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## Vadí/Nevadí: puppet play in Věra Chytilová's *Sedmikrásy* (*Daisies*)

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### ABSTRACT

This work explores Věra Chytilová's use of the aesthetics and semiotic space of the puppet theatre in her 1966 film *Sedmikrásy* (*Daisies*). Although critical response to the film has frequently highlighted the doll-like nature of the heroines' appearance in the opening scene, I argue that it is Chytilová's use of the puppet and its simultaneous status as both object and agent which underlies the film's inquiry into questions of morality, violence, destruction, and consumption. This simultaneous status as object and agent – or animate and inanimate – elucidates not only the moral ambiguity of the heroines' behaviour and corresponding massive variation in audience responses, but also the seeming contradictions in Chytilová's own discussions of the film both before and after the Velvet Revolution. Using Otakar Zich's and Henryk Jurkowski's theoretical works on the phenomenology of the puppet theatre along with Heinrich von Kleist's work on the moral sphere of the puppet, I present the puppet theatre as the film's mechanism for exploring themes of consumption, destruction, performativity, and agency.

### KEYWORDS

Puppet theatre  
Daisies  
Czech new wave  
Chytilová  
Czech film  
puppet theory

## Introduction

After an opening sequence that interposes images of bombs and warfare with moving gears, the viewer of Věra Chytilová's 1966 film *Sedmikrásy* (*Daisies*) is faced with two lovely young women sitting limp, like puppets waiting to be engaged by an unseen puppeteer. Critical responses to the film have often acknowledged this unusual introduction, but the imagery and thematics of puppet theatre are actually used throughout *Daisies*, and are central to the film's inquiry into questions of morality, violence, destruction, and consumption. While the heroines' conspicuous beauty and vapid dialogue have stimulated scholarly work presenting them as dolls or mannequins, these fixed ontologies confine the protagonists within a limited discursive space. The flexible ontology of the puppet – existing simultaneously as an object and a subject – offers a more complex engagement with *Daisies*, one which can account for the varied response *Daisies* has met from audiences, critics, and scholars, but also for the complexities of the film's protagonists and the physical and moral space they occupy. Rather than making definitive assertions about the

morality of the protagonists' behaviour, the discursive mode of puppet theatre allows *Daisies* to make the more subversive gesture of putting notions of the body, space, performance, and morality into question, both within the context of the film and in the viewer's experience.

The connections between *Daisies*'s protagonists, both named Marie, and the puppet theatre are established firmly in the film's opening scene. The curtain opens on a rough stage, where the two figures sit lifeless against a wooden backdrop wearing only bikinis, not yet fully costumed. As Marie I (Ivana Karbanová) opens her eyes, she mechanically raises a finger to her nose with a loud creak of her joints. Marie II (Jitka Cerhová) lifts a trumpet and plays a single note. Both of these motions reveal a puppet-like mode of locomotion; they raise their arms as if their shoulders were hinged, but the rest of their bodies remain limp, unengaged by the puppet's strings. While these two figures' wooden movements begin to establish their position as both object and human, it is the dialogue that follows that confirms this dual status. Their conversation plays with the ambiguities of the word *panna*, which can mean both 'doll' and 'virgin' in Czech. When Marie II asks her companion what she is doing, Marie I responds, 'Being a doll/virgin. I'm like a doll/virgin like this, aren't I? I'm a doll/virgin.' In these first few moments, Marie I has already placed herself in two roles simultaneously – one animate, and the other inanimate.

The depiction of the Maries' complex status as puppet-like figures develops throughout the film, in their aesthetic depictions, their play with their own ambiguous identities as objects and subjects, and their relationship to the world they occupy. When the girls visit the countryside, questions of identity broaden, and Marie I questions not only her identity, but her very existence:

**Marie I:** All the same, I'd like to know why that man in the garden didn't notice us.

**Marie II:** What exactly are we doing here?

**Marie I:** Why didn't he at least start scolding us? Maybe he didn't even feel sorry for us.

**Marie II:** Please, an old man like that. After all, we're young. We are young, and we have our whole lives ahead of us.

