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Feminism and Girlhood Through Chaos and Deconstruction in *Daisies*

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1. Introduction

Daisies (Sedmikrásky), an avant-garde masterpiece by Czech director Věra Chytilová, was made in 1966. This was just before the Czech Spring of 1968, a time when Czechoslovakia was moving towards greater political and cultural liberalism, allowing films to tackle topics that had previously been forbidden by the socialist regime. In addition, Czech New Wave filmmakers were known for their bold stylistic experimentation[1]. Nevertheless, freedom was not total, and certain subjects were still taboo, prompting filmmakers to invent a complex symbolic and ironic visual language. This also applies to *Daisies*, a film that gained iconic status with its anarchistic style and surrealist aesthetics, becoming part of the feminist cinema canon. That Chytilová was also the only well-known female film director of her time is a circumstance that cannot be ignored, one which vitally impacts the feminist reading and understanding of the film. Due to its provocative content, the film was banned shortly after its release, and Chytilová was censored from making new films for the following seven years[2].

1 Mazierska, Ewa, and Näripea, Eva. 2014: "Gender Discourse in Eastern European SF Cinema". *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1, March, p. 163.

2 Quart, Barbara. 1993: "Three Central European Women Directors Revisited." *Cinéaste*, vol. 19, no. 4, p. 58.

At first glance, *Daisies* is a collage of semantically elusive, fragmentary scenes in which two girls try to make (non)sense of their existence. If, however, we focus primarily on the chaos that the film creates on a formal level, and on its complex network of visual symbols, new spaces of meaning open up, allowing for a feminist interpretation and references to contemporary cultural and sociological phenomena, such as *girlhood*, thus possibly explaining why the film seems so timeless and why it still resonates with audiences today.

2. Marie I and Marie II—the dual archetype of girlhood

The film's protagonists, Marie I and Marie II, are something of archetypes, deliberately superficial female figures. Although of unidentifiable age, they seem to be around the age of majority—and yet they resist adulthood, and subsequently womanhood, in all aspects of their appearance. They are characters who "*are so femme that they exist in another universe from the gender binary, who offer a vision of life outside of heteronormative time, outside of capitalist and patriarchal notions of maturity.*"[3] Their physical appearance is excessively aestheticized—from fashionable short dresses, heavy makeup, which seems to grow heavier still throughout the film, and hairstyles that are partly fashionable but also somewhat infantile, to matching bikinis and lace full slips. An attempt to confront this aesthetic does not occur until the very last scene of the film, when their moral decay reaches its peak and they appear in strange outfits made of newspaper and grotesquely excessive makeup. Their dialogue is also mostly devoid of deeper meaning, and any moment of lucidity is immediately interrupted by banality.

The entire film seems to derive from their premise from the first scene that the world is rotten, and therefore they too will be rotten. This leads them into a series of hedonistic, reckless, and often irrational escapades, all of which, as befits their manifesto, are also immoral, a rebellion against a society in which their loud and uncompromising girlishness has no place. A synthesis of this can be seen in the scene that unfolds in a women's restroom, where they observe a slightly older woman fixing her lipstick, their unbridled girlishness making them so unlike her. This is an indirect illustration of the fact that only hard-working, independent, strong, and unobtrusive women fit the socially acceptable image of a woman, while the frivolous and unrestrained girlishness captured on film by Chytilová is not tolerated. The scene in the toilet sets the girls off on a new series of chaotic pranks as their way of claiming space and justifying their existence.

