



# The Ideology of Czech New Wave Cinema: A Turn From Society to Individuality



The Czech New Wave - a movement of avant-garde cinema  
Source: The Criterion Channel

The world has witnessed many cinematic waves that have transformed the course of films, and eventually our lives and perspectives. Of all the cinematic New Waves that broke over the world in the 1960s, the one in Czechoslovakia can be considered the most fascinating, and radical. Czech cinema has consistently been birthed, uprooted and revived by revolutionary filmmakers and artists, who maintained visionary yet highly opinionated perspectives on the scope of society and cinema. The 'Czech New Wave Cinema' (also known as Czechoslovak New Wave) was a monumental movement in experimental filmmaking that commenced in the early 1960s; a cinematic wave whose impact and references can be still traced in modern avant-garde cinema (Crawford, n.d.). The wave's films can be encapsulated in a few words - experimental and 'subtle anarchy'. These films portrayed deep skepticism towards the establishment, conformism, and conventional gender dynamics yet carried softer tones of vibrancy in colors and surrealism.



A shot from the film "The Death of Mr. Lazarescu"

Source: MUBI

The Czech New Wave, also known as 'Czechoslovak film miracle', marked the pivotal conceptual shift in the Czechoslovakian film industry from socialist and revolutionary narratives to the significance of storylines based on 'individuality'. The Czech New Wave was produced in Czechoslovakia (Czechoslovak Socialist Republic) and its film industry was nationalized in 1945. The national cinema of Czechoslovakia transformed from the rigidity of the state-controlled film industry to native filmmakers exploring more personal, stylized, and controversial themes - 'a turn from society to individuality'. The Czech films before the New Wave were characterized by social themes that invoke emotions of nationalism and community, or concentrated on fascinating adaptations of traditional folklore and stories. The 1950s Czech cinema was no less of a competitor in terms of popularity as it produced cult-classic films such as *The Proud Princess* (1952) (the most watched Czech film), *The Fabulous World of Jules Verne* (1958) (the most successful Czech film of all time), and *The Emperor and the Golem* (1951). However, the New Wave commenced a transformed league of films that had scope for characters to embark on 'personal' endeavors of identities and portray out-of-the-box perspectives on-screen. Some of the most notable films produced during the New Wave are *Diamonds of the Night* (1964), *A Report on the Party and the Guests* (1966), *Closely Watched Trains* (1966), *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (1967), and *Fruit of Paradise* (1969) (Tamkin, 2024).



The unique selling point (USP) of these films that also made them distinct from New Wave movements originating from other countries is the 'rigorous and satirical use of irony'. For instance, the French New Wave and Italian Neorealism Wave are the cinematic movements that also brought about transformation in the global scene of cinema, filmmaking, and societal norms. The films under the two waves adhered to grave themes and were represented with sentimentality and realist themes. The French film *Breathless* (1960) and Italian Neorealist film *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) portray the tragedies of real life in an unfiltered, linear story manner. Czech New Wave also conducted political and social commentaries like its contemporaries, however, it incorporated experimental storytelling to present a different perspective on the crude realities of life, infused with dark humor and non-linear narratives.



The 'surreal' cinematography of Czech New Wave Films (*The Valley of The Bees*, *Diamonds of the Night*)

Source: *The Criterion Channel* & *The University of Edinburgh*



**Bizarre yet unique juxtaposition of subjects in Czech New Wave films (Daisies)**

*Source: New Wave Film*

The cause for such a distinctively experimental approach in Czech New Wave's filmmaking appears to lie in the personal philosophies of its filmmakers. The young Czech filmmakers who pioneered the Czech New Wave had lived through the dark periods of war and Nazi occupation. This led to a desire for liberation and an escape from crude reality; the path to such liberation through cinema involved elements like 'surreal dream-like visions', experimental editing, satire, absurd and eccentric visuals, and stories that are combinations of truth and some bizarre elements. The three directors who led these transformative filmmaking techniques and eventually the Czech film wave were Miloš Forman, Jiří Menzel, and Věra Chytilová. The fascinating movement was filled with several fearless directors with a fruitful sense of humor and a radical way of thinking. This movement ushered a league of films beyond nationalist narratives and broke through the nationalized film industry shaped by the communist government at the time (Crawford, n.d.).