**Marie I:** You know what I'm afraid of all the sudden? That the old man didn't see us at all.

**Marie II:** That's just stupid.

**Marie I:** I thought maybe we'd evaporated.

**Marie II:** But no!

**Marie I:** Well then why didn't that guy notice us? Why didn't those guys on the bicycle notice us?

**Marie II:** Why? Why is there water here? Why is there a river? Why?

The puppet is only fully realized in the context of the performance. While in the puppet theatre itself, the puppeteer supplies the voice and movement for the puppet, it is the audience that unites the body and voice into a single being. Without an audience to reify them, Marie I has grounds to wonder if they had somehow evaporated. Her worries are quelled when the girls see the street littered in their discarded corn husks, the physical traces of their existence. Looking towards the husks, Marie II speaks without moving her mouth, 'You see? We do exist'. These words are not a simple reassurance for Marie I. Rather, almost terrifyingly, this disembodied speech is directed outwards, establishing contact

with the audience, assuring both the viewer and themselves that they do indeed exist. The girls celebrate their existence by parading home, chanting, ‘We are! We are! We are! We are!’ swinging their rigid limbs in militaristic, marching steps.

In their adventures around the city, the Maries are repeatedly seen in theatrical spaces, on stages or behind proscenia, most strikingly when they visit a nightclub and proceed to outshine the hired dancers with their own exuberant performance, consisting primarily of bouncing in their seats and blowing bubbles into their beers. The proscenium arch framing their table in the nightclub highlights the performative aspect of their misbehaviour. As the evening progresses, the girls burst through the proscenium into the main space of the club, imposing their naughtiness on their audience. Throughout *Daisies*, public spaces are performative or theatrical spaces, where the presence of audiences or witnesses defines the girls’ behaviour in the restaurant, the nightclub, and even the outdoors. Even the restaurant bathroom where the Maries escape from their dates serves as a kind of theatrical space, a backstage where the bathroom attendant repairs and adjusts their bodies and costumes and the girls can discuss and plot their future scenes.

These visual allusions to the puppet and the puppet theatre establish not only an aesthetic for the film, but also a discursive sphere, where the Maries perform not only for viewers of the film, but also for viewers within the film. The interactions between this puppet aesthetic and the thematics of the film are grounded in the space between the puppet-like performers and these viewers, in the phenomenology of the puppet theatre.

### **Subject/object ambiguities: *Daisies* and the phenomenology of the puppet theatre**

The profound consequences of *Daisies*’s engagement with the puppet theatre lie in the puppet’s simultaneous status as object and actor. The complexities of this dual status have served as the primary focus for the international discourse on the aesthetics, semiotics, and phenomenology of the puppet theatre, and offer insight into how these simultaneous statuses function both within the work and for the audience. The point of origin for Czech scholarly engagement in the puppet theatre is ‘Psychologie loutkového divadla’ (The Psychology of the Puppet Theatre), a 1923 article by the Czech philosopher of aesthetics Otakar Zich. He engages in the conflict faced by the puppet theatre audience, who must reconcile the fact that, ‘...according to its movement and speech, we have a live person before us, but according to other signals, we have an inanimate substance—a puppet’ (8). Zich proposes that the audience member must choose between these two impressions, viewing the puppets as inanimate objects, in which case the puppets are comic in their failure to accurately represent the human, or as live beings. In discussing this second mode, he claims:

Consciousness of the actual inanimacy of the puppet steps aside and only the feeling of something inexplicable appears, some kind of enigma, awakening our sense of wonder...If they were of the actual human size and if their mimicry were as perfect as possible, they would give us a sensation of horror. (8–9)

Zich offers as examples the Golem and the Stone Guest of *Don Giovanni*, figures who defy their inanimate roots and become active and often destructive agents in their worlds (9).

Zich's work provides a frame of reference for the Maries' dual status, allowing for the unsettling blend of humour and violence they bring to the film. A viewer perceiving the Maries as 'real' human characters with human agency could be horrified by their behaviour, while those interpreting the girls as objects, like hollow forms or caricatures of vice controlled by an outside force could enjoy the exuberance of their escapades. While the variation in response to the film indicates that many viewers did indeed choose between these two modes – between joy and horror – the viewer could also engage in both of these modes of perception. Henryk Jurkowski and other puppetry scholars would complicate Zich's binary schema with the assertion that the puppet could exist simultaneously as object and actor and could simultaneously be perceived as such. Both potentialities are not only always present, but always necessary for the puppet and for the audience (Jurkowski 1997, 209). By extension, Zich's notions of the comic and the terrifying are also both always present in the puppet theatre, which accounts for the simultaneous joy and violence that mark both the Maries and the entire film.

In the space of *Daisies*, this simultaneity is further complicated by the fact that the Maries are seemingly aware that they are both objects and actors, reaping all of the advantages they can from the innocence and depravity that mark their dual statuses. In their series of dates with progressively older men, they take advantage of the fact that they will be perceived as objects, putting them into a position of power. By embracing their status as objects, they preempt objectification. Here, the association with *panna* and the idea of playing at being a doll or virgin becomes one of their most powerful tools in taking advantage of men. Inverting all expectations of compliance and submission, they instead use and abuse their dates for their own amusement and for the satisfaction of their own massive appetites.