It is because of such moments of vulnerability, even if they are followed by reckless immorality, that the viewer cannot help but root for the girls, recognising their desperate position and perhaps even identifying with it to some extent. In fact, it is

3 Cohen, Sam. 2021: "Femme Freedom on Film: On *Daisies*, *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion*, and Twinning". Retrieved 14 July 2025 from: https://lithub.com/femme-freedom-on-film-on-daisies-romy-and-micheles-high-school-reunion-and-twinning/.

precisely because they are unquestionably fallible, frivolous, even selfish characters with destructive behaviour that they can win over the audience. In her reasoning behind this immediate audience sympathy with the protagonists, who are in fact antiheroines, Elena Pachner Sarno notes: "*They matter* because *they are (young) women of no consequence. Their significance as persons, and as characters, is not attached to their history or their role in society. In fact, they carry no value in a culture of productivity, they have no place at the table of society, they are entitled to nothing.*"[4] They also reject social expectations related to heteroreproductivity, as well as growing up itself, remaining girls because growing up would mean "*working in service of the machine of industrial capitalism or the machine of the war, either by wifing or by working.*"[5] By remaining *girlish* as the antithesis of socially acceptable *womanhood*, they reject the norms associated with their gender, replacing them with a life of "*ludic possibility, pleasure, and play*."[6]

2.1. The question of subverting the male gaze

The fact that they share the same name and are completely interchangeable in all other respects of the film's narrative (or whatever can be discerned of it), or that they appear as a couple, an inseparable entity, reflects society's view of these two girls, particularly the male gaze. Ewa Mazierska and Eva Näripea[7] write about how the protagonists of *Daisies* shape their identity in opposition to the male gaze, which sees them merely as sexual objects (or rather, object, because the plural implies a certain individuality within the pair). The two authors highlight another aspect of the film as key to understanding this antithesis: the documentary footage of war, of some nuclear explosions, framing the film as its prologue and epilogue. These images of war, a predominantly male affair, are linked to the notion of a rotten world that the girls talk about. Mazierska and Näripea read into this juxtaposition the idea "*that global disaster, caused by men, is mirrored by mayhem on the local scale, enjoyed and perpetuated by women*."[8]

The girls shape their identity in relation to the male gaze, not necessarily by avoiding it completely. This is most explicitly shown in the scene where they try, to no avail, to establish communication with a man who lives a peaceful rural life, and when they fail, they are overcome by existential panic about whether they even exist. This ends with them confirming that they can see each other, therefore they must exist. The moment shows why there must be two Maries—it is only as a duo that they can affirm each other's actions and their very existence; it is only as a pair that they can resist the

4 Pachner Sarno, Elena. 2018: "Feminism, Destruction and Joy in Daisies". *Eefb*, No. 88, October. Retrieved 10 May 2025 from: https://eefb.org/retrospectives/feminism-destruction-and-joy-in-daisies/.

5 Cohen 2021.

6 *Ibid*.

7 Mazierska and Näripea 2014, p. 167.

8 *Ibid*.

outside world.[9] On the one hand, this becomes a nihilistic echo chamber. On the other hand, as they quite literally exclude the male gaze from the definition of their existence, or at least strive to do so, this dialogue encapsulates the narrative of liberation from the patriarchal gaze. Nevertheless, a paradox arises since the panic that led them to their emancipatory conclusion was triggered by the (non)gaze of a man.

The filmmaker introduces another perspective that defines the position of the girls and underlines the overall ironic and subversive message of the film: an undefined, detached voice that appears only as messages on the screen towards the end of the film. These comments feature a third, separate voice, which, in Friedman's classification of points of view, could be described as a neutral, omniscient narrator. In fact, with moralistic comments about possible alternative outcomes for the girls, it parodies the social construct of a woman as a diligent, obedient, and quiet presence who, if she fails to behave in this way, is headed for social ruin.[10]