An important aspect to note about the Czech New Wave is its liberty and abundance of filmmaking budget. Compared to cinematic movements in Western European countries, the Czech movement had access to larger budgets as they were all funded by Czech central authorities. Some of these films were banned on initial release, but if they found success in foreign film festivals, eventually the bans tended to be lifted. The movement largely marched in step with the growing liberalization across the country. In Prague Spring 1968 (the Prague Spring was a period of political liberalization and mass protest in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic), there was greater tolerance for dissident films, which led to the filmmakers becoming bolder. But when the Prague Spring was crushed by the Soviet Forces and their tanks pounced on Prague, the censors returned with their claws out, ready to cut films and mark directors for life. However, the influence of the Soviet Union on the Czech film industry didn't last for long, as the native filmmakers persevered through the influences in the 60s and 70s (Fim Qualia, 2018).



Quirky aesthetics of *Daisies* and *Fruit of Paradise* by Věra Chytilová  
Source: Hero Magazine & IMDb



**Daisies: An expressionist and feminist film, yet banned**

Source: Film At Lincoln Center

The prominent directors in 1960s Czechoslovakia like Miloš Forman, Věra Chytilová, Jiří Menzel, Jan Němec, Ivan Passer, and Pavel Juráček made films that appeared to be 'personal and reflective' rather than grand and revolutionary (Crawford, n.d.). Their films often focused on the struggles of ordinary people, offering a fresh perspective on Czech society and politics. The films mimicked social reality but, interestingly, didn't adhere to it. Such an outlook of the wave carried the movement of 'sexual liberation' in the country - bridging the gap between sexes, and representation of females and their desires beyond stereotypes on-screen. The new wave led to the rise of feminist narratives in Czech cinema through two groundbreaking films - Věra Chytilová's *Daisies* (1966), and Jaromil Jireš' *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* (1970) (Rucker, 2023).



Daisies has established itself as a cult-classic foreign language film that incorporates the signature aesthetic of the 1960s - 'hippie and psychedelic themes'. The film is interventionary in areas of feminism on-screen, playful representation of sexual liberalism, abstract visuals, and characters oriented in 'self-gratification'. Since the inception of cinema, women characters have been consistently portrayed as characters upholding responsibility, traditions, heritage, or welfare of people around them. However, Daisies broke the mold in the conventional 60s, where its two female protagonists unapologetically indulge in self-gratification through simple and grand pleasures alike (Film & Media Studies, 2021). As a professor of Cinema Studies from the University of Washington, James Tweedie commented about the Czech New Wave films in 'Global New Waves':

"The films suggest that 'personal gratification is itself a socially powerful act', no matter how counterproductive it seems."

(Daisies: Discontinuity Editing, Feminism, and the Czech New Wave,  
Courtesy: YouTube)

Eve and the Apple: Invoking the iconography of female representation,  
and female rebelliousness...and cinematic rebelliousness



The biblical tale of Eve's temptation to apple has parallels to Daisies' theme of female pleasure,  
Source: YouTube



