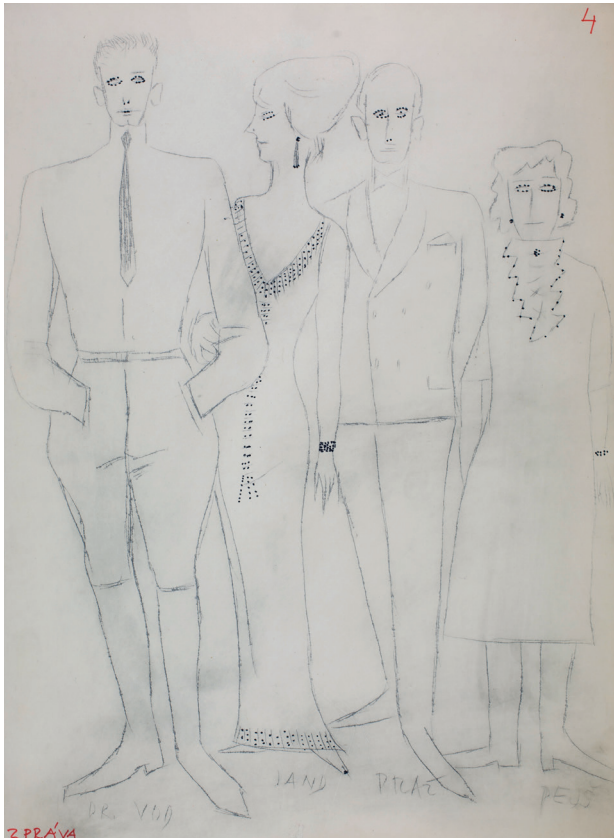


The Costume-Phantoms of Ester Krumbachová¹

Markéta Uhlířová



(1) Ester Krumbachová, Costume designs for the film *The Party and the Guests* (*O slavnosti a hostech*, directed by Jan Němec, 1966), Ester Krumbachová Archive, © 000571

Clothing is commonly considered to be a meaningful interface between an individual's self and the outside world. Like a crust forming on the surface of an otherwise amorphous substance, dress apparently solidifies the self, delivering it to the social sphere, making it legible. Yet among fashion theorists this communication is rarely deemed straightforward: if dress *externalises* selfhood, then this mechanism is also rife with ambivalence. In other words, the messages signaled are often conflicting and contradictory.² Costume design for film is based on a similar premise that forges a close link between clothing and a character's inner world. But, unlike fashion, it has less capacity for operating with semiotic uncertainties. Here, costume is regarded as a direct imprint of a character's self — their identity and state of mind at a particular moment. As Jane Gaines put it, costume sees characters "turned inside out on the screen".³ This is especially (though not solely) the case in classical narrative cinema, which pursues realistic illusion, verisimilitude and psychologically defined characters. According to French costume designer and filmmaker Claude Autant-Lara, a good costume must speak volumes about a character before they even utter a single word. Dress, he argued, is above all an "authentic" indication of the character's psyche: "through it, each of us gives away all, or part, of our personality, our habits, tastes, ideas, our current mood, what we have just done and what we are about to do."⁴ Ester Krumbachová's film costumes frequently went against the grain of this widely accepted assumption. Instead, her approach pointed towards a more idiosyncratic conception of costume that obscures as much as it reveals.

Krumbachová was a pivotal figure of the Czechoslovak New Wave. Her career in cinema was largely bracketed by the 1960s (a relatively liberal decade in the context of the country's 40-year-long communist past), severely restricted as it was by politically-motivated censorship after 1970. It coincided with a generation of young filmmakers — mostly graduates of Prague's Film Academy (FAMU) — bursting onto the scene, pursuing subjective expressions and socially engaged commentary. Taking on

the role of "ideological demystifiers", to borrow the words of journalist Antonín Liehm,⁵ these filmmakers found in the cinema an opportunity to exercise personal and political freedoms, however obliquely. This went hand in hand with a desire to break from conventional styles of narration and acting by embracing new filmmaking practices and formal experimentation, to some extent following the guidance of the French New Wave. And while the Czechoslovak New Wave cinema immediately received — and has since continued to receive — much critical attention both at home and on the international scene, Krumbachová herself has suffered decades of neglect, remaining an almost unknown name outside of the Czech context. Clearly, the lens of the director's gaze in both film criticism and historical analysis has been, for the most part, too crushing to allow for alternative viewpoints, even evidently authorial ones. And yet, Krumbachová's work represents a seminal artistic intervention and, as Peter Hames notes, an important stylistic link among many of the movement's films.⁶

Following her studies in applied arts, numerous short-term occupations and a seven-year career as a costume designer, scenographer and prop maker for the theatre, Krumbachová was introduced to Barrandov Studios in 1961. There she went on to create costumes for over 40 films that span numerous genres and settings, from musical and comedy to science fiction and wartime drama, to fantasy, allegory and other more experimental approaches. In collaboration with major directors including Jan Němec, Věra Chytilová, Vojtěch Jasný, Karel Kachyňa and Jaromil Jireš, Krumbachová asserted costume design as a vital cinematic discipline — one that is at once visually compelling and conceptually intriguing. But her agency and influence within the industry reached far beyond the realm of costume. Her divergent thinking, erudition, and capacity for sharp insight, combined with an instinctive sense of (self-)mockery and imagination, were sought after by directors across generations, many of whom wanted to consult her on all possible aspects of filmmaking.⁷ It was not uncommon for her collaborators to remark, with a degree of awe,

1 I would like to thank Edith Jeřábková and Zuzana Blochová for facilitating access to The Ester Krumbachová Archive in Prague, which this article draws on extensively.

