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'An Unreasonable Man' Documentary. With Ralph Nader. Directed by Henriette Mantel and Steve Skrovan. (Not rated. 122 minutes. At Bay Area theaters.)

If "An Unreasonable Man" is ultimately an apologia for the politician who gave America air bags, seat belts and the George W. Bush presidency, it's a very careful one. Only when it's almost over does it become clear that the intent of the filmmakers is to rehabilitate Ralph Nader in the eyes of Democrats who loathe him for his spoiler role in the 2000 election. For most of an entertaining 122 minutes, the film simply tells the story of Nader's life and chronicles his struggles and crusades.

As it stands, when people think of Nader today, they think of the 90,000 votes Nader got and the 538 additional votes that Al Gore needed to become president of the United States. Some others think of the campaign trips Nader made to crucial swing states in the closing days of the 2000 campaign. The film attempts to broaden public perception and remind people that Nader's legacy also includes his successful David-and-Goliath struggle with the auto industry to make cars safer.

Those who love Nader will appreciate the respect and attention given his career. Yet others, even those for whom the mere sight of Nader's face is enough to cause a spike in blood pressure, will appreciate the film's evenhanded elucidation of Nader's faults. Though filmmakers Henriette Mantel and Steve Skrovan clearly stand in awe of Nader's achievements, their film is not necessarily flattering to Nader as a man. He comes across as intelligent and dedicated and also messianic and self-righteous, incapable of believing he can be wrong about anything. And though his former colleagues insist that Nader has a marvelous sense of humor, this aspect has apparently eluded the camera for more than 40 years.

The film features interviews with left-leaning writers such as Eric Alterman and Todd Gitlin, who hold Nader in absolute contempt as a delusional, destructive, intellectually dishonest egomaniac. The filmmakers interview others who are in-between -- former Nader's Raiders who are disappointed with Nader's effect on presidential politics. And it gives no more than equal time to unabashed Nader admirers, such as Phil Donahue. The movie allows all of them to make their points, without the intrusion of a narrator, and viewers have enough to make up their own mind.

One thing everyone can agree on: Nader is "an unreasonable man," in the sense that George Bernard Shaw described -- a man "who persists in trying to adapt the world to himself." Shaw wrote that "all progress depends on the unreasonable man." That includes positive progress, like that made by individuals such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King, as well as

the destructive political transformations by people such as Lenin and Stalin in the Russian Revolution. Thus, "An Unreasonable Man" is a title guaranteed to please everyone.

About a third of the film is devoted to the 2000 race, with Nader's admirers and detractors -- and Nader himself -- getting a chance to have their say. As to the issue that Nader set out to spoil the election for Gore, the movie offers as definitive an analysis by Barry Burden, a Harvard professor, who studied Nader's 2000 post-Labor Day campaign schedule and concluded that Nader was merely trying to maximize his own vote. Yet deliberate or not, Nader, as Burden's study shows, actively campaigned and advertised in Florida, Pennsylvania and Michigan, all of which were razor-thin. Nader's efforts forced Gore to devote time and money to shoring up his base, rather than campaign in Tennessee and Arkansas -- red states that a Nader campaign veteran insists Gore should have won. Indeed.

In this otherwise scrupulously fair account, there is one place in which the film becomes a bit disingenuous, and that's in its ever-so-slight suggestion that Democrats' anger at Nader was a purely after-the-fact phenomenon, a case of sour grapes. In fact, Democrats were begging Nader to drop out as late as October, or at least to tell his supporters in swing states to support Gore. Nader did not, but at least "An Unreasonable Man" is honest enough to show Nader gloating in the aftermath of the 2000 vote.

"I do think Al Gore cost me the election, especially in Florida," Nader jokes. I guess that's what Nader's admirers mean by his great sense of humor.

-- Advisory: This film contains disturbing footage of election night 2000.

-- Mick LaSalle



'Maxed Out' Documentary. Directed by James Scurlock. (Not rated. 86 minutes. At Bay Area theaters.)

Documentary filmmakers have become the muckrakers of the 21st century, splashing injustices all over the screen. Visualizing wrongdoings rather than merely writing about them can have enormous impact. "An Inconvenient Truth" has done more to call attention to global warming than hundreds of newspaper articles.

