

## **“They’ve Seen the Impossible ... They’ve Lived the Incredible ...”. Repackaging Czechoslovak Films for the US Market during the Cold War**

Using poster-art to repack films for different markets, different audiences, and different time periods has been recognized by scholars as a standard business practice of distributors and marketers.<sup>1)</sup> This strategy is employed principally for two reasons — to avoid the alienation of imagined audiences and to appeal to the audience in ways deemed by the distributor to be in tune with movie-goers preferences, marketing trends, and the social, cultural, and political character of a given national market. On the US market, films of European origin have often been sold on erotic, titillating, and adult-oriented material.<sup>2)</sup> Historical understandings of the practices of distributors that handled European films in the United States can be expanded by looking at the ways in which they handled in the second half of the twentieth century films imported from an “enemy state” such as the Eastern Bloc country of Czechoslovakia.

This short essay looks, by a way of comparison, at the manner in which two films produced respectively in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s and 1960s were marketed on the Czechoslovak market and on the American market. It focuses on the promotional posters used to advertise a fantastical-adventure movie entitled VYNÁLEZ

ZKÁZY (1958), which was released in 1961 in the US as *THE FABULOUS WORLD OF JULES VERNE*, and on the science-fiction film IKARIE XB-1 (1963), which was released in the US in 1964 as *VOYAGE TO THE END OF THE UNIVERSE*. Comparative analysis shows how the identity of the two films was constructed for each market in part via their poster-art. In doing so, this short essay also permits consideration of the main reasons behind the manner in which the films were re-packaged.

Two general conditions characterizing the Czechoslovak market exerted a meaningful influence over the assembly of the Czechoslovak poster-art for VYNÁLEZ ZKÁZY and for IKARIE XB, as well as for that of similar films I have examined elsewhere.<sup>3)</sup> First, the concept of genre was commonly deemed antithetical to the cinema of socialist countries; genre was seen by film culture elites and by cultural elites generally as an inherently “Hollywood” phenomenon, and, therefore, by extension, a lowbrow cultural form. Consequently, features and iconography commonly associated with established genres, such as the heroes of action-adventure films, the loving couples of romantic comedies, and headlining performers of star-vehicles were deliber-

- 1) See Paul McDonald, ‘Miramax, *Life is Beautiful*, and the Indiewoodization of the foreign-language film market in the USA’, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, vol. 7, no. 4 (2009), pp. 353–375; Richard Nowell, “Where nothing is off-limits”: genre, commercial revitalization, and the teen slasher film posters of 1982–1984’, *Post Script*, vol. 30, no. 2 (Winter/Spring 2011), pp. 53–68.
- 2) See for example Mark Betz, ‘Art, Exploitation, Underground’, in Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lázaro Reboll, Julian Stringer and Andy Willis (eds), *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 202–222.
- 3) See Jindřiška Bláhová, ‘Dare you take the first ... voyage to America: Re-genrification, movie posters, and promoting Czechoslovak popular cinema in the Cold War United States’, (forthcoming).

ately played down or omitted entirely from poster-art. Second, poster-art was influenced by Czechoslovakia's state-controlled economy. The fact that the national film market was controlled by a state-run film "monopoly" and the fact that it was therefore not governed by the principles of free market economics impacted directly on the ways in which films could be advertised and sold. Because maximizing profit was not deemed the be all and end all of film distribution, poster-art in Czechoslovakia was often treated by designers as if it was a form of "applied art",<sup>4)</sup> which meant designers approached film posters first and foremost as artworks that would reflect the "essence" of the movie via a distinct creative style.

The posters for *VYNÁLEZ ZKÁZY* and *IKARIE XB-1* bore the hallmarks of the creative freedom given in Czechoslovakia to poster designers. The designers of the films' respective posters drew ostensibly upon the high culture traditions of European art and literature. The heavily stylized poster for *VYNÁLEZ ZKÁZY* established a direct link between the film it promoted and the work of French science-fiction author Jules Verne, upon whose writings the film had been based, by imitating the Victorian engravings that featured on the covers of Verne's books and by imitating the style of the books' covers, which often included a small "card" on which a book's title would be written (see Figure 1). The replication of this visual motif on the film's poster-art highlighted the national origins of the film ("Czech Film") and its literary pedigree ("A Fantastic-adventure film based on the work of J. Verne"). The poster also invited the drawing of parallels to the work and the distinctive fantastical style of French filmmaker Georges Méliès — an acknowledged inspiration on the film's director Karel Zeman. By aping a nineteenth-century artistic style and the look of Méliès' films, the poster also evoked a sense of nostalgia and a poetic tone, projected by the meeting of past and presence. It invited immersion into the fantasies of yesteryear, wherein intrepid adventurers ex-

