “You are not the first people who destroyed villages in Vietnam, unfortunately. And so, they are used to that, and it’s a great tradition that the village is not lost even when it disappears from the surface of the ground.” These are the last words of the film. In a strangely appropriate Chinese box structure it then ends much as it began—images of American GIs, now wounded, in agony, being carried to waiting helicopters. A scratchy version of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” begins to play, and the screen fills with the image of the same Civil War statue that began the film, the same half-black screen, “to show, in my mind anyway,” as de Antonio said, “that our cause in Vietnam was not the one that boy had died for in 1863.”<sup>93</sup> So ends the film.

What has the audience just experienced? “The genius of de Antonio,” wrote the *Harvard Crimson*, “is that he realizes that we see the actual war as a sort of documentary film.” With a similar sentiment Theodor Adorno once described the effect of representing reality through the media: “Men are reduced to walk-on parts in a monster documentary-film.”<sup>94</sup> This is exactly what de Antonio wanted to challenge, even if it required the ironic use of documentary film itself as a sort of “antifilm,” a continuation of the Brechtian strategies he used in *Point of Order*. To break the viewer’s passivity and emphasize the distance between the images of television and the statements of observers on one hand, and the reality of war on the other, de Antonio returned to his Brechtian technique, which “irritates the viewer into thought,” as one reviewer noted.<sup>95</sup> And consider his use of sound, which was always important to him, though nowhere more than in a film for which his crew had recorded 70 percent of the sound, though only 35 percent of the images.<sup>96</sup> With what Pauline Kael described as “unusually good sound-editing,” he created a

seamless flow of voices and sounds to form a narrative line on the soundtrack.<sup>97</sup> Yet at times it is difficult to determine who is speaking, because the film identifies the speakers only when they first appear. When we hear their voices later in the film, the filmmaker—whose memory was probably more powerful than his audience’s—gives no identification.

Other material on the soundtrack requires the viewer to recognize an unfamiliar sound at the risk of missing the point being made. De Antonio commissioned the introductory “helicopter concerto” from a student of John Cage, Steve Addiss, who also adapted several songs to be played on traditional Vietnamese folk instruments known as the dan bao and the dan tranh.<sup>98</sup> When the dan tranh’s one trembling string plays “The Marseillaise” after the defeat of the French at Dienbienphu, the irony is as unmistakable as the tune. But the initial helicopter concerto, with its grating rotors and sputtering engines, is more difficult to identify without the image of a helicopter on screen. Only those who know the sound from experience can fully appreciate the full effect of the concerto, as made evident by the Vietnam veteran who instinctively ducked when he heard it at the beginning of the film, whereas many audience members were mystified.<sup>99</sup>

Such limitations of the historical documentary, even in the complex form that de Antonio uses, are important to remember when assessing the accomplishment of this type of film. Not only was the soundtrack a source of some confusion for the audience, from its initial screenings in 1968 to one I attended in 1992, but so were the images. As de Antonio’s associate producer, John Atlee, wrote in an excellent in-house analysis of the film in 1968, it has a “disjointed collage effect” that did not suit the taste of many viewers at early screenings. More seriously, Atlee called the film “politically shallow” for not looking for systemic causes of the war—as a self-described Marxist filmmaker might be expected to do—or for ways to prevent such policies from being repeated. Atlee seems to have missed the point, for de Antonio was not making a Marxist critique, despite whatever he said, but a relatively brief film essay, a polemic on the irrationality of the war that at

times was guilty of the same quick treatment of complex issues that dooms television to superficiality.<sup>100</sup>

An acknowledgment of these limitations should not undermine the merit of *In the Year of the Pig*, however. Writing about the film, de Antonio described his desire to create an “intellectual weapon” against the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, “to make a movie that was not a lecture, not a scream.”<sup>101</sup> He succeeded in making an important film at a time when the perspective of an intelligent dissenter was desperately needed on screen. As Studs Terkel wrote to de Antonio, “I still can’t get *In the Year of the Pig* out of my mind. . . . Now more than ever we need it.”<sup>102</sup> Still, the filmmaker was not satisfied—“Everyone praises it,” he complained in 1971, even though “no one seems to understand how it was made.”<sup>103</sup> Today he might complain about how few remember the film at all, especially among the college-aged students who once filled auditoriums to see his work. If they have any familiarity with the work, it is from pieces that have resurfaced elsewhere in popular culture, such as the use of an image from the film on a 1985 album cover for an English pop group, The Smiths.<sup>104</sup>

