

## FILM

*Reds* (1981)

Warren Beatty & Trevor Griffiths

## ANALYSIS

[Sarah Easley, film critic] recalled seeing an ad that Beatty placed in the newspaper some time ago soliciting people for interviews who had known either the revolutionary John Reed or his wife the journalist Louise Bryant, both from here in Portland. She felt startled by his audacity in undertaking to film the life of a Communist hero, and by his casting himself as Reed the Red, the only American buried in the wall of the Kremlin. Beatty could hardly have chosen a more daring project.

On a mild clear evening, [her son] Davin met her outside her building in his pickup truck, looking comfortably rural in a green and black checkered logger's shirt. She felt elated by her freedom for a few hours. They headed out through the West Hills into the suburbs that sprawled across the valley toward the coast.

"I thought Beatty was just a playboy," Davin said as he drove with care through the evening traffic.

"He must have wanted to prove what else he can do."

"Like Hanoi Jane?"

"I doubt it. Elia Kazan made Beatty a star. I think he loves Kazan. I would expect him to take Elia's side. Against all the people who haven't forgiven him for testifying against the Reds."

Davin signaled for a turn.

"Then why did Hollywood love the picture?"

"We'll have to see."

"You haven't read any reviews?"

"I'm out of all that."

The suburban theater, a functional building with one story, had a low profile and a huge parking lot. Out front a large crowd stood in line at the box office. Davin bought tickets. Inside, they located seats close to the front.

The opening credits and title appear in understated white on black, introducing a tone of objectivity, a period film with ragtime music on the sound track. In a documentary format, elderly witnesses who knew John Reed and Louise Bryant talk about them in turn, gossipy and opinionated and contradicting each other, evincing the need for a more complete and historical account. The first scene, in color, is set in an art gallery in provincial Portland in 1915. Louise Bryant, played by Diane Keaton, is dressed uptight in the formal fashion of the time. One of the pictures on a wall of the gallery is herself displayed in the nude, seated with her back turned. She has not informed her husband, a stuffy dentist, and she takes pride in her emancipation when he is shocked and embarrassed. At the Liberal Club, dominated by patriotic stuffed shirts, Bryant admires the young John Reed when he is asked why the World War is being fought. Instead of giving a speech as expected, he stands up and replies with a single word.

"Profits."

These opening scenes portray rebels who shock conventional people they see as backward, dull and conformist. Hollywood thrives on rebellious stock responses to prevailing standards. Reed also illustrates the tendency in movies, as well as in Marxism, to reduce complexity to a single idea. He reduces the meaning of Communism to merely creating "one big union for everybody," a goal he repeats without considering that in such a state, the union bosses would become Management. A witness observes that an artist has to be a bit of a rebel, a common rationalization in Hollywood. Like most actors, both Reed and Bryant consider themselves artists. Yet when she shows him a picture and asks what he thinks, Reed says exactly what a conventional man in the art gallery said to her about a picture, that it looks "blurry." The film continues to subvert the pretensions of both Reed and Bryant by implying that neither is a true artist.

Bryant is bad at every art she attempts, from acting and singing to writing. Reed criticizes her repeatedly for not being serious. He writes serious advocacy journalism, but he cannot finish his poem about her. He cannot even cook a palatable meal. He lacks commitment, both personal and artistic. By casting himself as Reed, Beatty exploits his own reputation as an actor known for lacking commitment in relationships. The most authoritative witness, the writer Henry Miller, states twice that Reed did not want to face things in his

own nature. Like many actors, Reed makes political commitment a form of escapism like the movies. Bryant accuses him of always wanting to be in the limelight. *Reds* becomes Beatty's confession about aspects of his own nature in the past, and beyond himself, a critique of Hollywood and its ongoing love affair with Communism. When Reed urinates red, it indicates that he has an infection.

After he and Bryant move to Greenwich Village in New York, both are contrasted in every way to the great American dramatist Eugene O'Neill, his friend and her lover, played by Jack Nicholson. Surrounded by "parlor socialists" in the theater, O'Neill stands apart from them with a tragic vision that is the opposite of their utopian collectivism. He is repeatedly filmed as a solitary figure in shadowy darkened interiors, with eyes that see through people. He disdains the politics of "Village radicals," whose perspective is conveyed by filming them through a soft red filter. O'Neill falls in love with Bryant for the qualities she is denying in herself with her combative feminism. When directing her in a play, he tells her to step back and stop concealing herself behind an artificial moon. Bryant is an actress in the sense of miscasting herself as a liberated New Woman. After she insists that she believes in free love and has an affair with O'Neill, she throws a jealous fit when Reed is unfaithful to *her*. After proclaiming herself an emancipated woman and ridiculing marriage, she marries Reed. After committing herself to a life of art, she chooses a life of politics rather than life with a true artist. Yet she does not even share Reed's politics. She calls *him* too romantic, they fight and separate.