Returning to the Maries' first scene in the film, it is clear that the girls themselves establish the moral space of their game. Inverting the expectations of the 'real' world – where young women would be expected to place mens' desires before their own, to control their consumption of food, alcohol, and space, and to perform a position of weakness – the Maries' game demands that they both consider and indulge their own appetites and explore their own power and agency. The entire world of *Daisies* is determined in this scene, where the Maries begin their puppet play by establishing parameters for how they will act:

**Marie II:** Everything in the world is spoiled.

**Marie I:** Everything?

**Marie II:** Everything.

**Marie I:** In the world.

**Marie II:** You know what? If everything's spoiled...

**Marie I:** Yeah?

**Marie II:** We'll

**Marie I:** be

**Marie II:** spoiled

**Marie I:** too!

**Marie II:** Right!

**Marie I:** Does it matter?

**Marie II:** It doesn't matter!



These final lines of, ‘Does it matter?’ and ‘It doesn’t matter’ in the original Czech are each a single word. ‘Vadí? Nevadí? The verb the Maries are using resists translation, but its repeated use throughout the film demands consideration. Marie I is asking not only if it matters if they decide to reject goodness, but whether morality should be considered a hindrance to their choice – or any choice – at all. Their behaviour has ceased to matter because they reject the notion of consequence. This conversation not only creates an inverted sense of moral expectation where the most depraved action is the most desirable, but also establishes the frame for their actions in the film. They create a game where they will mirror the ‘spoiled’ nature of the world they live in (Škapová 2004, 135). With Marie II’s exclamation of ‘It doesn’t matter!’ she slaps Marie I, propelling both girls into a Garden of Eden, into this game, and into their new roles as depraved young ladies.

The girls’ rejection of conscience divests them of any guilt or internalized judgement, which alone can make for a dangerous character, but this exemption from judgement or punishment is not limited solely to their internal experiences. Through their simultaneous existence as actors and objects, the Maries gain the advantage of the puppet: the puppet cannot be judged because it cannot be punished, and it cannot be punished because it cannot be judged. The puppet’s natural indemnity serves as the foundation for the puppet theatre’s frequent engagement with political and social subversion. Communication is mediated through the performing object, which interferes with notions of culpability. When arrested for seditious themes in their performances, Czech puppeteers in the nineteenth century were even reported to have blamed their puppets for the politically subversive content of their performances (Bogatyrev 1983, 55). Together with the perceived innocence of the puppet theatre and its association with children and toys, this mediation creates a discursive space less restricted than the live theatre by formal institutions of censorship, as well as the social strictures of morality and taboo.

In *Daisies*, the autonomy of the puppet theatre allows the film to enter a discussion of consumption and destruction that is fiercely critical. However, the use of this autonomy is not simply a matter of cloaking a critique in the aesthetics of the film. Rather, *Daisies* is both a stunningly beautiful, joyful, hilarious adventure undertaken by two lovely, spirited young ladies and simultaneously an absolutely brutal examination of the relationship between consumption and destruction. The constant interaction and shared space of these two strata allows Chytilová to engage in a more profound inquiry into aestheticized or performative destruction and consumption, which becomes deeply disturbing not despite the beauty of the Maries and the world they inhabit, but because of it.

As the girls’ behaviour becomes progressively more savage, it becomes clear that even their youth and beauty cannot redeem them. Their physical beauty functions similarly to the non-threatening physical characteristics of the puppet, disarming the audience and creating a space that emphasizes the discord between expectation and behaviour. These girls violate virtually every rule of propriety, but they are also violating the viewer’s expectations of how both pretty young ladies and the protagonists of films should behave. They consume and destroy societal conceptions and expectations of feminine decorum with the same exuberance with which they consume and destroy food and property, embodying the ultimate rebellious status of being women who openly and eagerly want more than the world offers them.