2 See for example Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, rev. ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003).

3 Gaines's argument was gender-specific, referring to women, but has elsewhere been extended to men as well. See Jane Gaines, "Costume and Narrative: How Dress Tells the Woman's Story", in *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body*, eds. Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog (New York: Routledge, 1990), 18; see also Stella Bruzzi, *Men's Cinema: Masculinity and Mise-en-Scene in Hollywood* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 30.

4 Claude Autant-Lara, "Le costumier de cinéma doit habiller des caractères" *La Revue du cinéma*, no. 19–20 (Autumn 1949): 65.

5 Antonín J. Liehm, "Introduction", in *Closely Watched Films: The Czechoslovak Experience* (White Plains, N.Y.: International Arts and Sciences Press), 1–10.

6 Peter Hames cited in "Czechoslovak New Wave: Criterion Channel Introduction", June 16, 2020, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wz-JUV8ssZY>.

7 Tereza Brdečková, "Skrýty smysl krásy: Portrét Ester Krumbachové", *Lidové noviny* (January 27, 1996), 15.

on the transformative power her ideas had in the process of shaping an entire filmic world. The director Jan Němec, for example, called Krumbachová “the spiritual guru” of their first collaboration, *Diamonds of the Night* (*Démanty noci*, 1964), noting that her unusual, lateral thinking about the costumes — and, consequently, the film more generally — made him want to involve her in his next project from the very outset.⁸

The “Krumbachová touch” appears to have reached an almost mythical quality. In a 2013 television tribute to the artist, the actress Táňa Fischerová marvels at an ingenious hat worn by a character she played in Antonín Máša’s 1966 film *Hotel for Strangers* (*Hotel pro cizince*): the hat was decorated with a large protruding plume, which at a crucial moment poked her would-be lover in the face — a physical gesture that also acted as a metaphor for the impossibility of an intimate relationship between the two. In another documentary, the director Vojtěch Jasný extols Krumbachová’s work on his film *All My Good Countrymen* (*Všichni dobří rodáci*, 1968). He notes how, in an emotionally charged scene of post-war collectivisation of property by the new communist government, Krumbachová partially concealed the face of a landowner’s despairing wife behind a tall snake plant perched in her lap. Jasný felt that this simple prop (which effectively became an extension of the costume) resulted in a new dimension of emotional and artistic complexity.⁹

Over the course of the 1960s, Krumbachová was increasingly invited to step into various crew positions, with her contribution to the cinema of the New Wave (and beyond) becoming recognised more formally. Alongside costume, she began to receive credits not only in set design and art direction, but also in those aspects of film production that are normally well beyond the reach of a costume designer — story and script writing, dramaturgy and direction.¹⁰ And although in her case it is not always easy to tell where one discipline ends and another begins, costume design is unquestionably of central importance to her overall output. Not only was it an area in which she was

especially prolific and distinguished, but it was also one to which she was most consistently committed as a creative practitioner. She reportedly treated those around her to impassioned theories of costume,¹¹ and indeed, costume proved central to her way of thinking about cinema as a medium and an art form.

Going beyond concerns with characterisation and style, Krumbachová also understood costume as an important rhetorical device. She repeatedly stressed that it was “not just clothes” but rather an “event” possessing an important intellectual dimension:

“Costume is a significant component of film’s philosophical form [...] People’s appearances speak their own language, inextricably linked with the film’s original idea. Compared to the theatre, film has the benefits of close-up and firm composition.

That’s why appearance here is exceptionally important. It can sometimes be a catalyst [...]”¹²

Such recognition of costume’s foundational role in cinema is both rare and radical. In an attempt to grapple with Krumbachová’s unique perspective, this article considers not only her practice, with a particular focus on films in which her creative input exceeded that of a costume designer; it also explores her ideas and theoretical accounts of costume — and dress more generally — all of which attest to a deep artistic intrigue with the power of appearances.

8 Němec cited in *Pátrání po Ester*, directed by Věra Chytilová, 2005.

9 I cite here from Fischerová’s memories in *Zlatá šedesátá*, season 2, episode 9, “Ester Krumbachová”, directed by Zdeněk Suchý, 2015; and from Jasný’s interview in *Pátrání po Ester*.

10 Krumbachová thought of herself as something of a jack of all trades. She once quipped she had done everything except digging graves, prostitution and selling flowers in the streets. Alongside the cinema, her almost prodigiously versatile creative output also included painting, drawing, jewellery making and various other crafts. Krumbachová also authored numerous texts, both published and unpublished: from short stories and journalistic columns, essays and treatises, to dark fairy tales, diaries and unsent letters. In interviews she evoked artists as frequently as literary figures and philosophers, with a special fondness for Klee, Faulkner, Kafka, Hašek, Ionesco and Kierkegaard.

11 Josef Škvorecký, *Všichni ti bystří mladí muži a ženy: Osobní historie českého filmu* (Prague: Horizont, 1991), 127.

12 Krumbachová cited in Libuše Hofmanová, “Člověk v tolika podobách ... S Ester Krumbachovou o filmovém kostýmu”, *Divadelní a filmové noviny* 2, no. 12, (1966): 7.

