

# The Leader and the Mass: The Political Body and the Power of Rhetorics

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A person A meets a person B. Person A is attracted to person B. Person A tries its best to win over person B in love. Person B, aware of its charm, lets person A idolize itself. It is not just person A to be in love with person B, there is a bunch of people feeling the same sentiment for person B; a crowd, a mass. More or less, this sounds like the plot of a romantic comedy. My aim in this paper is to delineate the relationship between individual/mass and leader/power through this scheme: a seduction, an erotic ritual. Using as a case study two scenes from the film *The Fall of Berlin*, a war/love drama directed by Chiaureli, a stunning example of propaganda films of late Stalinist period, I will focus my attention on the relationship between mass and power; from the relationship between Alesha, the hero of the film, and Stalin as object of scopophilia, to the use of the body (and its rhetoric) and the importance of gestures, from screens to streets. It would be impossible to delineate in a short essay an exhaustive configuration of this dynamic; so, conscious of the limits this format imposes me, I will just present and analyze this case study, leaving an in-depth study of the topic to the authors mentioned in the bibliography.

*The Fall of Berlin* is a film made by Chiaureli in 1950, a historical drama that recounts the heroism of the Soviet army against the Nazis. The film is considered a stunning example of Stalinist culture/propaganda, that «answered the demands of Stalinist culture

so accurately that it was denounced by Nikita Khrushchev in his "Secret Speech" and was buried deep in the archives of the Soviet film industry. And yet the film demonstrates, above all, "the perverse logic of Stalinism"» (Kaganovsky 2008: 146).

The film opens with a celebration in a steel town in Belorussia. Alesha Ivanov, a stackhanovite worker, has received the Order of Lenin for his achievements. Natasha, a teacher of the same town, is asked to give a speech to celebrate Alesha. Alesha suddenly falls in love with her, while she is shy and reluctant to love him back. Alesha has been invited to Moscow to speak with Stalin. Stalin "blesses" the love of Alesha for Natasha and Natasha starts to love him back. Then, suddenly, the war starts. Alesha and Natasha are separated; the first one is injured and then involved in the war, while Natasha is captured and sent to a concentration camp. Then the Soviet army enters in Berlin, the war is over and Natasha and Alesha are finally reunited in presence of Stalin, surrounded by the crowd.

First of all, it is necessary to try to define the notion of hero (as alter ego of Stalin and representative of the mass).

«What distinguishes a hero from a nonhero? The heroic act transforms the hero's body from a medium into a message» (Groys 2008: 138). The body of the hero becomes the way in which the virtues of the regime takes form. Through this ideal body, the body of the hero Alesha, Stalin manifests himself: a body ready to sacrifice, ready to destroy and to be destroyed, a living, breathing weapon. Through this body, the invisible is unveiled and functions as a "living manifesto": the body of the hero, transformed into a message, needs a «public created by the media» (*ibid.*). The screen is the way the body penetrates in our collective imagination; it creates a stage, where the ideal body can function and satisfy the requirements of the regime. «What distinguishes the heroic body of a media star from the unheroic bodies of the audience? Where lies the magic border that separates the hero from the nonhero on a purely corporeal plane?» (*ibid.*: 139). Through the heroic act; it is in the gesture that lies the "extraordinary" in Alesha, it is through the gesture that Alesha distinguishes himself from

the crowd, the one in the diegetic world of the film, the one in the theatre: a crowd that aims to be like him. Alesha is didascalical to the point of nausea; more than a character, he is a breathing manifesto of Stalinist propaganda. Alesha has a double function in the diegetic world of the film: he is, clearly, an alter ego of Stalin, but also an accessible role model for the invisible spectator, the Soviet citizen, to whom the didascalical film is addressed (empathy/ self-identification with the figure of Stalin, represented on the screen in a metaphysical dimension, is impossible).

The body of the actor, performing as the body of the hero, has the aim to penetrate the collective imagination of the spectator, to make his body imitating (possibly) the ideal body of the hero/actor. Alesha, the hero of *The Fall of Berlin*, embodies the characteristics of the archetypal “alter” of Stalin: big, muscular, brave. Alesha has to be observed on the screen, but he also has to observe Stalin as a model. On the other, Stalin (just like Hitler as described by Groys) doesn’t have to observe: he only has to be observed, he wants to be observed. «And he wanted not only to be observed but to be admired, even idolized, as a hero. He understood art, artists, and artworks as objects of admiration—not as the subjects of observation or analysis. For him, observers, viewers, critics, writers, and archaeologists were always other people» (*ibid.*: 142). But Alesha does not simply embody Stalin’s virtues in a “human” form, in a material dimension; he also embodies the mass’ desire to face the leader and to become his alter ego.

