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Reviews

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Reds is a grand-scale historical drama based around the life and career of John Reed, a North American journalist who traveled to Russia to chronicle the Revolution. Based on his firsthand observations, Reed wrote Ten Days That Shook the World, his 1919 classic account of the events of the Revolution which took place two years prior.

Released in 1981, Reds is one of the best movies of its era. The most amazing thing about the film is perhaps the fact that Beatty was able to make it in the first place. Just consider: Reds depicts the Russian Revolution in the same heroic light as a Hollywood film might the signing of the Declaration of Independence or the invasion of Normandy. It presents Reed and Louise Bryant played by Warren Beatty and Diane Keaton as entirely correct and justified in giving up everything to support the Bolsheviks.

And although Reds hit the screens in the first flush of the Reagan era, with the Cold War still in full swing, it was both a critical and box office success. Incredibly, even Ronald Reagan himself liked the film when Beatty screened it for him at the White House though the president did wish “it had a happy ending.” Nominated for a record twelve Academy Awards, Reds won Warren Beatty (who also produced and directed the film) Best Director.

Forty years later, it’s well worth revisiting Beatty’s fifteen-year labor of love. The film is a homage to the Russian Revolution and the generation of North American writers and intellectuals it inspired.

The Last Stand of the New Hollywood

It's a safe bet that most people who packed cinemas to see Reds weren't socialists. Beatty himself was no Marxist. He was and remains a staunch and influential Democrat, who even as a young actor was involved in fundraising for the party. (As it happens, however, his cowriter on the film, playwright Trevor Griffiths, is a Marxist).

Nevertheless, Reds remains true to its subjects' revolutionary politics. Indeed, the film is arguably the last great hurrah of the New Hollywood. Sparked by the French and Italian New Waves, this American filmmaking movement of the 1960s and ‘70s combined looser, more experimental filmmaking styles with searching themes and rebellious politics. Beatty's role as both a producer and actor in Arthur Penn's 1967 Bonnie and Clyde, a film whose violence and antiestablishment protagonists shocked and thrilled audiences at the time, made his reputation a key figure of the New Hollywood.

Reds tells the true story of the relationship between famed leftist journalists John Reed and Louise Bryant. In 1915, they met in their native Portland, Oregon and began a scandalous affair before moving to New York together. Eventually they married and traveled to Russia in 1917 to report on the October Revolution as it unfolded. The experience radicalized them, and both committed themselves to the communist cause for the rest of their tragically short lives.

Both Reed and Bryant wrote books that helped English-speaking audiences understand the Russian Revolution. Reed's Ten Days That Shook the World and Bryant's Six Red Months in Russia still hold up as essential documents of the Revolution. Their writing showcases a knack for vivid, street-level detail a result of their having placed themselves in the action at great personal risk.
As early as 1966, Warren Beatty became interested in making a movie about Reed. Following a visit to the Soviet Union in 1969, the director developed a serious interest in the idea and spent years working on the screenplay. After producing, cowriting, and starring in two massively successful comedies—Shampoo (1975) and Heaven Can Wait (1978)—Reed had accumulated enough Hollywood clout to raise money for his leftist passion project. Paramount Pictures gave him a green light, although from the beginning, Beatty refused to accept studio input on the screenplay. Amazingly, he prevailed, ensuring that Reds would remain a faithful tribute to Reed, Bryant, and the Revolution.

Shooting on Reds began in 1979, and the process generated enough drama to justify its own film. With locations in several countries including the UK, Spain, and Finland, the budget ballooned out of control as filming took an entire year. Beatty became notorious for his fanatical commitment to shooting countless takes—some scenes took up to eighty before he was satisfied.

At one point, the process drove supporting actor Jack Nicholson to tears. It also placed a huge strain on the real-life relationship between Beatty and Keaton. It took another year to edit the millions of feet of film Beatty had shot, a record that surpassed even the obsessive madness of Francis Ford Coppola's Apocalypse Now.

In one sense, however, Beatty finished the film just in time. The cultural influence of Reaganism as well as the rise of the summer blockbuster largely put an end to the artistic and political ferment of the New Hollywood.

The Genius of Beatty and Keaton

Reds is very far from the ponderous pacing and drab winter tones you might expect from a historical epic set in Russia. Despite its massive scale, Reds is marked by a light touch and brisk storytelling; it consistently defies genre clichés. It's also beautifully shot by Apocalypse Now cinematographer Vittorio Storaro, with a rich palette that contrasts well against the more desaturated look that has become more popular today.