THE TOTALITY OF IMAGE AND
THE ROLE OF COLOUR

In whatever capacity she worked, Krumbachová always approached the medium of film holistically. She saw the cinema as a complex organism (a “Gothic cathedral”, a “multi-headed dragon”), in which each element was intertwined with all others, forming a single aesthetic vision.¹³ As she noted about costume, “it is not possible to evaluate it separately from the [film’s] original idea and meaning, it is impossible to ask about its aesthetics in isolation”.¹⁴ Indeed, costumes, in her conception, play an integral role in the overall dynamics of a *mise-en-scène*. This is most prominent in Krumbachová’s colour films, especially those on which she collaborated with the progressive cinematographer Jaroslav Kučera (Chytilová’s *Daisies* [*Sedmikrásky*, 1966] and *Fruit of Paradise* [*Ovoce stromů rajských jíme*, 1969], Vojtěch Jasný’s *All My Good Countrymen*, and Kachyňa’s *The Little Mermaid* [*Malá mořská víla*, 1976]) and those on which she worked in multiple capacities as screenwriter, art director and costume designer, and which thus allowed her to exercise considerable control over the filmic image (*Daisies*, *Fruit of Paradise*, *All My Good Countrymen*, Jaromil Jireš’s *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* [*Valerie a týden divů*, 1970], and her *The Murder of Mr. Devil* [*Vražda Ing. Čerta*, 1970]). These films abound in meticulously framed, tableau-like shots inhabited by actors who pose as much as they act. Here costumed bodies, décor and props are arranged into precise pictorial compositions (sometimes referencing well-known paintings) wherein they often visually interact with one another. In Věra Chytilová’s *Daisies* (which remains Krumbachová’s best-known film), a particularly striking colour scene pictures Marie 1, one of the kooky heroines, in a pretend suicide, ostensibly by poisoning from domestic gas. She is shown motionless, lying on a bed along the central axis of the image and framed from a high angle, with her figure foreshortened à la Mantegna’s *Dead Christ* (though facing away from the camera). Her mint-green shift dress is optically extended by several other shades of green, which ripple outwards from her body. There is the rich hue of the

grass turf that covers the bed, the acid tinge of artfully strewn apples and the deep-dark tones of large calla lily leaves pinned to the walls. The green theme is then extended further still, to the reverse shots showing Marie 2, the film’s other protagonist, who has just arrived in the flat to find running gas, but also an open window concealed behind a curtain. Her dress is almost identical, only in a shade of olive. As Marie 1 (the blond) proceeds to “wake up” and, still lying down, bite into one of the green apples within her reach, Marie 2 (the brunette) copies her by biting into a gherkin fished out of a large jar filled with green-dyed brine. These highly contrived chromatic arrangements exemplify Krumbachová’s painterly approach to the cinema (very much paralleled in Kučera’s own).¹⁵ The costumes in *Daisies*, largely monochrome but changing in colour from episode to episode, not only dress bodies but also double as colour fields that form immediately noticeable associations. As well as being visually pleasurable, such links are semantically functional. They establish the two Maries’ alliance with the objects they surround themselves with, wrap themselves in, consume or otherwise destroy, underscoring the girls’ constant oscillation between subject and object positions, between humans and living dolls. They also accentuate their symmetrical relationship — their status as doubles (of humans, of one another), who are inextricably bound together and effectively interchangeable.¹⁶ Finally, there is a nagging sense that the film’s singular use of colour — “diegetically unmoored”, to cite Richard Misek — also provides an apt visual analogue to the girls’ wanton behaviour.¹⁷

A no less chromatically coordinated interplay between people, things and environments also defines *Fruit of Paradise*, another collaboration between Chytilová, Kučera and Krumbachová. Made in response to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the film can be read as an allegory of political eye-opening and the steadfast search for truth.¹⁸ Like *Daisies*, it was shot on Eastmancolor stock, and while it is similarly reliant on saturated colours, it works with a decidedly more constricted palette (with the exception of the lengthy prologue, to which I will return).

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13 See Krumbachová in Liehm, *Closely Watched Films*, 294; see also Krumbachová in conversation with Světlana Lavíčková, *Dobré jitro*, aired June 2, 1995 on Czech Radio 2 – Prague (Ester Krumbachová Archive, ©002411_0001–0003).

14 Hofmanová, “Člověk v tolika podobách”, 7.

15 The diegetically unmotivated monochromatic tinting and toning of some of the black-and-white shots in *Daisies* was Kučera’s work, as were other, more experimental colouring techniques. For an analysis of Kučera’s work with colour, including in *Daisies*, and a visually stunning ode to his work as a cinematographer and visual artist, see Kateřina Svatoňová, *Mezi-obrazy: Mediální praktiky kameramana Jaroslava Kučery* (Prague: Národní filmový archiv, Faculty of Arts Press, MasterFilm, 2016). For Kučera’s own thinking on the dramatic and aesthetic functions of colour in film, and more specifically, his colour intentions for *Daisies*, see Jaroslav Kučera in Liehm, *Closely Watched Films*, esp. 273–275.

16 For more on the film’s theme of the double, see Bliss Cua Lim, “Dolls in Fragments: *Daisies* as Feminist Allegory”, *Camera Obscura* 16, no. 2 (2001): 37–77.

17 Richard Misek, *Chromatic Cinema: A History of Screen Color* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 71.

18 Iveta Jusová and Dan Reyes, “Between Two Waves: Věra Chytilová and Jean-Luc Godard”, *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 10, no. 1 (2019): 22–38.

