

# Killing Trotsky, Reviving Mercader

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## **Abstract**

This essay examines the historical portrayal of the assassination of Leon Trotsky, and the figure of his killer, Ramon Mercader, in three different forms: the films, *El elegido* (Chavarrías, 2016) and *The Assassination of Trotsky* (Losey, 1972), and the novel, *The Man Who Loves Dogs* (Padura, 2009). The author argues that historical movies have been the most popular genre of cinema since the invention of the medium, and that historians have a particular responsibility in rigorously interrogating them. In this essay, he proposes a triangulation of sources in order to carry out his analysis through the contrast he develops between them.

**Keywords:** historical cinema, Trotsky, Mercader, social revolutions, Mexico, Communism.

## **Resumen**

En este ensayo se examina la representación del asesinato de Leon Trotsky, y el personaje de su asesino, Ramon Mercader, en tres formas diferentes: las películas, *El elegido* (Chavarrías, 2016) y *The Assassination of Trotsky* (Losey, 1972), y la novela, *The Man Who Loves Dogs* (Padura, 2009). El autor sostiene que las películas históricas han sido el género más popular del cine desde la invención del medio y que los historiadores tienen una responsabilidad particular en interrogarlas rigurosamente. En este ensayo, propone una triangulación de fuentes para llevar a cabo su análisis a través de la comparación que realiza entre ellas.

**Palabras clave:** cine histórico, Trotsky, Mercader, revoluciones sociales, México, comunismo.

The past has long been a popular place to stage movies. It must also be profitable, because the costs of recreating bygone scenes and providing period costumes necessarily makes the genre more expensive than shooting films in contemporary contexts. In spite of its expense, it is probably no exaggeration to assert that almost half of all films produced in the world have been set in historical milieus, and about that same percentage have won the Academy Awards as Best Picture. They also dominate

lists of the best movies. For example, in the International Movie Database (IMDb) rating of the ten greatest films of all time we find seven situated in times gone by: *The Shawshank Redemption* (Darabont, 1997; set in 1947), *Schindler's List* (Spielberg, 1993; set in the 1940s) *Raging Bull* (Scorcese, 1980; set in the 1940s), *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941; set between 1871 and 1940), *Gone With the Wind* (Fleming, 1939; set in the 1860s), and *Lawrence of Arabia* (Lean, 1962; set in World War I).<sup>1</sup> I would have to include personal favorites such as *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974; set in the 1930s) and *The Battle of Algiers* (Pontecorvo, 1966; set in the mid-1950s). Revolutionary film cultures have shown a particular affinity for producing high-quality historical movies, as those that are considered to be the finest films ever made in the Soviet Union, Mexico, and Cuba have all focused on past events: *Potemkin* (Eisenstein, 1925; set in 1905), *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!* and *El compadre Mendoza* (De Fuentes, 1933-35; set in the Mexican Revolution around 1915), and *Memories of Underdevelopment* (Gutiérrez Alea, 1967; set in 1961-62).<sup>2</sup>

The importance accorded to movies about past events creates a responsibility for historians.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps first of all, we want to know if the film has been true to the otherness of the past, if it has somehow placed us in contact with those yesteryears in which things were done differently. But, we must get beyond the notion of simply contrasting a movie to “what really happened”, in order to interrogate the structural absences and the fictional presences. One of the more fruitful methods to carry this out is by comparing a film to other fictional works on the same subject. In examining a recent movie such as *El elegido* (Chavarrías, 2016), we are fortunate in having another film, *The Assassination of Trotsky* (Losey, 1972), as well as a book, *The Man Who Loved Dogs* (Padura, 2009), to triangulate the analysis.<sup>4</sup>

In both Losey's film and Padura's novel, Leon Trotsky (born Lev Davidovich Bronstein, 1879-1940) is identified as one of the most important revolutionary activists and theorists of all time. His commitment to making a more decent, humane, and egalitarian society in Russia began in 1896, and he was one of the leaders of the triumphant 1917 Bolshevik revolution. He then founded and commanded the Red Army that defeated counter-revolutionary forces, as well as the numerous foreign armies that

<sup>1</sup> WALCZYK, C. (2012; 2016): “Top 100 Greatest Movies of All Time”. <http://www.imdb.com/list/ls055592025/>; consulted 17 November 2016.

