

Envisioning a Renewal of a Fractured Society in Vera Chytilová's *Daisies* (Scene from 54:18 – 57:54)

Vera Chytilová's *Daisies* (1966) attempts to create a utopian space of unadulterated feminine celebration both through its narrative and its cinematic techniques. Yet, cracks appear in this utopian vision. Though the bodies of both the Maries are mostly unrestricted, their bodily movements become mechanized at particular moments. Instead of eliciting laughter from the audience, such behaviour connects both the characters to the real repressive world. The connection to the real world is lost when the protagonists' bodies become indestructible. At this juncture, both Maries are somewhat obscured within the frame as they blend in with their room's wallpaper. The positioning of elements within the single shot frame enables this to happen, as the characters lose their individuality as well as their bodies. Chytilová effectively deploys montage sequences as transitions between one scene and the next. Montages further the rapid acceleration of the narrative, while also evoking past scenes from the film. When the frame is cut by the protagonists, the action within the film impacts the cinematic frame, dissolving the space between the characters and the audience. The montages progress from locks, images of women's bodies to incomprehensible shots of black lines crisscrossed together. Hence, the theme of degradation becomes prominent both at the level of the individual body as well as the cinematic frame. Furthermore, the splitting of the protagonists' bodies is mimicked by the splitting of the screen into mosaic-like cubes. This itself reflects *Daisies*' desire to propagate liberation both through its main protagonists and its treatment of the cinematic frame.

In *Daisies*, both the protagonists feel like they are unseen and "would disappear into thin air" as the blonde Marie states. In this moment of crisis, both the Maries are on a boat, and start moving move up and down with their bodies. This resembles a pump or engine's mechanical movement as their synchronized bodies just prevent the boat from toppling over. Their bodily movements occur as the brunette Marie tries to answer "why" questions about their role in the space they are occupying. This scene becomes a moment of existential crisis for both characters. The only way out of this unstructured chaos is by establishing some kind of order by performing mechanical behaviour. This behavior mimics "comic routines that embodied" mechanization.¹ In *Daisies*, marching or a continuous undulating movement are not mere instances of the comical but represent a departure from the disordered absurdity of their actions. Instead of eliciting laughter, such a return to machines becomes a sigh of relief for the audience. Since most of the film deals with unrepressed child-like innocence, machine-like movements bring the protagonists closer to reality. They don't snap out of their self-made utopia, yet the mechanization allows them relatively less agency, especially in the marching scene. In Michael North's analysis of Bergson's theory, machine like movements elicit laughter which becomes an expression of the "natural hostility of organic life to the machine."² With *Daisies*, mechanization reinstates stability and control, in a world where the protagonists are making their own rules. Arguably, both the presence of laughter and hostility of "organic life to the machine" is absent in this instance. In mimicking machines, both Maries are following some sort of rule, code or regimented behaviour. Machine-like movements become equivalent to following a rule. Yet such movements also enable the protagonists to assert their physical presence, to be seen and prevent their disappearance.

¹ Michael North, *Machine-Age Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 4

² *Ibid*, pp. 4-5

The marching scene begins with both the protagonists' chanting "we are" together to the beats of the marching sound. Gradually, their voices are lost as the marching beats gain speed and momentum. The vanishing of their voices highlights an instance where both Maries are being subsumed and controlled by their mechanical movements. Instead of performing the marching themselves, the rhythm and beat of the marching song appears to govern their movements. This shift in agency underlines a loss of control—over themselves as well as their actions. From marching, the scene transitions to a series of locks on doors being shown in tandem with the marching beat. The emphasis shifts from the protagonists in the foreground to a close-up of the locks in the background. In the previous shot, the locks are hard to notice because of the movements of both Maries and the rhythm of the marching beat which creates a sensory overload for the viewer. By closing in on the locks, this shot establishes a sense of past time by emphasizing the many closed doors that the protagonists have traversed. The rapid editing builds the narrative and creates a transition from an exterior space back to the interiors of their room. The closeups of the locks morph into extreme closeups of sliced fruit, drawing a link between spaces that are forbidden and others that are open to them. Consequently, interior spaces of the room are easier to access and dissect than the outside world. The motif of locked doors with "no admittance" painted on them, occurs at other moments in the film. The protagonists also lean against doors in an attempt to look inside these spaces, which reflects their fascination with the unknown. The forbidden doors could also reflect repressed thoughts that are inaccessible to the protagonists.

In the interiors of the Maries' rooms, snippets of sliced fruit, the clock on the wall and shots of wooden shavings appear, all of which allude to previous scenes from the film. Most of these shots lead into a series of montages. When the blonde Marie comes in contact with the clock on the wall, the film swarms into a montage of numbers. Similarly, as the girls are rolling down a hill, a montage of wooden shavings inhabit the screen. The montage of all these shots, pieced together represents a recovery of the past and is assembled in a manner resembling the Freudian mechanism of free association. Arguably, this montage of rapidly-moving condensed images could serve as an example of visual condensation. As Lisa Trahair argues, "condensation abbreviates or compresses the material of the dream."³ The rapid pacing of the shots and their unclear association with each other also mimics the structure of dreams. Dreams in turn replicate "comic nonsense," fitting in with the absurdist montage sequences in *Daisies*.⁴ As a result, the montage sequence after the marching scene can be perceived as a reflection of the workings of the characters' unconscious mind. The scene of them cutting fruits and vegetables could be indicative of them breaking into their hidden desires. The montage sequences are tough for the audience to dissect and appear absurdist because past events are interlaced together in no structured order. This builds on the theme of rule-breaking as the use of the montage breaks the seamless flow of linear time and narrative. Furthermore, in order to connect the disparate images together, the sound of the marching beat lends the montage a rhythmic quality and appearance of continuity.