Alesha’s gaze on Stalin is the archetypal gaze of the mass on Stalin: a sentiment of admiration, almost configurable as an erotic one. The first scene I want to analyze from *The Fall of Berlin* perfectly exemplifies this tendency of representation of the hero in relation to Stalin. First, as I have said before, Alesha is the perfect example of the ideal Soviet citizen: proud, muscular, stakhanovite. However, even though Alesha embodies every quality of the Stalinist hero, he is human, too human. In fact he cannot sustain a comparison with Stalin: he is wounded after the war, he is an invalid heroic figure but, we can argue, he was also “damaged” before being compared to Stalin. He is

not the Leader, simply. And that is enough. The triangle between Stalin, Alesha and Natasha is impossible to solve, not least because, after all, Alesha too is in love with Stalin, like Natasha. In the scene I want to analyze, Alesha is invited to meet Stalin: he has to take a flight to Moscow. The first reaction of Alesha is an anxious one; just the idea of facing his leader generates in him a disordered reaction; it is impossible for him to control his body, to control his gestures. He starts walking around the room nervously, incapable of accepting the idea of facing his model and also his object of desire. He had already tried to avoid meeting him twice: «For God's sake, let me go!»; Alesha, welcomed by Stalin, is nervous to the point of being unable to pronounce correctly the Leader's name. Alesha is too shy, like a lover going to a first date with the object of his desire. Stalin, here apparently, embodying power, functions as the phallographic, dominant figure (Alesha is like a feminine character, cowering in front of the strong male figure). But approaching the situation from a different angle, Alesha can be considered as a man that, when facing the object of his desire, is experiencing a typical anxiety to fail, which manifests itself in his difficulty in elocution, and his fear of not being "masculine" enough.

Stalin, confident of his charm, looking perfect while gardening, is conscious of his (her?) status of perfection. The scene is not too dissimilar from those belonging to the tradition of romantic comedies: shy lover versus confident, inaccessible object of desire. Anxiety, paranoia, logorrhea, a kind of tourettism. Will there be a happy ending?

In the second scene of the film I want to analyze, the final scene, we do not just have a happy ending, but an overdose of happy ending and the role of Alesha/Natasha as representative of the mass is rendered explicit.

Berlin is conquered, the war is over.

Alesha, the stakhanovite hero, is finally reunited with Natasha, his lover. The dynamic of desire functions, again, through the triangular relationship between Alesha, Natasha and Stalin. Here, once again, Stalin is central and present, being the true object of (Natasha's)

desire. Indeed, the camera captures Natasha while she is looking at Stalin and, ecstatically involved, has to look away from him, since the figure of Stalin – in its utter perfection and pure spirituality – is too much to bear for more than a few seconds (Kantorowicz 1957). Natasha then sees her other love, Alesha. In a hectic and confused shot, the two hug each other, while Stalin, the one that initially propitiates their love, blesses from a distance their encounter. The hug between the two lovers does not last more than a few seconds; Natasha, having forgotten about Alesha, feels the need to homage Stalin and she asks «May I kiss you, comrade Stalin? For everything you have done for our people, for us». The real object of Natasha's desire is Stalin, not Alesha. Yet, the real object of desire of Alesha is Stalin, not Natasha. We can argue that the conflict generated by this "love" triangle, is more about the relationship between Stalin and Alesha: Stalin is a better version of Alesha, and Alesha feels a profound admiration for him. Alesha's love for Natasha is also aimed to satisfy, appease Stalin, the one that blessed their union. Through the relationship with Natasha, Alesha is able to love Stalin (and of course, Natasha is able to love Stalin, the "unattainable version" of Alesha). We can describe the condition of Alesha as a kind of "heterosexual panic"; as I mentioned before, the anxiety he feels the first time he meets Stalin is similar to the anxiety of a man that meets his object of desire. Heterosexual panic can be defined as «an acute attack of anxiety that results in the frantic pursuit of heterosexual activity in response to unconscious or latent homosexual impulses» (The Free Dictionary). Yet, while such a triangular conflict is usually resolved in favour of homosociality, instead of heterosexual marriage, here the relationship between Alesha and Stalin is imbalanced: Stalin is not a friend of Alesha, he is his mentor, master, model. But he is also the object of his sexual/emotional desire. So the only way to love Stalin is to please him through the relationship with Natasha. The only way to love Stalin is to avoid his homosexual feeling and accept an heterosexual/heteronormative convention.

