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Film: Satiric Documentary on Nixon: De Antonio's 'Millhouse' Is at the New Yorker

By VINCENT CANBY

The easiest way to describe Emile de Antonio's "Millhouse" is as a satiric documentary, but that's a bland, weasel-like definition for the exuberantly opinionated film form that de Antonio first used in "Point of Order" and then pursued, with somewhat less dramatic results, in "Rush to Judgment" and "In the Year of the Pig."

De Antonio has no special interest in balanced reportage, which is as antithetical to his concerns as it is to those of superior fiction, and "Millhouse," a study of the political career of Richard Milhous Nixon (as well as of his career's various lives and times), is superior fiction, as implacable as "An American Tragedy," as mysterious as "You Can't Go Home Again," as funny as "Why Are We in Viet Nam?" and as banal as "Main Street."

By this I don't mean to say that it's not true, but rather that it shares with fiction the kind of truth that is greater than the sum of its factual parts. In this case, those parts are mostly newsreel footage, television kinescopes and some out-takes from political spots that Mr. Nixon made as a Presidential candidate in 1968.

There also are interviews with such professional Nixon watchers as James A. Wechsler, Joe McGuinniss ("The Selling of the President") and Jules Witcover ("The Resurrection of Richard Nixon"), and with old opponents and former friends. When Mrs. Marjorie Hildreth Knighton, who dated Mr. Nixon at Whittier College, reports cheerfully that she can't think of any Nixon anecdotes, the effect is Transylvanian, as if the man had passed in front of the mirror and not created a reflection.

The only ambiguity in de Antonio's new work is the second "l" and the "e" he has injected into the title, which, if it is supposed to be a pun, leaves me mystified.

"Millhouse" is otherwise a Dos Passos-like collage of the American scene as represented by the man who, in de Antonio's portrait, seems always to win when he loses and lose when he wins, whose speeches are as barren as the California desert, whose rhetoric consists mainly in answering questions no one has asked (and avoiding those that someone might ask), and who can't even tell a funny story, or a reminiscence, without somehow sandbagging himself into exposing a lot more of his fantasy life than any man need decently do.

The film concludes with the jolly gaffe, made at the Inauguration Ball, when the new President recalled having saved his money so that he and his wife

could celebrate V-J Day with Guy Lombardo at the Roosevelt Hotel and hoped that the orchestra leader would be around to play at the end of the next war.

"Millhouse" is anything but subtle, which is not De Antonio's style, and some of the ironic juxtapositions of sounds to images are less than inspired (such as the "Chiquita Banana" jingle that is lapped over shots of Mr. Nixon's South American tour).

Others, however, are brilliant and, in Norman Mailer's phrase, very spooky. I think especially of Mr. Nixon's campaign oration that actually parodies the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, with which it is intercut on the soundtrack, as well as the magical moment when Mr. Nixon accepts the 1968 nomination saying, "Let's win this one for Ike." The movie cuts to the Gipper scene from "Knute Rockne" (Win this one for the Gipper"), and then to the Gipper himself, who turns out to be the present Governor of California at what looks to be the age of 13.

De Antonio is obviously both astonished and outraged by what he sees in the Nixon career, but no more by what he sees as the conscious deception of others during the campaigns than by the self-deception that allows Mr. Nixon to call himself an egghead and to express the wish to teach at some place like Oxford and write two or three books a year.

In one key area, in expressing horror at Mr. Nixon's tremendous ambition, de Antonio is being a little naive. Ambition in itself is no more immoral or moral than the drive to eat, and can be judged only by the channels through which it is directed. I would agree, however, with what I feel to be one of the filmmaker's most important points: that we have not—sadly—reached that point of social perfection when we can enjoy, as an especially fascinating display, the exercise of power for its own sake.

"Millhouse," which opened yesterday at the New Yorker Theater, is a fascinating 'work, but not quite "the white comedy" in the Marx Brothers tradition that its producer claims. Also on the bill, however, is something that really is funny, "Thank You, Mask Man," the hilarious cartoon version of the late Lenny Bruce just-so story on how and why the Lone Ranger formed his attachment to Tonto. Bruce does the various voices, and they are all great.

MILLHOUSE, directed by Emile de Antonio, edited by Mary Lampson; photographed by Ed Emshwiller, Mike Gray, Bruce Shah, Richard Kletter; produced by Mr. de Antonio; distributed by New Yorker Films. Running time: 92 minutes. At the New Yorker Theater, Broadway at 89th Street. (This film has not yet been classified by the Motion Picture Association of America's Production Code and Rating Administration.)