

Feminism in Vera Chytilová's "Daisies": Montage, Collage, and Symbol

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Abstract: Vera Chytilová's "Daisies" offers a particular case to view how montage, collage, and symbolism could contribute to feminist cinema. "Daisies" was subject to censorship when it was first released for its rebellious story which strongly challenged the social norms of that time. Although it has been widely regarded as a surreal exploration of nihilism, it explores the deconstruction and reconstruction of female identity. This study adopts a feminist theory to investigate how this movie communicates its feminist ideals using a defamiliarized visual language system. Specifically, the study analyzes certain scenes in the movie with a particular focus on how "Daisies" challenges conventional gender roles and creates a feminism narrative. It figures out that montage expands the inner space of these characters; collage allows for the fragmentation of their identities; symbolism such as apple trees, apples, and other motifs carry additional thematic possibilities of temptation, sin, and female resistance. These stylistic choices and visual strategies present a fresh female perspective, encouraging the audience to question social norms and embrace unfiltered viewpoints. By upending conventionally male-centric ideas, the movie's defamiliarized visual language reinforces feminist messages and helps us comprehend its complex artistic and thematic issues.

Keywords: *Daises, feminism, montage, collage, sign*

1. Introduction

The Czech film, "Daisies", directed by female director Věra Chytilová in 1966, offers a fresh and innovative artistic perspective. It encompasses various domains, including the Czech New Wave, surrealism, and semiotics. "Daisies" is often regarded as a surreal representation of nihilism by many scholars, with the director herself stated that "Daisies" condemns the female protagonists' morally destructive behavior [1].

In content, this movie was disturbing to the authority at the time when it released. Scenes that disrespect or waste food led to disapproval from the Czech government, resulting in a ban on the film for several years in Czechoslovakia. Apparently, the film centered around female protagonists continually defying societal norms was evidently deemed unacceptable.

However, as the ban was over, "Daisies" garnered substantial support and acclaim many years later for its unique aesthetics. The rapid film editing, collage, and montage provide a visually captivating experience. At the same time, the absence of a conventional plot creates a gap which make defamiliarize the audience. This research tends to view "Daisies" from the feminist

perspective. Addressing how “Daisies” exploits a defamiliarized visual language system to express its feminist ideas contributes to a deeper comprehension of its artistic and thematic complexities. In other words, this paper contends that the pranks constantly carried out by Marie I and Marie II deconstruct their identities, ultimately leading to the reconstitution of female identity. The seemingly corrupted duo insists on introducing a spectrum of colors into the black and white world, disrupting the expected and constructed social identity or images of women. While many scholars have delved into its thematic and feminist implications, there is a dearth of analysis that directly connects the film’s use of defamiliarization in its visual language to its feminist messages. Therefore, I will examine the estranged visual language system of “Daisies” to analyze how it employs such a way to express feminist subversion. Specifically, this paper discusses significant cuts thematically and formally to reveal the feminism beneath.

2. Literature Review

“We’ll be spoiled, too.” In a space without visible boundaries, Marie I and Marie II, two doll-like, express their intent to indulge in corruption. Their curiosity and ambition can no longer be restrained: they relentlessly engage in destruction at various locations, squander food, and enthusiastically play pranks on men. Can their escalating desires be satisfied? What do these desires metaphorically signify? These are the questions the film “Daisies” tried to respond. “Daisies”, a provocative film released in 1966, challenges traditional norms and societal conventions on multiple levels. Marie I and Marie II, who defiantly embrace corruption, have prompted extensive scholarly examination from various theoretical perspectives. In this section, existing literature on “Daisies” is explored in terms of its thematic significance, visual language system, and representations of feminist thought.