The performance and satisfaction of their appetites remains a high priority for both Maries. In divesting themselves of the notions of conscience and propriety, the girls

become free from the expectation that they will hide their carnal and culinary desires behind any kind of feigned demureness. They have wants and needs, and they will satisfy them using any means at their disposal. Most often, the means at their disposal are men. And dispose they do. In using these men for a laugh and a free meal, they turn men into resources and consume them with gusto, most often accompanying their gleeful consumption with a volley of emasculating questions, asking these men how old they are, how old their wives are and how many children they have. The Maries' behaviour disrupts and inverts these men's expectations. An evening that was supposed to confirm or inflate their sense of masculine prowess through sexual conquest becomes a deflation of their wallets and their egos. The attack is made all the more fierce through the Maries' alluring appearances and seemingly naive mannerisms. The girls' statuses as object and actor are in constant interaction. They use the fact that they are perceived as objects meant for consumption to assert themselves as the truly voracious consumers. In objectifying the Maries, these men have failed to realize that the Maries have agency, an agency that is amplified by the girls' acknowledgement and strategic use of their position as objects and actors. They destroy these men without any repercussions; because they are perceived as objects, they cannot be punished.

The Marie's destructive behaviour progresses quickly, escalating from taking advantage of these lascivious old men to robbing the restaurant's bathroom attendant. After concluding that this episode of lying and stealing isn't bad enough for their game, they decide to move on to 'something big.' The scene cuts immediately to the girls' apartment, where we see that they have covered the ceiling of the room with streamers and links of sausages which they gleefully set on fire. As the flames die out, the girls move to the bed and begin work on their 'something big.' The lovesick voice of a recent admirer comes through the telephone receiver lying on the bed while the Maries, unmoved by these tender words, proceed to mutilate and dissect a mass of sausages, pickles, and boiled eggs, cutting each into bits with their large scissors and handling them with oversized surgical tools. Once they have eaten everything in sight, they move on to eating paper foods, images cut out from magazine advertisements. The Maries' play here with object representation and symbolic violence is all the more intense and disturbing because it is enacted with a sense of fun and delectation. In this puppet theatre environment, where an object is an actor, all notions of signification are disrupted. We are not left to wonder whether this sausage is a signifier of a penis; rather, we are left to grapple with the fact that it is *both* a sausage *and* a penis. This act is both play with food and castration. The simultaneity of violence and domination with play and humour is amplified by the ineffective romantic pleas emanating from the telephone.

While this scene serves as the culmination of the Maries' violence against individual men, their destructive streak continues. After an unsuccessful attempt to wreak havoc on the countryside, they turn these impulses on each other. Back in their apartment, the girls begin to fight, wrestling on their bed. This struggle ends when Marie II sprawls out on the blanket, her arms and legs spread like a paper doll and says, 'Now I'm lying here. Now imagine that it's not me.' Just as she had cut out pictures of foods and later men, Marie I takes out her scissors and begins to cut around Marie II's outline. When she deviates from this outline and cuts across Marie II's camisole, it is an explicit act of violence. Marie II declares, 'That's too much!', picks up her own pair of scissors, and cuts off Marie I's arm. There is no blood, and the straight line of the cut makes it seem as though the Maries

are made of paper. Marie I responds by cutting off Marie II's head, which hovers in the air while its body lies on the bed groping for her pair of scissors. Both Maries have undergone a physical transformation where their bodies, like the body of the puppet, can be disassembled and reformed without pain or consequence.

In this scene, Zich's assertion that we choose to perceive these characters either as objects or as actors fails; these dismembers can only be a literal embodiment of some kind of simultaneous perception. These are characters that can cut, but cannot bleed. They can enact violence, but their status as objects exempts them from the possibility of punishment. At this point the Maries' brawl takes an alarming turn as the girls move from cutting each other's bodies to cutting the very film that portrays them. As they furiously snip their scissors, the entire image on the screen becomes fractured, cut into bits. Just like the Marie's bodies, the entire world they inhabit is constructed, both bound and liberated by its own materiality. The limitations of real space and real flesh do not apply. The Maries have escaped these limitations and have become the stuff of nightmares: the puppet cut loose, ready, willing and able to apply their terrifying agency in the space which we, the film's viewers, occupy.

### **Penance and parody in the moral sphere of the puppet theatre**

The Maries' final scene brings together the notions of destruction and consumption, when the girls break into a dining room laid with a luxurious banquet and proceed from gorging themselves on the delicacies to destroying and throwing food, eventually dancing on the table, crushing platters underfoot. This is performative consumption par excellence, and their feast destroys not only the banquet, but the space as well. Like the slap that ends the film's first scene, transporting the Maries into an entirely different space and time and marking the beginning of their game, here their fall from the chandelier lands them not on the table, but in a body of water, where their game comes to an end. The girls yell for help, admitting that this has happened because they are spoiled, but they also narrate their own action, crying, 'Come on, we're drowning here! We're calling for help!' In the midst of these pleas for help, a typed message appears on the screen: 'This was the only way it could end...Would it even be possible to fix what had been destroyed?...Even if they were given such a chance, it would have turned out this way even in the best of circumstances.' The game is over and the girls have confessed, but what kind of punishment is this? And if the game is over, why does the film continue? What is *Daisies* outside of the context of the Maries' game?

