

EYEBLAZE #2

DAISIES



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Part 2 of our new regular column in which we give short personal introductions to those unique gems of cinema that stand alone and are unlike anything else. Each week we shall focus on a film that has inspired and influenced our own work as filmmakers or has expanded our understanding of what cinema is and could be.

The film:

Daisies is an original, daring and energetic film that still surprises and enthralls audiences 46 years after its initial release.

It opens with a military snare drum and trumpet blaring a march over images of machinery turning and archive war footage of bombs being dropped over sea and land. It is a very exciting beginning, like a call to arms! It also feels like a warning – the cogs of this film will keep turning and turning and you'll feel bombarded with every scene!

We meet the characters, two girls who sit in the sun wearing bikinis and moving like dolls. One of them blows on a trumpet and says 'I can't even do this!' The world is falling apart and these girls are bored. 'If the world is spoiled, we'll be spoiled too!' one slaps the other in the face and in a wonderful cut, they fall out of frame into a lush garden. From here on we follow their mischiefs through a disorientating kaleidoscopic lens.

The film is driven by their constant games, pushing situations as far as they can take it, always prompted by the question 'Vadi? Nevadi!' (Does it matter? It doesn't matter!) In the course of these delicious 75 minutes they exploit and torment older male admirers who take them out to dinner, take over a dance show in a night club when they get a bit tipsy, and devastate several feasts of different sizes, the final one turning into a sensational food-fight and catwalk show. Throughout, cutting between their adventures in the outside world, we see them in their bedroom, which seems to always have a new décor and is the setting for their indolent philosophical musings on subjects like death, meaning, existence and love.



It is hard to put into words the playfully chaotic wonderfulness of *Daisies*, as much of it grows from its brazen characters and dialogue, but mainly from the restless and inventive use of colourful processing, the collage-like editing techniques and the apparent carefree structure. Filmmaker Claire Clouzot said of the film, 'there is no involvement, no conventional chronology, no psychological development... no narration', and yet *Daisies* has something that we find quite irresistible. What drives this film is not plot or narrative, it is a constantly unfolding chain of thought, an exploration of ideas. Director Věra Chytilová has described the film as a 'philosophical documentary in the form of a farce'. The film's form is more like a poem or a piece of music, each moment seeming to jump into the next. It seems to be rebelling, like its characters, against conformities, structures and rules.

'We decided to let ourselves be bound by nothing. Absolutely nothing. We would free ourselves of all the implications of the story and keep only the dialogues, very precise and very evocative, which would remain absolutely fixed.'
Věra Chytilová

The film's richness also stems from the close collaboration between Chytilová, Jaroslav Kučera, the cinematographer, and Ester Krumbachová, the production designer, who also co-wrote the script. They drew ideas and techniques from the experiments of the 1960's artistic avant-garde and the results turned out more complex than they expected: 'I wanted to use colour concepts to disparage a lot of things; I had no intention whatever of arousing an aesthetic impression of beauty. But somewhere early in the game, it turned out that the structure of things with respect to each other created aesthetics whose results I didn't expect at all' says Jaroslav Kučera.



Even though *Daisies* was constructed by its creators as a morality play that is supposed to condemn the behaviour of the two characters, the sheer pleasure of watching the film defiantly claiming its creative freedom makes us side with the rowdy girls. *Daisies* has been described as a feminist film, an attack on consumerism, a nihilist tale – but we'll leave you with Chytilová's own words: 'the spectator should be free to interpret the film in his own way as an active collaborator in the creation of its meaning.'

Who made it:

Věra Chytilová is a notorious filmmaker from the Czech New Wave, although the vast majority of her films are unknown outside of her own country. Film critic and historian Peter Hames has commented that 'when that situation changes, she will be seen as one of the most radically innovative filmmakers of the 1960s.' She is known for her subversive, dissident stance, *Daisies* was banned by Czechoslovakian censors on the grounds of food wastage, and after her next film *Fruits of Paradise*, a take on the biblical story of Adam and Eve, she herself was banned from making films for years until she managed to lift the ban with an open letter entitled I want to work. Our favourite quote from this lady is this: 'Not telling the truth should be made illegal!'

Věra Chytilová's husband, Jaroslav Kučera, was *Daisies'* cinematographer and is known as being one of the more experimental cinematographers of the Czech New Wave.

'I am terribly interested in exploring the possibility of making a cinematographic image into an autonomous affair, completely separate from this conventional concept of film. It is a matter of whether we are simply creating in film more or less beautiful moving pictures of something, or whether these pictures might not be bearers of meaning in and by themselves, whether they might not communicate something subjectively rather than objectively.' Jaroslav Kučera

His objectives are more like those of American underground filmmakers who explored both film as an extension of human perception of reality and its merely visual qualities as also possessing the ability to express meaning in themselves. Films in which he worked are usually a visual treat full of very inspiring ideas.



Why it's important to us:

Daisies has been possibly the most important influence on our own filmmaking during the past couple of years. It was the trigger that set us on our journey together, within this film we found the key to unlocking our own process. In many ways it was the blue print for the type of movie we wanted *Savage Witches* to be, as when we started we wanted to make a film that was as free, playful and as experimental as *Daisies*. Our film has some key similarities, the two lead females that form a single unit, the theme of them as in opposition to society, the unrestrained use of tints and other editing artifices and the chain of thought structure as opposed to story, all of these things came primarily from *Daisies*.

More than anything, this was the film that seemed to best epitomised our idea of cinema and allow us to discover for ourselves our own stance as filmmakers – that we would be bound by nothing but the limits of our own creativity, that we would create a cinema of exploration and truth, of questions rather than answers, of joy and playfulness and love for the art of cinema.

How to see it:

Daisies is available on an excellent DVD through Second Run DVD, that can be bought through their website. This is the director approved release of the film and contains an excellent documentary about Věra Chytilová and accompanying booklet essay by Peter Hames.

Further viewing/reading:

Even though Věra Chytilová has made around 25 films only two of them seem to be available on DVD in the UK. Her follow up to *Daisies*, as previously mentioned, is *Fruits of Paradise*. Certainly of a different tone, it is a retelling of the bible story of creation and Adam and Eve. Somewhat darker and less playful than *Daisies* but equally unique and absolutely one to see.

As far as we know there aren't any books about Chytilová's films but there is an excellent 19-page essay about her films in Peter Hames' book *The Czechoslovak New Wave*. This book will also give you a huge list of films to watch and is the best (possibly only) English language companion to Czech cinema.

We also recommend the films *Morgiana* by Juraj Herz and *The Cassandra Cat* by Vojtech Jasný, both shot by Jaroslav Kučera.

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