<sup>2</sup> On the Mexican and Cuban films made during the post-revolutionary cultural effervescence, see my article, MRAZ, J. (1999): "The Revolution is History: Filming the Past in Mexico and Cuba". In: *Film Historia*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 147-167.

<sup>3</sup> The bibliography on historical cinema continues to grow, but the best introduction remains that of ROSENSTONE, R. A. (1995): *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press; translated into Spanish as, ROSENSTONE, R. (1997): *El pasado en imágenes. El desafío del cine a nuestra idea de la historia*, Barcelona, Ariel Historia.

<sup>4</sup> *El elegido*, 2016. Mexico-Spain. Director: Antonio Chavarrías. Production Company: Alebrije Cine y Oberon Cinematográfica-TVE. Producer: Antonio Muñoz-Hierro. Script: Antonio Chavarrías. Cinematography: Guillermo Granillo. Music: Joan Valent. Editor: Ernest Blasi. Cast: Alfonso Herrera, Hannah Murray, Henry Goodman. Duration: 125 minutes. PADURA, L. (2009): *El hombre que amaba a los perros*, Barcelona, Tusquets; Havana, Ediciones Unión, 2011; published in English as, *The Man Who Loved Dogs*, tr. Anna Kushner, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. I have employed the Kindle edition, and have identified citations by their locations in the text. *The Assassination of Trotsky*, 1972. Great Britain-France-Italy. Direction: Joseph Losey. Production Company: Dino de Laurentiis, Cinematografica Compagnia Internazionale. Producers: Norman Priggen and Josef Shafel. Script: Nicholas Mosley and Masolino D'Amico. Cinematography: Pascualino de Santis. Music: Egisto Macchi. Editor: Reginald Beck. Cast: Richard Burton, Alain Delon, Romy Schneider, Valentina Cortese. Duration: 103 minutes. I am grateful to Magí Crusells for obtaining a copy of the *The Assassination of Trotsky*.

invaded Russia to destroy the new order and the dangerous example it posed to the ruling classes in those countries. During the 1920s, he became increasingly critical of Josef Stalin's centralization of power, and was eventually sent into exile in 1929. After living in Turkey, France and Norway, he accepted the invitation of Mexican Communist artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, going to Mexico in 1936, where he wrote prolifically until he was assassinated in 1940 by Ramon Mercader, a Catalan Stalinist. Padura observed that the assassination of Trotsky was "one of the most ruthless, calculated, and useless crimes in history".<sup>5</sup> A great thinker and visionary of alternative possibilities had been struck down cowardly from behind with an ice axe. In that moment, he posed no threat to Stalin's iron control, but his ideas could well have helped to change international politics after World War II through his critique of Stalin's betrayal of the revolution, as well as his analysis of the bourgeois rule and ferocious anti-communism in developed countries.

Losey's film begins with a documentary sequence that informs the audience of Trotsky's role as a world-historical figure, and constant reference is made to his importance as an international intellectual. The first fictional shot in which Richard Burton appears in his role shows him surrounded by stacks of papers and books, the context in which he is largely pictured on screen. He constantly dictates articles to his assistants or on a Dictaphone. In one scene, he reads back an article as it was later published in the US magazine, *Time*. Other publications on Trotsky's desk are *Life* and *Newsweek*, leading the audience to assume that they are also printing his work. Trotsky is fleshed out through the acting of Burton, who shows him reminiscing on his revolutionary activities, Stalin's betrayal of the movement, and the constant framing of the film in Trotsky's statements. The fictional footage begins with a voiceover of a Trotsky quote: "In revolution, there is no compulsion except that of circumstances. A revolution takes place when there is no other way out." Shortly before he is killed, Trotsky sums up his existence: "I shall die a proletarian revolutionary, a Marxist, a dialectical materialist, and an atheist".