Nevertheless, even if the film has slipped to the edge of our cultural memory, *In the Year of the Pig* should be remembered as a groundbreaking part of the filmography of Vietnam, especially because its influence on other films was significant. In an important book dedicated in part to the memory of de Antonio, Bill Nichols commends *In the Year of the Pig* for pioneering a way to examine the relationship of past and present in a documentary and cites eight films that show the influence of de Antonio’s technique of contrasting archival footage with interviews: *With Babies and Banners* (Lorraine Gray, 1977), *The Wobblies* (Deborah Shaffer and Stuart Bird, 1979), *Seeing Red* (Jim Klein and Julia Reichert, 1984), *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* (Connie Field, 1980), *Solovki Power* (Marina Goldovskaya, 1988), and *Hotel Terminus* (Marcel Ophuls, 1987).<sup>105</sup>

But Nichols does not discuss the film that *In the Year of the Pig* most directly influenced, a better-known documentary about Vietnam entitled *Hearts and Minds* (Peter Davis and Bert Schneider, 1974). De Antonio resented this film and its producers



on several counts: their hiring of his editor from *In the Year of the Pig*; their use of similar and sometimes identical footage; their manipulation of interviews such that one interviewee, Walt W. Rostow, former national security adviser to Lyndon Johnson, took the filmmakers to court and obtained a restraining order forcing the deletion of a two-minute segment of his interview—all to produce a version of de Antonio's film that was palatable enough to mainstream America to win an Academy Award for best documentary in 1974.<sup>106</sup> De Antonio's animus cannot be attributed to simple professional jealousy, even if he was envious of the recognition that *Hearts and Minds* received, for such emotions never stopped him from applauding a film he admired, such as *Invitation to the Enemy* (Christine Burrill, Jane Fonda, Tom Hayden, Haskell Wexler, and Bill Yarhaus, 1974). What he so detested about *Hearts and Minds* was its "japing, middle-class, liberal superiority" toward the subject, "its contempt for America," which was particularly offensive from a film made at a time when the war was winding down and the risks to the filmmakers were smaller.<sup>107</sup>

He called the film "heartless and mindless," which was almost as cruel as his assessment of Francis Ford Coppola's Vietnam epic, *Apocalypse Now* (1979). He could only laugh at this "semi-literate" rendering of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* with Marlon Brando as Kurtz: "in the heart of darkness we find a creampuff, a fat, bald, middle-aged creampuff spouting Eliot."<sup>108</sup> He complained that *Apocalypse Now* had nothing to do with the reality of Vietnam or the reality of America. Whether his own film did is a matter of opinion; what is certain is that it opens a window on the filmmaker's vision of the United States.

### *America Is Hard to See*

In describing the beginning of *In the Year of the Pig*, I have pointed out how images move past the viewer's eyes like photos from a scrapbook, like recollections of "what has been good in U.S. life . . . as well as what was going awry in [Vietnam],"

as the filmmaker wrote.<sup>109</sup> And at the end of the film we see images of the self-inflicted agony of the Americans fighting there, as the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” provides an ironic commentary on the moral differences between the American Civil War and the Vietnam War.

Between these two extremes lies a film about America whose setting is Vietnam, a film that “isn’t just ‘about’ that war but rather about deep-seated American doubts of their future function as Americans,” as one reviewer noted.<sup>110</sup> Even the distribution of those with speaking parts in *In the Year of the Pig* reflects this American focus: forty-six men and women (mostly men) from the United States; ten Europeans, mostly French; thirteen Vietnamese, from both the North and South. Furthermore, the film’s emphasis—on the way in which the Vietnam experience reflected turmoil in the United States—can be seen in de Antonio’s subsequent film, which functions as a domestic mirror of *In the Year of the Pig*.