Early on in the story, a shiny maroon leather satchel is passed between the heroine Eva and her tempter, the enigmatic Robert, who has aroused Eva's curiosity. Eva wears a darker maroon dress, which is then further echoed in Robert's deep crimson suit jacket. The mysterious encounter unravels in a woodland, against Rousseau-esque backgrounds of luscious green foliage — green being an ideal counterpart to red, a means of intensifying it. In another, similarly phantasmagorical scene later on, a long shot shows a group of people playing among sand dunes, engrossed in a childish game of keeping a balloon in the air. They wear dressing gowns, towels and bikinis in bleached tones of brown, beige and nude, creating an analogous colour scheme with the beige sand filling the frame. The scene's overall neutral tonality is only punctuated by two bright objects to which the film draws our attention: the orange balloon the group chases after and Robert's bright red dressing gown. Unlike in *Daisies*, such significant colour associations are not only staged within individual shots but also extend temporally, across different scenes throughout the film — a device that allows their importance to gradually build up. Red crops up strategically from early on, when a shot of the crimson-suited Robert is linked to a shot of Eva biting into an apple; orange is also reused throughout, in the beach balloon and in the similarly symbolically loaded images of carrots and oranges; white is mostly reserved for Eva, and is distinguished from the "almost white" attire of her shifty partner Josef.¹⁹ In part, *Fruit of Paradise* draws on a fairly conventional colour symbolism — as in the associations of white with purity, and red with danger, sexual desire and sin. At the same time, though, its deployment of colour remains rather difficult to penetrate. Although it would at first seem that there are strict chromatic rules (certainly in comparison to *Daisies*), colours are not always justified in terms of their narrative function. At times, the "significant" colours (white, orange) also appear as if arbitrarily, asserting their freedom from the code and troubling the story's interpretation.

Colour was for Krumbachová an object of intense fascination. Anecdotally, she traced her heightened colour sensibility back to early childhood, recalling how she licked Artuš Scheiner's illustrations off the pages of Božena Němcová's fairy tales, despite her mother's protestations.²⁰ Colour film for her became an opportunity to experiment not only with captivating chromatic combinations but also with ways in which meaning can itself be coloured. Describing the colour scheme devised for *All My Good Countrymen*, she noted:

"When, say, the merry widow cycles towards an ochre sandpit, she will go in black tights and she will wear an ochre dress. The postman will be dressed in a blue cape, the power of which will be greatly boosted in combination with the different ochres of the sand and the widow.

Another point of view: in the story's overall elegy, in other situations, the tragic figure of the merry widow shines with colour: a girl whose boyfriends kill themselves and are killed. A fact underscored by colour. [...] Careful. Not every film allows the viewer a sense of deliberate harmonization in color work."²¹

As this account suggests, the significance attached to colour often overrode concerns with other sartorial elements such as print, patterning, trimmings and other kinds of decoration, play

19 The juxtaposition of white and off-white is also narrativised in the film. When the post arrives, Eva places envelopes on Josef's reclining body, calling out their colours: "almost white, white, white, also white, not quite white, fragrant".

20 *Dobré jitro*.

21 Ester Krumbachová, "Všichni dobří rodáci", *Filmové a televizní noviny* 3, no. 11 (1969): 8.

with volume and movement of fabric or intricate construction. In that sense Krumbachová was a minimalist. Colour became a means towards abstraction, and, at the level of narrative, a way of shifting the register from realist description to metaphor, parable or allegory. *All My Good Countrymen* is a case in point. In one especially poignant scene, protesters gather outside a local committee office building to demand the release of an imprisoned vicar. The crowd appears homogeneous, with almost everyone dressed in black, having come straight from the church. As it begins to rain, many of the protesters open their umbrellas, again, almost uniformly black, like a Greek chorus. This image of bodies that are neither individualized nor completely uniform epitomises what Krumbachová referred to as the “collective body” and the “crowd’s rhythm”.²² As she noted, with reference to the (black-and-white) World War II drama *Transport from Paradise* (*Transport z ráje*, dir. Zbyněk Brynych, 1962), “You can work with a crowd in a similar way to the way you work with the background of a painting: sometimes it can be suppressed, and at other times it can become monumental. [...] It is important to create a unified look for them, not dozens of individual looks.”²³

Given the frequent interplay between the costumed body and its surroundings in Krumbachová’s films, it is hardly surprising that the notion of a clear separation between the two is sometimes challenged. In the submarine scenes of *The Little Mermaid* (on which Krumbachová worked as art director, with Šárka Hejnová as the costume designer), throngs of fairy-tale figures are paraded across the frame, all in flowing robes in gradations of blue, aquamarine, violet and green. Crowned by magnificently oversized hairdos of multicoloured locks interwoven with rhizomes, twigs, seaweed and flags, they enliven the rocky underwater seascapes around them, while at times also merging with it, becoming part of the décor. But it is the lyrical prologue to *Fruit of Paradise* that stages the most extreme fusion of costume and the natural environment. The montage, created largely by Kučera, is among the most spectacular and formally innovative

expressions of New Wave cinema. Its emphasis on the tactile, textural and chromatic qualities of surfaces over the determinacy of forms brings it into affinity with avant-garde and experimental filmmaking (Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, Ron Rice) but also with *art informel*.²⁴ A vision of Paradise before the Fall, it invokes a primordial natural splendour through a stream of heavily manipulated, superimposed shots and photographs of leaves, flower petals, grasses, waters and trees, and of naked human bodies among them. All this imagery rhythmically pulses, overlaps and interpenetrates in multiple exposures and dissolves, resulting in a perceptual richness which is at times near-psychedelic in its effect. The sense of turbulent beauty is reinforced by hand colouring and tinting, with ever-evolving combinations of greens, ochres, oranges, purples, pinks, reds and blues. As the bodies slowly move (or statically pose) in this multilayered “landscape”, they become blank canvases onto which the shimmering organic matter appears to be projected. They receive and effectively become cloaked in nature, but they are simultaneously invaded by its mutating forms, appearing under a constant threat of being submerged by them.

THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Krumbachová thought in images. Film to her was primarily image, even when she was dealing with words. The writer Ivan Vyskočil observes that she “saw [film] as a whole” and that, when working as a screenwriter, she reportedly began by “[doing] production design in her mind [...] and then tailored stories for that imagined environment”.²⁵ She believed that costume was one of the unique filmic elements that told their own story visually. As she put it, “When you read a screenplay, you shouldn’t be able to tell what will appear on the screen.”²⁶ Such an attitude is symptomatic of the New Wave’s broader shift from representation and illusionism to a deliberate foregrounding of cinema’s formal properties. With it, the traditional hierarchy placing plot and screenplay over other aspects of filmmaking began to break down, allowing

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22 Krumbachová cited in Hofmanová, “Člověk v tolika podobách”, 7.

23 Ibid.

24 For more on this point, and for a discussion of the prologue’s affective power, see Felicity C. Gee, “Věra Chytilová’s *The Fruit of Paradise* [Ovoce stromů rajských jíme, 1969]: Radical aura and the international avant-garde”, *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 10, no. 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/2040350X.2018.1469198>: 3–21.

25 Ivan Vyskočil, interview by Jana Beierová, October 24, 2017 (Ester Krumbachová Archive). In the same interview Vyskočil also jokingly admits that he accepted the role of the host in *The Party and the Guests* largely because he found Krumbachová’s promise to put him in a white suit hard to refuse.

26 Cited in Liehm, *Closely Watched Films*, 275.

stylistic innovation to become an essential, if not dominant concern. Kučera, for one, persuasively articulated his generation's ambition to recognise film as fundamentally collective work in which various artistic disciplines are on an equal footing:

"I don't like situations in which a script is brought in front of the director, and all the other elements then begin to *de-rotate* it. I would like for the character of a film — its final form — to begin to emerge from the initial conversations [...] between the director, cinematographer, musician, or, say, the art director So that nothing was pre-determined by one aspect alone.

**So that all the aspects
would be part of a
w h o l e [...]
rather than layering onto
one another as if you
were making a cake. So if
one was lost, you'd be in
t r o u b l e .**

This worked beautifully in *Daisies* with Věra and Ester Krumbachová.²⁷

Daisies can indeed be seen as a manifesto for a new direction in Czechoslovak cinema. The film owes its success to the fortunate artistic collaboration between the director and screenwriter Chytilová, her then-husband Kučera who was responsible for photography and much of the formal experimentation and Krumbachová, who designed the costumes and supervised art direction in addition to co-writing the screenplay. Each of these elements undeniably played a crucial role in shaping the film's singular style and, strikingly, the costumes became a decisive aspect in the early stages of the film's pre-production. As Krumbachová stressed, their colour palette became a *cornerstone* from which further ideas about the décor, props and overall stylisation were derived.²⁸ This makes *Daisies* unusual, even in the context of

the New Wave's collaborative spirit, and situates it in a line of experimental and arthouse films that were also costume-led but predominantly the result of a single author's vision — films such as Kenneth Anger's *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954), Sergei Parajanov's *The Color of Pomegranates* (1969) or Ulrike Ottinger's *Freak Orlando* (1981).

Krumbachová's design process varied wildly. For some films she created dozens of sketches, for others she barely sketched at all. Production budgets did not always allow for creating new wardrobes from scratch, and so she had to rely on Barrandov's costume store, and on actors volunteering their own clothing, which she would then alter by rearranging parts, cutting off and sewing on, creating new combinations, accessorising and otherwise restyling.²⁹ While working, she often carefully observed the unique individualities of the people behind the characters — be they actors, non-actors or extras — allowing their human condition to become part of the final design.³⁰ Krumbachová maintained that costume was a device through which, on the one hand, to make an immediate sensorial impact and, on the other, to furnish calculated, meaningful detail. What seems ironic, then, is that the details she conjured up were often deliberately understated, if not practically invisible: "Say, I make one sleeve shorter, and the other slightly longer. Nobody can tell by looking at it but there is a sort of disharmony. And you can instantly sense it. And you think, let me try, make it a tad shorter still, but not too much, so it's not visible."³¹ Such poetic stratagems, which she called "cunning tricks",³² are akin to what Viktor Shklovsky referred to as techniques of defamiliarisation (estrangement) — acts of making the habitual and the commonplace strange.³³ An off-kilter garment or a garment used out of context were intended to de-automatise routine ways of thinking and feeling, and to shift the perceptions of ordinary situations. This was often a delicate and intuitive process. Krumbachová refrained from making meaning transparent, preferring instead to lead the viewer back and forth, through fragments, ambiguities and contradictions.

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27 Kučera in Liehm, *Closely Watched Films*, 275–276; the emphasis is mine. Similarly, Krumbachová later wrote, with reference to her own practice: "The communication among the key crew members is vital — among the director, cinematographer, set builder, and costume designer, or the kind of costume designer who simultaneously oversees the overall image composition and colour palette, if the film is in colour." See Ester Krumbachová, "Transcript of a paper for the Graz-Österreich International Film Festival Symposium", June 1993 (Ester Krumbachová Archive, ©K002238_0002_0002).

28 Ibid., ©K002238_0002_0008–0009. Krumbachová did not take sole credit for this decision, tracing it back to initial "debates and sceptical mutual clashes, oh, how beautiful!" with Chytilová and Kučera.