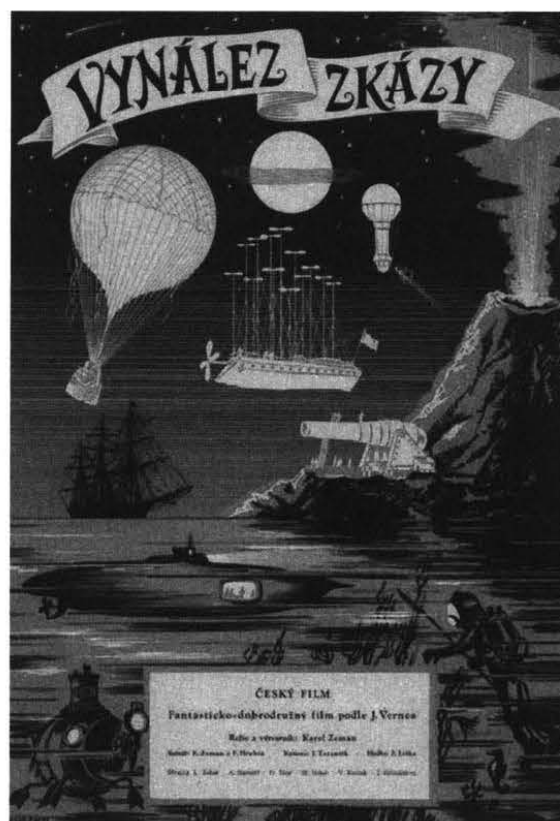


Fig. 1. The Czechoslovak Promotional Poster for *VYNÁLEZ ZKÁZY* (by Karel Knechtl).

plored the world and wherein ingenious inventors dared to dream the unimaginable. Technology, invention, and modernity were central to the poster. Imminent danger (symbolized by cannon, erupting volcano, and the color red) is romanticized. The sky, the land, and the ocean exist harmoniously; natural objects such as stars, the moon, and comets coexist alongside technology such as air-balloons and airships. This sense of whimsy is accentuated by the red and sepia tint of the poster, which recalls aging photographs, and by a floating banner bearing the title of the movie in a manner reminiscent of those used at nineteenth-century fairs.

The poster-art for *IKARIE XB-1* was fashioned in such a way as to evoke similarities with the well known and highly regarded science-fiction novels of Polish writer Stanisław Lem; novels which were rich in philosophical themes of an

4) Marta Sylvestrová, *Český filmový plakát 20. století* (Moravská galerie v Brně: Exlibris, 2004).

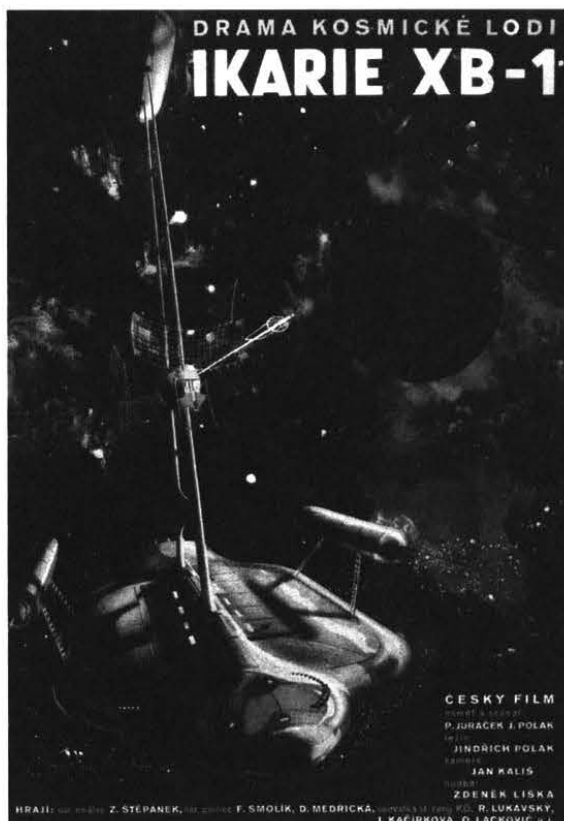


Fig. 2. The Czechoslovak Promotional Poster of *IKARIE XB-1* (by Theodor Rotrekl).