While the montage that begins with the lock scene marks the transition from the exterior to the interior, the montages that occur later serve to facilitate the shift from one action to another. The blonde Marie wraps the brunette Marie in a blanket before pushing her offscreen. The cycle continues as the brunette Marie performs the same action of wrapping and pushing. Shot from

³ Lisa Trahair, "Jokes and their Relation to..." *The Comedy of Philosophy: Sense and Nonsense in Early Cinematic Slapstick* (Albany: SUNY, 2007), p.119

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 119

above, this scene emphasizes the movements of the characters as they momentarily disappear and appear on the frame. The characters' fall is not captured within the frame, as the emphasis is on the action and not its result. In this scene, the montage serves to connect the cyclical repetition of the characters' actions. It also breaks the monotony of the same action becoming a transition shot. The montage in this scene focuses on a mosaic of women's faces and bodily parts, and resembles the wallpaper in the girls' room. Its content also represents a splitting of the body and foreshadows the next scene where the protagonists begin to cut each other. As Umberto Eco argues, in comedy "the broken frame must be presupposed but never spelled out."⁵ The characters' attempt to cut parts of the body is introduced to the audience in an earlier scene before the montage presents a similar vision. The structure of the montage itself is equivalent to a "broken frame" constituted of different, fragmented images. The mosaic-like cut ups within the montage morph into the frame being splintered into irregular shapes, essentially rendering it completely "broken." This emphasizes a transition from order to complete disorder as the cube like cuts lose their distinct shapes, merging into each other. In *Daisies*, montages connect parts of the film together, foreshadowing upcoming events but never fully predicting them.

In the succeeding scene, scissors are used by the blonde Marie to cut the other Marie's clothes. She progresses from cutting the sheet brunette Marie is lying on, to cutting her clothes. This indicates how brunette Marie is treated as almost being a part of the bed sheets. In keeping with Bakhtin's concept of "grotesque realism," the state of bodily "degradation" begins with this moment of bodily exposure as the clothes are cut.⁶ In response to this, the brunette Marie cuts the blonde Marie's arm off. Most of this cutting and amputating of the body occurs offscreen. This builds the notion of bodies being indestructible as the emphasis remains on their split bodies rather than on the act of cutting. The characters still perform actions after being cut, facilitating in the transformation of their bodies into grotesque and absurd entities. Degradation is primarily defined as a "lowering" of the body, but in this case, the body is altered and brought to its lowest.⁷ Arguably, the body becomes unbody-like and grotesque. Eventually both protagonists sever each other's heads off creating a separation between the lower body and the head. When brunette Marie's head is midair and separated from her body, both her parts fit in with the background of her bedroom wallpaper. This makes the whole frame appear like an abstract montage as the wallpaper itself is patterned and denoting a wide range of objects and ideas. As Bakhtin argues, the "unfinished and open body... is blended with the world, with animals, with objects."⁸ The bodies of the characters are prevented from touching each other, later in the scene as the fragmented frame makes them a literal part of the backdrop. The foreground and background are merged as the body is split. In this sense, the degradation of the body is almost restorative.

The separation of the body from its parts is momentary because both the protagonists' bodies become whole again as they use the scissors to cut the frame into mosaic like pieces. Even though the cutting happens onscreen, the scissors are never visible in the frame. Instead, the diegetic sound of cutting conveys the splitting of the image. The emphasis, once again is shifted on movement as the screen becomes visually splintered, rather than focusing on the fracturing weapon. The cube-like cuts are stable for the first few shots before they begin to move, creating a sense of chaos and obliteration. Hence, a dual movement of the mosaic like cubes and the

⁵ Umberto Eco, "The frames of comic 'freedom'," *Carnival* (Amsterdam: de Gruyter, 1989), pp. 4-5

⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Introduction," *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1984), p.19

⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 19-24

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 27

characters, who move up and down on their bed, occurs simultaneously. The frame is gradually reduced to two more series of montages, both of which highlight a degradation of the frame and image. From a close-up montage of unrecognizable elements to crisscrossed black lines, the next few scenes represent, yet another example of a broken frame. The frame splits, like the characters' bodies, and the montages that follow create a sense of disorientation and loss of vision. Hence, the cinematic frame is imbued with some degree of grotesqueness. Ultimately, just like the body, the frame regenerates moving onto the next scene.

Daisies focuses on how both split bodies and broken frames can renew themselves. In doing so, it offers a powerful meditation on the impact of the repressive regime dominant in the Czech Republic just prior to the Prague Spring, as well as the possibility of resisting such repression. Just as the protests that broke out during the Prague Spring envisioned a new social and political order, *Daisies* offers its own alternative to the extant order and examines the hope that disorder may morph into revival. Therefore, the protagonists' rule breaking is interlaced with optimism, as their violations may, in turn, produce a new society.