3. Visual narratology of rebellion and creativity through destruction

Needless to say, the reasons one can label the film a feminist work go well beyond its rebellious female protagonists. Its greatest quality lies not in a plot unfolding as a conventional story but in its exciting and experimental visual narrative. As film historian Kirk Bond notes, "*The style of a* Daisies *is the film*," and continues, "*Věra Chytilová turns the style /.../ into a language in itself, so that if we can read the language we understand and if we cannot we don't.*"[11] It is a destruction of the plot in favour of a ludic visual experiment, the aesthetic of which imbues it with meaning. In the context of feminist film theory, Teresa De Lauretis writes about this approach where the destruction of one element opens up space for creativity, proposing that "*women's cinema has undertaken a redefinition of both private and public space that may well answer the call for 'a new language of desire' and actually have met the demand for the 'destruction of visual pleasure'.*"[12] Although she does not quash visual pleasure completely, Věra Chytilová by no means makes the viewing experience easy: the film is full of unexpected twists, sensory overload, deliberate flaws, and uncomfortable moments that require the viewer to surrender to its wild flow, and only when they embrace this vertigo can they really grasp the film's message.

3.1. The chaotic fragmentation of the film

The film consists of a series of episodic vignettes whose sequence is based on no clear cause-and-effect relationships. Defying any logical order, they are a series of

9 Parvalescu 2006, p. 148.

10 As cited in: Herman, Luc, and Vervaeck, Bart. 2005: *Handbook of Narrative Analysis*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, p. 33.

11 Bond, Kirk. 1968: "The New Czech Film". *Film Comment*, vol. 5, no. 1, p. 71.

12 As cited in: Pachner Sarno 2018.

two girls' youthful adventures, full of temporal ellipses, and without any clear indication of how much time passes between individual scenes. The film relies on slapstick conventions, often resorting to gags to disrupt the narrative sequence.[13] However, the message of *Daisies* lies elsewhere, as new meanings are generated primarily by the pace and rhythm of the changing images and the text that occasionally appears on the screen. This, again, fits into the context of productive destruction present on both levels of the film, the surface level of the plot through the protagonists' actions and, more crucially, on the formal level, since "*[t]he editing can be said to frequently destroy continuity /.../. Linearity is constantly and intentionally shattered*." [14]

Chytilová opts for an extremely high-paced editing style that works by association, making it unpredictable and creating the impression that the film is always one step ahead of the viewer. The film's explicit message also lies in the gap between the dialogue spoken by the protagonists and their actions, or the overall visual aspect of the film. On a discursive level, the film becomes a "*manifestation of its characters' subversive spirit*."[15] Colours also play a vital role in creating a sense of playfulness and unpredictability, as the image constantly shifts between black-and-white and colour shots, with colours occasionally conspicuously bright and brilliant, and certain scenes dominated by just one of the basic colours. All of this comes together to create deliberate visual chaos, and it is important to note that none of the aesthetic variants offer a way out; they are all part of a nonsensical world in which the girls search in vain for their own meaning in life.

3.1.1. The concept of collage

The destruction of cause and effect in favour of subconscious sensory experience through experimental editing is most evident in the collages of visual associative fragments that unfold at striking speed at several points throughout the film. Seemingly arising directly from the girls' inner worlds, they consist of images of flowers, food, and magazine cutouts of women. All these images are rebellious in that they are perceived as superficial in the dominant (i.e., male-dictated) culture, for "*[c]ultural value has been gendered, with masculine-coded interests /.../ deemed superior, while feminine-coded expressions are trivialised*."[16] The motif of magazine clippings is a thread running through the film, with the most memorable scene being one in which the girls, with scissors in their hands, fall out and begin to literally cut each other's bodies as if they were paper

13 Donald Crafton, as cited in: Parvulescu, Anca. 2006: "'So We Will Go Bad': Cheekiness, Laughter, Film". *Camera Obscura*, vol. 21, no. 2, p. 152.

14 Pachner Sarno 2018.

15 Brown, Patrick. 2017: "Photomontage and Feminism". *The Cinessential*, 6 Oct. Retrieved 10 May 2025 from: https://www.thecinessential.com/daisies/photomontage-and-feminism.

