



Emile de Antonio's documentaries and radical art

Laura E. Ruberto (January 13, 2008)

The documentary films of Emile de Antonio, another chapter in Italian American radicalism.

Prompted by my visit to the SF MOMA last week, I netflixed some of Emile de Antonio's documentaries (Point of Order and In the Year of the Pig)—which, I admit, I'd read about but never seen. Many more are screening through February at the museum than are available on DVD. What I found most refreshing was how utterly different they are from the hyper-self-conscious post-Roger and Me-style documentaries that have been so popular recently. What gets me is the way his work seems (at least a good 40 odd years later) critical of the establishment without being overly dogmatic or obvious. In short, it's political art at its best.

Emile Francesco de Antonio (1919-1989) was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania, to an Italian immigrant father (from Alessandria, in the region of Piedmont), who was a prominent medical doctor, and a Lithuanian American mother, who worked as a nurse in the same hospital as the elder de Antonio.

De Antonio is part of a history of radical Italian Americans, a history we often overlook in light of other more popular, but no less fascinating, immigrant narratives. Perhaps one of the reasons these histories get overlooked is that often, like in de Antonio's case (or others like Mario Savio, Tina Modotti, etc.), the cause of choice is not explicitly related to Italian Americans....boh...just a thought. (Incidentally, I can't help but plug [George De Stefano's post](#) [1] from November on radical legislator Frank Barbaro and the fabulous volume, edited by Philip Cannistraro and Gerald Meyer, [The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism](#) [2].)

By the way, de Antonio went to Harvard, though he left before graduating (officially he was suspended for disciplinary reasons, but word is he'd been a member of various radical organizations, including the Young Communist League) and eventually got a degree from the University of Scranton. According to various interviews as well as the [Emile de Antonio: A Reader](#) [3], his father's love of literature and mythology taught him early on the importance of narrative and how to have a critical eye; it was his upbringing in rural Pennsylvania that led to his political beliefs: as Douglass Kellner and Dan Streible put it: "he later claimed that at the age of 10 he discerned the vast class in equalities in the lives of the rich and the poor coal miners and the unemployed" ([Emile de Antonio: A Reader](#) [3], U of Minnesota P, 2000, pg. 3).

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