

## **Letters to the Heroes: Exhibition and reception of Hanzelka and Zikmund's travelogues in Czechoslovakia of the 1950s**

Pavel Skopal,  
Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

### **Abstract:**

Drawing mainly on personal letters from cinemagoers and readers and on reports by cinema exhibitors, this essay examines the reasons for the enormous popularity of the feature-length documentary films shot by Czech travellers Hanzelka and Zikmund. The essay identifies certain modes of the movies' reception and argues that the popularity of the films was fuelled by a complex network of media products that were created around this duo (radio and newspaper reports, travel books). The example of the travelogues draws attention to the fundamental mechanisms of the distribution and reception of entertainment values in the cultural environment of the (post)Stalinist Czechoslovakia.

**Keywords:** cinema reception; socialist cinema; travelogues; cinema exhibition; popular culture in socialism

This essay concentrates on the history of exhibition and reception of three travelogues from Africa and South America, premiered in 1953 and 1954 in Czechoslovakia: *Afrika I. – Z Maroka na Kilimandžáro* (1952), *Afrika II. – Od rovníku ke Stolové hoře* (1953) and *Z Argentiny do Mexika* (1954).<sup>1</sup> These films are interesting as examples of reception history for several reasons. The first and most important is the extreme popularity that was achieved by the travellers, Jiří Hanzelka and Miroslav Zikmund (or H+Z, an abbreviation widely used for them), as well as by the pictures they made – despite the fact that the movies were black and white documentaries with post-synchronous sound and a didactic voice over. The first movie attracted 1,585,000 viewers in the Czech lands<sup>2</sup> in the year of its premiere – it was the fourth most-attended movie of that year. A second reason why the topic deserves attention is the complex network of media outputs that informed readers of newspapers

and magazines and radio listeners of the filmmakers' journey through Africa and America. The media production was supported by the communist regime (that had taken power in Czechoslovakia after the putsch of February 1948), and that helped to establish an extraordinary degree of fame for the duo – an exceptional phenomenon in the Stalinist era of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Besides a huge amount of articles in newspapers, the reports that H+Z were sending to Czechoslovakia were regularly published in the magazines *Svět práce* (The world of work) and *Svět motorů* (The world of motors), and their fifteen minute-long, weekly broadcast radio reports were among the most popular programs. In 1952, a three-part book *Afrika snů a skutečnosti* was published – and immediately sold out.

The uniqueness of the research topic also relies on the extraordinary fullness of the core archival source. Zikmund built up a personal archive and saved materials from both personal and institutional sources that would otherwise have been destroyed. In 1995, the materials were donated to the Museum of Southeastern Moravia in Zlín. Subsequently, Archive H+Z was established with the purpose of curating and preserving the materials. This collection has made it possible to follow the history of the exhibition and its reception not only through articles in period press, but also through the numerous letters that were sent to the travellers by their admirers.<sup>3</sup>

Some caution is warranted when dealing with the letters – especially the collective ones, such as those from Young Pioneer groups or school classes, as they tended to reproduce the preferred meanings spread by the ideological apparatus, rather than offering genuine traces of individual reception. Given the political processes in this period, the letters' authors would probably avoid expressing a strongly critical attitude (in fact, personal letters were massively read by the Ministry of Interior as a source of information on the attitudes of citizens).<sup>4</sup> This circumstance limits the scale of meanings and modes of reception that can be detected in the letters, and it therefore mostly excludes the availability of any oppositional readings. The content of the letters predominantly verifies this supposition – critical comments on their books and films are exceptional and mostly limited to anonymous letters. Nevertheless, the source is still extremely valuable, especially since my intention is not to explore the full range of possible readings but, rather, to investigate the sources and reasons for the enormous popularity of Hanzelka and Zikmund.

As Eric Smoodin remarks in one of the few analyses which use letters of film viewers for a historical research of film reception, these letters cannot be the basis for a real ethnography of the audience.<sup>5</sup> In this case, the situation is made even more complicated by the fact that the movies had never been the exclusive subject of the letters. Through the figures of Hanzelka and Zikmund, a whole cluster of discourses is addressed: on travelling, colonialism, work, emigration, etc. Moreover, these discourses are actualized through a range of media (radio, press, cinema, television) and in different institutional milieus: movie theaters, schools, workplaces, households. In surveying these, I try to follow some of the most significant discursive fields active in the frame of reference of the travelogues' receptions.<sup>6</sup>

