

*Something Different* (1963) and *Daisies* (1966): The Aesthetics of Change and Rebellion

The 1960s Czechoslovak New Wave captured a short but tumultuous time period of socio-political changes. Directors from the film movement rebelled against Socialist-Realism and its ideological agenda, but not with any uniform style or agreed upon conventions. By integrating a multitude of filmic techniques, director Vera Chytilova successfully challenged traditional practices and, simultaneously, traditional values and philosophies. Against a backdrop of fluctuating State-censorship, *Something Different* (1963) and *Daisies* (1966) offer us a substantial grasp of the movement's themes, criticisms and experimentation. From cinema verite to anarchic experimentalism, Chytilova's films employ elements of realism and surrealism to challenge viewers on a predominantly subconscious level: an artistic strategy inherently defiant of State-sanctioned art.

The political and cultural landscape of Communist Czechoslovakia, under Soviet control as a satellite state, helps set the movement apart from other New Wave national cinemas. Repression and censorship waxed and waned during the '60s, meanwhile political and artistic movements were working to liberalize the Party and further explore philosophy and ethics, respectively. The Communist coup, having taken place in 1948, eventually precipitated the (both Communist) reformers and conservatives who would ideologically clash throughout the '60s. The reverberations of neo-Stalinism and growing popularity of decentralization echoed in the background of New Wave cinema production. After issues of the Czech economy came to the political foreground, inviting a more liberal approach, artistic endeavors were endowed with more autonomy. "The effects of liberalisation were immediately felt in the cultural and intellectual spheres, with many writers, thinkers, artists and filmmakers promptly emboldened by the sense that change was afoot within the Party. The year 1963 was a watershed for

Czechoslovak culture, offering a bravura opening round of assaults in the fight against ideological and aesthetic restriction” (Owen 36-39).

A prominent piece in this watershed year, *Something Different* proved to be successful and won the Grand Prix at the International Film Festival Mannheim-Heidelberg. However, the film’s approval and production processes reveal an ever-present State authority and, perhaps more significantly, Chytilova’s unwavering resistance as a filmmaker. She diverted from the original script which focused more heavily on Olympic gymnast Eva Bosakova’s personal life involving an affair and abortion. The HSTD (Central Press and Supervision Office) approved it, with hesitation, because its message of success and sacrifice (of motherhood) seemed unethical. Even the form of the film was challenged, just a few months before its premiere, with a debate surrounding its juxtaposition of (quasi-) documentary and narrative fiction. This atypical structure could yield ethical ambiguities, unlike the preferred Socialist-Realist style (focus on everyday life and the emancipation of the proletariat), and yet, the film was ultimately approved. Chytilova’s final version excludes the affair (at least explicitly) and abortion content to allow Bosakova some privacy. Although the film differs from its original screenplay, this is mostly due to Chytilova’s unconventional creative process, and not merely pressure from the State (Skupa 237-38).

However, in 1965, the HSTD and the Ideology Department of UV KSC (Central Committee of the Communist Party) took a more conservative swing after deeming a handful of films to be problematic, and consequently cancelled some films that were in pre-production (one of which was Chytilova’s *Tomato Matylda*, set in a factory/socialist re-education facility). Apparently the films challenged the Regime’s ideology in an unsavory manner, setting up a tense atmosphere for the conception of *Daisies*. In reference to heavy stylization and allegory, “the

general director of CSF, Alois Polednak, said: ‘It is not a sign of artistic potential in cinema but rather a lack of mental conviction, when the author embraces the incomprehensible language of metaphor and allegory that obscures the real meaning of the film and allows multiple interpretations.’” The boldness of Chytilova’s narrative and formal experimentation in *Daisies* should not be underestimated; its subversive aesthetic choices were also not necessarily characteristic of the Czech New Wave, aside from its nontraditional and auteurist fashion. Although her screenplay indicated some level of formal experimentation, the final product nearly abandons any realism that was originally purported. The head of the CSF, Polednak, oversaw her script revisions that were suggested to address the unethical behavior of the lead characters, eliminate any (potential) lesbian imagery, and cut dialogue that was deemed vulgar. Chytilova altered or removed problematic content, like a scene involving a character whose work ethic did not align with Communist ideology, and Polednak argued in favor of the work as a moral parable about the characters’ superficiality (Skupa 239-41).

The first cut of the film, naturally, only loosely resembled Chytilova’s final script (originally written with Pavel Jurasek and rewritten with Ester Krumbachova), and wasn’t approved. Its length and certain aspects of symbolism were questioned, prompting Chytilova and Krumbachova to edit it down. A key scene was altered in which a ‘man in black’ on a boat tells the characters that they need to work hard and be good people, before abandoning the drowning girls for their misbehavior. The HSTD took issue with the symbolic authority turning its back on people in need, representing society in an amoral manner. The scene was thus recut, the overall length reduced, and elements like the bomb imagery in the beginning and end were added. Polednak approved the film in 1966: “... we can presume the argument that contributed to the approval of such a problematic film was business - the film had already been sold to export

markets at that time” (Skupa 242). However, it was essentially banned with limited exhibition due to its on-screen food wastage and lack of appropriate messaging. The text “This film is dedicated to those who get upset only over a stomped-upon bed of lettuce” appears at the film’s end, a jab at the Party authorities. *Daisies* was released during the brief and uncensored 1968 ‘Prague Spring,’ but was banned yet again after the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia the same year, reasserting its control and State censorship over the liberalizing nation (Owen 44-45).