2.1. “Daisies” in Czech New Wave

In the broader context, “Daisies” emerged during the period of the Czech New Wave, characterized by the move away from Stalinist influences. Scholarly works addressing this era suggest that the film industry witnessed an expansion of freedom and diversity [2]. Filmmakers often experimented with blurring the lines between reality and fantasy. They embraced non-linear storytelling, dream sequences, and absurd situations to challenge conventional techniques and perspectives. For instance, through filters and experimental editing, “Daisies” creates the dreamy sense of the train running towards somewhere. Also, the characteristic of the Czech New Wave lies in relatively more humorous political core [2]. Soukup delves into how gluttony depicted in this film defiles sanctioned behaviors, expanding the study to encompass patriarchy and socialism [3]. According to Soukup’s analysis, the existential and moral rebellions portrayed in the film can be seen as reflections of the complexities of that period. Similarly, Owen discusses in their work how “Daisies” reconstructs female identity through acts of rebellion [4]. He points out that how Marie I and Marie II correct their “ridiculous” actions in the very end of the film offers does not lead to a positive result. Suggestively, Věra Chytilová reflects on the fact that little changes are made by the reform act.

2.2. “Daisies” in Feminist Interpretations and Context

The analysis of “Daisies” through a feminist perspective has provided valuable insights into its depiction of women’s agency and empowerment. Geller discusses the mutual achievements of feminism and film [5]. She claims that “Feminist film theory, like Woman herself, refused to stay domesticated, confined.” Lim’s article examines the application of the doll metaphor, a representation of feminism, to the two main characters in the film [1]. While Lim supports

interpreting “Daisies” as a critique of the protagonists’ extreme behavior or an embrace of the embedded feminism, she emphasizes the latter. The dolls, she contends, represent female puppets in the male gaze, while also mocking gender performance. The sign of doll in “Daisies” becomes a weapon for the film to support its feminist intentions. Indicatively, Parvulescu explores laughter’s manifestation in the film and offers perspectives from a feminist angle [6]. She argues that “Daisies” is the attack of manner. Laughter and farces carry both Maries to mock the violation of gazes. While several scholars have delved into its thematic and feminist implications, there is a dearth of analysis that directly connects the film’s use of unfamiliarity in its visual language to its feminist messages.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework underpinning the analysis of the film “Daisies” revolves around the concept of defamiliarized visual language as a potent tool for expressing its underlying feminist themes. Based on the recourse to the feminist film theory, this framework unveils how the film’s distinct visual language disrupts norms and reinforces its feminist narrative.

Contents feminist film theory and criticism discuss is reflected on what the famous scholar Laura Mulvey said: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.” Feminist film is interesting and challenging because it provides the way one can watch and reflect on images through the film and the culture [7]. The narratives of “Daisies” can be described as non-linear, adding an additional space to the feminist narrative. In other words, the film’s unique visual language offers an alternative perspective that breaks away from the traditional male-centric viewpoint. As a result, viewers consistently experience a departure from the usual perspective, allowing them to engage with the film’s perspective with a more unfiltered outlook. The use of visuals to convey information in feminist films is an extension of second-wave feminism [7]. To elaborate, the film’s protagonists, Marie I and Marie II, engage in acts of rebellion that directly challenge traditional gender roles, reflecting the overarching feminist theme. As a result, feminist film theory guides the exploration of how the defamiliarized visual language in “Daisies” serves as a vehicle for challenging gender norms and amplifying feminist messages.

4. Visual Analysis of “Daisies”

4.1. Montage

Montage plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between the audience and the feminist subversions of Marie I and Marie II. The nonrepresentational narrative created by the montage intends to convey information by altering the intended meaning of reality [8]. Whereas the full context will help the audience to understand the narratives as directors expect, montage which breaks one plotline into several scenes, leaves more room for viewers to imagine and interpret. The nonlinear storytelling technique of “Daisies” Since meaning is largely context-dependent, the nonlinear storytelling technique employed in “Daisies” allows the audience to engage their imagination and fill in the gaps between logical sequences. This is what Boon refers to as “latent language” In simple terms, the combination of a flower with three different objects can yield various interpretations [8]. For instance, the combination of a flower and a knife may signify danger, while the combination of a flower and a smile may represent joy or hope. The combination of a flower and a pair of high heels may imply the presence of a woman. When unrelated elements are pieced together, the receiver automatically decodes them to extract information. The structure of film can be malleable in terms of time and [9]. By awakening latent dialogues, the montage facilitates a dialogue between the film and the audience.