In "Maxed Out," director James Scurlock takes on credit debt. While the documentary does a credible job of pointing out the magnitude of the problem, it skirts the issue of what can be done about it and by whom. The unfortunate people spotlighted in the film who have been sucked into monetary ruin sign papers with information, albeit in fine print, about the exorbitant interest rates charged on outstanding debt.

So is it the government's responsibility to protect these folks from themselves, and if so, how? Should Americans be taught in school how to handle their money? Would such courses stand us in better stead in the long run than Shakespeare or calculus? "Maxed Out" would have far more impact if the filmmaker had at least raised such questions -- even if he couldn't supply definitive answers.

Scurlock's biggest revelation is that multiple credit cards are offered by reputable financial institutions (one of them has been a major contributor to George Bush's election campaigns). They operate like dirty old men luring the innocent with candy. Once people take the bait, they often wind up going way over the limit set for them. Their debt becomes so overwhelming that in some instances bankruptcy seems like the best solution or, in the saddest cases, suicide.

You'd have to be pretty hard-hearted, or work for one of these financial institutions, to not be moved by interviews with the mothers of two college students who killed themselves after incurring enormous debt. Apparently credit cards are hawked on college campuses because young people are both susceptible to wanting more than their parents are willing to spring for and have almost no resources to pay their bills.

A widow in Half Moon Bay heartbreakingly describes to Scurlock how she has been reduced to selling her collection of specialty plates, pointing to the holes on her wall where they once hung. Whatever she can get for them won't even come close to paying off the credit cards on which she owes an additional 29 percent interest. Looking directly into the camera, she reveals that she's considered killing herself, "but I couldn't do that to my kids."

This is powerful stuff, almost like looking at Dorothea Lange's photos of migrant farm families. But Scurlock dilutes stories of individual ruin by hauling in the huge national debt. His point seems to be that the federal government has set a bad example. But he can't possibly believe this has anything to do with why people use credit to live way beyond their means.

The director attempts to enliven things by inserting peripherally related movie clips and a faux silent episode of somebody about to jump off a plank. But these only trivialize a very serious subject. If "Maxed Out" brings about any change at all it will be because of the response of audiences: You exit the theater inclined to burn all your credit cards.

-- Ruthe Stein



'Shadow Company' Documentary. Directed by Nick Bicanic and Jason Bourque. (Not rated. 86 minutes. At the Roxie Film Center.)

The use of mercenaries in warfare is as old as warfare itself, and yet the issues mercenaries present are new again, thanks to the U.S. government's employment of private military companies in the Iraq war. "Shadow Company" explores all sides of this practice, through interviews with ethicists, soldiers and the mercenaries themselves. The movie presents a balanced view, showing both the moral challenges and tactical advantages of using professional soldiers.

Like most things, the issues are clear-cut only from a distance. While there are cowboys out there, there are also professionals who fight only for causes they believe in -- though for a price. (They don't believe in them enough to do it for free.) The use of mercenaries gives an unfair advantage to whichever adversary has the most cash. Yet the movie points to a couple of incidents in which mercenaries have served an arguably positive function.

The term "mercenary" is, in itself, a loaded term. Most mercenaries don't think of themselves as being "mercenary." They see themselves as soldiers or helicopter pilots whose special skills aren't particularly needed in the civilian world. Some genuinely enjoy combat, as well as hanging around with their fellows. The movie makes clear that some are fairly decent guys, but it makes equally clear that the system, as it currently exists, makes it very easy for rogues to go around killing people with impunity.

The movie criticizes the fact that civilian safeguards on mercenary behavior are practically nonexistent, a state of affairs that can lead both to human rights abuses and to ill feeling toward the United States. Considering that an Iraqi doesn't

care whether he's getting shot at by an American soldier or an American mercenary, it must be faced that these mercenaries are de facto ambassadors, and they need to be under responsible government control.

"Shadow Company" makes a subtle case, that there may be a place for mercenaries on the U.S. payroll, but that every aspect of their employment -- including bidding for contracts -- needs to be handled better and more efficiently.

-- Advisory: Adult themes, disturbing images.

-- Mick LaSalle

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