

Teaching History and **'REDS'**

An Introduction to the Film

'REDS', directed by Warren Beatty (1981) tells the love story of John Reed (Warren Beatty) and Louise Bryant (Diane Keaton), two American Radicals in the 1910s U.S.A. in the 1910s who become involved in American politics. Later, Reed participates in the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution as a U.S. international socialist representative and the film follows his struggles there and how they affect his relationship with Louise Bryant. Eventually Reed dies in Russia at the age of 32 and is buried within the walls of the Kremlin. Reed's fame rests largely on his classic work of committed journalism, "Ten Days That Shook The World", a first-hand account of the crucial early days of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution (available in paperback with a foreword by Lenin). The film is as much about the position of left-wing radicals in the U.S.A. at that time as about the Russian revolution.



'REDS' as a Teaching Resource

The film is particularly useful in the following areas:

- **As an insight into the position of left-wing politics in the U.S.A. in the early Twentieth Century**
The film begins uncompromisingly with Reed's analysis of the root cause of the Great War being 'profits' and one scene shows clearly the effects of the 'Palmer Laws' and the 'Palmer Raids' on the 'Wobblies' (the Industrial Workers of the World). It explores the relationship between the workers and the Greenwich literary-political clique and shows graphically the split between the two main left-wing groups in the U.S.A. and their factional struggles. The oppressive nature of the U.S.A. at this time is revealed in Bryant's defiance of the State Department and in her defence of agnosticism. Griffiths was particularly pleased by this aspect of the film,"...a good attempt had been made to recover particular elements of a historical period that had been deliberately covered over, so that they had not fed subsequent generations as to what had been politically achieved. That's a big thing for a Hollywood movie to do..."
- **As an insight into the atmosphere and politics of Revolutionary Russia**
The film shows the stunning "reality" of the effects of war on Russia and captures the sense of the infinite possibility of world revolution in the heady days of late 1917. Reed's speeches, stressing the solidarity of American workers with the Revolution, are particularly useful, as are his conversations with Kerensky and with Zinoviev.
- **As an examination of early feminism**
The sexual revolution in the U.S.A. and its contradictions are personified by Louise Bryant in her struggle for equality and womanhood.

- As an examination of the role of “witnesses”**

The film includes footage of ‘primary evidence’ in the form of “witnesses” where 32 people with concrete reminiscences of the period bear testimony to the film’s text. The “witnesses” are beautifully photographed by Vittorio Storaro and include such notables as Henry Miller, Adela Rogers St. John, Dora Russell, Rebecca West, Will Durant and Oleg Kerensky. The witnesses complicate the narrative drive of the film by proffering contradictory, half-remembered accounts. Their appearance raises the questions, what is History? and how can we know about the past?” and suggests that all attempts to re-create the past in the present are provisional. Edward Buscombe considers the inclusion of the “witnesses” to be so productive that “there is a case for saying that REDS is the most complex and intelligent film not just about the Russian Revolution but about History that Hollywood has yet given us”.
- As an exploration of the balance between personal needs and the needs of the Party and of the State**

A crucial stage of the film is reached when Reed is challenging Zinoviev about a speech which had been misreported by the ‘authorities’. Reed argues that “dissent is the Revolution” and to purge it is to kill the Revolution, whereas Zinoviev argues for the supremacy of the Party-Line irrespective of personal opinions. The debate at the Second Congress of the Third International and the Soviet attitude to Reed wishing to leave Russian, illuminate the haunting questions surrounding the Individual and the State.
- As evidence for 1970s U.S.A.**

Griffiths thinks a weakness of the film is that “it looks like the period and sounds like now”. How far is the film about the pre-occupations of Americans in the 1970s? Another area worth exploring is Warren Beatty’s speech accepting the Oscar “...I think that your decision, taken in the great capitalist tower of the Gulf and Wester, to finance a 3 1/2 hour romance which attempts to reveal for the first time just something of the beginnings of American Socialism and American Communism reflects credit not only on you, I think it reflects credit on Hollywood and the movie business wherever that is, and I think that it reflects more particular credit on the freedom of expression that we have here in our American society and the lack of censorship that we have from the government and the people that put up the money”.

