



Daisies + Meshes of the Afternoon

Daisies

An early short film by Vera Chytilová bears the title *A Bagful of Fleas* (1962), an evocative image that neatly describes the intended effect of much of the work of Czech cinema's arch-provocate. Her best-known feature *Daisies* (1966) has been slotted into numerous pigeonholes since it escaped from the censor's clutches in time for the 1968 Prague Spring – feminist, surrealist, dadaist, situationist, anarchist, nihilist Freudian – but Chytilová seems hellbent on undermining a straightforward reading. It's a genuine one-off, and anyone for whom the term 'Czech New Wave' suggests the gently lyrical, humanist work of her contemporaries Milos Forman, Jirí Menzel and Ivan Passer will be in for a rude shock.

Chytilová and her main creative partners (cinematographer/art director/husband Jaroslav Kucera and co-screenwriter/art director/costume designer/best friend Ester Krumbachová) don't just adopt an overtly avant-garde approach from the start, but do so at aggressively confrontational speed. Many shots last just a frame or two as a cornucopia of visual and conceptual ideas explode across the screen with the exhilarating force of the stock-footage explosions and chandelier crashes that pepper the proceedings. Kucera's virtuoso cinematography spans black and white, tinted monochrome and full colour, while editor Miroslav Hájek is just as likely to establish a 'cut' by changing the dominant hue as by more conventional associative montage.

Though essentially plotless, *Daisies* is nominally about two young women, allegedly both named Marie (though they adopt various aliases), apparently in their twenties but emotionally closer to hyperactive five-year-olds. Their interest in sex seems negligible, their exploitation of numerous bewildered older men motivated primarily by an infantile desire for food (or even a mere representation of it – at one point they cut out and chew glossy advertising pictures from magazines). Like many small children, they decide that since the world is essentially a write-off and they have nothing constructive to offer, they might as well spend their time mocking if not actively destroying everything they can get their hands on. At one point they even take their scissors to the film frame itself, the image becoming a jagged, pulsing collage.

Comparisons are fairly fruitless, though there's a strong streak of Dick Lester zaniness to offset the serious philosophical pretensions, and the film was probably a significant influence on Jacques Rivette's *Céline and Julie Go Boating*. But it also has a resonant political subtext, given its origins in a country with a centrally planned economy, whose bureaucrats were enslaved by output figures. The Czech authorities could have banned the film for any number of reasons, so the official justification that it depicted the wanton and cynical destruction of scarce food resources spoke volumes – and ensures that the film remains just as subversive in a more eco-conscious era.

Michael Brooke, *Sight and Sound*, August 2009

Meshes of the Afternoon

Had Californian sunlight ever looked as suggestive or sinister before the sharply etched dream world of *Meshes of the Afternoon*? Certainly, it soon would, in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) and many later films noirs. That affiliation was first proposed by J. Hoberman in the 1970s. But *Meshes* has been invoked as seminal by many traditions over eight decades. For years, this 14-minute film was claimed as a founding inspiration of a distinctively American form of highly personal poetic psychodrama, typified by Stan Brakhage, who hailed Deren as 'the mother of us all'.

Deren's hands-on promotion of her work became a model for the co-operative movement of the 1960s. Rising interest in women's cinema would later refocus attention on her pioneering role. Today, she is the only woman among seven experimental filmmakers featured on the front page of the New York Filmmakers Co-op website, while the haunting image of her at a window must be one of the most widely reproduced stills from any avant-garde film. And rising interest in women's film after the 1970s would focus attention on her aesthetic of 'vertical cinema', creating an emotional and intellectual density within rather than between images, as Barbara Hammer has described it.

Both Deren and her co-director Alexander Hammid (originally Hackenschmied) were immigrants from Eastern Europe. She came from a Jewish family background in Ukraine, heavily involved in psychiatry, and he from experimental photography and film in Czechoslovakia. Deren would indignantly reject suggestions of influence from two earlier European avant-garde landmarks, Buñuel and Dalí's *Un chien andalou* (1928) and Cocteau's *The Blood of a Poet* (*Le Sang d'un poète*, 1930). But for all its cool originality, the eerie game of repeated symbols that its maker-protagonists play out in their West Hollywood home and garden – with a flower, key and knife linking Deren's divided self and a sinister mirror-faced figure – has undoubtedly extended the legacy of those earlier works.

Meshes has never reached the top 100 before in the *S&S* poll (despite some interesting previous backers, such as Derek Jarman in 1992). So this year's result must reflect some significant shifts in taste – most obviously the recognition of female creativity apparent in the poll leaders, but perhaps also a renewed interest in the phantasmagoric, as explored by Deren's most consistent fans among contemporary filmmakers, the David Lynch of *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Dr.*, and Jordan Peele.