existential and metaphysical nature. Science-fiction was thriving in 1960s Eastern Europe, particularly literature concerned with the future of mankind and with the limits of human existence. Accordingly, the poster for *IKARIE XB-1* was designed by one of Czechoslovakia's prominent science-fiction illustrators, Theodor Rotrekl. As a result of the emphasis Rotrekl placed on philosophical tropes, the Czechoslovak poster for *IKARIE XB-1* is meditative and atmospheric in tone rather than being action-driven — with adventure implied as opposed to being presented overtly (see Figure 2). Elusive rather than specific, indicative rather than literal, the poster openly invited philosophical readings — a stark contrast to the US posters examined below.

Underplaying action and human agency was a key characteristic of the posters for both *VYNÁLEZ ZKÁZY* and *IKARIE XB-1*. *IKARIE XB-1*'s poster stated that the movie was “[a] drama of



Fig. 3. A 1964 US Promotional Poster for *VOYAGE TO THE END OF THE UNIVERSE* (original Czechoslovak title: *IKARIE XB-1*) (by American International Pictures).

a space-ship called *Ikarie XB-1*”, leaving the rest of the film’s plot to the imagination of potential movie-goers. Built in to the film’s tagline and the visual style of the poster was a sense of the enigmatic, of the uncertain, and of a profound, collective experience. The spaceship dominates the poster, flying forward to explore the unknown. Potential threat is conveyed by a dying Sun shrouded by a red halo. The violet and black background resembles abstract paintings and underscores uncertainty. The poster for *VYNÁLEZ ZKÁZY* also minimizes human agency by centralizing a means of transport and presenting mechanical inventions as objects of wonder.

In contrast, all of the US posters used framed the selected Czechoslovak-made films as action-heavy sagas, with human agency suitably centralized. Consequently, poster-art repackaged both films primarily as action-adventure pictures, while retaining a sense of their original generic identities — science-fiction in the case

of *VOYAGE TO THE END OF THE UNIVERSE*, the fantastic in the case of *THE FABULOUS WORLD OF JULES VERNE*. On one of the posters that US distributor American International Picture used for *VOYAGE TO THE END OF THE UNIVERSE*, the single enigmatic spaceship featured on the Czechoslovak poster for *IKARIE XB-1* was replaced by a more conventional-looking spaceship, a flying saucer-shaped spaceship, a small satellite-like object, and two astronauts floating toward the machines. On another poster promoting the film in the US, one of the astronauts carries to safety an unconscious busty woman, thus further emphasizing action (see Figure 3). The shift to human agency is encapsulated in the film's change of title — from the name of a single spacecraft to a title conveying an adrenaline-driven journey into the furthest reaches of outer space. Similarly, the tranquil nostalgia of the poster for *VYNÁLEZ ZKÁZY* was replaced by kinetic action, with the cluttered composition of the poster pairing images of divers confronting a giant octopus and air-vehicles piloted by daredevils (see Figure 4).

Poster-art also obscured the Czechoslovak origins of *VOYAGE TO THE END OF THE UNIVERSE* and *THE FABULOUS WORLD OF JULES VERNE*. Both films were released in the US at the height of the Cold War, ensuring that the selling to American audiences of films associated with Communist enemies was anything but attractive: the label “made in Czechoslovakia” being a far from effective marketing hook. Oftentimes, the films were framed as American-made, even featuring anglicized versions of the actors' names. Conversely, its title change associated *THE FABULOUS WORLD OF JULES VERNE* with France and, as a consequence, that nation's cultural heritage. Crucially, this choice of title highlighted the name of Jules Verne, whose name promised to call forth fantasy-adventure thanks to the circulation in the US of comic books based on his work. Moreover, invoking fantastical worlds envisaged by a French author was, in the 1960s, more anodyne than directly translat-



Fig. 4. A 1961 US Promotional Poster for *THE FABULOUS WORLD OF JULES VERNE* (original Czechoslovak title: *Vynález zkázy*) (by Warner Bros. Pictures).

ing the film's original Czech-language title, which would have read “The Invention of Destruction”; a title which ran the risk of calling to mind apocalyptic imagery and as such a specter of nuclear war that was so prevalent contemporaneously in both American public-sphere discourse and in everyday life.

