

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 11. 10. 2022

Daisies

In 1963, a character study aptly called *Something Different* (O něčem jiném) premiered in Czechoslovak cinemas. After years of schematic dramas and socialism-building comedies, the veristic double portrait of a housewife and a talented gymnast offered a refreshing change. The film was the feature debut of Věra Chytilová – the first woman to graduate in direction at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU). She was also the only woman in a year led by the unkind but experienced director Otakar Vávra. In addition to that, she attracted attention with her independence, confidence, and formally unorthodox works.

While Chytilová's fellow students often made very misogynistic stories about lost men and delicate women, she had been emphasizing women's subjectivity from the beginning and, especially abroad, has been seen as a key feminist filmmaker (even though she herself refused to be labelled a feminist).

In her early films *Ceiling* (Strop, 1961), *A Bagful of Fleas* (Pytel blech, 1962) and *Something Different*, reflecting her own existential fumbling before entering FAMU, Chytilová was inspired by cinéma vérité, worked with authentic dialogues and documentary shooting, and was interested in the everyday lives of ordinary people. But then she joined creative forces with the multi-talented artist Ester Krumbachová and cinematographer Jaroslav Kučera, made a sidestep and created *Daisies* (Sedmikrásky, 1966), an extravagant, mischievous morality tale, which even after fifty years continues to entertain and provoke.

Even though in the 1960s Czechoslovakia was experiencing a decline in cultural and political tension and films were not the only works of art going beyond conventions, Chytilová's new film was still too formally radical for its time and had to go through a complicated approval process both before and after its production.

While *Something Different* was seen by the heads of Czechoslovak State Film as an important project, *Daisies* were considered a dubious experiment, something domestic authors might better avoid. The ideological department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was afraid that the metaphorical language would create space for ambiguous interpretations and, without authorial explication, the viewers would not know what to make of it. And yet that was exactly Chytilová's point.

The story is a series of images from the lives of two teenage girls, named Marie I and Marie II in the credits, who decide to be as wicked as the world around them. It can be interpreted as an attack against the patriarchal establishment, a joyful celebration of femininity, or a sceptical criticism of the decay of social morality and relationships.

Looking their age but in their naivety, playfulness, and infantilism behaving like five-year-old children, both Maries resemble interchangeable dolls without specific qualities, a set of external feminine features, and two masks with nothing behind them. Taking to an extreme the shallowness, emotional swings, and silliness traditionally attributed to women, they expose the ridiculousness of roles women are expected to play in a patriarchy. According to Chytilová, their dullness, preventing the viewer's identification with them, was to attract the audience's attention to the ideas of the film.

At first, there was not much indication that the work would be so ambivalent and problematic. It all started with a film story called *Daisies* (*Chudobky*) written for Chytilová by screenwriter Pavel Juráček, who was studying screenwriting and dramaturgy at FAMU at the same time that she was. Clearly set in the 1960s, the story realistically depicted two girls killing time playing various jokes at the expense of elderly men. At one point, the heroines decide to find out if there is in fact a decent person they could respect.

Written during brainstorming sessions with Krumbachová and Kučera, the final screenplay only contained fragments of the original text. The central principle of the story, in which the ordinary plot and character development is replaced by variations and repetitions, is the game "Truth or dare?" and mocking all kinds of conventions. The aim was no longer to present a realistic picture of the lives of two young women

but a “philosophic documentary in the form of a farce”. Men managing the Barrandov Film Studio were getting nervous.

An opinion on the literary screenplay issued by the Central Press Supervision Office (HSTD) – the central censorship authority in Czechoslovakia – was significantly negative, mentioning for instance the “strong cynicism of the young girls” and the fact that the author didn’t hold a clear view on their way of life. Chytilová was strongly recommended to assign to the heroines their own identities, psychological features, and pasts, explaining their lack of interest in social norms. She was also expected to rid the screenplay of taboo words and any indications of a lesbian relationship.

The director made some concessions to the censors, and despite many objections, the technical screenplay successfully passed the approval procedure in the end. However, further complications arose during post-production, when it turned out that many dialogues were the result of improvisation during the shooting and not even the composition of shots corresponded to the screenplay presented. The working copy was rejected by the authorities in February 1966. Even though the dramaturgists had expected *Daisies* to be experimental, non-realistic, and irreverent, the result exceeded their expectations with its subversiveness and testing the limits of the possible.