It should be noted that despite the oppressive environment that surely affected art via censorship, the absence of marketplace constraints did allow for general experimentation. Unlike Hollywood, the tastes of mass audiences didn’t affect creative content to much extent, contributing to an elitist culture in film. The New Wave’s focus on ambiguous morality and philosophy isn’t surprising given the artistic culture of the time, as well as political oppression that arguably necessitated an intellectual revolt. Academic researcher and journalist Jan Culik points out that “...the public was interested in their work because, in an atmosphere of authoritarianism, it took over the role of public political discourse” (200). The subtle and not-so-subtle challenges to the Party in these films appealed to viewers, locally and internationally, with their provocative content and aesthetics. However, political subtext was also negated in the materializing of some of these films. “To focus overwhelmingly on overt politics in the case of the Czech New Wave would be to miss the point that the New Wave was frequently oppositional and subversive precisely for exploring themes and asserting ideas that were neglected and even rendered taboo during the previous decade.” Academic author Jonathan L. Owen explains that part of this artistic rebellion was a *distancing* from politics, as Czech culture was already inundated with Communist ideology. Thus the exploration of human

existence and its many complications were favored, after having been stifled in previous years (Owen 8-9).

*Something Different* is a prime example of this departure from didactic subtext. While the story focuses on women and their day-to-day lives, Chytilova doesn't give audiences a clear ideological (feminist) message, which is appropriate given the State's agenda for political engagement and education. The ambiguous nature of modern ethics and women's role in society is questioned, not dictated. By juxtaposing Vera, the traditional housewife and mother, with gymnast Bosakova, the film could easily express a preference of values. It resists, however, frequently bringing attention to their *similarities* using editing techniques like match cuts as the narrative switches between them. Both women experience exhaustion, in different ways, questioning their life choices as they grapple with the reality that has taken shape around them. In the interview scene with Bosakova, her lack of enthusiasm for her assumedly exciting career choice is highlighted, and she even laments that she didn't have time to learn how to cook. When she points out that photography must be an interesting job, the photographer says "But of course if you're doing it all the time you get fed up with it" (*Something* 47:04). This casual sentiment seems to be a prominent theme throughout the film: Is fulfillment the same as accomplishment? Or is there more value in new enterprises, in spontaneity? The repetitive imagery of Vera cleaning and caretaking, alternating with Bosakova's relentless training, evokes the monotony of life. It is this *implicitly* philosophical exploration of everyday life that permeates the Czech New Wave, as Owen explains: "Meaning coincides with non-meaning, as the polemical need for expression competes with a desire to luxuriate in the plasticity of the image or the concreteness of reality" (Owen 219). In opposition to Stalinism and its dogmatic instruction for interpreting life, Chytilova and company largely chose not to prescribe meaning that exacts any one truth.

Materialism is another common theme in the film as Vera frequently mentions things she wants to buy, or her appearance in general. While the State predictably approved of critiquing consumerism, Vera isn't necessarily criticized for her desires by the audience. The narrative focus on her unglamorous days (aside from her affair) and the scene in which she asks her husband permission to buy something, creates a less critical view of her character. She is clearly craving something, *anything* to distract her from the woes of a stagnant lifestyle; materialism is just a simple, albeit temporary, solution. Yet again, the film poses a complex social observation brought on by modernization, though Socialist authority would ascribe a simplistic moral meaning to it.

Chytilova's emphasis on superficiality and materialism is elevated, and further complicated, by the characters in *Daisies*. Marie I (Ivana Karbanova) and Marie II (Jitka Cerhova) lounge around in fashionable swimsuits, indulge themselves with food at the expense of others, destroy food and objects with glee, and adorn their living space with trendy greenery and the names of conquests written on their walls. They epitomize decadence and destruction, which Chytilova herself claimed was at the heart of the story: the young women star in a moral parable (Owen 100). However, this censor-pleasing explanation doesn't seem to satisfy critics nor audiences. Film professor Bliss Cua Lim observes that "*Daisies* can be read multivalently as enabling both a critique of the heroines' excesses... and a latent feminist delight in the heroines' ability to effect reversals in the patriarchal order" (38). It isn't difficult for viewers to glean a similar subtext from the film, especially considering its experimental form that invites various interpretations. Compounding the overall style and structure of the film, the protagonists' behavior is so exaggerated and appalling that it can hardly be taken as literal or realistic.

Therefore, the young women can easily be seen as satirical characters who mock gender performativity and societal ideals.