16 Thanki, Surbhi. 2025: "Reclaiming the Feminine: Girlhood, Pop Culture and Aesthetic Resistance". *The Social Digest*. Retrieved 15 July 2025 from: https://thesocialdigest.com/reclaiming-the-feminine-girlhood-pop-culture-and-aesthetic-resistance/.

dolls—whereby the scene remains shockingly light-hearted—until only floating heads remain and the image itself shatters into small, flickering pieces.

In his article "Photomontage and Feminism", Patrick Brown compares this concept of collage with Dadaist assemblage, citing Hannah Höch's photomontage *The Beautiful Girl* (Das schöne Mädchen, 1921). The meanings suggested by the artist behind this work of art can also be recognised in *Daisies*. As parallel tropes, Brown cites "*the artificiality and irrationality of beauty standards to which female figures are subjected, and the absurdity of maintaining romantic standards in a mechanical world*," and "*the commodification of female bodies*." [17] Meanwhile, Anca Parvalescu highlights that what causes the body to be cut up is resistance to these social manners, and even if the body "*coalesces back together, /.../ we know that the pieces in the mosaic never amalgamate in exactly the same way*."[18]

4. Looking between the lines

4.1. Connecting shots and their (underlying) meaning

An important parallel thread is formed by scenes that I will refer to as 'connecting shots'—a series of images that stand in direct contrast to those from the intimate world of the two Maries. These are images from the 'male world': shots of war explosions and unusual mechanical devices, which make up the bulk of the opening and closing credits. They form a graphic depiction of the outside world, which the girls rerefer to as rotten. But as it is rotten on a much more fundamental level than any life and actions of a single individual can be, the girls' rotten actions pale in comparison, or at least lose their radical charge. In the core part of the film, the connecting shots appear as scenes of a train ride, accelerated to dizzying speeds and blending into each other in vivid kaleidoscopic, psychedelic colours. Although trains are usually associated with journeys, departures, and even escapes, these trains just rush headlong along the tracks, with no destination. Although one can interpret them as the desire of both Maries to escape and alter their position in the world, their attempts are aimless and doomed to failure from the outset.

The reason why these fragments of the film appear so strikingly contrasting, or even uneasy, in relation to other scenes is that they lack life. In all the other scenes, the protagonists are necessarily present, and as Elena Pachner Sarno points out, they are often framed so that the world is cropped very narrowly around them, leaving no room for others, "*as if nothing else mattered, or even existed*."[19] The contrast, not just one between the human and mechanical worlds, is amplified by the fact that these are radically opposed worlds of cold machines and loud, cheerful girlishness.

17 Brown 2017.

18 Parvalescu 2006, p. 154.

19 Pachner Sarno 2018.

4.2. Symbolic worlds of the film

Another semantic level is formed by a dense network of symbols that recur as leitmotifs, often disrupting the flow of the story. More than anything, they work subconsciously, attracting the viewer's attention and expanding their associative flow beyond simply following the story of the two girls, adding new meanings to everything seen and heard. All these meanings are linked either to various stereotypes of womanhood or to escape or rebellion. These objects also often have a technical function as connecting elements between two shots, stitching together otherwise unrelated scenes as kind of visual gags and giving the viewer something visually tangible that fills in any confusing gaps in time and action, thus serving as a means of establishing trust so that one can surrender to the dizzying flow of the film.

