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Subverting Authority of the State Through Gendered Resistance

The Cold War era left behind not merely geopolitical fractures, but profound cultural reckonings—a collective consciousness negotiating the growing dissonance between revolutionary promises and lived injustices. Věra Chytilová's *Daisies* (1966), Han Hyeong-mo's *The Hand of Destiny* (1954), and Chŏn Kwangyong's *Kapitan Ri* (1962) emerge as pivotal works grappling with this fallout, interrogating the mythologies of authority, solidarity, and identity amidst political decay. Even as they are formally quite different in style—absurdist film, socialist-realist fiction, and ironic short story—the three pieces are unified in their militant distrust of the state's moral guidance. Under the striated surfaces of gendered revolt, the decay of collectivity, and heroic betrayal, these pieces offer a bitter denunciation of postwar modernity. Their radical re-imagining mandates a reevaluation of resistance itself: not the heroic revolution, but shattered and often intimate acts of rebellion camouflaged within the ordinary.

In this series of works, *Daisies* presents itself as a subversive mode of rebellion in film. Chytilová's two Maries perform disobedience as stylistic, moral, and structural disruption, stating that they desire to be spoiled because the world is spoiled (*Daisies*, 00:55:30). Their anarchic activities—seduction, consumption, destruction—are not nihilist voids but affective interrogations of the social scripts that fashion femininity, work, and civic conformity under late socialism. In one of the first scenes, the Maries awkwardly flirt with middle-aged men at a restaurant, over-performing their sexuality to absurd degrees, thus laying bare the transactional

nature of gendered power (*Daisies*, 00:08:45). Their behavior becomes increasingly puppetlike throughout the film, emphasizing the artifice of gendered decorum they are required to maintain.

The notorious and now-infamous banquet scene, during which the Maries dine and ritually deconstruct a hedonistic banquet, grotesquely satirizes decadence and betrays the corruption behind state-ordained consumer rituals (*Daisies*, 01:00:25). What gives this devastation its particular potency is its figurative dismantling of abundance as state machinery: the banquet, so meticulously arranged, is an emblem of national fantasies of affluence that fall apart upon analysis. Watching the Maries stamp, eat, and laugh—using their own bodies as instruments of attack—I was struck by how Chytilová resists facile judgment: the Maries hollow conventions from within outward, making performance itself a gesture of destruction. Even when the Maries subsequently attempt to "turn good again" by re-making the table they destroyed, their feeble efforts are foiled by the falling ceiling (*Daisies*, 01:09:50). This moment reveals that redemption in an inherently corrupt system is impossible and absurd. By deconstructing innocence-corruption dichotomies, *Daisies* constructs a feminist praxis avant la lettre—a praxis that theorizes not revolt in theory, but performs, dances, and eats it into being. Their friendship, turbulent but deeply intimate, indicates that in the splinters of forced meaning, intricate but alive new collective forms of life are possible.

Han Hyeong-mo's *The Hand of Destiny* offers a calmer, more personal vision of revolution—one based not on coordinated uprising, but on the slow loss of ideological devotion through emotional awakening. Jung-ae, one of the North Korean agents working under the pseudonym "Margaret," is initially an eager instrument of the state, using her charms to seduce and manipulate an impoverished South Korean student. But the finely honed machinery of espionage begins to fall apart under the strain of true love. Her reserve cracks when she

confesses, “I may not deserve to be loved by you, but I can love you. That’s my freedom” (*The Hand of Destiny* 41:01–41:17). Here, love is not an escape from politics, but its undoing—a revolutionary act of self-will in a life scripted for deceit. Jung-ae’s refusal to complete her final mission—the assassination of her lover—is the film’s greatest moment of uprising. Her opposition—“I can’t do it” (*The Hand of Destiny* 1:17:40)—is not howled in the streets or sanctioned by collective power, but mumbled against the steel dictates of officialdom. Her resistance here arises not from ideological conviction but from unbearable intimacy.

What gives *The Hand of Destiny* its particular subversive power is the way it positions gender as the terrain on which loyalty breaks down. Jung-ae’s entire self has been built for state performance, but she gradually retrieves her personhood through love and grief. When she insists on being called by her real name—“Please, call me Jung-ae” (*The Hand of Destiny* 1:26:58)—she not only refuses the codename imposed on her, but symbolically severs herself from the role her past demanded. Her final act—voluntarily placing herself to be killed not by the regime but by her beloved—renders the battlefield humane. “Please… kill me by your hand” (*The Hand of Destiny* 1:28:01), she pleads, collapsing state logic into the irreducible tension of love, shame, and dignity. Whereas *Daisies* explodes with baroque excess, and *Kapitan Ri* disintegrates with ironic disillusion, *The Hand of Destiny* dissolves ideology through affective contradiction. Jung-ae’s betrayal of her mission is not a political thesis—it is an embodied fracture, an erotic refusal to become the machine the state trained her to be.

