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# WHY MAKE A MOVIE ABOUT THE ASSASSINATION OF TROTSKY?

Joseph Losey uses a historic event to express his hatred of murder as an instrument of political change in our time.

BY JUDY STONE

A French television interviewer took a random sampling on the question "Who was Trotsky?" before the Paris opening of Joseph Losey's new film *The Assassination of Trotsky* and so elicited one really revolutionary new theory: "She was a ballet dancer."

If somebody had asked Losey that question in the 1940s, he would have answered, "The enemy." But today, at sixty-three, his blue eyes weary in a powerful, furrowed face, the director is less certain. "There are no absolutes," he says. "I want to make films that break down certainty."

He is at the height of his career, years past films that the anti-Communist black list forced on him as well as star-studded failures like *Boom* and *Secret Ceremony*. He has achieved international respect for his skill in exploring ambiguous complexities in the relationships between England's upper and lower classes in *King and Country*, *The Servant*, *Accident*, and *The Go-Between*. If there are any themes that continue to grip him, they are those that involve a hatred of hypocrisy, as well as a troubled preoccupation with the "destruction and anguish and waste of most sexual relationships."

Now taking on a political subject he never dreamed he would touch, he has chosen to present the old "enemy" during the last four months of his life in Mexico, 1940: Lev Davidovich Bronstein, who borrowed the name Trotsky from his jailer; coleader with Lenin of the October Revolution of 1917, founder of the Red Army, exiled by Stalin from the Soviet Union in a power play, which thus precipitated the first of the big splits in the Communist movement.

The American premiere of *The Assassination of Trotsky* will take place October 13 at the New York Film Festival. Losey has drawn from his two stars the finest performances of their careers. Richard Burton is magnificent

as the erect old revolutionary, meticulously dictating his memoirs: "In revolution there is no compulsion . . . except that of circumstances. A revolution takes place only when there is no other way out." Alain Delon—a mixture of premeditated charm, irresolution, nerves, hysteria—suggests mysteries that have never been solved about the man who killed Trotsky in August 1940.

Losey became involved in the film out of some curiosity, but mostly out of loyalty to a black-listed old friend who wrote the original screen treatment (later discarded). Because they had shared a common pro-Soviet assumption that Trotsky was a counterrevolutionary, Losey wondered what had brought his friend to the project.

The director realized very quickly that he knew almost nothing about Trotsky; nor, he surmised, did the vast majority of people who had once taken an anti-Trotsky position. He was surprised to learn, for instance, that Trotsky's theory of permanent world revolution, so widely disseminated by his disciples, was confined to a few sentences in the large body of his work and that, unlike many of his adherents, Trotsky regarded the "unconditional defense of the Soviet Union" as essential.

Ironically, the final script, which contains footnotes citing sources for nearly all of Trotsky's lines, was written by Nicholas Mosley—son of Sir Oswald Mosley, once considered Britain's leading fascist, and of Lady Cynthia Mos-

ley, one of Jessica Mitford's sisters. Lady Cynthia was a Trotskyist and Labour MP who had met Trotsky during his exile in 1930 in Turkey.

"I wasn't trying to do a *life* of Trotsky," Losey explained, somewhat irritably because that's what some people think he should have done. We talked in the unpretentious, black-and-white living room of the house in London where he lives with his fourth wife, Patricia. A ceiling-high mirror above the black-and-gray marble fireplace gives an illusion of spaciousness, and a small convex mirror offers a refreshing, almost Persian, miniature reflection of the green beech trees in the quiet Chelsea square outside. A death mask of Losey's old friend Bertolt Brecht is a reminder of the Hollywood witch hunt and of Losey's staging of an earlier inquisition, the American premiere of Brecht's *Galileo*.

"The point of this film is the horror of the means used to effect political change now, the horrible, gruesome hounding and secret assassinations that seem to have become the instrument of world-power politics. I would equate Trotsky's assassination with the terrifying cynicism of the meetings Nixon had in Moscow. It was all so brazen. The backslapping, the champagne drinking, the banqueting, the Bolshoi Theater, and the smiles—while genocide is being committed systematically in the East. It's a nauseating spectacle. If they have to have their bloody meetings,



Losey (left) coaches Romy Schneider and Alain Delon (center).