'REDS' in the classroom

"Reds" can be used particularly to stimulate interest in, and enthusiasm for, the study of twentieth century U.S.S.R. and American History. Particular skills which can be developed using "Reds" are:

- A. Empathy
- B. Awareness of bias and distortion
- C. Awareness of the difference between 'primary' and 'secondary' source evidence
- D. Awareness of the 'hidden messages' of the sources

Problems which can be anticipated in the use of "Reds" are:

- A. Its length (196 minutes)
- B. Its apparent leap from November 1917 to 'Stalinism' in one jump. ("The extent to which the Russian Revolution after 1917 is represented by Zinoviev is really a terrible calumny" - Griffiths)
- C. Its reliability as a source of evidence.

The film is accessible to most school classes because of the narrative drive of the 'love-story', but it is essential to have studied the period of Bolshevik Russia (1917-1924) before viewing.

'REDS' and GCSE History

The film could be used most effectively to satisfy the syllabus objectives in the three main areas, particularly with regard to course-work.

Objective A

Selection, deployment and communication of content. The film could be used as part of a task which requires students to select and organise information from a range of resources e.g. books, images, film statistics, biographies, memoirs etc.

Objective B

Ability to place the chosen problem in context and to reveal an empathetic understanding of individuals and situations. Examples of questions used to assess empathetic understanding could be:

1. Explain Reed's point of view during the revolutionary period. Does it change and in what ways is his position challenged by events?
2. What were the motives, problems, policies, beliefs of the Bolshevik leadership during this period?
3. Write about given events or problems as if you were:
John Reed, Louise Bryant, Zinoviev, etc.

Objective C

Interpretation, use and evaluation of sources; relevance of conclusions drawn from the evidence provided by the sources.

REDS could be analysed in terms of: date, the film's viewpoint or purpose; information available to the film-makers; intended audience, style of film and presentation. The film could be used as a related comparative source in terms of similarity and difference; to detect omission in evidence; to compare visual evidence with other forms of evidence.

'REDS' and areas for discussion

Compare REDS with your own study of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil War years:

- a. Which scenes in the film illustrate areas you have explored?
- b. Which major areas of this period are not referred to in the film and why do you think these absences exist?
- c. Has the film helped you understand more clearly any aspects of Revolutionary Russia, 1917-1922. Give examples and reasons to explain your answer.

The Witnesses

- a. How reliable is the evidence of the "witnesses" likely to be? Explain why?
- b. How convincingly is a point proved by the evidence of the 'witnesses'?
- c. What is the relationship of the 'witnesses' to the film's narrative?
- d. How useful/adequate is the 'witnesses' evidence?

How does the film demonstrate the complex relationship between the power and needs of the State and those of the individual in both the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R.

"The effect-whether conscious or otherwise-of structuring historical drama around the lives of (usually famous) individual men and women is to suggest that history is made primarily by the individual interventions of men and women acting as free agents, rather than by the complex interplay of classes, institutions and modes of production." Colin McArthur, 'Television and History', p16.

Discuss this view in relation to the film 'REDS'.

Historical feature films can have a vital role in providing evidence of the period in which they themselves were constructed. Does the film tell us anything about 1970s U.S.A. and international relations? Why do you think the film makers presented the view that they did?

Suggested Bibliography

Films

Useful comparison can be made with:

October – Ten Days That Shook The World, Directed by Sergei Eisenstein (1928)

Dr. Zhivago, Directed by David Lean (1965)

Books

The Making of Modern Russia (1983, 2nd Edition), Lionel Kochan and Richard Abraham, Penguin.

Television and History (1978) Colin McArthur, BFI Publishing

Ten Days That Shook The World (1962) John Reed, Lawrence & Wishart

The Film in History Pierre Sorlin (1978), Blackwell

World Powers in the Twentieth Century (1978) Harriett Ward, Heinemann

Websites

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