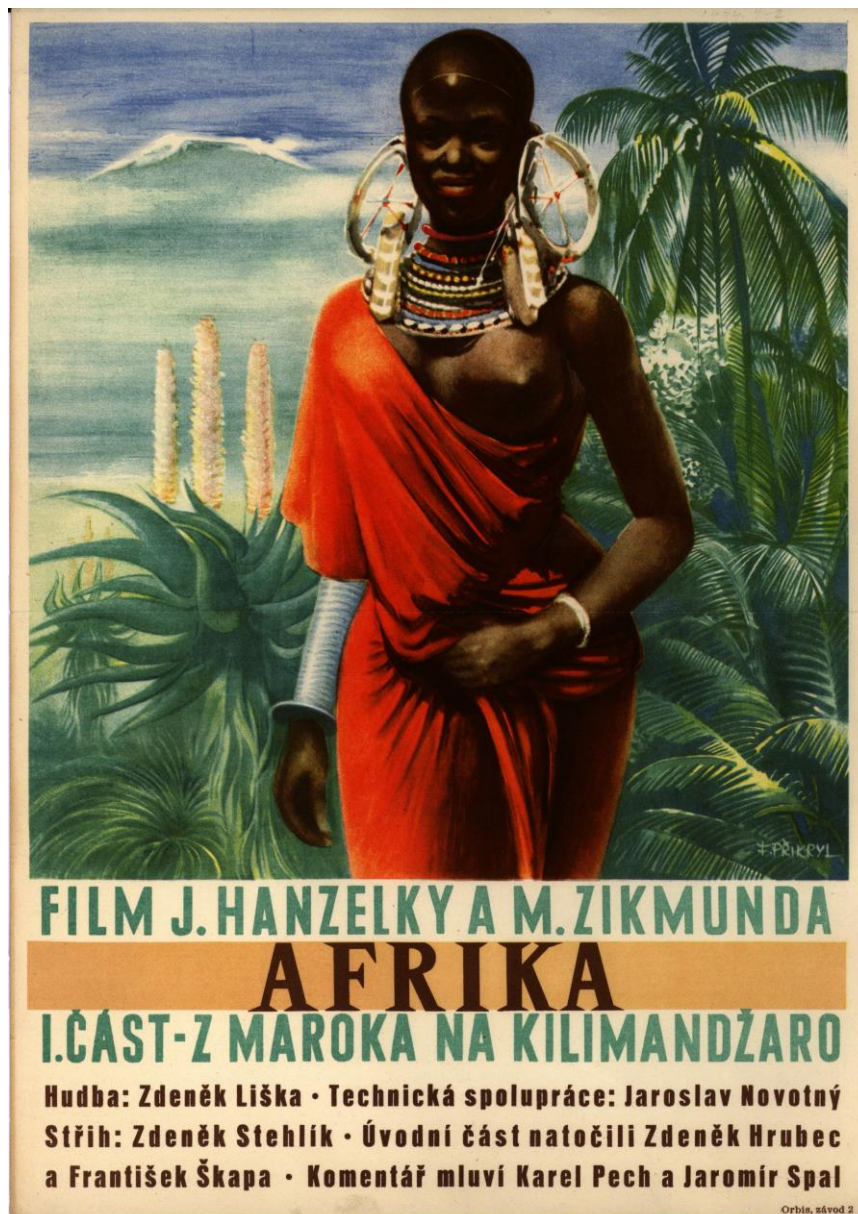
The fans' letters represent valuable material that helps to disclose the shapes of viewers' experience, expectations and desires in the 1950s. Besides the letters themselves, the archive in Zlín holds the reports on viewers' reactions to *Africa II* that were sent in by cinema managers to the Board for Cinefication.<sup>7</sup> As mentioned, these reports need to be approached cautiously, as some of them were completed with an apparent intention of providing such information as would please their superiors. One cinema manager declared that "throughout the discussion after the screening, a lot of viewers pointed out that the western capitalists exploited the unconscious nations despite the propagated freedom and prosperity – it showed that the movie carried out its political mission" – an assertion that certainly is an apt expression of an ideal readership as modelled by the authorities,<sup>8</sup> but more suspicious as a proper portrayal of empirical readers' reception. Still, most of the reports are very useful as pretty reliable evidence that gives an opportunity to reconstruct more precisely what movie exhibition looked like in the 1950s. This is evident, for example, in the mentioning of factors commonly associated with screenings at the time, such as interruptions and an uncertainty over start and end times of screenings. The reasons for this were blackouts – nine of the 136 archived reports explicitly mentioned blackouts as an element that influenced the attendance or prevented the possibility of specifying the start of the screening.

When complemented by other sources (The National Archives in Prague and period journals and newspapers), the unique archival materials allow a complex contextualization and reconstruction of the horizon of reception. The first part of this essay offers a brief history of Hanzelka and Zikmund's project of the journey around the world. Next, I focus on the history of distribution and exhibition of the three feature films based on the journey to Africa and South America. The next part analyses how the movies were presented in the period press and which registers of reading were proposed by the critical discourse, highlighting the educational values of the movies and the critique of colonialism of the Western powers, all the while acknowledging the entertaining value (to a strictly limited degree). This analysis provides the background for the comparison with traces of the actual reception by contemporary viewers as I try to reconstruct some of the common and stable modes of reception. I will argue that it is possible to identify three such modes: the experience of suspense that was related to the methods of narrativization in the features; the use of the movies as a tool for virtual travelling; and the visual pleasure of the presented "attractions".

### **1. The project of the journey around the world and its media cover**

In 1946, Hanzelka and Zikmund asked the Ministry of Information for financial support for a project that was presented as "the promotion of the Tatra car, as well as the state" and that aimed to shoot a travelogue for the Ministry of Education.<sup>9</sup> Young engineers (Hanzelka was born in 1920, Zikmund in 1919) emphasized the economic purposes of the journey (establishing business contacts, gathering information on duties and traffic, etc.), while some news reports<sup>10</sup> as well as car manufacturer Tatra stressed the adventurous features of

the journey. Tatra also intended to promote its Tatra T-87 model and to establish contacts with business partners.<sup>11</sup> Then, however, came the communist putsch in Czechoslovakia in February 1948. The discourse on the expedition changed radically as the new communist regime shaped it for its own purposes. One of the characteristic features of the change was that the presentation of the journey as a sporting performance was removed and the goal of the journey was set in a direct contrast to the car expeditions of the “First Republic” era (1918-1938) which were critically characterized as “sporting joyrides” or “would-be strong gestures”.<sup>12</sup>



Picture 1: Poster for *Africa I*. Prague's theater Sevastopol.

Hanzelka and Zikmund set out on their journey in April 1947, ten months before the communist putsch and the hermetic closing of the borders. Their popularity was definitely enhanced by the adventurous character and exoticism with which the expedition was

associated, as it appealed to citizens who had no chance to go abroad. What permanently grounded their popularity, however, was the pair's extraordinary productiveness: in the course of the journey and shortly after the return to the Czechoslovakia, they prepared 293 printed reports and 702 radio reports. Just in the 1950s, the travellers published 7 books about the journey – one of them, *Afrika snů a skutečnosti*, had five editions and was used in communist cultural policy as an example of the new, “correct” literature. Together with professional filmmaker Jaroslav Novotný, who specialized in school and educational movies, they made 10 short movies and 3 features in the Studio for popular-scientific and educational movies in Gottwaldov.<sup>13</sup> Czechoslovak Radio broadcast the reports during the years 1947-1952, which means they remained on the public's radar a long time after the return of Hanzelka and Zikmund to Czechoslovakia on November 1<sup>st</sup> 1950. According to one survey, these reports were the seventh most listened to program of the radio (*Rozhlasové reportáže mívaly mimořádný ohlas*, 2007).<sup>14</sup>

A few other reports were available to readers in the late 1940s and the 1950s (written by travellers or writers such as František Alexander Elstner; Ladislav Mikeš Pařízek; Norbert Frýd; Jaroslav Raimund Vávra), but those from Hanzelka and Zikmund were exceptional both for the level of their popularity and for the support they received from official cultural policy. This is evident both from the high print-runs (e.g., 50,000 copies of *Afrika snů a skutečnosti*) and from the fact that their books were used as a model case of the “new” literature supported by the regime in its fight against “trash literature”.