The film's several dinner date scenes exemplify this farce of polite behavior as the Maries eat gluttonously and ask inappropriate questions, to the horror of their unsuspecting companions, before ditching the men in slapstick fashion. Their ambivalence and disrespect towards these men can be interpreted as cruel and selfish, lending the film's meaning to Chytilova's critical defense. Or, as per Lim's argument, their simultaneous disavowal of patriarchal power structures and expectations. The Maries' unique ability to flounce society's unwritten rules and invite criticism of them stems from their very unorthodox characterization. Cultural academic Cheryl Stephenson connects their doll-like appearances and performances with their natural resistance to judgment and criticism for their behavior (223). It appears to be difficult for audiences to condemn the Maries for their transgressions since they are so far removed from reality- both in characterization and due to the film's experimental, fragmented form. In addressing the women's dates with (increasingly older) men, Stephenson goes on to posit that "they use the fact that they are perceived as objects meant for consumption to assert themselves as the truly voracious consumers" (224). Thus the very behavior that was used to persuade the State's approval, also works to promote feminist ideology. This accomplishment is further politicized in the banquet sequence wherein the characters destroy an elaborate feast, presumably prepared for Party officials to enjoy. Chytilova's allusion to hypocrisy within the government was likely not lost on viewers, although subtle in its execution (Owen 110-11).

The aforementioned doll (or puppet) analogy also provides subtext for existentialist themes: the Maries explicitly question whether or not they exist after they go unnoticed by a farmer and passersby. They appear particularly flustered when the group of male cyclists ride

past them, prompting their conversation. There are a couple of key aspects in this sequence that provide social commentary: the characters who seem to not notice them are all men, and the women only realize they exist after seeing corn on the ground that they had trampled. To expand on the critique of superficiality *and* patriarchy, it seems that the women only exist when men see them. Stephenson points out that “the puppet is only fully realized in the context of the performance,” building upon her argument of their problematically gendered state as both object and subject (220). What are the implications for women’s agency if their existence (or fulfillment) depends on attention from men? And what are audiences meant to take away from the proof of their existence being sourced from destruction? Their declaration of “We are! We are!” combined with marching style drums, earlier heard in the flywheel-and-bomb introductory sequence, evokes a criticism of masculinity and destruction caused by militaristic endeavors. It isn’t surprising, given this example, that the State lamented such unavoidable subtext found throughout *Daisies*, inherently boasting its challenging interpretations of society without delineating any one interpretation.

To the chagrin of Alois Polednak and other Party officials, the form of *Daisies* does indeed pose more questions than answers, and opens dialogue for criticism of society and the State. Chytilova’s experimental assemblage of shots and scenes, with due credit given to editor Miroslav Hajek, allows for meaning to be derived from montage and from exposure to the film’s constructed techniques. Owen refers to the introductory sequence that rhythmically alternates shots of the flywheel and explosions as “intellectual montage at its most sophisticated, of the kind that Eisenstein theorized” and then correlates it with an “automization of human consciousness” (106). This, of course, is one of several possible meanings, but also parallels the Maries’ mechanized, doll-like state, and their unethical explorations throughout the film. Their

frequent and seemingly nihilistic question “Does it matter?” could be a challenge, not of ethical standards themselves, but of the invisible authority that takes root in a collective consciousness and that sets ethical standards (Owen 108). This philosophical critique materializes again near the end, when the Maries try to atone for their transgressions at the banquet, wearing newspaper outfits that symbolize “proper conviction” (Lim 43). Although they appear to apologize for their nihilistic games, in an effort to appeal to an invisible Authority, their behavior appears insincere as they try to reconstruct the room they’ve demolished. In accordance with Party values, they are ultimately punished in the final scene with an explosion, and yet the clarity of this punishment is left wanting: what is the relationship between ethics and free will? Are the women punished for their callousness, or for challenging the status quo and operating outside of a prescribed and mechanized mentality?

A multitude of questions go unanswered, starting with the primordial question of who the Maries are. Since the film lays its construction bare with alternating colors, asynchronous dialogue, literal pieces of the film/characters cut up and reassembled (in the spectacular scissors scene), and frequent collage inserts, it seems to further articulate the theme of reality. The identities of the Maries, as well as their world, are unreal, constructed, and estranged (Owen 103-105). To what extent is reality itself constructed? Or gender identity? And, possibly one of the most significant questions the film poses, who or what has the power to assemble these constructions?

Vera Chytilova herself may not have agreed with the many scholars and critics who have speculated various interpretations of *Daisies*, but her efforts in this film were assuredly purposeful and politically strategic. The very conception of films like *Something Different* and *Daisies* were subversive of the Regime’s values, and among other works contributed to

Chytoliva's six year involuntary absence from filmmaking. Overall, using nonconformist aesthetics and subject matter, the Czech New Wave filmmakers were able to explore the ambiguities of life and ethics while grappling with waves of Censorship. In this act of artistic rebellion, the movement sought out truth and resisted ascertaining it.

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