Judy Stone, recently back from freelance writing in Ireland, edits the daily entertainment section of the San Francisco Chronicle.



they could have them without this hypocritical facade. I don't think it proves anything except that the whole world is sick and corrupt and cynical."

Losey grew up in the much simpler world of LaCrosse, Wisconsin, where the Losey Memorial and Losey Boulevard honor his grandfather, one of the founders of the Northern Pacific Railroad. He entered Dartmouth College at sixteen, thinking he would become a doctor, but the world of literature, music, and painting exerted a stronger pull. He took an M.A. at Harvard, began writing about theater, and directed and coproduced his first play on Broadway at twenty-three.

His first feature film, *The Boy With Green Hair*, was made in 1948 at the start of the investigation into "subversion" in Hollywood. To combat this infringement on the First Amendment, Losey staged a huge meeting in Los Angeles for the original "Hollywood Nineteen" on the eve of their departure for the first of the Washington hearings. Their framed letter of appreciation hangs on the wall of his fourth-floor study. "You have launched a counterattack," the letter reads in part, "from which our whole people will profit. This is small thanks, but you don't need any anyway."

Losey's own subpoena never arrived, and he left for England the day after General Eisenhower was elected President. In England he began gradually to direct again, and his films were "discovered," devoured, and dissected by a Losey cult on the Continent.

When he went to Mexico last year to research the Trotsky film, one difficult problem was his meeting with Trotsky's only surviving grandson, Vsevolod (Seva) Volkov. Volkov, who runs a small photographic laboratory, lives with his wife and two sets of twin daughters in Trotsky's old home, now a museum, in the Coyoacán section of Mexico City. An apolitical man himself, Volkov nonetheless jealously guards his grandfather's reputation against what he calls "Stalinist lies."

"It is not easy to get access to the house," Losey said, "or easy to win his [Volkov's] confidence. First, I was allowed to the door, then into the garden. Volkov was suspicious and, I think, also had been warned against me. He said, 'Are you a Communist?' I said, 'No, I'm not.' He asked, 'Were you a Communist?' I said, 'Yes, I was.' He asked, 'Are you a Trotskyist?' I said, 'No, I'm not.' He said, 'Do you intend to tell the truth?' I said, 'I intend to tell as much of the truth as I can find out.' He finally said, 'I'll help you as much as I can because I believe you're honest in what you're trying to do.'"

Once Losey began filming, he found that the Mexican government had laid down some "terrifying" conditions.

Mexico is notorious for political censorship, and Trotsky's death is not exactly an uncontroversial subject.

"I had to have a representative of the censor on the set at all times, and she had to see all the rushes. The negatives had to be processed there, and they wanted to hold them until they saw the completely cut and finished film. For a two-and-a-half-million-dollar film it was quite a risk, but they were finally very cooperative. When some of the lab work was poor and we had to reshoot, they let the footage be processed elsewhere."

The most interesting government decree was that David Alfaro Siqueiros, last survivor of the great Mexican muralists, could not be mentioned by name in the film, nor could any of his art be shown. Historians agree that Siqueiros, a Communist who had fought in the Spanish Civil War, led an abortive raid on Trotsky's heavily fortified home on May 24, 1940. Two hundred shots were fired, but only Trotsky's grandson, Volkov, was slightly wounded.

Neither Siqueiros nor anyone else ever served a sentence in connection with that attack. The artist later said that the purpose of the raid was not to kill Trotsky but to provoke a "psychological shock" and protest his presence.

Losey wanted the ebullient Siqueiros

to take an active part in the film for artistic reasons. "I wanted to use his paintings because they are very cinematic—particularly the later ones. I was also fascinated by the juxtaposition of Trotsky to the Mexican culture and the October Revolution to the Mexican Revolution. The close relationship of Mexican artists to the Mexican Revolution was totally unlike the divorcing of artists from revolutionary Russia.