Besides the reports, there were other outputs of the journey: slides were made for the Ministry of Information,<sup>15</sup> and Hanzelka and Zikmund gave a series of lectures and participated in forums with screenings of their movies. A very popular exhibition was prepared that started in Prague (Náprstek's museum) and then travelled around the country.<sup>16</sup> Hanzelka and Zikmund's output was exceptional both in quantity and in its concept of regular printed and broadcast reporting that created an impression that the reader/viewer could follow the trip and share the travellers' experience continuously.

However, Hanzelka and Zikmund had not planned to produce a feature film. Initially, they limited all the shooting to a concept of a short educational movie for schools: “We came from the position that schools would not be interested so much in the persons of travellers and filmmakers as in the Egyptian fellahs, the Valley of the Kings, the glaciers on Kilimanjaro, or dwarves in Congo.”<sup>17</sup> However, both the press and the radio asked them for a higher level of personalisation, and Novotný urged them to film themselves as well; not as stars, of course, but as devoted men working for the common benefit. The cultural policy of the communist regime promoted the creation of a new kind of a viewer: this viewer “does not adore film ‘stars’ blindly” and, thanks to this, “the old kind of stars’ fandom is dead”.<sup>18</sup> In fact, the iconography of stardom was used in the 1950s only for character actors (often Soviet ones) and it was usually accompanied by a reference to the progressiveness of the actors or the interpreted characters.<sup>19</sup> A person could be individualized and celebrated only if he or she was a prototype of “a new man of the new era”, a creator of a better society. Hanzelka and Zikmund and their journey were presented precisely in this way: as men



working for the socialist society and for Czechoslovak industry, as promoters of Czechoslovakia and its new social order. The travellers were used as an ideal – for instance for tractor-drivers, who were advised (in an instructional filmstrip “an exemplary tractor-driver”) to learn “the perfect symbiosis between man and machine” from Hanzelka and Zikmund.<sup>20</sup> The fame of H+Z was compared to the supposed eminence of Stakhanovites: “Just as the excellent work made the lathe operator Václav Svoboda famous around the Republic, and just as everybody knows the name Karel Doutnáč, the two travellers became famous thanks to their purposive, dutifully made work”.<sup>21</sup>

The media presentation of H+Z, however, elicited a mass popularity that was soon followed by an unwelcome symptom of stardom: a crowd of girl fans. The press of the time ignored this phenomenon, with the exception of a local rag that mocked the behaviour of the fans after Hanzelka and Zikmund’s arrival in Gottwaldov where they opened an exhibition:

A whole bunch of girls, absolutely sane till that moment, started to resemble somebody who had been standing too long on the sun without a cap. (...) they formed a mass around the famous travellers, posed as being in love, or unconcerned, or dully, according to their abilities. (...) At the moment when the pictures were taken, a tragedy was within a reach – each of the girls wanted to be photographed as close to the engineers as possible. The travellers surely felt worse than among the head-hunters in the South American forest.<sup>22</sup>

There are letters from young girls – asking for a picture, a phone number, or a date – in the private correspondence of H+Z as well. Next to them we can find, however, letters that express admiration for the outstanding performance, or a feeling of trust and closeness to the men, who clearly became moral leaders for some fans. A woman from Plzeň asked them to be godfathers for her baby. The same letter provides us with a lively example of the range of emotions the media image of H+Z was able to stimulate:

The radio often broadcast your reports in the time you were still on the journey around the world. I was waiting for each of the quarter-hours with joy and I was thrilled about what new and interesting we would hear about. And the joy from your news was joined by silent, selfish pride and self-evaluation coming from the fact that all these deeds were carried out by Czech people, citizens of my state and men representing the homeland with dignity. When you finally returned, I visited your exhibition in Nárstek’s museum. It exceeded all my expectations and I thought: the men who had achieved something like that must be magnificent. My pleasure in your work was not disappointed either by the movie *Africa I*, which I had seen twice. I

thought I would like to have children that would be like you. That is why I'm asking you to be the godfathers of my child.<sup>23</sup>

For the press, however, the conflict between the extraordinary popularity and the unacceptability of star status in the proposed new social order could be managed only through persistent references to the travellers' hard work, and to their effort to create the new society – this way, the press was able to justify the fame as being of a new kind.

## II. Promotion and exhibition of the travelogues



Picture II: Poster: *From Argentina to Mexico*

Both parts of the Africa movie premiered in 1953, and *From Argentina to Mexico* in 1954. Official support of the movies combined with a huge interest from viewers resulted in an exceptionally long run the first-run cinemas: 11 weeks for *Africa I*, 18 weeks for *Africa II*, and 14 weeks for *From Argentina to Mexico*. The two parts of *Africa* reached an overall

attendance of 3,433,000 viewers by the end of 1953, while 1,479,000 viewers watched the third movie. In comparison, the 1953 feature with the longest run was the Czech film *Nástup* (1952) – a politically preferred adaptation of a socialist-realism style novel (15 weeks, 1,648,000 viewers). Two Soviet movies, *Sadko* (1952) and *Admiral Ushakov* (1953), reached 14 weeks (with 1,983,000 and 1,354,000 viewers). The extremely popular French film *Fanfan la Tulipe* (1950) with the adored Gérard Philipe received 2,500,000 viewers while its run was limited to 10 weeks. The numbers confirm that the travelogues were both popular and firmly supported by official policy.