Finally, the respective US distributors of *VOYAGE TO THE END OF THE UNIVERSE* and *THE FABULOUS WORLD OF JULES VERNE* emphasized spectacle in such a way as to appeal to a demographic that American film industry-professionals deemed to be the most avid consumers of science-fiction and fantasy films: children and adolescent boys.<sup>5)</sup> In this sense, distributors American International Pictures and Warner Bros employed the kind of carnivalesque ballyhoo that exploitation film promoters used to

5) See Eric Schaefer, *“Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!”: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).





Fig. 5. US 1964 Promotional Poster for *THE FABULOUS WORLD OF JULES VERNE* (original Czechoslovak Title: *VYNÁLEZ ZKÁZY*) (by Warner Bros. Pictures).

package lurid or curious spectacle (rather than the more elevated sense of wonder and awe used to sell the period's big-budget Biblical epics).<sup>6)</sup> Accordingly, the poster-art for *THE FABULOUS WORLD OF JULES VERNE* evoked, by way of a banner that was stretched across the poster, the visual and experiential pleasures of the fair-ground. It also emphasized wholesome Saturday matinee attractions including "The Wing-Man and the Living-Submarine! The fantastic Pedal-Blimps! The Four-footed Fighting Machines!" and mildly dangerous action involving "The underwater escape from Terror Island!". With purported novelty central to the marketing of exploitation and having been fairly recently used to sell some high-profile "event pictures", distributor Warner Bros. went as far as coining a new term to reflect combination of animation

with live action on display in *THE FABULOUS WORLD OF JULES VERNE*. Renamed *THE FABULOUS WORLD OF JULES VERNE*, a little Czechoslovak science-fiction film was advertised as "The first motion picture produced in the magic-image miracle of Mystimation!" (see Figure 5).

The promise of visual pleasure was also central to the poster artwork for *THE VOYAGE TO THE END OF THE UNIVERSE*, which evidently was designed to appeal to a perceived insatiable desire among audiences to SEE new and transgressive, albeit largely un-threatening, phenomena. A stream of visual attractions was conveyed via small frames running alongside poster's main image, all of which promised mild titillation, bounded scares, and fun-filled surprises (see Figure 6). Similarly, the poster for *THE FABULOUS WORLD OF JULES VERNE* promised never-

6) Ibid.



Fig. 6. A 1964 US Promotional Poster for VOYAGE TO THE END OF THE UNIVERSE (original Czechoslovak title: IKARIE XB-1) (by American International Pictures).

before-experienced sensations — a promise conveyed by captions, under small frames highlighting a scene from the movie, which read: “They’ve Seen the Impossible ... they’ve lived the incredible ... now they must come back!” The poster for *THE VOYAGE TO THE END OF UNIVERSE* amounted to deliberately misleading marketing because the content that would supposedly generate such responses did not in fact appear in *THE VOYAGE TO THE END OF THE UNIVERSE* in the way being suggested.

The analysis of the Czechoslovak and US posters used to advertize a Czechoslovak science-fiction film and a Czechoslovak fantasy-adventure film that have been presented in this short essay invites reconsideration of the extent to which deliberate misrepresentation functions as a legitimate strategy among film distributors and marketers, and, by extension, invites consideration of those instances in which, and those

forms by which, misrepresentation is employed industrially. It also invites consideration of how such extreme instances of repackaging movies impact upon audience experiences of the films in question. Digital archiving of the popular press, including many small-town newspapers, offers film historians increased and easier access to print advertising materials. This development promises deeply to enrich understandings of distributor and exhibitor promotion. It therefore provides long-overdue opportunities to examine how films were framed in quite different ways for different national or even regional audiences and, more importantly, permits consideration of why such practices are a key aspect of global audiovisual culture.

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