So many biopics are plodding and stiff, with every shot a golden-filtered saintly portrait and every line of dialogue a portent. In contrast, although Reds doesn't stint on drama and tragedy, it often has the feel of a screwball comedy or an indie romance. The screenplay is dense, layered with politics and history and is frequently laugh-out-loud funny.

In large part, this is thanks to Keaton and Beatty's acting talent: they light up the screen. They ramble, talk over each other, crack jokes during tense moments, and lapse into awkward silences. Bryant and Reed feel like real people—a rare feat for a biopic that helps the viewer feel invested in their radicalization.

Keaton brings the same oddball charm that made her a '70s cultural icon in Annie Hall, and combines it with fiercely independent toughness. Early on, Bryant's struggle to be taken seriously as both a writer and a woman outside of her relationship with Reed is central to the conflict within the film. Keaton navigates all the passion and tension with tremendous wit and verve, lending her performance a contemporary resonance.

Despite how exhausted he must have been from the scale and length of production, Beatty is magnificent as Reed. By all accounts, his passion for completing Reds was in part born of an affinity he felt with the film's protagonist. From his brashness, risk-taking, and his inability to separate his art from his politics, Warren is not so much playing Reed as channeling him.

Unusually, Reds includes documentary interviews with old friends and colleagues of Reed's and Bryant's—including noteworthy figures like novelist Henry Miller and Roger Baldwin, founder of the American Civil Liberties Union. These
"witnesses” regularly interrupt the narrative like a Greek chorus. It’s a brilliant storytelling device that tethers historic events to what was, in 1981, a living memory.

A Bohemian Elegy and the Exhilaration of Revolution

The first hour of the film focuses on Bryant's and Reed's budding romance and their life in Greenwich Village and on Cape Cod. They write and live together as lovers while socializing with a lively community of artists and philosophers. These include Eugene O'Neill (Jack Nicholson at the peak of his talent) and legendary anarchist Emma Goldman (a wonderfully wry performance from Maureen Stapleton). The amazing texture with which this bohemian world is depicted is the upside to Beatty's obsessiveness.

Similarly, Reds does not skirt over details about Reed's work as a radical journalist covering militant labor organizing or his conditional support for Woodrow Wilson's candidacy for president. The film makes clear that the latter was motivated by the vain hope that the Democrats would keep the United States out of World War I.

That said, these early scenes are more concerned with the concept of free love and its implications for Bryant's burgeoning feminism than they are with socialism. The turning point comes when Reed and Bryant arrive in Russia, just in time to witness the birth of the first government run by workers, peasants, and soldiers.

As exhilarating as these sequences are, many key events of the Revolution are presented in montage. We are only given tantalizing glimpses of the storming of the Winter Palace or of Lenin's and Trotsky’s historic speeches in the Smolny Institute. But after an abbreviated insurrection, Reds's next act focuses in fascinating detail on Reed's role in the formation of the Communist Party of the United States. Then, the film turns to his journey back to revolutionary Russia as a delegate to the Comintern, and his assignment as a propagandist for the Red Army in the Russian Civil War.

The dramatic tension animating these final passages revolves around Reed's inner conflict between his life as an artist and husband, and his obligation as a revolutionary. At one point, Comintern leader Grigory Zinoviev (brilliantly, if unexpectedly, played by anti-communist playwright Jerzy KosiDski) tells Reed, “You can never, never come back to this moment in history.”

The way Reds resolves that tension is breathtaking: Bryant and Reed come to realize that they are comrades as much as lovers.

"You'd Never Be Cynical About Anything Again!"

The film's consistently favorable view of Bolshevism is remarkable. You would forgive the liberal Beatty if he balked and presented Bryant and Reed as well-meaning but naive in their support of the Bolsheviks. Many great political biopics compromise in this way, and had Reds followed them, it would still be laudable.

However, the screenplay never once sells out. In a pivotal scene, Reed argues with Emma Goldman about the Bolsheviks' ruthless tactics during the Russian Civil War. In a lesser film, this is when Reed would begin questioning things. And yet, against Goldman's antiauthoritarianism, he retorts: "What did you think this thing was going to be? A revolution by consensus, where we all sat down and agreed over a cup of coffee?"
In one of the film's best scenes, Bryant gives a fiery defense of revolutionary politics against O'Neill's misanthropic individualism. "If you'd been to Russia, you'd never be cynical about anything again! You'd have seen people transformed, ordinary people!" This sentiment that our dreams and our labors should be for the people and for revolution, not just for ourselves is the heart of this beautiful film. And forty years after its release, it explains why Reds is still a classic.

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