This next film, *America Is Hard to See* (1970), takes its title from a poem of the same name by Robert Frost. As I discussed in the introduction, in this poem Columbus navigates along the coast of the “New World” with uncertainty, which seems to stand for the confusion of contemporary Americans:

America is hard to see.  
Less partial witnesses than he  
In book on book have testified  
They could not see it from outside—  
Or inside either for that matter.<sup>111</sup>

Senator Eugene McCarthy, whose candidacy for the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party in 1968 is the subject of the film, chose *America Is Hard to See* as the title of the book he was writing about the campaign. When his publisher rejected it as uncommercial, opting instead for *The Year of the People*, an unintentional echo of *In the Year of the Pig*, de Antonio decided to use Frost’s phrase as the title for his film.<sup>112</sup>

*America Is Hard to See* depicts the failure of liberalism in 1968

from the vantage of a filmmaker whose hopes to do something meaningful “within the system as we know it” rested upon one “decent, complicated intellectual,” as he described McCarthy.<sup>113</sup> Tracing the McCarthy campaign from its humble start to its disappointing finish at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago the following summer, de Antonio built the film from the usual archival footage and specially conducted interviews. We see McCarthy himself, as well as supporters and observers such as the playwright Arthur Miller, economist John Kenneth Galbraith, former Johnson speechwriter Richard Goodwin, and antiwar activist Martin Peretz, whose wife helped finance the film.<sup>114</sup>

Released one year after *In the Year of the Pig*, this film continues de Antonio’s critique of the U.S. role in Vietnam. It begins with the words *In the gap of credibility* written across a photo of President Johnson and his cabinet, then launches into a short reiteration of the themes of *In the Year of the Pig*, emphasizing the “arrogance of power,” to use the phrase of Senator William Fulbright, the Arkansas Democrat. Included in the film are excerpts from the Department of Defense’s bizarre documentary from 1965, *Why Vietnam?* that provide the opportunity for McCarthy to repudiate that film’s comparison of Ho Chi Minh to Hitler.

However, the bulk of *America Is Hard to See* concerns the inner workings of a presidential campaign, a process that seems, from an insider’s vantage, to be designed to minimize participatory democracy. De Antonio’s admiration for the quixotic spirit of McCarthy’s grassroots efforts, as well as for the wit and intelligence of the candidate, is evident throughout the film.<sup>115</sup> Though his film avoids the mawkish heroism of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (Frank Capra, 1939), de Antonio attempts to paint the candidate in the hues of Adlai Stevenson’s statement about McCarthy: “There is no more eloquent representative of what is good in American life.”<sup>116</sup> But no matter how eloquent the candidate, how idealistic the campaign, the machinery of politics pushes aside our urbane and modern Jimmy Stewart and the rest of “what is good in American life.” The film ends on the sour note of Hubert Humphrey’s giving thanks to Lyndon Johnson as

Humphrey accepts the Democratic presidential nomination—a pessimistic ending to an otherwise hopeful film.

Like de Antonio's other "positive" films such as *Underground*, the filmmaker seems to be slightly lost without an obvious target for his anger, and perhaps this explains why the film received inadequate distribution and few reviews. Too often his efforts to praise the virtues of Senator McCarthy come across as halfhearted and unpersuasive, rendering McCarthy as bland as the film's caricatures of Humphrey and Robert F. Kennedy. The reviewer for *Cinéaste*, one of the few film journals to take note of the film, complained about this shortcoming and trashed de Antonio for taking "a tedious and disingenuous look at his subject" and for refusing to explain "in what way Eugene McCarthy could represent a significant alternative to his supposedly more conservative antagonists in the Democratic Party."<sup>117</sup> The reviewer was particularly incensed that the film would present "a standard politician as a daring rebel," though de Antonio acknowledged as much in interviews related to the release of the film. "*America Is Hard to See* represents a dramatic change in my work because it is a very positive statement about one man and his work in America in the 1960s," he said, willing to ignore the leftist skepticism about McCarthy because de Antonio recognized something of himself in the candidate—another idealistic intellectual in whom he saw hope for changing U.S. politics.<sup>118</sup> Yet the disappointment of the film's ending reveals something darker than was evident to the *Cinéaste* reviewer, something that is fundamental to de Antonio's vision of America, which blends hope and despair in equal measure. The real importance of this otherwise minor film is as a complement to de Antonio's previous film. When viewed in combination with *In the Year of the Pig*, one can discern the basic outline of this vision.