Ian Christie, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 2022-23

MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON

A film by: Maya Deren, Alexander Hammid

Music by [added in 1952]: Teiji Ito

Cast

Maya Deren (*the woman*)

Alexander Hammid (*the man*)

USA 1943

14 mins

DAISIES (SEDMIKRÁSKY)

Director: Vera Chytilová

Production Companies: Filmové Studio Barrandov, Československý Film

Producers: Bohumil Smída, Ladislav Fikar

Screenplay: Vera Chytilová, Ester Krumbachová

From an idea by: Vera Chytilová, Pavel Juráček

Director of Photography: Jaroslav Kucera

Editor: Miroslav Hájek

Art Directors: Jaroslav Kucera, Ester Krumbachová

Set Design: Karel Lier

Costumes: Ester Krumbachová

Music: Jirí Slitr, Jirí Sust

Sound: Ladislav Hausdorf

Cast

Jitka Cerhová (*Marie I*)

Ivana Karbanová (*Marie II*)

Julius Albert (*man about town with butterfly collection*)

Marie Cesková

Jirina Cesková

Jirina Mysková

Jan Klusák

Czechoslovakia 1966

76 mins

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Philosophical Screens:**Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles**

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Daisies (Sedmikrásky) + Meshes of the Afternoon

Wed 1 Mar 20:50; Wed 8 Mar 18:20 (+ intro)

Au hasard Balthazar

Thu 2 Mar 20:50; Mon 6 Mar 18:30

Taxi Driver

Thu 2 Mar 21:00 BFI IMAX; Fri 3 Mar 18:10; Mon 13 Mar 20:40

La Règle du jeu (The Rules of the Game)

Fri 3 Mar 14:30; Sat 4 Mar 13:20; Sat 11 Mar 18:05

Persona

Fri 3 Mar 18:30; Thu 9 Mar 21:05

Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Portrait de la jeune fille en feu)

Fri 3 Mar 20:30; Wed 8 Mar 20:30

Do the Right Thing

Fri 3 Mar 20:35; Sat 11 Mar 18:10

Singin' in the Rain

Fri 3 Mar 20:40; Thu 9 Mar 18:10 (+ intro by Miles

Eady, Film Writer and Curator); Tue 14 Mar 14:30

Man With a Movie Camera (Chelovek s kino-apparatom)

Sat 4 Mar 15:30; Sun 5 Mar 10:30 BFI IMAX; Thu 9 Mar 20:50

Playtime

Sat 4 Mar 17:00; Sat 11 Mar 20:30

The Searchers

Sat 4 Mar 17:40; Tue 7 Mar 20:35

Seven Samurai (Shichinin no samurai)

Sat 4 Mar 18:50; Tue 14 Mar 18:40

Apocalypse Now: Final Cut

Sat 4 Mar 19:40; Sun 12 Mar 20:00 BFI IMAX

Tokyo Story (Tôkyô monogatari)

Sat 4 Mar 20:15; Fri 10 Mar 18:00; Wed 15 Mar 14:30

Shoah

Sun 5 Mar 11:00; Sun 12 Mar 11:00

Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans

Sun 5 Mar 11:45; Mon 6 Mar 14:00; Mon 13 Mar 20:35

The Passion of Joan of Arc (La passion de Jeanne d'Arc)

Sun 5 Mar 14:00 (with live accompaniment); Wed 15 Mar 20:40

(with score)

Citizen Kane

Sun 5 Mar 16:15; Tue 7 Mar 20:30

Cléo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)

Sun 5 Mar 17:45; Wed 8 Mar 21:00

2001: A Space Odyssey

Sun 5 Mar 19:00; Thu 9 Mar 18:00

Vertigo

Mon 6 Mar 20:30; Thu 9 Mar 14:30; Wed 15 Mar 18:10

In the Mood for Love (Fa yeung nin wah)

Mon 6 Mar 20:40; Fri 10 Mar 21:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:30

Late Spring (Banshun)

Mon 6 Mar 20:45; Tue 7 Mar 14:30; Sun 12 Mar 18:20

The Night of the Hunter

Tue 7 Mar 18:00; Sat 11 Mar 20:45

Mulholland Dr.

Tue 7 Mar 20:10; Tue 14 Mar 20:15

Beau Travail

Wed 8 Mar 14:30; Fri 10 Mar 20:45; Mon 13 Mar 18:20 (+ intro by

Catherine Wheatley, Reader in Film Studies, King's College London)

Close-Up (Nema-ye Nazdik)

Fri 10 Mar 18:30; Wed 15 Mar 20:50

The Godfather

Fri 10 Mar 19:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:15

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