The most striking example is the flower wreath on the head of the fair-haired Marie. She puts it on at the very beginning of the film, saying that she now looks like a *panna*, which can be translated as a virgin or, more accurately, a doll or a puppet. The latter translation explains the movements of both Maries in the opening scene, which are stiff and rigid, accompanied by creaking sounds. This establishes the girls as puppets controlled by the dominant societal system, or bodies that, regardless of what they do in their attempt to achieve freedom, are dictated and objectified through an external gaze. Related to this, although in the opposite sense, are the apples, a likely allusion to Eve's apple of sin. This suggests two opposing archetypal images of women. On the one hand, there is virginity, as personified by the Virgin Mary, the namesake of Marie I and II, a woman who is submissive, obedient, shy, and pure; on the other hand, there is Eve, symbolising the sin of disobedience, for which she must be punished. Anca Parvulescu points out a similar duality, interpreting the double name Marie as an allusion to the two biblical Marys, the *virgin* and the *whore* (borrowing the latter observation from Thomas Pepper)[20], adding that the film assigns the first role to the fair-haired Marie and the second to the dark-haired Marie. Parvulescu writes: "*Together, the two Maries — the virgin who is not quite a virgin and the whore who is not quite a whore — embody 'woman.' If the film stages a revolt, then it is woman herself who is in revolt.*"[21] I would replace the word *woman* with *girl*, for it is precisely this inherent departure from the socially defined ideal of "womanhood" that characterises the protagonists and triggers their revolt.

Fruit is a common motif, appearing mainly in various stages of decay—in parallel to the moral decay of the girls, which, of course, should be understood ironically. The girls' rebellion and nonconformity are primarily seen in their reckless gluttony, starting with lavish dinners paid for by much older men they date and escalating into

20 Parvulescu 2006, p. 147.

21 *Ibid.*

increasingly bizarre situations. The most striking scenes include the one in which they walk around the city with armfuls of corn, chewing it and spitting it out, and the one at the very end where they randomly come across a lavish banquet, greedily tuck in, and then almost systematically destroy every plate on the table without eating most of the food. This is an extreme form of rebellion manifested as a purely hedonistic desire to destroy as much food as possible. Here, Anca Parvalescu argues that this rejection of table manners should be read as a metonymy for a general rejection of social conventions.[22] Food seems to be an obsession for them, as well as a tool they use to express their desire for chaos and a symbolic way of trying to take control of the male gaze.

5. Daisies and girlhood—a contemporary perspective

While researching *Daisies*, I repeatedly encountered the same phenomenon, noticing that, perhaps surprisingly, it is still very warmly received, particularly by young female audiences. Images from the film are highly popular on social networks, especially Pinterest, and many, more or less amateur, video essays analysing the film are available on YouTube. It seems interesting that this highly experimental and personal work by a Czech filmmaker from the 1960s still appeals to a young female, or even girlish, audience, and this raises the question: Why does *Daisies* resonate so strongly with female viewers today?

Reviewing the film, critic Marya Gates E. writes: "*A feminist triumph, Chytilová's film satirizes the bourgeoisie, authoritarianism, and the patriarchy, all while being unabashedly girly*."[23] I want to pause at the word *girly* and link it to the phenomenon of *girlhood* as a dominant trend in pop culture and beyond over the last decade. Television series and films, a seemingly very fertile format for this cultural phenomenon, make the most significant milestones in the development of the contemporary notion of girlhood, starting with *Girls* (Lena Dunham, 2012—2017), a series that premiered on the HBO streaming platform in 2012. As for films, the first example that comes to mind is virtually the entire filmography of Sophie Coppola.[24] Another master of this 'genre' is Greta Gerwig, starting with her 2017 film *Lady Bird*, followed by *Little Women* (2019), and most recently *Barbie* in 2023. Notable examples from recent years also include *Poor Things* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2023). In terms of addressing the theme of girlhood, Slovenian cinema keeps up with the trend with films such as *Little Trouble Girls* (*Kaj ti je deklica*, Urška Djukić, 2025). The topic of liberation through wild, unrestrained, and often aesthetically amplified girlhood is

22 Parvalescu 2006, p. 152.

23 Gates, Marya E. 2022: "Nobody's paying any attention to us!" Retrieved 31 May 2025 from: https://oldfilmsflicker.substack.com/p/nobodys-paying-any-attention-to-us.