At the beginning of the film, two doll-like female protagonists engage in a conversation. Then, the scene transitions to a wild outdoor setting with an apple tree at its center. When Marie I mentions that they are going somewhere where something is happening, a heap of green apples falls to the ground, and the camera switches to a different location, implying that the events will take place there. Similarly, when Marie I throws her flower crown, the audience immediately hears the sound of something falling into water and sees a man resting in the water. These direct yet abstract connections between various scenes persist throughout the film. This editing technique is both fast-paced and contributes to meaning-construction. By subverting the assumption that each element has its own realistic meaning, the montage disrupts the conventional rules of the game.

Another example is that after the two Maries bid farewell to the older man they dined with on a train, a colored filter transforms the train footage into a dreamlike, ethereal, and distorted scene. While the audience may wonder where the train is heading, but the next moment, the two Maries are directly shown on a stage. Obviously, a train cannot stop at a stage, thus distorting the intended reality. This is followed by the mischievous of the two Maries on the stage - they dance, drink someone else's wine, and stand on elevated surfaces instead of the ground - until they attract everyone's attention and are kicked out. Just like the apple and flower crown transitions mentioned earlier, montage plays a signaling role in "Daisies". The scene changes foreshadow the birth of a new round of tricks or the beginning of another prank by the two protagonists. The film uses this jumping editing technique to connect these female protagonists' rebellious behaviors. When the two Maries constantly say that they want to indulge and try everything, the montage helps audience to understand how unconventional their actions are. They are well aware and consistently defy tradition according to their own desires and pace. Far from isolating the audience, montage is the driving force behind this transformation. The director skillfully generates visual and conceptual estrangement through montage, which is also the profound significance bestowed upon the two female protagonists in "Daisies".

4.2. Collage

Collage, like montage, is a form of artistic expression and psychological exploration that has been used by feminists. It allows for the deconstruction and reassembling of real elements, often giving the viewer a sense of fragmented consciousness [10]. Any material or content can be part of a collage, and by cutting and combining specific objects in a particular way, new possibilities and interpretations are revealed. For example, in the movie, the scenes of two Maries' room are frequently interspersed with outdoor pranks. The decoration of the room changes with different time periods. In one scene, the walls of the room are filled with a collage of various numbers and photos of men and women. It clearly shows that both Marie I and Marie II are fascinated by playing with men's emotions. They even collect the names and phone numbers of men alphabetically and write them on the walls and ceiling. The room serves as a secret intelligence station for them. They mutter the names of men and search for information about them in the room. At this moment, the room is more like a space to collect memories for the both of them; and Marie I's act of touching the swinging pendulum on the wall triggers the flow of memories. Various numbers, codes, and images appear in the collage - numbers written on photos of residential buildings or photos of men and women. Meanwhile, a man comes to Marie I's door to confess his love. Faced with this man who may fall in love with her and the explicit words constantly spoken by Marie II, Marie I only shows boredom and a lack of enthusiasm. Whether it is about memories or reality, Marie I only cares about how many men she has manipulated emotionally, rather than genuinely seeking a relationship. Resultantly, the stories of her encounters with different men at various locations are nothing more than pranks and games for the Maries. The collage expresses the possibilities of

reconstructing memories created by the two Maries. Resultantly, the fragmented memories brought by the collage remind the Maries of the fact that they have dominated in emotions, or simply pranks.