Henry Goodman plays Trotsky in *El elegido*. He is no doubt a fine actor, but Chavarrías' direction leaves him standing on the sidelines, because viewers of that politically vacuous film receive little information about Trotsky's importance. Instead, his figure is eclipsed by the work's focus on the relationship of Mercader with his mother, and his seduction of Sylvia Ageloff, a Trotsky follower. As is so often the case in cinema that wishes to replicate Hollywood's "apoliticalism", the narrative is driven by love, rather than by historical events. Director Chavarrías attempts to explain away his incapacity to explore the opportunities he evades by unconvincingly stating that his film is "Not an historical recreation, but a fictional history" (*No es una recreación histórica, es una ficción histórica*).<sup>6</sup> I would describe it as a "costume drama" rather than a serious attempt to explore past events.

The figure of Mercader is presented in both Chavarrías' and Losey's films as a typical Hollywood hero: he is rich and handsome, well-dressed, lives in luxurious settings, and easily seduces women. However, the resemblance of Mercader's persona in the two films ends at that superficial level. A television actor, Alfonso Herrera is unconvincing in the role of Mercader, so *El elegido* greatly emphasizes the trappings in which he is enveloped: his ostentation, his fancy car, his variety of elegant clothing, and the international sophistication that is demonstrated in his command of several languages. This film attempts to make us sympathize with Mercader by evidencing his

<sup>5</sup> Padura, Location 7114, Kindle edition.

<sup>6</sup> "El elegido: entrevista con Antonio Chavarrías y Elvira Mínguez", <https://losinterrogantes.com/cine/criticas/pelicula-el-elegido-2016>; consulted 17 november 2016.

subjugation by his mother, who shoots his dog to teach him that such emotional attachments interfere with his political work. In fact, that is one of the few elements that distinguishes *El elegido* from Hollywood cinema: you cannot kill dogs in mainstream US films, although you can kill as many people as you wish, especially if their skin is a bit darker than their killers. Infected by Chavarrías' attraction to morbid characters, Elvira Mínguez, who plays the role of the mother, considers her a "fascinating person, about whom you could make an entire film or even a television series" ("*Es una persona fascinante, se podría hacer una película sobre ella, o una serie*").<sup>7</sup> In an effort to humanize Mercader, Chavarrías has Herrera express doubt about the necessity to murder Trotsky. A further attempt to create empathy with this villain occurs when he runs into a friend whose life he saved at the front in the Spanish Civil War, and who then recognizes him (a sequence that appears in neither the Losey film nor the Padura book). Mercader first attempts to deny his identity, but when the man persists he goes with him to drink, and then sets him up to be killed, an act that he is shown to regret.

The Mercader character as acted by Alain Delon is very differently constructed. Delon and Losey collaborated to produce an icy, enigmatic figure, often hidden behind dark glasses that distance him from both the audience as well as the other characters.



Alain Delon as Ramon Mercader sits emotionlessly behind his dark glasses.

A truly Brechtian creation, he pushes away any sort of identification or empathy; he is more of a machine than a man, a representation underscored by the fact that he usually wears the same clothes. Of course, Delon is outrageously handsome, but he plays an unsympathetic Mercader, sulking and throwing fits, and barely communicating with anyone. He is shown to have few social skills: for example, when he finally gains access to Trotsky's house, he goes immediately to see the grandson's rabbits rather than socializing with the adults. Delon is so skilled at playing a distant, repulsive figure that we come to see that the only reason Sylvia Ageloff would be interested in him is because of her own passion.