24 Cartner-Morley, Jess. 2023: "Move over, lads! How the world turned girly". *The Guardian*. Retrieved 15 July 2025 from: https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2023/dec/02/how-the-world-turned-girly.

back on the agenda, exploring the limits of what society considers moral or right and subverting social expectations in order to prove them trivial and untrue. More than sixty years after the release of *Daisies*, the themes explored by Chytilová and written about by Gates remain largely unresolved, and this is precisely why the film still leaves such a powerful mark.

Katie Kohn highlights that this boom in 'girl culture' or its rising visibility is key to our understanding of post-internet youth culture. Young people build a collective imagination that flourishes both on online platforms and in real life, creating (or reviving) iconic images of girlhood that "*occup[y] an increasingly influential share of contemporary narrative cultures*."[25] In order to understand the culture of girlhood and how it can be directly associated with the protagonists of *Daisies* and their rebellion, we should first define more precisely what this concept encompasses. In her article "Reclaiming the Feminine: Girlhood, Pop Culture and Aesthetic Resistance," Surbi Thanki defines the phenomenon as follows: "*[G]irlhood as a cultural construct is far more complex than biological age. It encapsulates a mode of being, a set of aesthetics, a particular social position, and, critically, a site of regulation and resistance*,"[26] whereby girlhood is understood not as a "*passive prelude to adulthood*" but as a domain in its own right, worthy of consideration. Insisting on complexity, the current social trend of girlhood rejects binary thinking, especially the division between the emotional and the intellectual. It is an aesthetic rebellion whose existence relies on online platforms that "*became archives of collective girlhood*," enabling radical reclamation through a collective aesthetic treasure trove and the open embrace of sentimentality.[27] It is a reclamation of those aspects of growing up and culture that women are expected to neglect; rather than just naive nostalgia, this is "*an act of cultural revision and emotional honesty*."[28]

Daisies plays into all these contexts of girlhood in vital ways. The film is a cinematic portrayal of two girls who stand on the threshold of adulthood, or have perhaps already crossed it, but resist it in all aspects of their being in favour of freedom, loudness, playfulness, triviality, and, just generally, the pop culture of their time. They are the prototype of loud, attention-seeking girlhood that reclaims everything women are taught to hate and plays with destructiveness to subvert or exploit these same social expectations and turn them to its advantage. This is complemented by the filmmaker's unique aesthetic expression, whose vivid, striking imagery makes it inherently nonconformist and rebellious.

25 Kohn, Katie. 2017: "Exploring Girlhood Through Film". Retrieved 14 July 2025 from: https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/news-and-ideas/exploring-girlhood-through-film.

26 Thanki 2025.

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*

6. Conclusion

What is brilliant about Věra Chytilová's film is that, using clever visual techniques and directing methods, she manages to transform a script full of clichés, which was ultimately approved and financed by the then state authority, into a nuanced farcical critique of contemporary existence—and not just of her own time. I believe many of the themes it raises are still relevant today. The film plays with audience expectations and social stereotypes at all levels, starting with the very fact that its protagonists are archetypes, overly aestheticized, frivolous girls named Marie I and Marie II, who bluntly announce that they will be rotten, and yet one cannot truly blame them for it. Nonconformity extends from the narrative to the aesthetic level, with the bulk of the film's dizzying associations consisting of a densely woven network of the filmmaker's own visual language, which, at the level of editing, connecting shots, and the use of colour, moves in the realm of Dadaism or at least Surrealism, indicative of the girls' inner chaos. On the other hand, objects serving as leitmotifs establish a symbolic line of restrictive images of women, dictated to the protagonists by the *male gaze*. The protagonists, or rather anti-heroines, transform from passive, squeaky puppets into masters of their own hedonistic chaos, subverting social stereotypes and attempting to measure up to the rottenness of the external, male world. Meticulously woven into every aspect of the film, the feminist message of *Daisies* remains (forever) relevant. The primary reason it is perceived as timeless is that patriarchal constructs of womanhood, which the film parodies at all levels of its story and aesthetics, have remained more or less the same since the film's release nearly sixty years ago.

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