

Document Citation

Title	Reading the news
Author(s)	John Coleman
Source	<i>New Statesman, The</i>
Date	1968 Dec 06
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	In the Year of the Pig, De Antonio, Emile, 1968

Reading the News

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Emile de Antonio is a cosmopolitan American, who has been in his time a longshoreman and lecturer, book-editor and freelance producer for our BBC Third Programme. He has a well-deserved reputation for making pricking films about thorny subjects: *Point of Order* (about those TV hearings which finally did for Joe McCarthy) and *Rush to Judgment* (based on Mark Lane's disturbing post-mortem of the Kennedy assassination). He is a propagandist, if by that you mean he has strong beliefs about the way the world wags and is prepared to use all the film documents at his disposal to make a case. But I've yet to find him tampering with the evidence, only selecting it according to his lights. One of the less forgettable things about his McCarthy compilation was not the appearance of the grinning swerver who was greasy, the late Senator for Wisconsin, but a quite unexpected downgrading of one's esteem for photogenic Joseph Welch, the Boston lawyer whom the tabloids of the time made heroic: he registered as the purest ham. Had he wanted to, Mr de Antonio could have edited his film so that this unpalatable but all too human discovery were side-stepped. Instead, he chose to edit for authenticity: McCarthy was the bad guy, all right, but few of his opponents rode in shining armour.

In the Year of the Pig (ICA Cinema, Nash House: ring them for days and times) is de Antonio's latest film, 'about' the war in Vietnam. Since it seems to me by far the most informative and powerful piece of assembly yet aimed at us in that sad, complex connection, may I adjure attendance? This time round, cuts from documentary (newsreels of war and politicians), are tucked into a series of interviews specially conducted by the director. The public pronouncements – of course – ring hollowly against the private questionings. A short history of both the French and American intervention in Vietnam is conducted. Senators, soldiers, reporters and historians speak their minds on what has gone so dreadfully wrong. Gradually, a second picture emerges: this isn't just 'about' that war but rather about deep-seated American doubts of their future function as Americans. Ho Chi Minh, cheerfully or not, is prepared to fight to the death. By and large the country is prepared to be united behind him. If such a tiny force, however supported, can withstand such a colossal invader (and the film rightly underlines the draining enormity of the American commitment), then the end of superpowers may be in sight: David's sling could yet see Goliath off again. Several of the interviewees, who seem honourable men, buzz perplexedly around this interesting new issue. It is useful to find this as the film's focus and not those – alas, familiar – images of bloody babies and plucky little smiling Viet Cong. De Antonio does more than stir our wrath or pity in the cause of a quick, alleviating cheque to Oxfam or whatever. He irritates the viewer into thought.