In the meantime, the film was seen by many representatives of the Czechoslovak film community at private screenings. Pavel Juráček suggests in his diaries that when he attended the film festival in Pesaro, Italy in 1966 with *Every Young Man* (*Každý mladý muž*, 1966), some members of the Czechoslovak delegation mentioned *Daisies* and Jan Němec’s equally problematic film *The Party and the Guests* (*O slavnosti a hostech*, 1966) to foreign journalists. Subsequently, a request came from Italy to release both the secretly kept films for the Venice film festival (which didn’t happen in the end). According to Juráček, the Czechs assumed that the reason for this “interference in the internal cultural policy” were domestic filmmakers letting some information slip in Pesaro (and earlier in Cannes). Allegedly, the angry communist politician and ideologist Jiří Hendrych even called Juráček and his colleagues “bastards” and “snitches”.

Daisies only got the green light in July 1966 after several editing changes and significant shortening. Money probably played a role here as well. Shot on a more expensive colour material, the film had already been sold abroad. With its ban, the state-owned film industry would lose the invested capital and an opportunity to earn hard foreign currency. However, the distribution in Czechoslovakia still didn't run smoothly. The discussion continued as to whether the film would be released in cinemas at all. Moreover, the press could not publish any texts about *Daisies*. The readers didn't find out why the film, finished already for several months, only premiered in December 1966. The release was also greatly limited.

Chytilová, Krumbachová, and Kučera meant their satirical parable as a polemic with modern society and the means of expression of a rational, disciplining (male) world that the Maries refuse to submit to.

The collage-like edited composition decomposing the whole into autonomous pictures, lenses deforming the perspective, sped-up and slow motion, experimenting with image colours, unnatural sound effects, ironically used classical music pieces, extravagant decorations and costumes combining Art Nouveau cuts with fashion magazine aesthetics: the result is not meant to be harmonic. On the other hand, connecting the high and the low, the ugly and the beautiful reflects the position of women who were prevented by society from creating meaning, and that's why they resorted to destructive anarchy and play (including word play, which in their case replaces using full sentences, which would mean submitting to the language structure of the patriarchy). With their irrational, unmotivated behaviour, they expose the hidden charm of destruction.

With her story about girls whose lives are only made of idleness, seducing men, destroying things, and consumption, the author wanted to provoke a response. And the audience – mainly its male part – was indeed not indifferent. The film was sharply rejected by Juráček, the author of the original story (however, his contempt was combined with admiration for Chytilová's execution capabilities), and by surrealist Vratislav Effenberger, who wrote about "decorative cynicism". According to other reflections of the time, *Daisies* was too pessimistic and hopeless, lacking faith in the power of reason.

It was MP Jaroslav Pružinec who voiced the harshest criticism in 1967. His interpellation at a National Assembly session was related to selected works of the Czechoslovak New Wave. He called for a ban of distribution especially for *Daisies* and *The Party and the Guests*. His request, which prompted several filmmakers to send a letter to the Minister of Culture, was denied, but it showed that Chytilová – just like in her earlier and later films – managed to grasp the absurdity of the time. What Pružinec hated most about the film criticizing the indifference to things that should make us indignant was not the Maries' nihilistic apathy. He was offended by the wasting of food during the final apocalyptic feast scene, which was allegedly insensitive to Czech farmers.

Daisies (Czechoslovakia 1966), director: Věra Chytilová, screenplay: Ester Krumbachová, Věra Chytilová, director of photography: Jaroslav Kučera, music: Jiří Šust, Jiří Šlitr, cast: Jitka Cerhová, Ivana Karbanová, Julius Albert, Jan Klusák, Marie Češková, Marcela Březinová, Jiřina Myšková, Oldřich Hora, Václav Chochola et al. Filmové studio Barrandov, 73 min.

References and recommended reading:

Michael Brooke, Flower Power. *Sight and Sound* 19, August 2009, No. 8, p. 87.

Petra Hanáková, Případ Chytilová a Krumbachová. In: Petra Hanáková, Libuše Heczková, Eva Kalivodová, Kateřina Svatoňová (eds.), *Volání rodu*. Praha: Akropolis 2013, pp. 202–224.

Pavel Juráček, *Deník III, 1959–1974*. Praha: Torst 2018.

Bliss Cua Lim, Dolls in Fragments: Daisies as Feminist Allegory. *Camera Obscura* 16 (2001), No. 47, pp. 37–78.

Alison Frank, Formal Innovation and Feminist Freedom. *Cineaction*, 2010, No. 81, pp. 46–49.

Lukáš Skupa, Perfectly Unpredictable: Early Work of Věra Chytilová in the Light of Censorship and Production Reports. *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 9, November 2018, No. 3, pp. 233–249.

Kateřina Svatoňová, *Mezi-obrazy: Mediální praktiky kameramana Jaroslava Kučery*.

Praha: Univerzita Karlova, Národní filmový archiv 2016.

Zbyněk Vlasák (ed.), *Autorka neklidu. Věra Chytilová očima české filmové kritiky*.

Brno: Moravská zemská knihovna 2021.