The marketing campaign that accompanied the films exploited the attractiveness of the travelogues. The voice-over commentary for the *Africa I* trailer highlights the values of virtual traveling, exoticism, and the experience of suspense and surprise, while the educational role of the movie is only briefly mentioned at the end:

The movie will guide you across the north of Africa, it will show you the rest of the Moorish culture as well as the contemporary life of the Arabs in the French colonies (...) you will stop in Tobruk (...) You will experience the bustle in the port of Alexandria (...) you will see Muslim festivity (...) you will be surprised by an eccentric hobby of the Egyptian prince (...) you will see in your own eyes the drudgery of his dependents (...) you will visit the legendary pyramids (...) the most dramatic part of the movie is the passage through the Nubian Desert (...) you will feel relief when the travellers find their way from the desert maze (...) in the movie of Hanzelka and Zikmund, you will experience Africa as it really is.<sup>24</sup>

The viewing experience is not presented primarily as a learning process, as would fit an ethnographic or documentary movie. Instead, the emphasis is put on emotions, the experience of suspense, surprise, and relief, and on the virtual displacement of the viewer to distant, exotic, and at that time absolutely inaccessible places. The promotional flyer for *Africa II* emphasized the exoticism of the continent and the natives, the beauty of nature, the adventurousness and the suspense. The flyer also used the pretence of ethnographic imagery in order to present half-naked women, something which would be unimaginable in any other context in the Stalinist era. These images did limit the movie's reach to the 16+ audience segment, and led to cinema-goers' indignation, possibly harming overall attendance.<sup>25</sup>

An important context of the period's reception was that of Czechoslovakia's contemporary poverty, including shortage of goods and extreme consumer frustration. The film distributors carefully evaded any images of consumption and fortune in western countries. The reality of the poverty in early 1950s Czechoslovakia was so pervasive, however, that even images from the poor countries in Africa were feared to rise viewers' frustration: Novotný advised H+Z not to put pictures of bananas in the movie as "it would not be suitable to show in our country what abundance of the fruit there is elsewhere".<sup>26</sup>



Reviews of the travelogues further suggested viewers read them through a parallel with the experience and environment of the viewers – with the alleged successes of socialism as a directive for understanding and comparing the movie images:

There is no explicit reference in the movie *Africa I*, but you can't avoid thinking of the dams of the Soviet Union, the irrigation channels, the construction of Volga – Don, where machines made the job of people, the beautiful streets of Moscow, Leningrad, Stalingrad. And also thinking of our socialist buildings, of the new housing estates, of our life, as well as of the new Warsaw, the new streets of Hungary, Bulgaria, Rumania, the Stalin's alley in Berlin.<sup>27</sup>

As such, a reception spectrum emerges that, on the one hand, sees appear a scale of entertainment values attributed to the movies, mostly via its viewers, and, on the other side sees pushed a preferential reading of the travelogues as part of a register of a critique of imperialism. The latter is often supported through the rhetorical trope of a contrast or juxtaposition. This trope was noticeably used in the movies. Some contrasts were presented as the result of a *temporary* cultural decay (next to “the poor peasants fighting for every drop of water” there are “the monumental witnesses of the ancient times, the arcs of the aqueducts”). Mostly, however, the decay was presented as an effect of the imperialist policies of the Western countries (“the English did not allow a construction of a hydroelectric plant”; “huge cranes idle in the port (...) the work of men is cheaper than the work of the machines”).<sup>28</sup> To a certain extent, the documentaries employs tropes traditionally applied in the “Western” representation of exotic territories: the trope of infantilization (the colonized embody an earlier stage of human or cultural development), or the penetration of a *terra incognita* by the figure of the “discoverer” (endowed by the aura of scientificity invoked by the images of maps or technical equipment).<sup>29</sup> This discourse of modernity sometimes evokes the conventional Western binarism of modern vs. primitive. Yet the rhetoric of Hanzelka and Zikmund's travelogues frequently also differs from such conventions; nor does it follow closely the Soviet movies' tradition of Socialist modernization tropes<sup>30</sup> – for instance, the movies never juxtapose shots from Africa and South America with images of achievements of socialism, or with malevolent capitalists,<sup>31</sup> and they refuse to infer the inevitable transposition of the underdeveloped countries into the marxist history. Rather, in Hanzelka and Zikmund's travelogues, the images of primitive, pre-modern ways of life and working processes are juxtaposed with a *general* potential of modernization. The audio-commentaries blame the selfish interests of Western colonizers for keeping the people in their poor conditions, but the rhetoric does not differentiate explicitly between capitalist and socialist forms of modernization.



Picture III: *Africa II*, a poster in a Prague street

### III. The discourse of the film reviews and the preferred meanings

The next two sections will analyze the journalistic discourse, with its typical rhetorical figures, and the empirical reception by the cinemagoers, respectively.

Reviews in newspapers and magazines situated the travelogues within several discursive fields – the critique of colonialism and imperialism being the most prevalent of them. At the same time, the preferred meanings constructed by the period articles framed, marginalized or suppressed the entertainment values of the features.

The anti-colonialist rhetoric used the above-mentioned trope of contrast and juxtaposition as well as a topos of “an insight beneath the surface” – the capacity for this insight was associated with the values of the *new kind of report* the documentaries were said to be. Hanzelka and Zikmund, it was argued, “did not see just the surface, they deeply reflected things and discovered by their words, pictures and films the incredibly difficult lives of the common people in the sucked out countries”,<sup>32</sup> they found “the poverty beneath a glamorous surface”,<sup>33</sup> the movie *Africa I* “does not glide over a shiny and attractive surface of the tropical and oriental Africa”.<sup>34</sup> A similar ideologically inspired reading was also applied to some of the private letters sent to Hanzelka and Zikmund: “... I have never read a book like this one. Imperialism plays the biggest, unfortunately dirty role in the book,”<sup>35</sup> “you have opened the eyes of hundreds of thousands. You described the enormous poverty and suffering of people who live under the rule of the capitalists.”<sup>36</sup> This infiltration of the official discourse and its most pervasive tropes into the “private” sphere of letters manifests itself most strongly in the children’s letters, which were obviously written under teachers’ tutelage: “You were situated in a beautiful and wealthy country in black Africa where the poor people have to work for the rich ones. The rich people live in beautiful palaces, while little blacks live even in underground holes,” “Africa is a beautiful and wealthy country. I felt

sorry for the little donkey that had to drag water. I felt sorry for the little black boy covered with flies.”<sup>37</sup>