"I said to Siqueiros, 'Anything you can tell me is not true—unless I can absolutely prove you're wrong—I will accept. Or, if you want to let me use your paintings, at the end you can appear in person and say, 'This is one version of history, but it's not mine.'" Up to the last day before shooting he wavered but finally decided against becoming involved in the film."

Speculating on the government's ban on Siqueiros, Losey said he thought the May 1940 attack on Trotsky's home was still "a touchy subject for both the government and the family. I'm sure the frightful event that occurred in June 1971 just before I began shooting—an unfortunate word—added to the difficulties. There was a perfectly peaceful student demonstration, and a group of uniformed, organized fascists attacked and broke it up. It was announced that there were nineteen dead, but there were, in fact, more. These gangs went into the hospitals and shot to death some of the wounded."

The violence he saw then returned to haunt him at a spectacular bullfight, which became a recurring motif in the film. "I wanted to make the point," Losey said, "that people can accept certain kinds of brutality as they accept the horrors of Vietnam."

Some people may see a bullfight as

**An actor hides behind mannerisms and masks; he'll play safe until he knows the director won't let him be hurt.**



*Trotsky (Richard Burton) records his memoirs, his last literary work.*



choreography of a kind, but Losey believes that the only reason a person with feeling can stomach one at all is that it is always filmed in long shot. He filmed it all in "inescapable" close-ups. This bullfight was particularly horrifying because the picador's lance broke off in the bull. Every time the bull charged, the lance was a threat to the matador, who risked being impaled not only by the horns but also by the lance.

"This was an accidental, but particularly apt, parallel to Trotsky," Losey said, "because he was struck in the head with an alpenstock, a three-cornered ice pick for mountain climbing." The director emphasized the parallel by intercutting bullfight scenes with the assassination.

"The ice pick was buried in Trotsky's brain to a depth of two-and-a-half inches, sufficient to render him unconscious immediately. Instead, from almost a resigned, fatalistic attitude toward the inevitability of assassination, he sprang to life and struggled physically—a man of sixty-one with a man of twenty-five—for four minutes, and he lived another twenty-six hours. For the first two hours he made jokes, he tried to comfort his wife, he made political statements. Likewise, this bull went on charging, and the lance had to be pulled out before the bullfight could proceed."

Losey was struck by Trotsky's almost fatalistic acceptance of what was to come. The assassin had maneuvered his way into the household through a carefully cultivated relationship with a spinsterish New York Trotskyist, called Gita (played by Romy Schneider) in the film. He asked Trotsky to read an almost illiterate manuscript he had written, while he sat perched on the desk above him with an ice pick, a dagger, and a gun concealed in his coat! It was his dress rehearsal. Later, to his wife, Trotsky expressed unnamable anxieties about the visit. Yet he let him return.

"Some of the older Trotskyists dismiss him as a trained killer," Losey said, "but I find it difficult to believe that a trained killer would have made so many mistakes. He was either a very stupid man, a very untrained man, a very frightened man, or all three."

The assassin used the aliases of Jacques Mornard, "son of a Belgian diplomat," and Frank Jacson, a Canadian. Ten years after his conviction he was identified almost certainly, through a check of his fingerprints in Madrid, as Ramon Mercader, whose mother was a Cuban-born Spanish Communist known for her intimacy with the Soviet secret police.

However, the killer never departed from his "cover": that he was a disillusioned Trotskyist, acting from principle but also out of a desire for his mother's approval. His one human concern was to absolve "Gita" of com-

plicity. After serving his full twenty-year sentence in a Mexican prison, he went first to Cuba and is now believed to be living in Czechoslovakia. The film itself ends with the assassin's capture—to which he offered no resistance—his identification still unknown.

