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DAISIES

If the entire world is bad, why shouldn't we be? Adopting this insolent attitude as their guiding philosophy, a pair of hedonistic young women (Ivana Karbanová and Jitka Cerhová), both named Marie, embark on a gleefully debauched odyssey of gluttony, giddy destruction, and antipatriarchal resistance, in which nothing is safe from their nihilistic pursuit of pleasure. But what happens when the fun is over? Matching her anarchic message with an equally radical aesthetic, director Věra Chytilová, with the close collaboration of cinematographer Jaroslav Kučera, unleashes an optical storm of fluctuating film stocks, kaleidoscopic montages, cartoonish stop-motion cutouts, and surreal costumes designed by Ester Krumbachová, who also cowrote the script. The result is *Daisies*, the most defiant provocation of the Czechoslovak New Wave, an exuberant call to rebellion aimed squarely at those who uphold authoritarian oppression in any form.

Czechoslovakia | 1966 | 76 minutes | Color | In Czech with English subtitles | 1.37:1 aspect ratio

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PRODUCTION HISTORY

The story of *Daisies* (1966)—one of the Czechoslovak New Wave’s most famous entries and certainly its most anarchic—begins in 1946, with the founding of the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU). It was at this nationalized institution that many of the brightest lights of the New Wave began their careers: Jaromil Jireš, Jiří Menzel, Jan Němec, and Evald Schorm. A peer of theirs named Věra Chytilová—the first woman to study directing at FAMU, starting in 1957—also displayed exceptional promise with her thesis film, *Ceiling* (1962), about the disillusionment of a fashion model, and *A Bagful of Fleas* (1962), a short about young textile workers. With these early efforts—as well as her feature debut, *Something Different* (1963), a dual-narrative film—Chytilová employed a cinema-verité style that incorporated experimental techniques in order to express the unique perspectives of female characters and subjects. Her ability to discover new modes of cinematic storytelling placed her at the forefront of the New Wave, which started to form in the year that *Something Different* was released.

Daisies, however, was an entirely different type of movie—not only from Chytilová’s previous work but also from conventional cinema altogether. On the surface, the film possesses a simple narrative: inspired by the corrupt, meaningless state of the world, two young women, named Marie I and Marie II, run riot in various locations, including their apartment and an elegant banquet hall—rejecting a bevy of male suitors, destroying their surroundings, and, finally, engaging in an epic food fight. Chytilová’s stated artistic objective, however, was to “direct the spectator’s attention [away] from the psychology of the characters . . . to restrict his feeling of involvement and lead him to an understanding of the underlying idea or philosophy.” This led her to depict the action through a ceaseless stream of narrative, visual, and tonal discontinuities that frequently take a playfully surreal form but just as often become so disorienting as to communicate one of the film’s major themes: that nihilistic destruction carried out by individuals arises from a nihilistically destructive society. As Chytilová once described it when looking back on *Daisies*: “The form of the film was really derived from the conceptual basis of the film. Because the concept of the film was destruction, the form became destructive as well.”

Chytilová took full advantage of filming at Prague’s Barrandov Studios, where she had worked in several capacities a decade before. Now, with its facilities at her disposal, she oversaw a project on which she encouraged an atmosphere of free-spirited collaboration—only the dialogue of the screenplay (written by

Chytilová and Ester Krumbachová, from a story by Chytilová and Pavel Juráček) would remain intact amid the experimentation of the production. Director of photography Jaroslav Kučera, Chytilová’s second husband, employed a kaleidoscopic range of cinematographic techniques, including black-and-white, color, prismatic, and monochrome stocks; alternating color filters; and matte effects that, at one point, make the two Maries’ severed body parts appear to float through the air. Krumbachová created the film’s eye-poppingly surreal and color-coordinated costumes. And editor Miroslav Hájek assembled, from single-frame shots of various objects (butterflies, plants, photo collages), the rapid montage sequences that punctuate the narrative intermittently.

In her early films, Chytilová elicited compelling performances from nonprofessional actors, and she sought to do the same in *Daisies*. For the roles of Marie I and Marie II, Chytilová cast, respectively, Jitka Cerhová and Ivana Karbanová, both newcomers to screen acting. Still in high school at the time, Cerhová had caught the attention of a casting director during her routine at the Prague Spartakiad—“one of these mass gymnastics spectacles of the Communist regime,” according to Cerhová. Chytilová explained that she “chose as my heroines two young girls because it is at this age that one most wants to fulfill oneself and, if left to one’s own devices, his or her need to create can easily turn into its very opposite.” During production, the director coaxed Cerhová and Karbanová to stylize their performances in order to match the paradoxical tone of the film: at once gleefully silly and disturbingly strange. Along with the occasional cartoonish sound effects that accompany their movements, the Maries’ nonnaturalistic gestures and vocal intonations evoke the behavior of renegade marionettes—infantilized sex objects rebelling against their patriarchal puppet masters.