Then in 1917, the Reds stun the world.

The Russian Bolsheviks overthrow the Czar. Yet Reed has to persuade Bryant to join him just in time to become one of the only western journalists to witness the revolution. He buys her ticket to Petrograd. From the train, they see wounded Russian soldiers at the stations, bread lines and misery. The Bolsheviks have promised to withdraw Russia from the World War, led by Lenin, the mastermind with a heart as cold as Siberia. We see the fiery orator Trotsky, passionate and theatrical, exhorting crowds with the showmanship of an actor. Later, Trotsky opposed Stalin and got terminated in Mexico with an alpenstock, a staff with an iron point used for mountain climbing. His fate did not dissuade the leftists in Hollywood from their faith that their own theatrics would be welcome in the Soviet Union.

At first the revolution is full of promise. The people have overthrown a tyranny and utopia seems possible. It appears to be a rebirth of the human race, paralleled by the repeated deaths and rebirths of the relationship between Reed and Bryant. The lily is her favorite flower and Reed repeatedly gives her lilies when they reconcile. O'Neill points out that Reed also repeatedly takes advantage of opportunities to run away from her. Geographically, he moves further and further away, yet he carries a torch for her, as the saying goes. Everything in Russia looks dark and cold, then here come the Bolsheviks marching in triumph through the narrow streets, bringing passion and flickering light with their torches, carrying red flags and singing mightily together as heroes of a movement that will spread throughout the world.

"Thanks for bringing me here!" Bryant exclaims to Reed, as if on a really terrific date.

At a Bolshevik rally, Reed takes the stage and becomes a hero too when he promises the crowd that American labor will join their revolution. Bryant is thrilled. Personal and political romance fuse, as do Bryant and Reed. Revolution is an aphrodisiac. In the darkness of their barren hotel room, her hair turns red. The first half of the film concludes with a victory speech by Lenin, followed by Reed and Bryant celebrating Christmas with a decorated tree. Neither of them are religious, and a witness states that politics was Reed's religion. His celebration of Christmas tradition is a motif in the film indicating that, though a dedicated Communist, at heart he remains loyal. He is still an American.

After an intermission, Reed leads the formation of an American Communist Party and is sent as a delegate to obtain recognition from the Comintern in Moscow. Bryant believes the status of women will improve under Communism, but she does not think a revolution is possible in America and threatens to leave Reed. He promises three times to return by Christmas. Throughout the film, their immaturity is conveyed at times by a children's song on the sound track with the lines, "*I don't want to play in your yard, I don't like you anymore.*"

In his new yard, Reed is disappointed again.

The new Communist government is represented almost entirely by one bureaucrat, played by the writer Jerzy Kosinski. At the time Beatty selected him for this role, Kosinski was an anti-Communist television celebrity known for having escaped from the Soviet Union. His casting is a joke. At the outset of his first interview with Reed, Kosinski offers him a lemon. Reed declines and Kosinski proceeds to eat one. When he tries to return home, Reed is told that his personal life is irrelevant, he is detained and forced to work in the propaganda bureau. Now he experiences the same lack of compassion for individuals that he displayed

in his own political conduct back home. Likewise, his past intolerance of diversity is echoed when the Party refuses to accept his explanation of political differences in the United States.

Reed encounters his mentor Emma Goldman, the influential anarchist born in Russia, and he finds that she is completely disillusioned, but she cannot escape either. Their predicament is like that of Hollywood leftists who were trapped by their past support of the Soviet Union when the House Committee hearings began in the forties. Their dream of a nation run by workers has been fulfilled, but as Goldman exclaims, "Nothing works!" Now the dream is dying. The free press has been shut down, she has been jailed and the Soviet Union is a military police state. Many dissenters are being executed. Reed argues with Goldman that they just need time, going so far as to advocate war and torture, like Trotsky, that their end justifies their means. He refuses to swallow the lemon, then literally contracts scurvy.