From time to time, reviews would mention a certain suspense in the movies (“while the first part had external dramatic suspense, we can emphasize internal suspense in the second movie”) (*Znovu s Hanzelkou a Zikmundem*) and occasionally even sensual experience or virtual traveling (“In the movie, the viewers will take a journey from the centre of Africa /.../ a journey full of impressions and knowledge”).<sup>38</sup> All these mentions of attraction and entertainment values of the movies were connected, however, to the concept of “newness” that set what was perceived as a spectacle apart from “the cheap romanticism of unknown parts as we know it; from bad books of travelogues or adventurous novels”.<sup>39</sup> The Czechoslovak State Film distributed two foreign “adventurous travelogues” in the period when *Africa I* was premiered: *Jungle Cavalcade* (1941) and *Abenteuer im roten Meer* (1951). These movies were harshly criticized and the only positive value they could bring, according to the reviewers, was the educational value of the images of nature. In contrast, *Africa*, it was argued, “highlights the fact that there is no full image of the nature and of the life in it without the harmony of beauty and the dignity of man. (...) the feature replaces the objectivistic descriptiveness of the previous movies with a deeper insight into the relationships and lives of people, an insight based on the class point of view”.<sup>40</sup>

Clearly, this type of critical discourse did not embrace the movies’ entertainment value, in spite of what was obviously provided to audiences as pleasure. In trying to bridge this opposition, critics appealed to the rhetorical tool of gradation (a sliding scale) which allowed for the establishment of a clear hierarchy of values, with spectacle and entertainment at the low end of the scale. The final part of *Africa II* gave a perfect opportunity for applying this tool. A spectacular image of an erupting volcano gave critics the chance to allegorize its meaning, while at the same time marginalizing its attractiveness in comparison to its “true”, “deeper” meaning: namely, the conflict between the richness of nature, and the living standard of the black people is “escalated to amazing effectiveness by the final image of the erupting volcano that becomes something more than a natural curiosity for the viewer – it is a deep symbol of life’s vitality that hides beneath the surface of the continent”.<sup>41</sup> According to one review, for Hanzelka and Zikmund “what is viewed is not interesting in itself, despite its possible exoticism – it is the social reality which is interesting. (...) they used this attractive moment for an effective comparison: in the same way the volcano erupted from a flat land, Africa will wake up from its sleepiness to free the black people from their enslavers”.<sup>42</sup> We see here a distinct hierarchization of modes of reception. At the same time, this rhetorical reconfiguration of the media reception of Hanzelka and Zikmund’s movies provides critics with an example of how apparently “shallow” or “escapist” values could be turned partly acceptable for the official discourse: in order for that to happen, they had to be framed by a “deeper” reception mode that preserved the thesis of building a new kind of culture and its consumers.

#### IV. Viewers' letters and reactions: between "the virtual traveling" and "the cinema of attractions"



**Picture IV:** Queuing for Hanzelka and Zikmund's autographing of their books, Prague, 22 January 1958

Two registers dominated the viewers' reception of Hanzelka and Zikmund's travelogues as evidenced in letters: in the first one, the travelogues are used as a tool for virtual traveling, while the second one focuses on the visual attractiveness and spectacle that suppress both the educational frame and the narrative line of the movie.

The topos of the cinema as a tool for traveling is common one in film studies, and we can find it in different contexts and historical periods.<sup>43</sup> In the case of Czechoslovakia after the communist putsch in February 1948, "virtual travelling" via cinema images became an even more apt metaphor due to the sealed borders of the state which deferred possible realization of such travels to the sphere of pure imagination.<sup>44</sup> The letters from the readers of Hanzelka and Zikmund's books very often reflect on the impossibility of going abroad. In one example, the physical situation of one of the letters' authors (a woman confined to her bed after an injury) becomes an embodiment of the metaphor of a nation locked and paralyzed inside the state borders. The woman wrote to the travellers: "I'm ill and I can't leave my house, a book is my companion (...) your oeuvre brings the faraway lands closer (...) somebody who is forced to watch all the life from a quiet house's window gratefully grasps a book."<sup>45</sup> Some of the letters point out both the impossibility of going abroad and the (implicitly unhappy) concrete historical situation the writers are situated in: "Please, do not forget about us, the readers, who do not know the geography of South America and who have to satisfy their romantic desire for faraway places by a trip to Krč."<sup>46</sup> Another woman (who is, as the letter proclaims, strongly critical of the communist regime) asks Hanzelka and Zikmund: "Do you know of a place – where you have been – where an allergic person tired of the Czechoslovak-European hysteria could live?"<sup>47</sup> The travelling is not

connected here with pure crossing of borders or visiting an exotic land; rather, it is associated with looking for an utopia, with an imaginary leaving of the time-space of communist Czechoslovakia and of the trauma of Europe divided by the Iron Curtain.

A 12-year-old boy mentioned that during the screening of *Africa* “there were a lot of photographers making pictures of the movie in the cinema”.<sup>48</sup> It is inviting to read this activity as chasing a souvenir from the virtual journey through Africa. In any case, this example supports the supposition that the audience perceived the movie more as a spectacle than an (educational) narrative. An exhibitor report from the theatre in Uherské Hradiště exemplifies most reactions to *Africa II*: “People liked the movie very much. A lot of them have seen it more than once. Those who I asked what they liked in the movie answered almost identically: the waterfalls, the volcano burning, and the fauna. They just regretted that the movie was not in colour. They imagined how beautiful the waterfalls and the volcano would be.”<sup>49</sup> Repeatedly, the same sequences and textual features are mentioned: in the case of *Africa I*, it is the climbing of Kilimanjaro first of all, i.e. the only part shot in colour. A girl who had seen the movie twice described her experience as follows:

I saw (...) your movie about Africa, the first part. And it is the reason I’m writing you for. I’m a regular cinemagoer and I have seen a few travelogues, even the American ones, but I liked your movie the most. I found there everything that I was interested in and that added to my knowledge. The most beautiful were, however, the shots of climbing Kilimanjaro in colour. I have seen the movie twice. We had a screening for our school and I liked it so much that I went to the movie once more. (...) We thank you heartily and we hope the second part of the movie will be as beautiful as the first one was. I believe you will succeed in that – especially if a part of the movie was in colour.<sup>50</sup>

The girl identifies explicitly the part that was the most beautiful to her and probably important for her decision to see the movie again – the only colour sequence in the movie. Other viewers also hoped that the second part would contain colour sequences as well, and the exhibitor reports for the Board for Cinefication often mentioned the absence of colour as a reason of disappointment. Viewers named the sequences of the Victoria Falls and the erupting volcano as the most interesting ones.<sup>51</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the impression of suspense was occasionally acknowledged by reviewers (“the first part had external dramatic suspense”) and even promoted in the trailer (“the most dramatic part of the movie is the passage through the Nubian Desert (...) you will feel relief when the travellers find their way from the desert maze”). This sequence from the Nubian Desert describes how the travellers got lost in the desert, found themselves without water, and barely survived. The sequence uses audio-commentary to build up heightened tension: the commentary often shifts from past tense to present tense to imply an



uncertainty about the outcome of the seemingly hopeless situation.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, the audio commentary that runs across the sequence with the eruption of the volcano adds suspense to the narrative, and presents the process of shooting the movie as an outstanding performance. Such impressions of suspense are present in the letters as well.

