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Document Citation

Title	**[Two english girls]**
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Source	*Village Voice*
Date	
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	77
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Les Deux anglaises et le continent (Two english girls), Truffaut, François, 1971 The assassination of Trotsky, Losey, Joseph, 1972

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films in focus

by Andrew Sarris

Francois Truffaut's **"TWO ENGLISH GIRLS"** seems far more vulnerable to the derision of the congenital anti-romantics in our midst than was his "Jules and Jim" 10 years ago. The English girls (Kika Markham, Stacey Tendeter) are often too awkward and inexpressive for the necessary dramatic interaction with the swing characterization of Jean-Pierre Leaud. Even now, I can't really remember what the two girls look like, or indeed which is which. By contrast, Jeanne Moreau and Oskar Werner remain truly inoubliable more than a decade later. Thus, there is nothing comparable in "Two English Girls" to Jeanne Moreau's lilting song number, or to Werner's Chaplinesque walk to emotional oblivion after witnessing the cremation of his two dearest friends.

And "Two English Girls" is, if anything, even more offensive than "Jules and Jim" was to the cinematic purists a la Vorkapitch for an alleged reliance on spoken sentiments without accompanying visual equivalents. Long, literary, Lawrentian letters are read aloud again and again as if the screen were for the first time challenging the limitations of the medium's sensibility. As it happens, I watched "Two English Girls" for the longest time with a protective feeling toward its frailties, and with a reawakened loyalty to Truffaut. But then near the end when Leaud and Truffaut circle around Rodin's "The Kiss," I found myself more moved than I had ever been by any other Truffaut movie, perhaps by the rigor of a romanticism that has found a new depth in its despair, a depth so deep that the sympathetic spectator may find it a little difficult to breathe.

Joseph Losey's **"THE ASSASSINATION OF TROTSKY"** is the most underrated movie of the year largely because audiences seem to have anticipated one kind of experience, and Joseph Losey and his scenarist Nicholas Mosley have provided another. I must admit that I too was suspicious of Losey's intentions before I saw the film, not so much because Losey was a self-proclaimed non-Trotskyist, and was therefore not emotionally committed to his subject, but rather because history is in itself more constraining than fiction. People had complained of being bored by the film, and I believed them to the point of finally having to drag myself to the Baronet Theatre where my early departure would not be too noticeable. Also, I preferred not to endure the hostile vibes of the festival audience.

But as I watched the film I experienced the double epiphany of appreciating it for its own sake and also perceiving why it was disliked by other people. It is the old story. People are always demanding intellectual entertainment, but deep down they want to be emotionally raped. Oh, why aren't there more movies made about intellectuals and about intellectual subjects, but beware if you don't invest the screen intellectual with the endearingly crochety mannerisms of Paul Muni in his bearded period or with the voluptuous vacuity of Peter O'Toole's somnambule.

Richard Burton's Trotsky is all the more admirable for being so dryly and (until the pick-ax of Alain Delon's Jacson comes crashing into his skull) so bloodlessly intellectual. That is the whole point of Losey's meditation on the vulnerability of the political animal at bay. A man, like Trotsky, who believed in the power of the Word to change the world could never have sniffed out his assassin in advance. A bureaucratic beast like Stalin, by contrast, placed his faith in the world as it was, and employed the word merely as psychological camouflage. Stalin, with his seminarian's scent for the preternatural, would have recognized Alain Delon's Jacson as the Angel of Death. But Trotsky saw in Jacson merely a potential convert to the Fourth International, a shy journalist manque who needed only some of Trotsky's editing and encouragement to become an effective polemicist in the cause.

Losey's style is very rigorous in this regard. He never lets us warm up to the emotional space between the victim and the assassin, and thus he never exploits the facile paternal-filial feelings which flowed through the film version of Jean-Paul Sartre's "Dirty Hands" some years ago with the victim-assassin histrionics of Pierre Brasseur and Daniel Gelin. It must have struck Losey from the beginning how fitting it was for Trotsky's assassin to aim for the brain as Robespierre's assailant had once assaulted the eloquent mouth. Why else would Losey have staged such an inglorious guignol when he might have cut away to the emotional ripples and reverberations attending the death of a Great Man?

Indeed, it seems almost perverse of Losey to take so long to take us to Trotsky and then so long to take leave of him. But I don't believe that Losey has thus diminished Trotsky any more than Straub diminished Bach by not placing him in the jazzier movie Ken Russell now seems to have in mind for the compulsive composer. What Losey, Mosley, and Burton among them have devised is a rare portrait of an intellectual, dying as he has lived, with full faith in the rational processes of history. Losey could have inserted more of Trotsky's words, but he might have had to sacrifice thereby some of the music of Valentina Cortese's emotional radar as Natalya, Trotsky's wife, and the counterpoint and balance to Trotsky's noble obtuseness.

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