Alesha, aware of his position of inferiority, lets Natasha kiss her (and his) real, impossible lover. And through her, in a sense, he is

finally able to kiss Stalin. «I will kiss the lips that kissed Stalin» we can say paraphrasing Barthes (Piretto 2007: 7). Stalin here acts as an object of scopophilia: he is the passive/female (using Laura Mulvey) character, object of the male gaze (Alesha's but also Natasha's; her gaze can be here canonically considered as the gaze of the male). «Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle [...] signifies male desire» (Mulvey 2005: 309). If «the presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence [...] freezes the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation» (*ibid.*: 311). Stalin is the object of every gaze, functioning as a female character in the traditional scheme of narrative cinema. Assuming that Stalin in this scene is acting as a female character, we can quote Budd Boetticher: «What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concerns he feels for her, who make him act the way he does» (*ibid.*). Alesha's actions are dictated by love, not just for Natasha, but for Stalin. His aim is to be admired by the leader; to be reunited with Natasha, in order to be able to love Stalin through her. Too much? Maybe. But coming back to Mulvey, we can absolutely point out, using her words, that Stalin in this scene can be considered as a female character, an object of eroticism: using again Mulvey: «she is isolated, glamorous on display, sexualized [...] by means of identification with him (the male character), through participation, the spectator can indirectly possess her too» (*ibid.*). Through Alesha and Natasha, two counterparts of the same feeling for Stalin, the spectator can experience the realization of his desire to love him. Stalin, dressed in white, as a virgin, offers himself to the voyeuristic gaze of the mass.

Attention has to be paid to the mass surrounding Stalin in the scene of him landing to Berlin. Stalin, as written by Piretto, was incapable of facing the crowd, the mass; his media body had the duty to do what his material body was not able to.

This paranoia, this idea of being always observed, changed his iconography: during the annual procession to celebrate the Victory, in 1945, Stalin avoided parading on the Red Square, «[...] trusting Zukov with the duty of appearing riding a white horse. Stalin was standing

and looking at the parade from Lenin's burial place, hidden from the crowd's gaze, allowed to be immobile and static» (Piretto 2007: 6). There is, arguably, a juxtaposition between the crowd's gestures and Stalin's immobility. As Agamben argued in his *Notes on Gesture*:

What is most extraordinary is that after these disorders had been observed in thousands of cases from 1885 onwards, there is practically no further record of them in the early years of the twentieth century - until the winter's day in 1971 when Oliver Sacks, walking through the streets of New York, saw what he believed were three cases of tourettism within the space of a few minutes. One of the hypothesis that can be constructed to explain this disappearance is that ataxy, tics and dystonia had, in the course of time, become the norm, and that beyond a certain point everyone had lost control of their gestures, walking and gesticulating frenetically. (Agamben 2008: 325)

Agamben suggests, quoting Oliver Sacks, that this catastrophe of gestures is, in a way, a social construction, motivated culturally in a society that has lost its capacity to control its movements: a very particular type of Tourette syndrome that the living habits made pathological.

What Agamben writes can be applied to the enthusiastic crowd of screaming, frenzied men and women that greets Stalin in the final scene of *The Fall of Berlin*. As if caught in a "gestures' Holocaust", a schizophrenia of gestures and movements, falling victim to a pure ecstasy towards Stalin, Soviet citizens abandon all sense of decorum in their manifestation of affection, esteem, submission to their Leader. Stalin, on the other hand, is the opposite of this tendency: still, steadfast and self-assured, he is the embodiment of discreet power. Canetti, in his *Crowds and Power*, dedicates some attention to schizophrenia in relation to the nature of the crowd: «The schizophrenic subject, in his condition of extreme susceptibility, behaves like the member of a mass; he is equally exposed to exterior strains and stimuli. However, because he is alone, the possibility of

him being in such a situation is never considered. The schizophrenic is a fragment torn from the mass» (Canetti 1984: 390).

The uncontrollable reaction of the mass towards Stalin can be associated to some manifestations/symptoms of schizophrenia: the schizophrenic, part of the mass, is alone in fact, although it is reacting to the same stimuli as a part of a crowd: this crowd of schizophrenics is united by the same incapacity to control the gestures. Stalin himself seems affected by a kind of fear of being touched (that's why he needs his mediatic body to do what he is not able to do with his material one):

Man fears nothing more than being touched by the unknown. We want to see whatever reaches towards us: we want to get to know it, at least classify it. Everywhere man strives to avoid being touched by what is unknown to him. At night, or anywhere in the dark, the fear of being touched by the unknown can cause absolute panic. (Canetti 1984: 17)

A situation in which paranoia and impossibility of controlling the body and gestures became the norm.

It is interesting to juxtapose the reaction of the crowd in *The Fall of Berlin* to an iconic use of the body in the Gezi Park protests. On June 18th of this year, a man, called by the media Duran Adam (literally, "standing man"), manifested his dissent against the demolition of Gezi Park and generally against Erdogan, by standing still for hours looking at a gigantic reproduction of Atatürk. An immobile body, finally controlled, that interrogates the image of the so called "father of modern Turkey." This way of manifesting dissent has inspired most of the demonstrators. The immobile bodies of the crowd, the eyes projected towards the future (and the past) are asking to all of us to take position. From our screens, to our streets. To problematize our position in a power relation through our body.

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