

Dennis Rothermel, PhD

(California State University)

Joseph Losey's First Four Post-Pinter Films

Gilles Deleuze called Joseph Losey, American, but so slightly. Losey's flight from McCarthyism-infected Hollywood inaugurated his career in Britain. That phase of his career peaked in his celebrated three collaborations with Harold Pinter. In the four films that constitute the immediately subsequent period of his work, Losey's attention turned to international subjects with international productions, though retaining mostly British actors: *The Assassination of Trotsky* (1972), *A Doll's House* (1973), *Galileo* (1975), and *The Romantic Englishwoman* (1975). In place of Pinter, Losey worked with source material and adaptations by Henrik Ibsen, Bertolt Brecht, Tom Stoppard, Nicolas Mosley, and Franco Solinas. After this set of films, Losey directed filmed opera and French films. Losey's wanderings into broader cultural and historical contexts for the themes that originate in his Pinter collaborations thus offer both an expansion of those timely and seemingly quintessentially British themes, and a recapitulation of the film-maker's chosen transposition out of a cultural locale that he could by that time call home.

Though without reference to these four films, Deleuze identifies these enduring traits of Losey's cinema: internal, innate, static undercurrents of violence that aren't exhibited in either image or action but pervade the characterizations and dramatic flow; servility and dominance defining human relationships in moments of exacting humiliation; and personal behavior governed by fixations and impulses. Deleuze also characterizes Loseyan male protagonists as bogus weaklings, who align without avowal to the inherent violence of the social environments that render them vulnerable. Deleuze describes Loseyan female protagonists as solely capable of salvation—they are immersed in the impulses and fetishes of men, which in turn either victimizes them or enables their role as manipulators. It is Losey's women who alone are capable of withdrawal from these hopeless realms.

Losey's *Trotsky* and *Galileo* corroborate Deleuze's insights about Loseyan male heroes, while also exemplifying the plight of the self-possessed revolutionary thinker who invokes unwittingly brutal repression directed to him personally by massively powerful historical institutions that purport to stand for compassion and grace. For *Trotsky* that institution is Russian Communism, for *Galileo* it was the Church of Rome. For Losey, it was Hollywood. Losey's *Nora* and *Elizabeth* corroborate Deleuze's insights about Loseyan female heroines, while also exemplifying the courage of the way individual who escapes from a personal life-world that can only promise perpetually to enforce a stultifying oppression. For *Nora*, that is a tradition of marriage that needs to affirm constrictive gender roles at every single moment. For *Elizabeth*, it is the manipulative impulses of a husband whose literary projections impose servility

in the guise of libertinism. For Losey, it was the comfort of his ascension into the crux of his adopted cinema representation of contemporary British culture.

Losey's productivity during this period was marked by turbulent behavior and a series of difficult relationships with those close to him and those he needed to work with. These four films were together neither financially successful nor critically acclaimed. The critical reception to a large part found the political-historical messages excessively cynical or diversionary, particularly compared to the incisive social criticism more easily detected in the Pinter collaborations. The ironic distanciation underscoring the social farce of *The Servant* and *Accident*, however still prevail, but directed now to atypical bourgeois protagonists. The resulting isolating confrontation with a failure to alter an intransigent reactionary environment poses the standpoint of the individual's despairing reflection upon purpose and meaning. That theme may well resonate with different moments in the arc of Losey's own life-story, but also with the aftermath of the collapse of radical political momentum in the 1970s. These four films do, however, contribute to the continuous body of Loseyan exploration of the human predicament, which was never gratuitously optimistic. They are well worthy of reconsideration as constituting an important phase in the film-maker's corpus, during which his association with British cinema waned.

Bibliography

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David Caute, *Joseph Losey: a Revenge on Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).