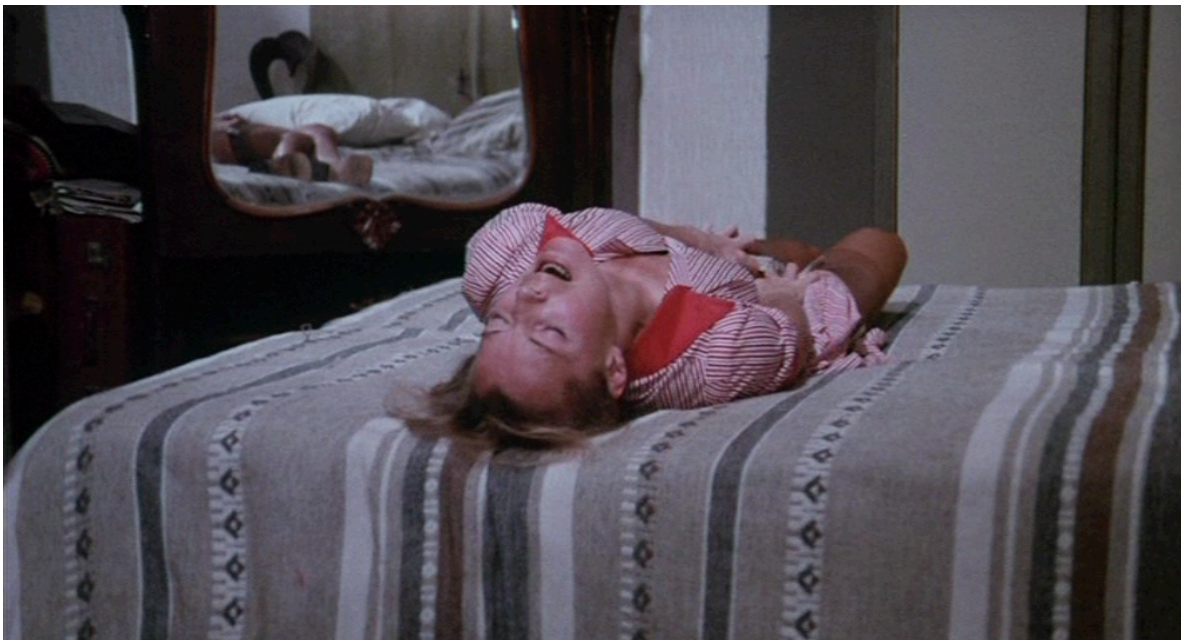
The figure of Sylvia is, on the surface, as typical a Hollywoodian creation in both films as is Mercader. Both Romy Schneider and Hannah Murray are far too attractive to be reasonable facsimiles of Sylvia Ageloff, who was very plain (if Padura's

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



description and the images found on Internet are any indication). Although the actresses share the physical attractiveness necessary for cinematic portrayal, their characterizations of Ageloff are very different. Because of Chavarrías' direction, Murray is as much of a non-entity in depicting Ageloff as is Goodman in representing Trotsky; she is a simple soul easily manipulated by Mercader. Schneider takes an opposite tack, playing the role with great passion and commitment, as must have been the case with a woman capable of dedicating her life to the politics demanded by a time of deep ideological divide and strife. This difference can be seen in how each film presents the situation in which Ageloff confronts Mercader about her discovery that there is no office to which he has been disappearing constantly, when he was actually meeting the Soviet agent. Murray easily accepts the obvious lie with which Herrera excuses himself, saying that she must have gone to the wrong address. Schneider is offered no excuse: Delon mounts her and she is readily willing to forget the evident contradiction in order to make love.