Losey said he does not believe that Trotsky had a death wish despite his failure to act on his suspicion about the assassin. "Trotsky must have been terribly depressed and sad and discouraged and aware that he was working in a vacuum. At the time of Lenin's death he was the heir. There's no doubt that he could have taken power, but he didn't even come back from the Caucasus for Lenin's funeral. He stayed away for three months, and he deliberately provoked Stalin by calling him the 'undertaker of the Revolution' at a Politburo meeting. I believe he abdicated power. My own feeling was that, when he recognized what the revolution would mean in terms of more deaths, half of him didn't want to go on, didn't want the responsibility."

I said that I felt the one wrong note in the film was the assassin's fleeting glimpse of Stalin's face in the floating gardens at Xochimilco, to which he had taken Gita for an outing prior to the assassination. Stalin's ultimate responsibility had already been implied, and that apparition seemed melodramatic.

It may have seemed "stylistically isolated," Losey suggested, "but it was part of my original plan. I wanted to get much more visual documentary footage on Trotsky, but I simply couldn't find it. I needed that Xochimilco scene rhythmically, to give the audience a breathing space."

A perfectionist about the finest details, from the quality of the color prints to the music-and-sound mix, Losey stresses the necessity of shape and form in his work. "Beauty is very important to me. I risk being called, and sometimes am called, formalistic. A lot is being written now about happenings and similar activities. They more or less abdicate the function of the artist. True art is the breaking down of reality and the reconstructing of it in a shape, in a form, to show people something in a way in which they wouldn't otherwise have seen it. I want to show them ugliness that they wouldn't see, to show them beauty in connection with the ugliness that they wouldn't see. Beauty without the ugliness isn't enough, and ugliness without the beauty isn't enough to me."

He approaches each film with the utmost confidence. "But when it comes down to the nitty-gritty," he says, "I start getting sick to my stomach and being unable to sleep and having nightmares. I'm terrified of the actors for the first few days, of the technicians, of myself. I'm convinced I'll never

make another film as long as I live."

Losey's sensitivity to actors grows out of the knowledge of his own trepidations. "The productiveness of the director/actor relationship depends on the degree to which the actor trusts the director. Unless the actor feels he can safely risk everything he has to give without making himself ridiculous, he won't try. An actor will hide behind mannerisms; he will hide behind a mask; he'll hide behind tricks; he will avoid using himself to avoid being hurt; he'll play safe until he knows that the director will not let him be hurt and will not let him make a fool of himself. Then he can draw on things he otherwise wouldn't dream of drawing on. If you wear your heart on your sleeve and some ass comes along and says, 'What's that red flash on your sleeve?' and cuts it to ribbons, then you haven't got any heart left to put on your sleeve or anywhere else."

Losey finds Burton a "most satisfying actor to direct, although a lot of people don't believe me. Richard is an extraordinary man of vast talent. He also has a small, but distinguished, writing ability. His relationship with Elizabeth is very important to him, but he's a perplexed man who is troubled by all sorts of contradictions. He mistrusts everyone, including himself. He has come to trust me as much as he can trust anybody. I think a large part of his life is not very happy. He doesn't take films or directors seriously and tends not to understand much of what goes into the making of a film. But when he saw *Trotsky*, he wrote me the most extraordinary letter."

"Dearest Joe," Burton wrote, "I rarely use the superlative unless I mean it so I don't think the dearest is a matter of useless form. It is rather nice to grab a portion of someone else's ephemeral immortality if you'll pardon the paradox. For whenever they have a Losey festival, I'm fairly certain that I will be in it together with lesser beings like Elizabeth Taylor and that has (the very name) a certain catch to it . . . . The particular virtue of this present film is that it compels one's imagination for many hours after the event . . . because of your pointing out with exactitude other lives than our own . . . . I think that this film might, at last, make Delon into the international star that he should have been a long time ago. I think that even I act with the most precise precision. There's a delicacy and frailty in my performance that I didn't think I was capable of and a reduction of my voice to its basic truth rather than a noble suggestion . . . . My wife loves you a great deal and she is sparing in her affections and also loves your wife and so do I and it is rare in our mentally suspicious world to love anybody at all. . . ." □