



EMILE DE ANTONIO DOCUMENTARIAN

Emile de Antonio had his most notorious cinematic appearance on January 19, 1965, in the stairway of Andy Warhol's Factory. Anyone who knows the filmmaker's work is sure to see the irony in this. Here, before the video camera of the great Pop showman himself, de Antonio was filmed guzzling a bottle of scotch, rambling incoherently, and half passing out cold on the stairs. The Warhol film *Drunk* was never released, at the request of the subject, but it is no less dogging that the radical documentarian hovered for an hour as the '60s paradigm of drifting consciousness on Warhol's silver screen. De Antonio, turns out, was anything but an ineffectual drunk, falling during his one big moment on the stairs. Rather, he became the virulent archaeologist of an America being buried just as it was being born.

In the winter of 1998, a very different version of America was playing on repeat in my head. I was a senior in college in New York, four credits short of graduation, and living in a large university-owned brownstone on 114th Street, which, rumor went, had already been condemned by the city (ceilings had been caving in all semester), the school merely waiting out the term to get the last students out before demolition. It occurs to me, looking back, that I suffered in those days from what most of my generation—at least those of us not born in any part of the 1960s—had inadvertently contracted: That is, a particularly romantic vision of mid-century America. (Common symptoms range from statements like *There are no more good ideas left* or *At least they*

knew what they were fighting for to any number of neurotic relapses, like compulsive folk collections or frequent trips to Haight-Ashbury.) It wasn't a matter of ignorance, all of us being well schooled in the list of U.S. contributions—the Bay of Pigs, Vietnam, Johnson, Nixon, Ford. Still, the romance held. I sensationalized the era with the most Hollywood of endings. I reduced the sides of good and evil to stylistic conventions. I continued to believe—all to the backdrop of a psychedelic light show, all the while Grace Slick bellowing in the background—that flowers did fit in the muzzle of a gun, that the police did arrest the right man for each assassination, that Congress, the President, and the press had fed America the truth. Or at least enough of the truth that America could handle.

As a generation, we were great practitioners of historical delusion.

On a particularly harsh winter day of that year—so awful I didn't want to leave the brownstone on 114th Street—a friend handed me a videotape and said point-blank, "This is the film the F.B.I. never wanted you to see."

The film was *Underground*, a 1975 documentary by a filmmaker named Emile de Antonio, and the feeling of watching it was nothing short of revolutionary. In a boarded-up "safe house" outside Los Angeles, shot through strategically placed mirrors and opaque scrimms, de Antonio and his team interviewed five members of the radical leftist group the Weathermen, all of whom were wanted by the F.B.I. Slowly, amid the anticapitalist rhetoric

and relentless paranoia, a new American story emerged. It was this American story that tore the dreamy tie-dye curtain quite literally down off the wall.

In *Underground*, de Antonio's mission was not to tell a neutral story. It was to tell the Weathermen's story, the one account missing from the police reports and news bulletins. It is the only story that attempted to explain how five upper-class white kids turned from peaceful protesters to professional revolutionaries engaged in armed struggle against the U.S. government. And it was de Antonio's way of digging up human roots deep in the underground.

The camera work is only part of *Underground's* genius. De Antonio certainly could not shoot the five fugitives straight on—any detail could be enough for the Feds to make a positive identification. Instead, the director captured character by focusing on a gesturing hand, a stretch of cheek, a sure, unyielding voice—underneath all of the wigs and hats and glasses—a simple, confident shake of the head. The resultant images are so stunning, the subjects so honest and cool, that the film almost runs the risk of collapsing into a play of fashionable aesthetics (another Hollywood gimmick is the sexy radical à la Patty Hearst beaming with a beret and a loaded carbine). As a master of mixing raw footage with appropriated newsreels, de Antonio bombards the viewer with such aggressive images that there is no Hollywood left to be found. His world is too real. Threaded into the Weathermen story are clips of civil-rights speeches, assassinations of black leaders by police, footage from the Days of Rage, S.D.S. rallies, fields of bombs falling over the fields of Vietnam, and even the Weathermen's bombing of the U.S. Capitol (one of many such targets). In what proved to be a signature maneuver, de Antonio places a clip of ferocious police violence next to a sham news conference, whose reports from the men upstairs can only be read as lies.

Underground is not propaganda for violent resistance. No question, the group went too far, its tactics ultimately just as tyrannical as the oppressor's. The Weathermen literally blew themselves up in 1970 when sixty sticks of dynamite accidentally exploded in the basement of their Greenwich Village townhouse (three key members were killed, and the survivors had to scramble from the wreckage to escape). What de Antonio offers instead is a story that competes with the official version. Without it, we are left, to quote Black Panther Fred Hampton (later murdered by cops during a raid of the organization's headquarters), holding "answers that don't answer, explanations that don't explain."

De Antonio's entire life's work followed this mission of destabilizing the general consensus. In his first documentary, *Point of Order* (1963), he used archival footage taken from a 1954 Senate trial between the U.S. Army and Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy. Streaming one McCarthyism after another, the film reads like a mesmerizing antivalentine to the Red Scare senator himself. In *Rush to Judgment* (1967), de Antonio turns his attention to a different sort of American theater: the assassination of John F. Kennedy. To show the glaring oversimplification of the notorious Warren Commission Report (the government's verdict that J.F.K. was assassinated by a lone shooter), de Antonio strings together a series of such destructive blows against the official version that it's hard to believe the government didn't wipe out the film and its creator to complete the cover up. As for the Vietnam War, his documentary *In the Year of the Pig* (1969) creates a visual history board of events that led to America's bloody, unjustified occupation. Appropriated images, such as a U.S. infantry soldier with the slogan *Make war not love* written on his helmet, were so unsettling they remained in the popular imagination for quite some time (in this case, the image was seized by the Smiths for their 1985 album cover).

Such radical filmmaking does not go unnoticed, least of all by a government being attacked on its own soil. De Antonio had long been on the F.B.I. radar. After shooting *Underground*, he became a central target. He was put under surveillance, his phone tapped, a list of potential charges compiled. Finally, in June of 1975, he was handed a subpoena to turn over all film and negatives concerning the Weathermen. The government did not want the film produced; they wanted it to lead them straight to the fugitive hideout. Only after an international outcry over the First Amendment right of free press—one that resounded from the Hollywood elite through the offices of the A.C.L.U.—did the government realize what it was up against. A man who holds a camera gets the attention of the world.

Trace of any Greenwich Village townhouse once inhabited by the Weathermen has entirely disappeared. So has the neglected university-owned brownstone on 114th Street where I once spent a whole year trying to figure out what to do next. I suppose if I believed that those in charge really did try to erase any record of their detractors, I could make a hard metaphor out of those facts. But I don't. I think the powerful rely on America to do that all by itself—its short memory, its ability to adjust, move on, go to the next idea, forget. Perhaps that is why Emile de Antonio's documentaries are slipping from our consciousness. They're rarely screened and increasingly hard to find on video or mentioned in film catalogs. We prefer to think of the '60s in Warhol's colors, the surface of diamond dust, the beautiful junkies, and the big movie stars. De Antonio's '60s are far more difficult to digest. They're tough, grisly, and, ugliest of all, true. **Christopher Bollen**

From top:

In the Year of the Pig, 1969

Mary Lampson, Haskell Wexler, and Emile de Antonio interviewing the Weathermen in *Underground*, 1976

Images courtesy Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research

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