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ATTACKING THE SKIES

(ASALTAR LOS CIELOS)

SPANISH - DOCU

A Cero en Conducta production, in association with Television Espanola and Canal Plus (Spain). (International sales: Cero en Conducta, Madrid.) Produced by F. Torresblanco, V. Andresco, S. Martinez.

Directed by J.L. Lopez-Linares, Javier Rioyo. Camera (color), Lopez-Linares; editor, Pablo Blanco, J. Fidel Collados; music, Alberto Iglesias; sound (Dolby Digital), Gilles Ortion; narration, Charo Lopez; research, A. Aguirre. Reviewed at Valladolid Film Festival (Tiempos de Historia section), Spain, Oct. 24, 1996. Running time: 98 MIN.

A documentary about the man who murdered Trotsky would seem unlikely to set pulses racing far beyond the wrists of a few die-hard old-style socialists. But "Attacking the Skies," film debut by journalist Javier Rioyo and cameraman J.L. Lopez-Linares, converts this raw material into a remarkable, gripping narrative which, by refusing to be earnest, takes us through a satisfyingly wide range of emotions. Pic deserves further exposure.

In 1940, Ramon Mercader, a young Catalan, drove an ice pick three centimeters into the skull of the bearded revolutionary while he was feeding his rabbits. Nobody knew why, and Oswald-type theories flourished. In a quest to find the answer, Rioyo and

**The documakers visited
10 countries and conducted 50 interviews
to solve the mystery
of why Ramon Mercader
murdered Trotsky.**

Lopez-Linares visited 10 countries and conducted 50 interviews to come up with over 100 hours of footage.

The portrait that emerges of Mercader is of a sad mother's boy who later became a KGB member and wanted to engrave his name in history. He was the sort of man who people laughed at when he boasted he was going to kill Trotsky, and then went right ahead and did it.

Family and friends are interviewed, most of whom knew Mercader personally, some of whom are happy to theorize about him. Wrinkled faces and words of wisdom abound amongst the old revolutionaries. "We called him the Icepick Man," El Burrero, a fellow felon, fondly recalls. Another character recalls Trotsky pointing out that Mercader — the two men met on several occasions — was "strange."

After the assassination, Mercader spent four years locked up in Mexico, when friends made an attempt to spring him from jail. It went awry, and he stayed there another 16 years, during which he kept "silence and faith."

Beautifully edited, the docu is not only a record of one man's descent into madness but also a version of European history. The Mercader story travels to Cuba, Moscow, Paris and London, spreading its tentacles beyond the range of its apparent subject without losing its focus — which is as much Mercader's mother, the high-strung Caridad, as it is Mercader himself.

As well as clearing up a problem that has tickled the Spanish subconscious for 50 years, the film also puts to rest Mercader's own hopes for heroic status. "Silence and faith," as one interviewee points out, "are not worth a bean in the end."

—Jonathan Holland