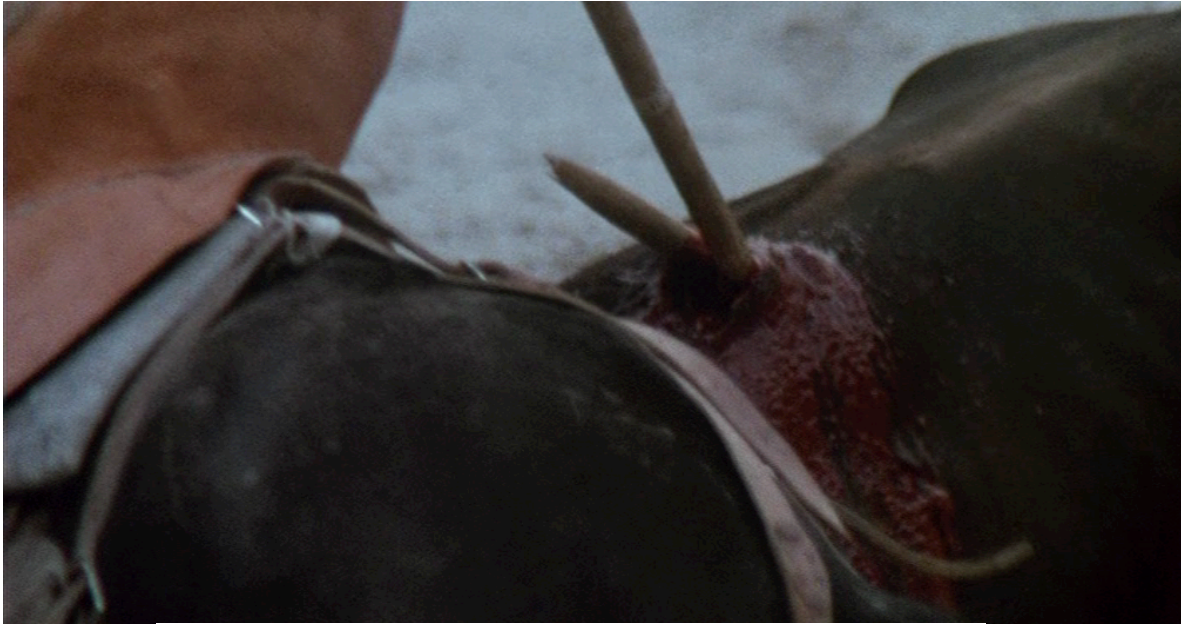


Romy Schneider as Sylvia Ageloff pleasures herself after Mercader has moved off her.

Schneider as Ageloff is extremely passionate. She has a recognized power within the Trotskyist association, sitting at a desk where she is brought reports, some of which she dramatically flings aside. When anti-Trotsky forces arrive with an effigy to protest against the leader's "betrayal" of workers, she throws herself into the middle of the ensuing street battle, tearing the effigy from their hands and stomping it into the ground. When Delon acts strangely distant, she becomes irritated with him, and smashes a glass on the floor of their room. And, when he mounts her but then moves off, she stimulates herself sexually. In short, she is a woman as conscious of her sexuality as she is of her politics, and just as demanding.

This is played out in the incredibly brutal representation of a bullfight that Delon and Schneider attend (a scene absent in Chavarrías' film and in Padura's novel). This may well be the most critically-filmed depiction of a bullfight in the history of cinema. There is no doubt that it is a documentary of a real bullfight, although the film style does not signal it as such, for example, by changing to a hand-held camera or a film stock with more grain. Instead, the bull is shown entering the ring, and the matador makes a few unexceptional passes before the picadors stick the bull from horseback.

Here, the camera lingers on the way the pike injures the bull, provoking whistles of censure from the crowd, which are emphasized by cutaways of the public objecting to the overuse of the lance. A closeup captures the shaft that has broken off in the bull's back, from which blood is streaming. The shattered shaft is soon accompanied by another, which opens up the wound even further.



A second lance enters the wound opened up by a prior pike in the bull's back.