The Maries return to the space of the banquet hall, their stylish dresses are gone, and the girls are costumed only in newspaper. Again they speak in disembodied voices; we hear their hurried whispers, but their mouths do not move. The Maries begin to undo the damage they have done to the space, but as they straighten the filthy tablecloths, smooth out the piles of ruined food, and reset the table with broken plates, we see that this work is actually a parody of penance. They perform the motions of bringing order to the space, but this labor actually fails to restore the functionality of the banquet. In this light, the previous scene, when the girls are plunged into the water, also becomes a parody of punishment, repentance, or any notion of baptism or cleansing away sin. Just as they had narrated their own supposed drowning when they were cast into the water, here they narrate their corrective labor, maintaining their indispensable connection with their

audience. This parodic performance of both repentance and rectification serves as a theatrical epilogue, mocking the idea that their actions within the game had any real consequences.

After this parody concludes the performance, the Maries' conversation turns to the future; they must decide what roles they will play next. The new frame, the parameters for the next play, is a game of being happy. Marie I encourages Marie II to begin this new game, telling her, 'Well, say that we're happy'. Marie II questions the game, asking, 'Is that what we're playing?' When Marie I objects, claiming that they are actually happy, Marie II rejects the importance of being actually happy. Their actual happiness has no effect on how they will choose what to play. 'But that doesn't matter' ('Ale to nevadí'). The crash of the chandelier that follows not only transports the Maries, but also the audience. We are cast out of the puppet theatre and back into the space of warfare and mechanization that we had seemingly left behind to watch the Maries' performance. But despite the abruptness of this transition, the gears and bombs take on new meaning at the end of the film. The same simultaneously terrifying and entralling mechanization and destruction that we have seen in the Maries' bodies and behaviour is here in the outside world. This is the 'spoiled' world that they have chosen to reflect in their game.

The moral sphere the Maries enter in the film's conclusion comes rather unexpectedly. Along with the Maries, the viewer comes to see the world of *Daisies* as one without consequences, even for the most spoiled of actions, and many critics have perceived the film's conclusion as a definitive punishment of the heroines. With the parodic elements of their repentance and rectification, along with the implication that the end of the film marks the beginning of a new game for the Maries, any effectiveness of this punishment is put into doubt. The heroines' exemption from judgement or punishment is an inherent element of the puppets' existence, and one that creates this exceptional relationship to notions of morality. This alternative moral sphere is firmly established in the beginning of the film when the Maries begin their game. However, it is not until we have seen how the Maries play their game and how the film concludes that this puzzling space becomes clear.

There are three moments in *Daisies* where a fall transports the Maries into both a new diegetic space and a new moral space. Their fall from the chandelier and the chandelier's fall onto them mark their transitions within the space of their performance and in their moral positions. These two moments shed new light on the fall at the beginning of the film when a slap sends the Maries into a colourful world reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, complete with a tree of knowledge covered in fruit. Here the girls appear fully costumed, dressed for their roles, and in both senses begin to play; they enter into the dramatic space and begin to play the game they have established. The slap instantly propels both characters not only from black and white into colour, but into an entirely different space and time. As Herbert Eagle explains, 'On the narrative level the montage resembles a conventional cut on action: a motion begins in one shot; the next shot, from a different angle, ends the action... Chytilová's changes in setting and costume are only possible, of course, if this is a different time and space in the world of the story. Thus we cannot construct an illusionist reality out of this editing' (Eagle 1991, 226). While this is certainly true when the viewer first encounters this scene, the moral framework established by the film's conclusion brings a new perspective.

This startling shift places the heroines in a world where causality has an unsettling flexibility, but the scene also firmly grounds the Maries and the film as a whole in an

established discourse. The connections drawn between puppet performance, questions of conscience and consciousness, and the Garden of Eden are not unique to *Daisies*. These seemingly disparate realms come together most explicitly in Heinrich von Kleist's 1810 essay 'On the Theater of Marionettes'. While the thematic commonalities between this text and *Daisies* are striking on their own, it is their engagement in the philosophical sphere that truly brings the works together. The essay engages in its own kind of simultaneity, exploring the human and the puppet and how they differ, both revealing the potential of the puppet theatre as a genre and using this discussion to pose larger questions of the relationship between conscience and consciousness, behaviour and performance.