In *Kapitan Ri*, Chŏn Kwangyong provides an even narrower but no less queasy critique of ideological failure. No longer the national hero that he once was, the fallen Captain Ri clutches pieces of a lost dominance, nostalgically clinging to such symbols as his engraved watch, which he imagines in terms of “a miniature of his bygone life” (Chŏn 61). This

sentimentalism, far from evoking awe, works instead as an affirmation of his egocentrism and alienation. His pride is founded on the validation of vanishing authority figures, as in how he smiles over Stenkov's approbation, chanting, "Ochen, ochen… Ochen khorosho!" (Chŏn 80), with abject yearning. His concern with dignity and title—denuded of modern relevance—makes him blind to the slight contempt of succeeding generations. One young man, for instance, responds skeptically to Ri's ambitions for his son: "What for?" (Chŏn 71). Their deferential politeness is less reverence than passive resistance—a way of letting myths collapse without open rebellion.

Chŏn's irony unfolds not through spectacle, but through the slow erosion of reverence. Ri's decline is traced in small humiliations and moments of fading significance. Even his ceremonial gestures—like gifting tokens of his service—are soured by self-doubt, as he privately wonders, "Where was the value, the satisfaction, in having them?" (Chŏn 81). The hero myth that had previously united collective memory now isolates him alone. His boasts of memory are met with deafness, and his final patriotic gestures are calculated ones—reiterations of an unconvincing past. Thus performing, *Kapitan Ri* is a fable of disillusionment in the Cold War: an indicator of a state-father whose amorous power is tainted by the pressure of recurrence.

In this subtle deconstruction of narrative dominance, *Kapitan Ri* speaks powerfully to *Daisies*: both dismantle the performative machinery of state authority, but in different tonal registers—carnivalesque absurdity in Chytilová, weary irony in Chŏn. In *Kapitan Ri*, gender is less explicit, but the crumbling of heroic masculinity subtly undermines the patriarchal foundations of nationalism. Across *Daisies, The Hand of Destiny,* and *Kapitan Ri*, rebellion appears not as a coherent movement, but as dispersed, contradictory resistance. Solidarity, where it exists, is tenuous; authority, when it endures, is revealed as hollow spectacle. In *Daisies*,

solidarity manifests in anarchic, life-affirming female camaraderie. In *The Hand of Destiny*, it survives through fleeting alliances against shared fear. In *Kapitan Ri*, solidarity dissolves into silent estrangement, exposing the fragile illusions underpinning exhausted myths.

Each vision is complicated by gender. *The Hand of Destiny* highlights the “invisible” sacrifice and labor of women sustaining social survival. *Kapitan Ri* quietly stages the redundancy of masculine heroism, hollowing the foundations of nationalist power. Retracing these works, we find that rebellion is rarely the grand act mythologized by nation-states. Instead, it takes the form of obstinate survival, muffled dissent, and fractured bodily persistence against structural collapse.

Engaging with *Daisies*, *The Hand of Destiny*, and *Kapitan Ri* challenged my assumptions about what resistance looks like amidst systemic collapse. I had once been drawn to the idea of revolution as something coherent, heroic, and visible, but these works revealed a deeper, less comfortable truth: that dissent often takes the form of fractured acts, modest survivals, and stubborn refusals that are not openly declared. Witnessing the Maries dance, gorge, and wreck—not out of allegiance to a cause, but simply to affirm their existence against absurdity—I understood that resistance can be disorganized, unattractive, and yet profoundly transformative. The reluctant solidarity of the female protagonist spy in *The Hand of Destiny*, and Ri's isolated resentment in *Kapitan Ri*, further grounded my understanding of how collective memory, gendered labor, and political exhaustion shape the fragile textures of survival and defeat.

These realizations resonated with my own anxieties about how change unfolds in the contemporary world. At a time when grand narratives appear increasingly fragile, these Cold War works reminded me that small acts—whether a whispered "no," a reassembled dinner table,

or a bitter laugh—can carry immense power. I now recognize that maintaining human dignity often requires living within contradiction, accepting incompleteness, and forging temporary solidarities even amid broken systems. Rather than offering direct answers, these pieces taught me that resistance is not a singular moment, but an ongoing process: it is performed through the relentless refusal to abandon meaning, even when meaning itself feels impossible. This insight has profoundly shaped not only my understanding of Cold War cultural production, but also my broader sense of activism, solidarity, and perseverance in times of uncertainty.

Ultimately, a reading of *Daisies*, *The Hand of Destiny*, and *Kapitan Ri* overturns sanitized visions of Cold War cultural production. These films reject neat narratives of triumph. They argue that when grand ideologies fracture, it is not the end of politics but its transformation—at the scale of gesture, affect, and intimate disruption. They insist that liberation is not a singular event, but a stubborn, embodied, and continuous labor, present wherever bodies refuse containment. Through witnessing their acts of refusal, however fragmented, we sense the persistent heartbeat of human freedom.

Works Cited

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