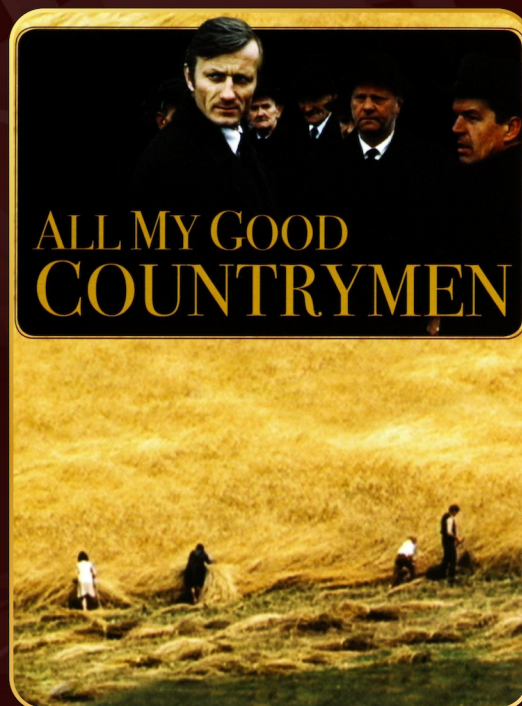
The two teenage girls, as the protagonists of the film, carried the notion that since the world is spoiled, they will be spoiled too. They embark on a series of destructive pranks to rebel against a conventional society. Věra Chytilová's film challenged the concept of the ideal demeanor of females in Czech society. The art-house-inspired film created a commotion in the then-conservative societies in Czechoslovakia. The film perfectly represents all the salient features of the Czech New Wave films - strange but symbolic images, use of amateur actors for raw performances, dream-like realities, psychedelic/vibrant color palette, abrupt jump-cuts between sequences, and rebellious characterizations that are often classified as 'quirky' (Rucker, 2023). On keen observation, the film shares parallels to the biblical tale of the *Garden of Eden (Eve and the Apple)* concerning the themes of female pleasure and the complexity of their desires (Film & Media Studies, 2021).



The Firemen's Ball  
Source: IMDb



Several Czech New Wave films have established the movement as one of the pioneers of surrealist cinema and a major contributor to global experimental cinema. *The Firemen's Ball* (1967) can be considered one of the most recognizable films from the wave, thanks to its Hollywood-famed director Miloš Forman. American audiences are familiar with director Miloš Forman for Hollywood hit films such as *Amadeus* (1984) and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), starring the generational actor Jack Nicholson. But before achieving international fame, he was an active filmmaker of the Czech Wave. *The Firemen's Ball* is his most acclaimed Czech film that has immaculate dark humor and is deeply cynical. *All My Good Countrymen* is another famous film released during the Wave that is beautifully shot in a Czech village from 1945 to 1958, during which time people slowly realize that their new political system is mysteriously repressing them in the disguise of a goodwill revolution. The director Vojtěch Jasný won the award of 'Best Director' at the 1969 Cannes Film Festival thanks to a print of *All My Good Countrymen* that was smuggled out of Czechoslovakia, where the film had already been banned. Interestingly, many of the Czech films that are classified as masterpieces in the current time were banned at the initial release, including the film *Daisies* (Tamkin, 2024). Usually, the most controversial or experimental films of the Czech New Wave suffered bans by the conservative forces of the Soviet Union; interestingly, the initially banned films grew to become the most successful films internationally. The transition establishes the transformation that the Czech film industry has gone through since the success of the New Wave - from conservative film bans to liberty of experimentation and individual expression on-screen.



All My Good Countrymen  
Source: Rotten Tomatoes



Kolya (1996)  
Source: Rotten Tomatoes

Thus, the Czech New Wave has established itself as a highly impressionable movement for modern films, with immense contributions to global cinema. The New Wave inspired European and American independent cinema movements and introduced avant-garde techniques such as natural lighting, surrealist themes in real environments, establishing 'absurd yet meaningful' visuals as the new standard, and improvised performances (Crawford, n.d.). The wave's purpose of portraying 'personal stories over grand historical narratives' through stylized absurdity in visuals was consistently pursued by the native filmmakers. The new wave transformed into a modern age of socialist Czech films like *Kolya* (1996), which is the first and only Oscar winner in the category of 'Best Foreign Language Film' for the independent Czech Republic (Tamkin, 2024). The on-screen stories by Czech artists signify their transition from lives of struggle for independence to lives of liberty, where they search for a 'personal' adventure and discover multi-faceted meanings of life. The world of cinema has witnessed several insightful movements rising from various parts of the world, however, the Czech New Wave remains one of the most impactful waves of all.



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