29 Antonín Máša, "Dopis Martinu Fišerovi, 27. července 1998", in *Ester Krumbachová — první dáma českého filmu by Martin Fišer*, catalogue for an exhibition of documents from Krumbachová's life and

work at the Summer Film School Uherské Hradiště, 1998. See also Hofmanová, "Člověk v tolika podobách", 7.

30 Krumbachová cited in Liehm, *Closely Watched Films*, 270.

31 Krumbachová in an interview with Jana Klusáková, *Host Radiofóra*, aired 1995 on Czech Radio.

32 Ibid.

33 Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique", in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, eds. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 3–24.

Intellectually, she was drawn to problems without obvious resolution and conditions of inner conflict, through the genres of absurdity or tragedy-as-farce, or themes such as oppression disguised in seemingly joyful social rituals.

But her idea that an *invisible* detail can cause a semantic shift in a narrative also points in a more esoteric direction, implying magic. Not magic in the sense of sleight of hand but, rather, in the sense of a fetishistic investment in the power of inanimate things. Krumbachová maintained that a shorter sleeve or an ill-fitting collar could act upon an actor / character, their immediate situation and, ultimately, the whole universe of a film. There is an echo here of anecdotes surrounding the director Erich von Stroheim (notoriously, a fetishist of an altogether different kind) who, during the shooting of his decadent Hollywood blockbuster *The Merry Widow* (1925), reportedly had all the soldier characters wear silk underwear embroidered with the crests of their mythical country — fineries that would never be shown on camera.³⁴ Krumbachová used similar tactics in her set design too. When creating the banquet scene in *The Party and the Guests* (*O slavnosti a hostech*, dir. Jan Němec, 1965), she insisted on sourcing “genuine” props such as real silver cutlery (where cheaper substitutes would have passed for the real thing, especially in a black-and-white film).³⁵ Was she convinced that the objects’ noble origin, distinct weight and historical patina would elevate the occasion in a way alternatives could not? Such a belief would suggest a renunciation of cinema’s smoke-and-mirrors principle — its illusionistic capacity to make things appear as something else. With reference to Stroheim’s meticulous attention to detail, commentators have often evoked his “excessive” or “obsessive” realism. By comparison, Krumbachová had, I think, less interest in imitating reality on the screen than in channeling a truly authentic pro-filmic experience as a means towards something transcendental at the level of the filmic.

COSTUME-PHANTOMS

Krumbachová liked to refer to her costumes as *phantoms*. At times this was a general statement: “Costume — in the theatre as well as the cinema — is an event. It’s a phantom. Something of the story must happen in costume”;³⁶ and at other times the concept was narrowed down more specifically. In a conference paper presented shortly before her death, for example, she declared that the idea of a costume-phantom was a *method* of hers, which she used in some of her films, including *Daisies*, *The Party and the Guests* and *Carriage to Vienna* (*Kočár do Vídně*, dir. Karel Kachyňa, 1966). With specific reference to *Daisies*, she placed the costume-phantom in contrast to “dresses or clothing that smack of psychology”, noting:

“Had we taken the psychological route to costume design, we would have found ourselves in the obvious territory of fashionability and profane exclusivity, which would mean watering down a story about the pitiful nature of two hungry pests. We would not have been able to show their human indifference.”³⁷

What, then, did she mean by such an opposition? Can a closer look at the costuming of the *Daisies* protagonists help illuminate this elusive idea? The two Maries are “spoiled” teenage girls who pull pranks on unsuspecting victims — especially older men — and wreak havoc wherever they go. With girly hairstyles and big eyes covered in thick black make-up, they drift (and sometimes roll) from one episode to another, their spontaneous diableries being an apparent escape from boredom and apathy. The Maries’ wardrobe is youthful and fun, allowing for maximum movement and goofing around. When out and about in the city, they appear in simple, modishly streamlined shift dresses with a clean, A-line silhouette, bright colours and hemlines that are perpetually in danger of being a little too high. In private, they flaunt even more daring get-ups — babydoll dresses, frilled bikinis and plenty of underwear.

To contemporary (Western) sensibilities, the Maries’ bohemian spirit and recklessness represents a liberating abandonment of propriety. This is sometimes interpreted as a feminist

34 Jesse L. Lasky and Don Weldon, *I Blow My Own Horn* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1957), 229.

35 Vyskočil, interview.

36 *Host Radiofóra*.

37 Krumbachová, “Transcript of a paper”, ©002238_0002_0008.

subversion of patriarchy, at other times as a poke at glum totalitarianism and an anti-establishment “screw-you!” attitude.³⁸ Curiously, however, both Chytilova and Krumbachová were less inclined to see the film as a celebration of anarchic rebellion. Their professed intention was rather to condemn the girls’ “parasitism”, albeit by means of a comic inversion (burlesque, slapstick, hyperbole), which would offset the moralistic tone and highlight the absurdity of the girls’ stance.³⁹ For her part, Krumbachová referred to the Maries in no flattering terms, as “pests”, “loose women” (*lehčí dívenky*) and “sluts” (*štětky, kurvičky*), stating that their alarming charm and beastly instincts had a parallel in the demonic chic of Nazi SS men.⁴⁰