Kleist's essay takes the form of a dialogue between the narrator and a dancer on the nature of consciousness in the human and the puppet. The dancer explains the natural superiority of puppets, claiming that the puppet can only act in the most genuine way because the disconnect between intent and action is altogether absent. In contrast, the human actor's performance will always be marked by affectation because of the constant struggle between the body and soul or intent and action. The narrator simplifies his interlocutor's idea, realizing that, 'the spirit can't go wrong if there's no spirit to begin with' (Kleist 2010, 269).

The dancer offers another advantage of the puppet performer: the grace that naturally results from their inverted relationship to gravity. The human, and particularly the human actor, has lost its grace in its struggle with consciousness, but the puppet or the being without conscience – including the two protagonists in *Daisies* – has not suffered the same fate:

...grace return[s] once perception, as it were, has transversed the infinite - such that it simultaneously appears the purest in human bodily structures that are either devoid of consciousness or which possess an infinite consciousness, such as in the jointed manikin or the god.

'In which case,' I observed, a bit befuddled, 'would we then have to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge again to fall back into the state of innocence?'

'Undoubtedly,' he replied; 'which will be the last chapter of the history of the world.' (Kleist 2010, 273)

In discussing a film as ebullient as *Daisies*, this apocalyptic association may seem extreme. However, *Daisies* is nothing if not extreme, and it is the very extremity of these apocalyptic notions that makes the Maries' play all the more naughty and, by extension, all the more fun. As they return to the Garden of Eden to take their second bite of the fruit, the Maries enter into this space of a second innocence, and it is one where destruction and joy are intimately connected. They avoid any susceptibility to judgement by renouncing the very idea of conscience, guilt, or sin, and they celebrate in a joyful dance around the tree. The Maries eliminate the disconnect between desire and action, not through a purification of desires, but through embracing a natural impunity. Here, moral codes and social expectations are preserved only as a plaything. In this world, it is not only the Maries' transgressions that are committed in the space of parody and performance, but also their repentance and punishment.

Taken together, Zich's and Jurkowski's discussion of the dual nature of our perception of puppets and Kleist's exploration of the potentiality of the puppet in the moral sphere

provide a cohesive frame for understanding the work of the puppet aesthetic in *Daisies*. Kleist's work examines the particularities of the moral space of the puppet within the performance, and Zich and Jurkowski's works address the audience's perception of the puppets in performance. However, the divide between these two discourses is breached in the space of *Daisies*. In the theatrical space, the puppet's dual status as object and actor largely does not affect the puppet's behaviour; this duality occurs in the audience, while the puppet on stage technically remains inanimate. *Daisies* inverts the relationship between object and actor that marks the puppet's existence. Rather than the traditional object that can play at being human, the Maries are the inverse, humans that represent or play at being objects devoid of conscience.

Despite this inversion, the Maries maintain their access to the moral freedoms implied by Kleist and the advantages of their simultaneous status as objects and actors. The heroines of *Daisies* are unfazed by the fact that they are not technically puppets. However, if we revisit Zich's assertions about the audience experience in the puppet theatre, we see that the implications of this inversion are quite significant for the viewer of the film. In his original model, Zich posits that the audience can view the puppet as an object, finding humour in its unsuccessful attempt to mimic the human. Alternately, the viewer can perceive the puppet as an animate being, one that has overcome its inanimacy and gained real, almost unbound, agency. When we invert this model for *Daisies*, the first mode of perception has the audience viewing the girls as girls. They play at renouncing conscience, but their play is unsuccessful. The film becomes a joyful romp, a portrayal of youthful defiance where two lovely young ladies break a few rules and then proceed through the established cycle of repentance and punishment. The second mode of perception is much more ominous. If we perceive the Maries as beings who have successfully overcome or renounced their own humanity, not only divesting themselves of conscience, but securing an exemption from morality and punishment, the implications are alarming. The girls become morally dead living beings, beings whose agency can effect change on the world, but is ungoverned by moral constraints.

### **Morality and identity in *Daisies'* reception**

These multiple modes of viewing available in *Daisies* are reflected in the massive variation in response to the film, where even the film's admirers presented vastly different impressions. In a 1967 review in *Literary News (Literární noviny)*, Milan Kundera focused on his simultaneous repulsion and attraction to the film's protagonists, writing that, 'I can't comprehend how it was even possible to depict this kind of monstrosity so elegantly, so poetically, with such a dreamlike beauty, all without losing that sense of monstrosity' (Kundera 1967, 2). That same year, Drahomíra Novotná's review in *Film and Television News (Filmové a televizní noviny)* praised the film as well, but largely for its nuanced analysis of the connection between indifference, destruction, and affection. Despite her praise, Novotná goes on to express pity for Chytilová and the challenges of creating negative protagonists. She laments that, 'people will always accuse you of glorifying them. And your fate will be all the worse if you make them pretty like these two Maries, because then people will think you're siding with the bad guys' (Novotná 1967, 2). Novotná's claims were often true in the film's reception, as it is all too easy to conflate the Maries' ideas with the ideas the film as a whole portrays.