Released in December 1966, *Daisies* was reviewed positively by critics and eventually earned Czechoslovakia’s coveted Trilobit Award. Its run was no less successful in the United States and elsewhere in Europe, where the film won the Bergamo Film Festival’s Grand Prix and the award for the best movie of 1968 from the Belgian Film Critics Association, and gained notice from critics who heralded Chytilová as one of the freshest voices of her country’s New Wave. Unfortunately, Czechoslovak Communist Party leaders failed to appreciate the film’s merits, deeming it too avant-garde and specifically condemning Chytilová for “depicting the wanton.” As Cerhová explained in an interview with the French newspaper *Libération*, “You can’t imagine how



these scenes, where we threw down the table and the platters of a sumptuous banquet, were shocking in a country where people waited on line for hours in front of grocery stores.” The government’s objection to the film, which included a denunciation on the floor of the National Assembly in May 1967, foreshadowed the fate of many of Chytilová’s other films: following the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, she was forbidden to make features at all for a significant period of time. Chytilová, however, would have the last laugh: she returned triumphantly to filmmaking with 1977’s *The Apple Game*, while *Daisies* continued—and still continues—to grow in stature as a lasting testament to cinematic free expression and a delirious celebration of creation amid a world hell-bent on annihilation.

DIRECTOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Věra Chytilová was born on February 2, 1929, in Ostrava, Czechoslovakia. Her family practiced a strict Catholicism that would inspire many of the motifs and themes in her films.

At college in Brno, Chytilová studied architecture but eventually abandoned that path to work as a draftsman, a fashion model, and a photo retoucher. Later, she became a “clapper girl,” writer, actor, and assistant director for Barrandov Studios in Prague. In 1957, at the age of twenty-eight, Chytilová became the first woman to study directing at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU). She graduated in 1962.

Chytilová’s first marriage, to photographer Karel Ludwig, provided her with connections to some of the key figures of Czechoslovakia’s early-1960s artistic and cultural renaissance, including writer Bohumil Hrabal and graphic artist Vladimír Boudník. After directing her first feature, *Something Different* (1963), Chytilová played a major role in reinvigorating Czechoslovak cinema as part of the country’s rising New Wave, alongside directors such as Miloš Forman and Ivan Passer. Her greatest success came with 1966’s *Daisies*, an anarchic satire containing a dizzying array of unconventional storytelling and cinematographic techniques.

But, just as the film was being acclaimed as an avant-garde masterpiece and a pioneering work of feminist cinema, the walls of Communist Party censorship and Soviet-instituted blacklisting closed in on Chytilová. First, *Daisies* was banned in major Czechoslovak theaters for what party leaders considered its formal audacity and brazen decadence, and then, with the 1968 invasion by the Soviet Union, the antiauthoritarian Chytilová was relegated to directing television commercials under the name of her second husband, the cinematographer Jaroslav Kučera.

After *Fruit of Paradise*, which began shooting the month of the invasion and was released in 1970, Chytilová was unable to direct a feature film until 1976. That year, she informed contacts at a U.S. film festival that the Czechoslovak government would not allow her to attend the festival nor permit her to direct films.

CAST

Marie I	Jitka Cerhová
Marie II	Ivana Karbanová
Women in toilet	Marie Češková, Jiřina Myšková, Marcela Březinová
Elderly gentleman	Julius Albert
Gentleman	Oldřich Hora
Young gentleman	Jan Klusák
Cheerful man	Jaromír Vomáčka

CREDITS

Director	Věra Chytilová
Story	Věra Chytilová, Pavel Juráček
Screenplay	Ester Krumbachová, Věra Chytilová
Artistic collaboration	Jaroslav Kučera, Ester Krumbachová
Cinematography	Jaroslav Kučera
Editor	Miroslav Hájek
Production manager	Rudolf Hájek
Music	Jiří Šust, Jiří Šlitr
Set design	Karel Lier
Sound	Ladislav Hausdorf
Costume design	Ester Krumbachová
Makeup	Ladislav Bacílek
Assistant director	Rudolf Jaroš



The festival initiated an international campaign to pressure the government to reinstate Chytilová in its national film industry, and after Chytilová herself wrote a letter of appeal to President Gustáv Husák, she was finally granted permission to shoot *The Apple Game* (1977).

Chytilová went on to direct more than twenty feature films, documentaries, and television episodes. Many of these projects take on controversial subjects with dark, acidic humor, as in *A Hoof Here, a Hoof There* (1989), about two friends’ confusion surrounding a positive HIV test, and *Traps* (1998), about a woman who takes violent revenge on her assaulters. Chytilová also directed the documentary *Searching for Ester* (2005), about her *Daisies* and *Fruit of Paradise* collaborator Ester Krumbachová.