Then, the *banderilleros* enter into action, racing by the bull and stabbing him with their sticks. Furious, the bull twists in pain from the *banderillas*, and attempts to identify the enemies coming from all sides to hurt him, over and again, until he is so weakened that he stumbles for an instant. Mercader watches the action without emotion—as he is throughout the film—, but Ageloff is furious with such cruelty. The matador has little skill, and instead of going in over the horns and through the aorta in the “moment of truth”, his *estocada* sticks into the side of the bull, hitting the lungs and causing the animal to limp off vomiting blood. It eventually falls over, and an assistant finishes it by cutting the spinal cord. Some of the public clap, but the loud whistles express displeasure. Delon and Schneider argue, and he leaves while she races after him. The bull is dragged from the ring, and then is shown being cut up into pieces. The metaphor to the destruction of Trotsky is clear, though a later cutaway to the critical closeup of the broken lance emphasizes that relation.

The killing of Trotsky is as botched as that of the bull. Herrera hits him with the flat end of the ice axe rather than the sharp point. This results in Goodman crying out, and Mercader being apprehended. Is Herrera's incompetence an expression of the hesitation and doubt that Chavarrías has had him portray throughout the film? Would someone who had been in combat and been trained for years to carry out this repugnant task have such a problem in killing that he would hit his victim with the wrong end? Delon uses the axe as it was intended, but Losey has Burton rise up forcefully into the frame with an indignant glare and an outraged scream, surprising both the audience and Delon with his powerful response.



Left: Alain Delon as Ramon Mercader holds the ice axe with blood on its point after attacking Trotsky.  
Right: Richard Burton as Leon Trotsky rises up after being struck by the ice axe and screams at Mercader.

Trotsky attacks his assassin, and overcomes the assault long enough to allow Delon's capture. In the end of Losey's film, Delon is asked who he is, and he responds, "I killed Trotsky". The closeup on his bandaged head replicates that of the dead revolutionary, and becomes the freeze frame with which the film ends.



A freeze frame of Alain Delon as Ramon Mercader after he has been captured.

In Losey's final scene, the problematic of identity that both Chavarrías' film and Padura's book explore in much detail had already been solved: he was "the man who killed Trotsky".<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, Chavarrías follows the transformation of Mercader into Jacques Monard, a Belgian diplomat, as well as Frank Jacson, a US businessman involved in import and export. Padura adds yet another identity to Mercader, that of Jaime López, a mysterious Spaniard with two Russian wolfhounds that he dotes over. López tells his story to a Cuban novelist, Iván, who is the narrator of *The Man Who Loved Dogs*. Iván's very name alludes to the Sovietization of Cuba, thus linking the loss of identity suffered by Mercader to the horrors of life in the totalitarian states of the USSR and Cuba. For example, Trotsky was made invisible in Cuban Marxism; as Iván observes, "Getting into Trotskyism would have been like tying a rope around your own neck".<sup>9</sup> In essence, Padura proposes that living under such control is a subversion of the Marxist notion that people make themselves into who they are through their labor. Iván

<sup>8</sup> One is reminded of repugnant individuals such as Mark David Chapman, whose only identity is that of being the man who killed John Lennon in 1980.

<sup>9</sup> Padura, Location 4231, Kindle Edition.



had lost the possibility to realize himself in his chosen medium when it was made clear to him that he was not allowed to write whatever he desired: “That day what really happened was that they fucked me for the rest of my life, since besides feeling ... full of fear, I left there deeply convinced that my story should never have been written, which is the worst thing that they can make a writer think”.<sup>10</sup> That Padura was able to publish his work in Cuba, where he continues to live, provides yet another turn of the screw to this tale of three narratives, one of which is more concerned to resuscitate Mercader than to recognize the historical importance of Leon Trotsky.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Padura, Location 1259, Kindle Edition.

<sup>11</sup> [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonardo\\_Padura](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonardo_Padura). Consulted 18 November 2016. When asked why he continues to live in Cuba, Padura replied, “I am a conversationalist. Havana is a place where you can always have a conversation with a foreigner in a bus stop” (“*Soy una persona conversadora. La Habana es un lugar donde se puede siempre tener una conversación con un extranjero en una parada de guaguas*”).