Věra Chytilová's discussions of the film often engage with this kind of confusion about the protagonists' behaviour. In a 2002 interview, she commented on audiences' understanding of *Daisies'* focus:

The authorities were under the impression that it was a film about the Czech youth. What we wanted to make was an existential film and to use it as a protest against the destruction of the country. What was interesting was that the western part of the world perceived this film as being against all conventions. So it's clear that it depends from what angle you perceive the film...We thought that the creativity as well as destruction was two sides of the same coin because people who are not capable of creation get their kicks from destruction. (Chytilová and Yates 2007)

She not only presents two contradictory viewings of the film, but also their interdependence and the intimate connection between creation and destruction that is achieved by this simultaneity. As she explained in a November 2000 panel discussion, the authorities viewing the film accepted the Maries at face value, a display of bad behaviour. Indeed, Bohuslav Laštovička, the chairman of the Czechoslovak National Assembly, spoke out against the film in a May 1967 session, claiming that the film, 'has nothing in common with our republic, with socialism, or with the ideals of communism', and questioning how and why the Czechoslovak government could fund the work of such 'internal enemies' (Národní shromáždění 1967). Chytilová attributes the unfavourable official response to the film to the censors' failing to see this display as a critique, but rather as just a 'bad example for children' (quoted in Lim 2001, 44). She was able to use this limitation in a 1975 letter to the Czechoslovak president Gustav Husák where she argues for her right to work in film, insisting that:

*Daisies* was a morality play showing how evil does not necessarily manifest itself in an orgy of destruction caused by war, that its roots may lie concealed in the malicious pranks of everyday life. I 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. (1976, 17)

While Chytilová's assertion that the film is a morality play may certainly be disingenuous, it is not untruthful. Through the complex interactions between the Maries' dual statuses, compounded by the variations in modes of audience perception, *Daisies* gains access to myriad interpretations in the censors' response, reviews of the film, and in scholarly discourse.

Petra Hanáková highlights a crucial limitation in much of the scholarly work on *Daisies*. As she explains, 'Most of the classical readings intellectualize the film's message and fail to analyze the illicit enjoyment we can experience in the 'aberrant,' subversive viewing' (2005, 67). These reductions of *Daisies* to a single message or moral are particularly problematic. Although Chytilová's assertion that the film is a morality play is certainly an excision of the full spectrum of the film's resonances, the act of replacing one moral frame with another does equal disservice to the film. Hanáková opens a much more fertile discursive space, arguing that, 'there emerges a productive tension because the proclaimed moral message of the framing fails to impose itself on the impulsively "naughty" film core' (67). In modelling the film as a variation of puppet theatre, this framing is an acknowledgement of the extra-theatrical space, the outside world that we intentionally leave to enter the sphere of theatrical performance. The Maries' only direct commentary

on this world beyond the performance is a dismissal, the claim that, 'Everything in the world is spoiled'. Mirroring the spoiled state of the outside world, the Maries create a reflection, a completely separate space which responds to the world from the outside. The complexities of the Maries' status as objects and actors and all of the ethical implications of this status exist within this exterior space. Any connections to the space outside of the performance exist only as constructions or conclusions produced by the audience.