Still, the main attraction obviously was the subject itself and its presentation. In that sense, viewers' reactions to the sequences correspond to the mode of address Tom Gunning famously characterized as "the cinema of attractions":

Rather than being an involvement with narrative action or empathy with character psychology, the cinema of attractions solicits a highly conscious awareness of the film image engaging the viewer's curiosity. The spectator does not get lost in a fictional world and its drama, but remains aware of the act of looking, the excitement of curiosity and its fulfillment. Through a variety of formal means, the images of the cinema of attractions rush forward to meet their viewers.<sup>53</sup>

The three travelogues offered many sequences that match the 'attractions' reception mode. Examples include the shots of half-naked black women, or those exhibiting both cultural and physiological differences from normativity; the shots of Pygmies and head-hunters too fit the exploitative strategies of travelogues, all the while offering the opportunity to justify these otherwise unacceptable images through an ethnographic veil. In certain sequences in Hanzelka and Zikmund's movies, visual and audial attractions work together. At the start of the five minutes-long sequence of the Victoria Falls we listen to a commentary supplying facts; then, however, the voice falls silent because "words are too weak a tool of expression for showing all the mightiness and beauty of the eighth wonder of the world." Shots of the waterfalls are followed by a post-synchronously recorded roar and a music track, while the incessant panning of the camera mimics the act of looking. Another sequence, with the erupting volcano, is preceded by a scene summarizing the whole journey through Africa as a series of "attractions" and showing static images to the viewer that catch "the most interesting and dramatic impressions from the journey": "moments in Kenya's morasses", "the tropical forest" or "animals' paradise in Africa". These pictures culminate in "the greatest experience of the journey" – the volcanic eruption. Shots of the erupting crater are accompanied by a commentary that describes the situation of the travellers in a way that overlaps with the situation of the viewers: "the volcano's growth in front of our eyes"; "we are stunned by the most horrible and the most spectacular phenomenon that nature is capable of". Such a modus of addressing the viewer was extremely rare within the ascetic model that Stalinist culture had appointed to "the new age" and "the new kind of man". The traces of the films' contemporaneous reception indicate however that exactly this mode of address was one of the main reasons for the extremely high level of attendance and popularity of the travelogues.

## Conclusion

This essay identified the most significant modes of the reception of Hanzelka and Zikmund's travelogues. It informed by research in three overlapping directions: a study of the wider context of the distribution of the travelogues; a consideration of the social situation of the period that viewers were situated in; and a delineation of the most important discursive fields occurring around the movies. The materials available allowed the identification of three main modes of reception:

1. The experience of suspense based on a narrativization of the documentaries – the success of this mode depended on viewers' intertextual knowledge of reports and books that enabled them to become part a complex network of information, co-constructing the story of H+Z's adventurous travel. The narrative structure of the three movies was, however, gradually weakened because of the director's use of contrasts as the main structuring tool. Jaroslav Novotný's attitude emphasized the educational value of the travelogues. The result is a clash, between entertainment and educational values, a fight for the meaning and value of the movies, inscribed both in the texts and in the adjacent discourses.
2. The experience of a movie as a means for "virtual traveling". This mode corresponded to the concrete historical situation with people not allowed to go abroad as well as a frustration towards the extensive shortage of goods and the sharply limited possibilities of consumption. Critical discourse acknowledged this mode *only* in connection with the topics of colonialism and the hard work that the travellers carried out.
3. The reception of the movies as visual attractions. This mode is apparent from the reactions of the viewers (in the letters and the reports for the Board for Cinefication). While the official discourse tolerated this mode only to a very limited extent, the fragmentary structure of the movies augmented the role of the visual attractions. Even with the ethnographic, educational, or political-economic characteristics of such segments taken into consideration, the viewers were presented a very rare experience of visually evoked excitement.

These three modes partly overlap and in doing so they also point to a more general register, however problematic in its ambiguity: escapism. Taking inspiration from Jackie Stacey's study of female spectatorship in postwar Britain,<sup>54</sup> we can define escapism as looking for a utopian fulfilment of needs that a society cannot satisfy and which would only be addressed through entertainment forms. Echoing Richard Dyer, such a desire for intensive emotional experience (of the kind that a visual attraction can offer) is a reaction to the monotony, predictability and inconsolability of everyday life.<sup>55</sup>

My research into Hanzelka and Zikmund's travelogues has offered some suggestions as to where we can look for the reasons for the popularity that movies achieved in the 1950s. They probably did give audiences chance to fulfil desires that otherwise could not achieve any satisfaction. The scope of the reception modes through which this happened

seems all the more exceptional when we remember that they were reliant on black-and-white documentary movies with post-synchronous sound. Czechoslovakia in the 1950s obviously lacked (or was refused) a film production culture that would first and foremost satisfy a desire for experiences of suspense and visual fascinations and attractions, and that would offer a temporary escape from the oppressive reality of the time. Because of this lack, viewers were forced to find enjoyment in a surrogate fashion, through a set of movies that offered the values, emotions, and experience people were looking for in a less intensive form.

### **Biographical note:**

Pavel Skopal is Assistant Professor in the Department of Film Studies and Audiovisual Culture, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic. His ongoing research interests lie primarily in questions of local film history, history of cinema distribution, exhibition and reception (especially in the dictatorial regimes), and film co-productions in the Soviet bloc countries. Contact: [skopal@phil.muni.cz](mailto:skopal@phil.muni.cz).

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### Filmography:

*Abenteuer im roten Meer* (Adventures in the Red Sea). Dir. Hans Hass. West Germany, 1951.