Kosinski sends him out into the vast countryside on "the train of revolution," evoking the trains flying red flags that Lenin sent out carrying revolutionaries who showed propaganda movies to convert the workers to Communism. With the children's song a refrain in the background, using a translator, Reed exhorts the masses. He speaks a different language in both a literal and a moral sense. As a true idealist, all along he has tried to be truthful. As a Marxist, however, he reduces the motives of America to capitalism. In the Middle East, he tells the Arabs that Americans only want to take their oil. His call for a *class* war is deliberately mistranslated into a call for a *holy* war--a Jihad against western infidels. When he discovers that he has been duped and used, in the phrase repeated so many times by Hollywood leftists trying to escape responsibility for their past support of Soviet Communism, he confronts Kosinski and denounces him for dishonesty, for purging dissent and for denying individual human rights. "You have no *self*!" When their train comes under attack by insurgent White Russians, he runs away and desperately tries to join the resistance to the Reds, but he is too late.

Bryant stops playing a role and becomes authentic only when she becomes traditional, acts out of devotion to a husband and dedicates herself to finding him, risking imprisonment and death when she enters revolutionary Russia secretly. She crosses vast expanses of snow and ice, slogging for miles cross-country on skis with a guide, displaying such loyalty and determination and bravery and heroic stamina that she more than redeems herself in the hearts of the audience as she searches an enormous country in chaos where people are starving while the Reds fight the insurgent White Russians. When at last she finds Reed getting off the train of revolution, he is near death and begs her not to leave him. In desperate need, he finally commits himself to a personal relationship. Likewise, she forsakes independence for love and even adopts his politics by calling him comrade, unaware that he has forsaken the Party.

His last word, comrades, is uttered with an expression of disheartened amusement at the irony of it all. Facing the truth about himself, he too is redeemed by the personal, after all. They are truly together at last, yet still disconnected. She leaves his bedside and goes out to get him a drink of water. When she knocks a cup onto the floor, the children's song recurs on the sound track and a small boy picks it up for her. As he hands her the empty cup, she associates the boy with Reed and realizes with horror that she is too late! She rushes back and finds him dead! Beatty overthrows the government of Hollywood convention with an unhappy ending and succeeds in blending a popular movie and a complex art film, a rare achievement.

On the way out of the theater, emerging through the crowd and into the huge parking lot full of vehicles evincing the triumph of American capitalism, it occurred to Sarah that she had never seen a picture out of Hollywood that gave so much authority to literary writers. Beatty chose to express his own perspective directly through both Eugene O'Neill and Henry Miller, then ironically through Jerzy Kosinski.

Driving back through the hills into the city, Davin helped his mother piece together implications in the film. "Maybe he'll do a sequel about Hollywood," he suggested.

"You mean *directly* about it."

"Yeah, head on!"

She sighed, "That may take a century or two."

"This gives them an excuse," Davin broke into a chuckle. Then he whined, "We were idealists. We didn't mean to betray our country. We were duped and used!"

"Lauren Bacall said they were naive."

"That works for her. And for Bogey and Elia Kazan and the others who were loyal Americans, but what about those who still hate Kazan? Most of Hollywood. They haven't learned a thing. They didn't die. They're still alive and propagating. Still pumping up their ridiculous myth of being persecuted by Joe McCarthy. Their great Blowfish!"

"They still believe that Communism can work. It failed in the Soviet Union, but that was just one case. They still have faith in Cuba and Nicaragua and so on."

“It’s mind-boggling.”

“What is?”

“How capitalists who live like gods can pretend to believe in equality. But then, that’s what they do for a living, isn’t it. They pretend. They live on illusions.”

“They dream the impossible dream.”

“Yeah, like under Communism they would be part of an elite with guaranteed status for life. They feel entitled. That’s why they hate the free market. They want tenure.”

“No free press, no bad reviews.”

“And captive audiences.”

“Did you notice that Emma Goldman makes the same criticisms of the Soviets that Elia made?” Sarah laughed quietly. “Beatty cast the kindly little Maureen Stapleton as Emma because Hollywood loves her. She’s the only one in the cast they gave an Oscar. Beatty knew they would also love Emma’s politics. By identifying with Emma, they agree with Elia. Beatty tricked them into validating his testimony to the House Committee.”

“They were duped and used!”

Sarah laughed happily with Davin.

“Elia must love this picture!”

“Anarchism has to be the dumbest political philosophy there is. No government at all? That’s even dumber than Communism. Goldman jumped over the whole evolution that Marx says would have to take place before government could wither away.”

“You know very well. Movie stars feel superior to the masses. The gods are anarchists.”

“Emma called voting the opium of the people.”

They emerged from the tunnel.

Michael Hollister  
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