Chytilová died in Prague on March 12, 2014.

VĚRA CHYTILOVÁ

FILMOGRAPHY

The films below are narrative features unless otherwise noted.

- 1960 *Zelená ulice* (documentary short)
Mr. K (Kočičina – Pan Ká) (short)
- 1961 *Ríkánky* (short for the omnibus film *Zurnal FAMU – První občasník*)
- 1962 *Ceiling (Strop)* (FAMU thesis short)
A Bagful of Fleas (Pytel blech) (short)
There's a Bagful of Fleas on the Ceiling (U stropu je pytel blech) (compilation film containing *Ceiling* and *A Bagful of Fleas*)
- 1963 *Something Different (O necem jiném)*
- 1966 *At the World Cafeteria (Automat Svět)* (short for omnibus film *Pearls of the Deep*)
Daisies (Sedmikrásky)
- 1970 *Fruit of Paradise (Ovoce stromů rajských jíme)*
- 1971 *Kamarádi* (television short)
- 1977 *The Apple Game (Hra o jablko)*
- 1978 *Inexorable Time (Cas je neúprosný)* (documentary short)
- 1979 *Prefab Story, a.k.a. Panelstory, or Birth of a Community (Panelstory aneb Jak se rodí sídliště)*
- 1982 *Chytilová Versus Forman: Consciousness of Continuity Calamity (Kalamita)*
- 1983 *The Very Late Afternoon of a Faun (Faunovo velmi pozdní odpoledne)*
“Prague: The Restless Heart of Europe” (episode for Italian television series *The Cultural Capitals of Europe*; released a year later as a stand-alone documentary)
- 1987 *Wolf's Hole (Vlčí bouda)*
- 1988 *The Jester and the Queen (Šašek a královna)*
- 1989 *A Hoof Here, a Hoof There (Kopytem sem, kopytem tam)*
- 1990 *TGM the Liberator (T.G.M. – osvoboditel)*
- 1991 *My Prague Understands Me (Mí Pražané mi rozumějí)*
- 1992 *The Inheritance, or Fuckoffguysgoodday (Dědictví aneb Kurvahošigutntag)*
- 1997 “Jak se zije s nebožtíky podle Very Chytilové” (episode for the television series *Jak se zije . . .*)
- 1998 *Traps (Pasti, pasti, pastičky)*
- 2000 *Flights and Falls (Vzlety a pády)* (documentary video)
- 2001 *Expulsion from Paradise (Vyhánění z ráje)*
- 2001–
- 2002 Two episodes for documentary television series *Gen: Galerie elity národa*
- 2004 “Módní navrharka Klára Nademlynská” (episode for television series *12 odvážných*)
- 2005 *Searching for Ester (Pátrání po Ester)* (documentary)
- 2006 “Otcové zralého věku” (episode for documentary television series *Táta jako máma*)
Pleasant Moments (Hezké chvíleky bez záruky)



TRIVIA

In its overall conception, *Daisies* was inspired by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's 1933 satirical *ballet chanté* *The Seven Deadly Sins*, in which sisters named Anna I and Anna II uncover the injustices of a patriarchal, capitalist society. Another inspiration was likely Louis Malle's *Viva Maria!* (1965), which features protagonists named Maria I and Maria II.

At the beginning of *Daisies*, Marie I and Marie II frolic in a verdant setting that resembles the Garden of Eden. Věra Chytilová would use similar Edenic imagery in her follow-up to *Daisies*, the psychedelic *Fruit of Paradise* (1970).

Daisies' opening and closing title sequences are made up of aerial footage shot by the United States Navy of its bombing raids in the Pacific theater during World War II.

Daisies' cabaret sequence, in which an inebriated Marie I and Marie II interrupt a performance with their wild behavior, was likely inspired by the attempts of the Czechoslovakian government's cultural department to denounce jazz and pop music. Leading jazz singer Eva Olmerová was alleged to have fallen offstage while drunk at a Spanish nightclub, while singers Eva Pilarová and Waldemar Matuška were accused of urinating on the members of a workers' delegation. A song with vocals by Pilarová plays over *Daisies'* cabaret scene.

The applause and whistling sounds that can be heard during *Daisies'* cabaret sequence are meant to evoke the crowd noise from the annual Czechoslovakia–Soviet Union hockey match.

Jitka Cerhová would go on to play Hana in Chytilová's 1977 film *The Apple Game*.

Daisies' soundtrack includes uncredited selections from Johannes Brahms's *A German Requiem*, op. 45; Jean-Paul-Égide Martini's “Plaisir d'Amour”; and Richard Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*.