

## San Diego Latino Film Festival—Part 3

# On the assassination of Leon Trotsky, Latin American death squads and pictures of immigration

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*This is the third and final part on the recent San Diego Latino Film Festival. Part 1 was posted April 3 and Part 2 on April 6.*

## *El Elegido (The Chosen)*

Directed by Spanish filmmaker Antonio Chavarrías, *El Elegido (The Chosen)* is an absorbing but limited work about Ramon Mercader, the Stalinist assassin who carried out the murder of Leon Trotsky in Mexico in August 1940.

As we previously noted when the film was shown in Toronto, an honest film about Trotsky, founder of the Fourth International and a central leader of the Russian Revolution, is welcome. While the film focuses on Mercader, care was taken to study the more general circumstances surrounding Trotsky's assassination.

For whatever reason, the distributor of *El Elegido* allowed only one screening at the San Diego festival, which was sold out a week in advance. More than a few audience members were obliged to sit on the stairs or folding chairs.

At a question-and-answer session following the screening, Alfonso Herrera, who plays Mercader, explained that the film was undertaken because not much was known about the assassin's life—"Our goal was to present a clearer picture of Mercader." He also mentioned that during the filming in Mexico, the crew ran into many people who had been to Trotsky's house—"Everyone in Mexico City seems to know who Trotsky was." In response to our questions, Herrera admitted that he wasn't very familiar with the issues surrounding the assassination.

*El Elegido* takes up Mercader's life when he is already a combatant in the Spanish Civil War (1936-38), fighting, Herrera asserts in a voiceover, for a world "without classes, without war."

Caridad del Río (Elvira Mínguez), or Caridad Mercader, a prominent member of the Spanish Communist Party, visits Mercader and informs him he is needed by the party for a special mission. Throughout the film, the relationship between the two is the propelling force. Mercader worships his mother and unquestioningly obeys her orders.

Mercader accepts the mission to infiltrate the Fourth International by means of initiating a romance with Sylvia Ageloff (Hannah Murray), a young Trotskyist from New York City, in 1938 in Paris. Both Ageloff and Mercader eventually make their way, separately, to Mexico.

We are introduced to a number of individuals working with Trotsky in Mexico who are, for the most part, portrayed favorably. While the film

provides very little analysis of Trotskyist politics, Trotsky (Henry Goodman) is depicted in a sincere and humane light, someone principled and fighting for the worthiest of causes.

The least convincing scenes are those that contain political discussion. At one point, for example, Mercader comments, "I don't believe in the class struggle." Things have always been and always will be the same, he asserts. The responses from Ageloff, Harold Robins (Toby Harper) and another of Trotsky's guard, Otto (Brontis Jodorowsky), are largely impatient and unpersuasive. The dialogue here feels stilted and unconvincing.

In one of the best scenes in *El Elegido*, Mercader randomly runs into an old comrade, Carles Vidal (Roger Casamajor), an army captain with whom he fought in Spain. Over dinner, Vidal explains how the GPU was responsible for the defeat in the Spanish Civil War. Mercader is shocked and questions Vidal's principles, to which the latter responds, "I'm still a communist, but communism is not in Moscow any more." Vidal comes across as genuine and honest, and Mercader is clearly troubled. The former comes to a violent end.

As the assassination mission draws closer, Mercader experiences doubt. He brings up the deaths he has witnessed to his mother and the commanding GPU officer, Kotov (Julian Sands). "Not everyone who dies is a traitor, haven't we become lost with so much lying?" Mercader asks, to which Kotov replies, "We are trained to serve the party, not to question, obey or betray." The blind loyalty to Stalin and the party gives Mercader pause. But he goes ahead ...

Chavarrías' film neglects a more in-depth investigation of the *political* issues that would compel someone like Mercader to commit such a heinous *political* crime. Years of plotting, learning multiple languages and engaging in intimate but false relationships clearly involved a considerable effort. To boil this down to Mercader's relationship with his mother, as the film tends to, is an oversimplification.

To what extent does the filmmaker understand Trotsky's life and work, and their significance, 100 years after the Russian Revolution?

In any event, it is to Chavarrías' credit that he has brought some of the issues involved in Trotsky's assassination to the screen. By nature of its honest treatment, *El Elegido* sheds light on the river of blood produced by the crimes and betrayals of Stalinism. The film has been purchased by Netflix and will be available for streaming in mid-April.

## *El Amparo*

*El Amparo* is a remarkable retelling of the famous 1988 massacre, in which a Venezuelan joint military-police unit killed a group of fishermen and then tried to claim they were guerrillas who had attacked them.

The film opens in October 1988. Pinilla (Vicente Quintero) joins a fishing trip with friends, with the promise of a big cash payment. Soon after heading out, Pinilla and the 13 others are attacked by the Venezuelan military on suspicion of being fighters from Colombia, on their way to blow up nearby oil refineries. They are fired on without warning or the chance to identify themselves. There are only two survivors of the brutal mass execution, Pinilla and Chumba (Giovanni Garcia).

As part of a cover-up, the government concocts the story that the army was combating guerrilla forces along the border. Officials allege the men they faced were armed and had blueprints of the refinery site.