*Admiral Ushakov*. Dir. Mikhail Romm. USSR, 1953.

*Afrika I – Z Maroka na Kilimandžáro* (Africa I – From Morocco to Kilimanjaro). Dir. Jaroslav Novotný. Czechoslovakia, 1952.

*Afrika II – Od rovníku ke Stolové hoře* (Africa II – From the Equator to Table Mountain). Dir. Jaroslav Novotný. Czechoslovakia, 1953.

*Afrika snů a skutečnosti I-III* (Africa: The Dream and the Reality I-III). Praha: Družstevní práce, 1952.

*Fanfan la Tulipe* (Fanfan the Tulip). Dir. Christian Jaque. France, 1950.

*Jungle Cavalcade*. Dir. William C. Ament. RKO Radio Pictures, 1941.

*Nástup* (Taking up). Dir. Otakar Vávra. Czechoslovakia, 1952.

*Sadko*. Dir. Alexandr Ptuško. USSR, 1952.

*Z Argentiny do Mexika* (From Argentina to Mexico). Dir. Jaroslav Novotný. Czechoslovakia, 1954.

### Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> For a wider context of the travelogues from Africa and South America in the post-war period, see Staples, Amy J. 'Safari Adventure: Forgotten Cinematic Journeys in Africa', *Film History: An International Journal*, 18, 2006, no. 4, pp. 392-411.

<sup>2</sup> The numbers refer to the Czech part of Czechoslovakia, as the cinema distribution and reception in Slovakia had its own specificities and my research has been focused on reception by the Czech cinemagoers.

<sup>3</sup> Hundreds of letters fill three unprocessed cartons in the Archive of H+Z (AHZ) in Zlín. Most letters do not mention the movies and only admire the performance of the travellers and their characters (with exception of two anonymous cards blaming H+Z for support of the criminal communist regime). There are no other significant views on the movies recognisable in the letters besides those commented on in the paper.

<sup>4</sup> Informational Bulletins of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party Central Committee. Communist Party Central Committee files, 014–12, National Archive, Prague (hereinafter NA Prague).

<sup>5</sup> Smoodin used about one hundred letters sent by cinemagoers to Frank Capra in a reaction to the 1941 movie *Meet John Doe*. While it is impossible, as Smoodin admits, "[...] to produce any reasonable kind of ethnography of the 1940s film audience to match the one that David Morley has constructed, through interviews and a careful process of selection, for the contemporary British television audience", Smoodin still succeeded in indentifying various modes of reaction of the "Capra audience's" segments to the movie. See Smoodin, Eric, *Regarding Frank Capra: Audience, Celebrity, and American Film Studies, 1930–1960*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004, p. 139, and also his "'This Business of America": Fan Mail, Film Reception, and *Meet John Doe*'. *Screen* 37, 1996, 2, pp. 111-128.

<sup>6</sup> Jackie Stacey's trio of discourses of spectatorship – escapism, identification and consumption – was methodologically inspiring for this essay. To an extent, her research also paralleled my own findings through some analogies in the cinemagoers' social conditions (the shortages of commodities in the war period in Great Britain, on one side, and in the late Stalinist era in Czechoslovakia, on the other side). The basis of Stacey's study were letters and questionnaires from over 350 woman memorizing

their favorite Hollywood stars. See Stacey, Jackie, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*, New York: Routledge, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Archive of H+Z (AHZ), sign. 972-4. Cinema managers are not to be confused with owners. Theatre ownership was nationalized in 1945.

<sup>8</sup> For insightful use of the 'ideal reader' concept in the sense of a reader constructed by authorities, see Dobrenko, Evgeny, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, pp. 282-396.

<sup>9</sup> Minutes of the meeting at the Ministry of Information, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1946, Ministry of Information files (MI), archival unit (AU) 556, box 168, NA Prague.

<sup>10</sup> Anon., 'Dobry výkon čs. automobilistů v poušti', *Pravda*, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1947, p. 1; anon., 'Kolem světa na osmiválci Tatra – zpráva ve sportovní rubrice *Svobodného směru*', *Svobodný směr* 3, 23<sup>th</sup> April 1947, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> AU 108, box 168, MI, NA Prague.

<sup>12</sup> Tůma, Adolf, 'Afrika Hanzelky a Zikmunda', *Svět motorů* 7, 1953, no. 1, p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> The city was renamed from Zlín to Gottwaldov after the first communist president in 1949. It returned back to its original name in 1990.

<sup>14</sup> The high popularity of the reports is exemplified by the statistics of the Czechoslovak radio and by the reactions from its listeners, see AHZ, AU 4031-2.

<sup>15</sup> The slides were supposed to be sent to local committees, army units and schools, for so-called "evenings of slides": these evenings would be composed of watching the slides, listening to topical music, and reading from the book *Africa: The Dream and the Reality* and discussing the topic of "the fight of the colonized nations". AU 134, box 471, MI, NA Prague.

<sup>16</sup> A letter of H+Z to Novotný (hereinafter H+Z – Novotný), 18<sup>th</sup> April 1948. AHZ, part "J. Hanzelka", correspondence with Jaroslav Novotný, 1948-1959.

<sup>17</sup> Novotný – H+Z, 8<sup>th</sup> June 1950; H+Z – Novotný, 1<sup>st</sup> July 1950. Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Vaněk, Karel, 'Nejde o hvězdy', *Rudé právo* 38, 12. 8. 1958, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., the Czechoslovak Film Company sent out to all cinema managers pictures of Soviet actors to be put in a frame and placed in the lobbies (pictures of Nikolai Cherkasov, Boris Andreyev, Boris Chirkov, Tamara Makarova, Lyubov Orlova). Krajský filmový podnik (unprocessed files), G 604, Moravský zemský archiv.

<sup>20</sup> *Příručka k instrukčnímu filmu Vzorný traktorista, díl I. Pracovní den traktoristy. Směnová – denní údržba*. Praha: Státní pojišťovna, 1953.

<sup>21</sup> Široký, Zdeněk, 'Afrika skutečnosti', *Svět práce* 8, 11<sup>th</sup> September 1952, no. 37, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> K.B., Háček se směje našim dívkám, Svitovský punčochář, 1952, AHZ, AU 1837-5.