So how exactly do the costumes act as phantoms here, and how does this contrast with classical cinema’s preference for psychological determination? In common parlance, the “phantom” is closely bound with the fantastical, the illusory and the delusional, implying trickery of the eye over the mind. It is a form emptied out of the physical body that nevertheless possesses an insistent presence, like the “phantom limb” phenomenon described by Merleau-Ponty — a limb which is objectively absent, yet strongly felt.⁴¹ Thus, a phantom possesses agency, a capacity to behave autonomously. It can intrude and unsettle, but it can also act as a messenger. Even in ancient Greek literature, phantoms (*eidolons*) are portrayed as obscure spirits that can take on the likeness of, or even demonically possess, the bodies of the living, often to communicate or accomplish something of importance. It is in all these senses that the costumes in *Daisies* — and elsewhere — behave like phantoms. They make their presence felt and intervene in the story itself. Hence Krumbachová’s notion of an “event”, which, according to Slavoj Žižek, is (much like the phantom) fundamentally a disruptive thing, no matter how shattering or intimate. It is, he writes, something “miraculous”, “an appearance without solid being as its foundation” which emerges seemingly out of nowhere and “interrupts the usual flow of things”.⁴²

This would explain Krumbachová’s fondness for distortions, contradictions and incongruities — of time, place, situations or habitual representations. In *Daisies*, she made a conscious decision to avoid the “slut” iconography of sexy underwear and other such accoutrements: “instead, we chose the cheapest and most common clothing, with no eye-catching ornaments”, if only to demonstrate that “the term ‘little slut’ is not as unambiguous as it may seem to conventional morality.”⁴³ She noted that she had derived the colour palette of the girls’ dresses from the religious paintings of saints of the Italian quattrocento. The harmonious combinations of these colours were, to her, the “serious matter” that would dignify the girls’ pathetic story, lending it majesty and gravitas.⁴⁴ The costumes here — and elsewhere — are not really in the service of individual characters. They are neither indexes of their true selves, nor seismographs registering their deepest psychological tremors. Rather, they are akin to masks that turn people into ciphers.

Indeed, the theme of masking was one Krumbachová actively investigated as an artist, as did Chytilová, a former fashion model. There is a rare quasi-*vérité* moment in *Daisies* showing the two Maries mock-revering an alluring young woman in the public toilets. In contrast to their lack of polish, the woman’s svelte, mannequin-like physique and sophisticated elegance appear at once exquisite and overly pompous. As she adjusts her make-up in the mirror, with an urbane *savoir faire*, the girls sit there, gawping in awe and stupidly smiling, eventually succeeding in making her feel self-conscious. After a while, one of them declares (in voiceover): “An angel, and one that doesn’t fly!”. Though only brief and apparently inconsequential, this chance encounter is in fact significant. It becomes a telling clash between the Maries’ “fictional” world of dress-up and the “real” world of fashionable style and glamour whereby the latter is farcically revealed as a fabrication, another type of fiction.

While Chytilová’s critical sentiment towards fashion is well known from her debut film *The Ceiling* (*Strop*, 1961),⁴⁵

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38 See, for example, “Mark Kermode introduces *Daisies* (1966)”, March 8, 2019, video, <https://player.bfi.org.uk/subscription/film/watch-daisies-1966-online>; and Mark Kermode, Simran Hans, Wendy Ide, Guy Lodge and Jonathan Romney “Europe in 25 Films: The Critics’ Choice”, *The Guardian*, February 10, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/feb/10/european-film-must-see-25-movies?page=with%3Aimg-26>.

39 This view was held by both at the time around the film’s release as much as in the decades that followed. Chytilová famously described the film as a “philosophical documentary in the form of a farce”. Peter Hames, *Czech and Slovak Cinema: Theme and Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 151. For a discussion of Chytilová’s own declared intentions, and an excellent analysis that deftly reconciles the two opposing perspectives, see Lim, “Dolls in Fragments”.

40 Krumbachová, “Transcript of a paper”, ©K002238_0002_0007. See also Krumbachová in Liehm, *Closely Watched Films*, 297.

41 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

42 Slavoj Žižek, *Event: Philosophy in Transit* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), 2.

43 Krumbachová, “Transcript of a paper”, ©K002238_0002_0008–0009.

44 Ibid., ©K002238_0002_0008.

45 For more on this see Peter Hames, *The Czechoslovak New Wave* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), 183–184.

Krumbachová's own conflicted relationship with fashion is most explicitly revealed in a handful of unpublished polemical essays she wrote sometime during the 1970s, under the overarching title *Underneath the Dress (Pod šaty)*.⁴⁶ With an almost naïve sense of wonder (though one laced with a penetrating wryness), she asks here about the meaning of fashion in human history. Dwelling on its quaint and bizarre manifestations, she views it with a great deal of mistrust, as a fabricated social contract, to which people "bestowed their faith".⁴⁷ Dress, she argues, physically re-forms bodies; attributes of garments such as height, volume, fabric weight, density or lightness lend their wearers an air of majesty, dignity and attraction, or other qualities that may be desired, from humility to terror. Fashion is at once an instrument of power and control, and the illusion of such an instrument. It is a masquerade — a form of artful deceit, a process of mastering the decorum — wherein the mirror has played an especially central role:

"The mirror has taught man to control not only the draperies of a dress but also the poise of the body, hands and the face [...]"

courtly, political or religious ceremonies engendered the smile, the benevolent self-confidence, the quiet, pleasant voice, the gentleness of speech, nice walk, controlled movements — the mirror yielded its smooth and cold fruit."⁴⁸

If the themes of falsity, power, and social hierarchy (themes broadly shared with Marxist critics of fashion) run strong throughout the essays, so too does the concept of metamorphosis as a creative pursuit. Human desire for refinement and self-transformation, Krumbachová contends, may at heart be an attempt to escape the harsh realities of the natural body — its crudeness and mortality. Hence fashion's imagination and exuberant irrationality, which can be both wondrous and beastly