This externality of critique or political engagement has proven problematic in scholarship on *Daisies*, particularly in light of the official criticism and censorship it met in Czechoslovakia. The film's clear play with representation along with the temptation to impose an unambiguous dissident statement onto any censored work has generated a vast body of responses positing the film as an allegory. While this structure does nominally avoid reducing the film to a single moral framework by positing a double signification, the allegory persists in privileging the 'deeper' of these two tiers and fails to contend with the complex interactions between them. In her 2001 article, 'Dolls in Fragments: *Daisies* as Feminist Allegory', Bliss Cua Lim writes that, '*Daisies* can be read multi-valently as enabling both a critique of the heroines' excesses...and a latent feminist delight in the heroines' ability to effect reversals in the patriarchal order' (38). Lim fixes these valences into a structure of allegory, claiming that, 'The likeness of the two protagonists to dolls is key to the rest of the film's allegorical critique of the emptiness of surface appearances' (49). In the present study, the very inanimacy of the doll image is problematic, but the more critical limitation of the model of the allegory is Lim's insistence that, '...the film is an allegory that expects the viewer to look beneath the surface' (51). Lim supports this assertion with a remark from Chytilová: 'On a superficial level, *Daisies* is the story of two girls but it really is an existential story...The idea is that every human action has a basis in ethics and there's absolutely nothing we do that does not have an ethical dimension' (quoted in Lim 2001, 51). While Chytilová does acknowledge this superficial level of the narrative, she also underscores the interconnectedness of action and ethics. If everything has an 'ethical dimension', this must include the aesthetics of the film. To 'look beneath the surface' of the film, trying to separate the aesthetics from the deeper, truer content would be to ignore the film's deep engagement with the relationship between form and content, between the puppet as object and the puppet as actor. If even compound narrative structures such as allegory cannot engage fully with the film's thematics and aesthetics, we come to a moment of questioning. Using the framework of the puppet theatre and all of the complex dynamics it entails, what interpretation of the film can we generate? The answer, of course, is that we can generate any meaning we like. Because the Maries are not only positioned as both objects and actors, but also occupy the infinite space between these two ontological statuses, the film can be, and indeed has been, interpreted as everything from a joyful Dada romp, a statement against nuclear war, a celebration of Czech youth, a critique of Czech youth, a morality play, a biting feminist critique, or a farce, presented through some representation or combination of girls, women, dolls, mannequins, marionettes, or fashion models. *Daisies* pushes the onus of interpretation completely onto the audience, for it is the audience that actually constructs the puppet play. In the diegetic space of the puppet theatre, the puppet's voice or soul and body are separated; it is the audience that does the work of combining them into a single performing entity. But this is not the only work left to the puppet theatre audience. The disconnect between the

outside world and the puppet play can only be reconciled by the audience. The puppet theatre's disruption of the audience's notions of signification is neither unintentional, nor without purpose. Both during and after the performance, the audience members must reassemble signification for themselves, finding a way to reconcile the aestheticized experience of the play and the world outside of the theatre. The individual subjectivity which governs this creative or recreative act accounts for both the massive variation in response to the film and the inadequacy of any single interpretation of its thematics.

In forcing the audience into this creative role as the real animator of the puppets and as the creator of meaning, *Daisies* achieves a level of subversion beyond any simple moral assertion. Both within the context of Czechoslovakia in the 1960s and in the modern, industrialized world more broadly, bringing an audience to engage in problems and questions is a much more subversive act than merely countering one unambiguous, dogmatic statement with another. The film's play with ideas of joy and depravity or, in Chytilová's words, between creativity and destruction, puts all assumptions of unambiguous oppositions into question. When we leave the theatrical or filmic space, we bring these questions with us. The viewer at large who is engaging in these questions of morality, of conscience, of subjectivity and objectivity, of the aestheticization and performativity of consumption and destruction, is a dangerous figure indeed, one who has managed to sneak some part of the puppet's flexibility and comfort in undetermined spheres out of the puppet theatre. As Kleist asserts, this could signal the 'final chapter in this history of the world' (2010, 274). But it might not. *Vadi?* ('Does it matter?')

## Notes

1. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
2. Czechoslovakia became an international centre of scholarly work on the puppet theatre during the interwar period, with particular focus on the phenomenology and semiotics of the medium. Zich's 1923 work can be seen as a point of departure for both branches. In his article, he establishes the phenomenological complexity of the puppet theatre, where a viewer perceives both an animated and an inanimate object simultaneously. The semiotic study of the puppet theatre presented by members of the Prague Linguistic Circle beginning in the 1930s began with Petr Bogatyrev's refutation of Zich's premise and the insistence that Zich was examining puppet theatre through the lens of live actor theatre. In Bogatyrev's 1937 article "A Contribution to the Study of Theatrical Signs: On the Perception of Signs in Puppet Theatre, Theatre with Live Actors and Art in General," Bogatyrev set out to establish the puppet theatre's distinct modes of signification.
3. While the thematic and philosophical dimensions of *Daisies* and "On the Theater of Marionettes" show remarkable similarities, I have not seen any evidence that Chytilová used Kleist's work as an inspiration for the film or had encountered this text. Despite this lack of a confirmed connection between the works, Kleist's essay provides a valuable entry into the complex moral space of the puppet and the liberation it gains through its exemption from concerns of morality and conscience, both of which underlie the Maries' exceptional moral status.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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