<sup>23</sup> A letter of A. K. to Hanzelka and Zikmund, 16<sup>th</sup> July 1953. AHZ, část J. Hanzelky, korespondence společná, 1948, 1952, 1953.

<sup>24</sup> Script for the movie's trailer, AHZ, AU 964. As the actual trailer is not available for viewing (and probably does not exist anymore), it is not certain that the audio-commentary was identical with this scripted version.

<sup>25</sup> Two reports for the Board of distribution describe the inconveniences that the regulation caused: a cinema in Prague (Moskva) "had a lot of explaining to do and even incurred a few incidents, especially on Saturday and Sunday, when we did not admit viewers' children to the cinema"; to a cinema in Jablonec nad Nisou "the police sent a two-membered police patrol to ensure that the age limit would be respected". The age restriction could have potentially led to heightened expectations



regarding the movie's nudity. However, the first part of *Africa* had no age limit and bearing in mind the enormous popularity of the travellers with a massive group of followers it is more likely that such measures did not attract many new casual cinemagoers.

<sup>26</sup> A letter of Novotný to H+Z, 6<sup>th</sup> March 1950. AHZ, part "J. Hanzelka", correspondence with Jaroslav Novotný, 1948-1959.

<sup>27</sup> Veselý, Ludvík, 'Afrika známá i neznámá', *Literární noviny* 2, 1953, no. 25, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Another article counted seven contrasts as, e.g., "luxurious American cars" versus "wooden carts" or "Paris robes of perfumed ladies" versus "a naked and dirty daughter of the forrest". Loukotka, Čestmír, 'Cestou inženýrů Hanzelky a Zikmunda. Několik poznámek k výstavě v Náprstkově museu', *Český lid* 1951, no. 5-6, p. 136.

<sup>29</sup> See Shohat, Ella & Stam, Robert (eds.), *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. London: Routledge, 2003 (first published 1994), pp. 145-151.

<sup>30</sup> Honarpisheh, Farbod, The Oriental "Other" in Soviet Cinema, 1929-34, *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14, 2005, no. 2, pp. 185-201.

<sup>31</sup> Hanzelka and Zikmund rejected a proposal of the Soviet ambassador to insert contrasting external shots, e.g. a shot of a "capitalist exploiter with a cigar". Interview of author with Miroslav Zikmund, February 2, 2008.

<sup>32</sup> Veselý, Ludvík, 'Afrika známá i neznámá', *Literární noviny* 2, 1953, no. 25, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Janek, Dalibor, 'Nositelé Řádu republiky Hanzelka a Zikmund', *Svět motorů* 149, 1953, no. 13, p. 389.

<sup>34</sup> Šikl, Zdeněk, 'Afrika – inženýrů Hanzelky a Zikmunda', *Mladá fronta* 9, 26<sup>th</sup> June 1953, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> A letter from a district public library to H+Z with a quotation of a reader's letter where she answered the question "How did you like the book *Africa: The Dream and the Reality*". AHZ, AU Pořadač 23.

<sup>36</sup> A letter to H+Z, 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1953, *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Letters of children from the second class of a primary school. AHZ, part "J. Hanzelka", common correspondence, 1948, 1952, 1953.

<sup>38</sup> Bor, Vladimír, 'Od rovníku ke Stolové hoře', *Svobodné slovo* 9, 5<sup>th</sup> October 1953, p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> Vrabec, Vlastimil, 'S kamerou do nitra Afriky', *Svobodné slovo* 9, 14<sup>th</sup> June 1953, p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Anon., 'Některé nové filmy', *Práce* 26<sup>th</sup> June 1953, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Anon., 'Znovu s Hanzelkou a Zikmundem', *Lidová demokracie* 9, 24<sup>th</sup> October 1953, p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Česal, Miroslav, 'Afrika II. Od rovníku ke Stolové hoře', *Kino* 8, 1953, no. 23, p. 366

<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., Ruoff, Jeffrey (ed.), *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006, especially pp. 6-10.

<sup>44</sup> For details on the closing of state borders in February 1948, see Rychlík, Jan, *Cestování do ciziny v habsburské monarchii a v Československu: pasová, vízová a vystěhovalecká politika 1848-1989*, Praha: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 2007. Going abroad was impossible for common citizens until 1956, when a limited chance to visit the "people-democratic states" was available.

<sup>45</sup> A letter from 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1955, Prague. AHZ, AU Pořadač 23.

<sup>46</sup> A letter from 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1954, Prague, *ibid.* Krč is a city quarter in Prague.

<sup>47</sup> May 1955, Vsetín, *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> A letter from 26<sup>th</sup> April 1954, Rýmařov. AHZ, sign. Pořadač 23.

<sup>49</sup> AHZ, AU 972-4.

<sup>50</sup> A letter from 15<sup>th</sup> September 1953, Velké Meziříčí. AHZ, part “J. Hanzelka”, common correspondence, 1948, 1952, 1953.

<sup>51</sup> AHZ, AU 972-4.

<sup>52</sup> Suspense as an emotional reaction to narrative fictions is dependent on uncertainty of the outcome of a situation – the more differentiated the consequences of the alternatives are (like “death or life” outcomes for the travelers lost in the desert), the more intensive the experience of suspense can be (a recipient’s knowledge of the outcome, based on his previous reading/watching of the story or on familiarity with the “real events”, does not cancel the experience). For cognitivist explications of suspense, see Vorderer, Peter, Wulff, Hans J., & Friedrichsen, Mike (eds.), *Suspense: Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses, and Empirical Explorations*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996.

<sup>53</sup> Gunning, Tom, ‘An Aesthetics of Astonishment. Early Cinema and the (In)credulous Spectator’, in Linda Williams (ed.), *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994, p. 121. Gunning identified the “cinema of attraction” as the mode of cinema most dominant in the early period until 1906, but he recognized its continuation in later modes and genres as well. For a critical evaluation of Gunning’s concept, see Janet Staiger, ‘Modes of Reception’. In: Staiger (ed.), *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*. New York: New York University Press, 2000, pp. 11-27.

<sup>54</sup> Stacey, Jackie, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*, New York: Routledge, 1994.

<sup>55</sup> Dyer, Richard, ‘Entertainment and Utopia’, in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods. Volume II*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.