(as an example, Krumbachová describes the paradox of historical military uniforms, where, as she points out, the flamboyant use of gold, feathers, ribbons, capes and gloves decorates death and suffering).⁴⁹

The two Maries' avowed embrace of masquerade in *Daisies* seems to subvert the phoniness of fashion by calling its bluff. The girls' own version of dressing up is full of humour, mischief and exaggeration. Theirs is a fantastical performance, which at times openly parodies fashion by imitating its repertoire of posing, walking and gesturing. In scene after scene, the girls are seen tinkering with clothes, accessorising their simple dresses, or improvising garments out of blankets and found objects: picture frames with taxidermy butterflies are fashioned into impromptu underwear; a stiff wire mesh is turned into an asymmetrical cape; a sheer white curtain is draped over the body, half ghostly garb, half exotic gown and a mass of wood shavings makes up a giant opulent hat evocative of the Edwardian era. Arguably the most emblematic of all the DIY-style creations are the extraordinary newspaper jumpsuits of the final "reform" sequence, fastened to the girls' bodies with strings that resemble wire netting holding

together the shards of a shattered ceramic bowl.⁵⁰ In costumes like this, Krumbachová shows fashion's capacity for unbridled creativity and play, as something to celebrate. One can logically conclude that such expressions of



excessive imagination are themselves phantom-like (for isn't the word *phantom* also related to the idea of *fantasy*, *fantasising*?), able to powerfully corroborate a sympathy for the Maries and undermine an unequivocally serious, critical reading of their actions.

Throughout her career, Krumbachová advocated costume as one of cinema's fundamentals, arguing that it must go beyond rudimentary characterisation — what she dismissed as "the obvious territory" — to "philosophically transcend a character's

46 These essays are accessible in the Ester Krumbachová Archive in the form of typed and corrected manuscripts, with some existing in more than one version. I am not wholly certain in my dating of them, except for Krumbachová's reference to current women's fashion of "suits" and "felt hats", which would suggest the 1970s. Ester Krumbachová Archive, [EKR002160_0001-0021](#).

47 Ester Krumbachová, "Underneath the Dress I" (Ester Krumbachová Archive, [EKR002160_0002_0011](#)).

48 Ibid., [EKR002160_0002_0009-0010](#).

49 Ibid., [EKR002160_0002_0012](#), [EKR002160_0008](#).

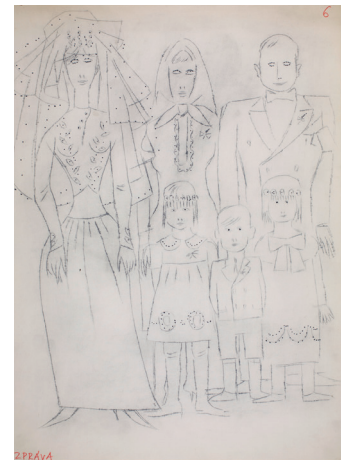
Taking a broad historical and cultural perspective, Krumbachová targets men's fashion more than women's. On the subject of uniforms she takes a decidedly feminist standpoint, delivering a scathing critique of male war-mongering, self-love and vanity.

50 To the writer Josef Škvorecký these outfits symbolized "the correct outlook" on life. Škvorecký, *Všichni ti bystří mladí muži a ženy*, 119.

Krumbachová cited in *Pátrání po Ester*.
Eric Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (London: Routledge, 2006), 199.

(ii) From the film *Daisies* (Sedmikrásky, dir. Věra Chytilová, 1966), © Czech Film Fund, source: Národní filmový archiv, Prague

realistic appearance”.⁵¹ Indeed, many of her characters are not full-blooded humans but stylised embodiments of human qualities within allegorical narratives. In rejecting the “psychological route”, Krumbachová allowed costumes the self-determined existence of spectres that can violate a film’s meaning and frustrate audience expectations. It would be an error, however, to understand her costumes merely at a metaphoric level (as signs, messengers). Just as importantly, they are also things on display, objects of visual pleasure that draw attention to themselves and have the power to beguile. After all, the etymological root of “phantom” is anchored in the very notion of visibility, in acts of making something visible: it has a common origin with the Greek φάντασμα (*phántasma*), derived from the verbs φαντάζω (*phantázō*), meaning “make visible” and φαίνω (*phainō*), “cause to appear, bring to light” — with φά meaning “shine”.⁵² This is another way in which Krumbachová broke with the classical tradition: she allowed her costumes to step into the limelight, blatantly and audaciously transgressing the self-contained realist illusion. Instead of merely propping up the narrative in any given film, her costumes also regularly intervened with it, always ready to challenge its semantic unity.⁵³



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53 For more on this, see Gaines, “Costume and Narrative”; see also my article “On Fire: When Fashion Meets Cinema”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Film Theory*, ed. Kyle Stevens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

(iii) From the film *Daisies* (Sedmíkrásky, dir. Věra Chytilová, 1966), © Czech Film Fund, source: Národní filmový archiv, Prague

(iv) From the film *Fruit of Paradise* (Ovoce stromů rajských jíme, dir. Věra Chytilová, 1969), © Czech Film Fund, source: Národní filmový archiv, Prague

(v) From the film *Daisies* (Sedmíkrásky, dir. Věra Chytilová, 1966), © Czech Film Fund, source: Národní filmový archiv, Prague
 (vi) Ester Krumbachová, Costume design for the film *The Party and the Guests* (*O slavnosti a hostech*, directed by Jan Němec, 1966), Ester Krumbachová Archive, © 000569