"As I became more involved in film, the great seams of the American Empire began to give way more and more, revealing the hollowness of the centre," he confided in a 1972 letter.<sup>119</sup> Each of his films added a chapter to his informal study of the decline of the American empire, and in this sense he saw himself as a cinematic Gibbon of his age, at least in the sense that Gibbon's great history

of the Roman Empire was a “creation of strong feeling and great mental vigor rather than psychological depth . . . [imbued with] grief at the extinction of values dear to the enlightenment.”<sup>120</sup> Driven by the same secular passion for rationality as Gibbon, de Antonio produced a body of work that fits this description equally well. Because he is placed so quickly in an amorphous, if vaguely leftist, category of “radical filmmaker,” it is easy to overlook the strain of cultural conservatism in his thinking, one that is reflected in his films, as I will discuss, and his choice of literary heroes: Gibbon, Santayana, and Eliot. Each wrote from a cosmopolitan, often expatriate, perspective that de Antonio claimed for himself, although he spent most of his life only a few hours from where he was born: “Yes, I am cut off. It was my father who introduced me to that god awful word which Santayana liked too: *déraciné*.”<sup>121</sup> This perspective accounts for both his fascination with what it meant to be American as well as the detachment that enabled him to attack his homeland with such vitriol.

In her review of *In the Year of the Pig* in the *New Yorker*, Pauline Kael recognized these aspects of the film: “de Antonio obviously means to suggest a basic rottenness in Americans, and an America which is anti-life.”<sup>122</sup> Certainly, one can find hints of this cultural pessimism throughout his films, and explicitly in his journal, where he paints a melancholy portrait of a country that killed Native American women and children “to make room for plodding farmers who were in turn run off the land by the banks and agribusiness.” Where was honor? What gods, what dreams could live in such a place? Unable to answer these questions, he announced his agreement with Allen Ginsberg that it is time to say *Kaddish* for America.<sup>123</sup>

Yet Kael’s understanding of de Antonio is incomplete, for he also admired America “when it can be found,” as he said, when it is not “hard to see.” He believed that his work was “always in opposition but not necessarily in hate, for at bottom I love America as well as hate what it’s doing and what is happening.”<sup>124</sup> The object of his patriotic impulses was in the past, when he believed the country had been different, that its innocence had

once been genuine, that the authors of the Bill of Rights were made of different stuff than Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson.<sup>125</sup> De Antonio expressed these views, often obliquely, in his films and, more privately, in his writings. Quoting Melville in his journals of the late seventies, de Antonio wistfully described America's chance to be the river of the blood of all the people of the earth and with bitterness reported that instead we became "a flashy urinal."<sup>126</sup> Then he referred to Hemingway's statement that America was ruined after the Civil War—hence the images at the beginning and end of *In the Year of the Pig*—when "all the robber barons became our souls," as de Antonio phrased it.<sup>127</sup> This was the same conflict of idealism and materialism that Santayana dissected in *Character and Opinion in the United States*, a book that had a profound influence on de Antonio, who no less than Hemingway or Santayana saw the turning point of American culture in the Civil War.<sup>128</sup>

In fact, the essence of his vision of the United States can be traced to his childhood tears over the "faint little men who had fought in the Civil War [standing] before my grammar school assembly in 1929." Weeping at the sight of their blue uniforms and tattered campaign ribbons as a boy, he remembered their names throughout his life.<sup>129</sup> He believed, perhaps naively, that the nobility of those men could be recaptured in the contemporary struggle for social change and that he had no alternative but to work and hope for a radical renewal of America.<sup>130</sup> This hopeful romanticism undercut his conservatism, making it possible for him to believe in the beneficence of change, even the necessity of revolution, in a way his literary heroes had never allowed.<sup>131</sup> If the virtues of America were hard to see, if the spirit of revolution was frustrated at every turn by the "police state" he so detested, they might be glimpsed in his romantic vision of the Vietnamese, who were resisting the onslaught of U.S. culture with a vehemence he could only admire. If Ho Chi Minh was the George Washington of his country, as we learn from Senator Morton in the film, in a metaphoric sense Ho was a founder of de Antonio's America as well.