Pinilla and Chumba are bribed and coerced with the promise of money and houses into admitting to being guerrilla fighters, to preserve the “good” name of the army. However, the people are no fools. No one believes the army and government story. Equally, no one wants to reveal the truth, because the exposure will lead to the disappearance and death of Pinilla and Chumba.

Director Rober Calzadilla does an extraordinary job of painting the risks involved in telling the truth. While *El Amparo* focuses on a very concrete incident, the story speaks to episodes that repeat themselves over and over again throughout the Americas. From the mass disappearances of the 1960s and 1970s, to the persecutions of Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange and Edward Snowden today, the state apparatus, as *El Amparo* makes clear, will go to any lengths to suppress the truth.

Without giving away too much, the film ends abruptly, but not before it has pointedly highlighted the effectiveness—or lack thereof—of the Inter-American Court where the case was argued. Let it simply be said, justice was never served and no government officials were punished for their role in covering up the murder of innocent men.

## **X500**

*X500*, directed by Juan Andrés Arango, is a Canadian, Colombian and Mexican co-production. It features the stories of three young adults. The stories are tied together by a single thread—each youth leaves his or her native country and becomes entangled in a gang.

David (Bernardo Garnica Cruz) leaves a small village in Michoacán, Mexico after the death of his father and finds his cousin in Mexico City. Immediately on arrival, he is roughed up by the local gang and, despite carrying out an initiation task, is continually harassed and eventually beaten to a pulp.

The more interesting scenes show David as he works construction on a high-rise building with his cousin and other workers. He attempts to fit in to a “counter-culture” punk scene and begins dancing at a local club in his spare time. Unfortunately, we don’t find out much more about the nature of David’s rebellion or why he is continually attacked and has such a hard time making a life for himself.

In the Colombian strand of the story, Alex (Jonathan Diaz Angulo), is deported from the United States back to his hometown where he reunites with his aunt and younger brother. He sets out in search of a motor for a small fishing boat he is repairing so he can provide a better life for his aunt, who survives only by wading through the mud and collecting black crab for “a few dollars.”

His aunt believes Alex is part of a local gang, and she fears her younger nephew is also coming under its influence. Alex begins working in a “chop house” where rival gang members or disloyal members are killed and afterwards dumped in a river. His younger brother also starts working

as a guard for the gang and Alex attempts to convince his brother this is a bad plan. The following chain of events is labored and unrealistic.

Maria (Jembie Almazan) arrives in Montreal to live with her grandmother after her mother dies in the Philippines. Enrolled in a strict French-language school, she immediately becomes entangled in fights with other students and her teacher. Reticent and angry most of the time, Maria rebels against her grandmother, whose admonishments have the opposite of the desired effect.

She falls in with the wrong crowd, and things unfold tragically. There is little investigation of what causes her rage. We learn nothing about why her mother died, what her life was like in Manila and what produces Maria’s social isolation.

The stories in *X500* have the potential to illuminate life, but too much is left unexplored and undeveloped. While they do seem to flow together cinematically and the international connections force their way in, the Colombian-Canadian Arango’s film is too narrowly focused on psychological and personal tensions within families without exploring more broadly the global issues of poverty, borders and police violence.

## ***Lupe Bajo el Sol (Lupe Under The Sun)***

*Lupe Bajo el Sol (Lupe Under The Sun)* tells the story of an alcoholic farm worker living in California’s Central Valley who must find a way back home to Mexico when he discovers he has cancer.

Rodrigo Reyes’ film is told through extensive long takes and a slow pace. However, one becomes accustomed to the approach and unlike a number of other films shown at the festival, it actually contributed to the artistry of the film.

Lupe (non-professional actor Daniel Muratalla) arises every day at 4 a.m. to prepare his breakfast of fried eggs wrapped in a tortilla. His daily routine is brutal. Despite his age, he has to work in the hot sun harvesting pears in an orchard. His can of Coors Light is always on hand.

Lupe’s home is a dilapidated motel room, but at least he has a girlfriend, Gloria (Ana Muratalla), who utters the first line in the film after 40 minutes with almost no dialogue. When Lupe is told he has cancer he tries to mend relations with his family in Mexico to whom he sends money, but they have “moved on” and want nothing to do with him.

Reyes’ film is refreshingly honest in its look at social conditions in the United States, especially life in the impoverished Central Valley. It is significant that here the immigrant protagonist is trying to *leave* the United States. Something of the loneliness and spiritual emptiness of life in America comes out.

We never find out if Lupe makes it to Mexico or not, and this ambiguity is especially tragic because it recalls all the other “Lupes” who have since gone missing, their stories never to be told. The film is not without its flaws—there needs to be more dialogue and greater dramatic complexity. Some of the scenes feel a bit rudimentary and over-long. There is the same passivity that pervades many of the other films as well.

But the saving grace here is the poetic quality of various moments in *Lupe Under the Sun*: Gloria’s hand caressing Lupe’s face; the agricultural machines in the background ready to replace Lupe any day; the voice of his daughter back home.

We see how a worker’s life is chewed up and spat out. Given nothing culturally, morally or spiritually, Lupe and his class brothers and sisters are literally left to die under the sun. At a time when the Trump administration and the entire establishment demonizes and attacks immigrants for living and working in the United States, Reyes’ film is at once humane and courageous in its depiction of the most oppressed sections of the working class. There need to be more films like this.

*Concluded*



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