Similarly, when two Maries returned to the room, the concept of collage extended to a physical game involving their bodies. They took turns wrapping each other in fabrics of varying colors and sizes and playfully pushed one another off the bed while uttering phrases like “go die” and claiming they were burning. This was followed by a display of female images in a collage, reflecting their excitement about embracing their identities as women. But it seemed not enough, so Marie I brought a pile of scissors and started cutting the fabrics on the bed and even Marie II’s clothes. Thus, they began a war on their bodies with scissors. The scene turned into a flowing collage - the bodies of the two Maries and their room became smaller and smaller pieces, constantly flowing. This chaotic scene appeared to signify their desire to let loose, disregarding their physical appearances in pursuit of the satisfaction of their inner selves. Even as their physical appearance became more and more vague, they continued to cut each other. Collage in this process evolved into a medium to present the madness in their hearts - giving them the opportunity to reconstruct themselves.

Indeed, the arrangement of the room by Marie I and Marie II, as well as their behavior inside, broke the norms and tended towards schizophrenia, just like their collage. Nevertheless, they bounced back through their exploration and collisions with the real world, to learn about their own appearance. Regardless of the images they created or the chaos they engaged in, they always retained the autonomy to deconstruct and reconstruct their identities as they saw fit.

4.3. Symbol

The symbols in “Daisies” provide a visual focal point for the audience, introducing the concept of female revolt. The first colored shot at the beginning of the film depicts a wilderness scene with only one apple tree growing in the center. Apart from the grass and flowers, there is no empty space or other elements in the frame. The lack of spatial composition and the flat quality of the cut make the shot resemble a painting. This two-dimensional quality enhances the visual unfamiliarity for the audience. In terms of form, this shot violates the continuity of space. Often, the images in films are the agents, and the symbolic meanings within the images are intradiegetic [9].

Based on the ambition of the two Maries to indulge themselves before the colored shot appears, the shots centered around the apple tree may have extended meanings. It is undeniable that the apple tree represents the failure of resisting temptation in the story of Eden, especially about the female role of Eve. Therefore, the shots surrounding the apple tree may serve to introduce key information about women, temptation, or sin. They could also be a sign of Marie I and Marie II’s decision to embark on their plan of indulgence. Whether it is a rebellion against the three-dimensional spatial sense in film or a subversion of their female identities, the apple tree and the act of biting into the apple are deliberate coded actions in the film.

The middle scene of the movie also shows how symbols help represent feminism. In the face of compliments from the man, Marie I twists her body while adjusting her bra straps, tilts her head, places her fingers on her lips, winks, and smiles at the man across from her. The man accepts these seductions but still says he hopes he never met Marie I, and turns around to start playing the piano. As the music plays, various butterfly images quickly flash across the screen. However, Marie I questions the man’s words and asks, “Is that so?” When the man sees Marie I using a butterfly specimen to cover her exposed body, he says he knows what love means and reaches out to take the butterfly out of the specimen box which Marie I is using to cover her lower body. Marie I is clearly terrified by this and expresses that she doesn’t know what the man is talking about. In the end, when the man asks Marie I not to leave, she only cares if there is any food. The frequent appearance of butterflies may imply the beautiful but ultimately lifeless objects of desire. The butterfly specimen

will never leave and always carry the man's endless fantasies. It is impossible to confirm whether the man likes Marie I or the female image in his mind that is like a butterfly specimen.

5. Conclusion

"Daisies" is a cinematic masterpiece that explores issues of identity, rebellion, and social norms from a feminist perspective. Directed by Věra Chytilová in 1966, this Czech film continues to inspire critical analysis from various angles. This study focuses on the defamiliarization caused by visual languages in the film, particularly the use of montage, collage, and symbolism as tools to convey feminist resistance towards their identity. These stylistic choices and visual strategies present an insightful female perspective, encouraging the audience to question social discipline on females. By upending conventionally male-centric ideas, the movie's defamiliarized visual language reinforces feminist messages and helps us comprehend its complex artistic and thematic issues.

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