

Responsibility, trust and the truth: Reading travelogues within the command book communication circuit in 1950s Czechoslovakia.

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In his *Forbidden Bestsellers* of Pre-revolutionary France Darnton challenged the “big questions in history” regarding which books cause revolutions, or shall we say, are responsible for them? [xvii] He proposed to raise the query of a different order: what did the French actually read before the Revolution? In my contribution I suggest to ask what (and how?) did the Czechs read after the 1948 Communist Revolution, which among other things resulted in the state assuming responsibility for and full control of book production and reception. While instead of Voltaire and Diderot, the French were hungry for the salacious, often pornographic booklets, for the Czechs –rather than works by Marx and Lenin –among the most desired and sought-after texts were travelogues.

The case study draws on the resources of H&Z Archives in Zlín, depository of over 100 linear metres of correspondence and documentation related to the career and multi-media production of travellers and writers Miroslav Zikmund (1919-2023) and Jiří Hanzelka (1920-2003). Following recent impulses of paperwork studies (Kafka) and STS (Asdal, Haraway) I develop the term epistolary document which allows me to adopt “practice perspective on texts” and explore “the ways in which (in this case highly personalised and intimate) documents enact, or take part in enacting, realities” (Asdal). It enables me to move beyond the notion of casual fandom correspondence as a representation of reception history. Instead, I focus on the way epistolary documents took part “in modifying and transforming issues” (Asdal) and established an (truthful and credible!) embodiment of the exotic and unreachable for which the authors were largely held accountable. Consequently, at the peak of the de-personalised era of ‘cult of personality’ a male fan in his letter demanded that the travellers import a “suitable and obedient” Black woman for him to marry; group of schoolchildren requested seashells to decorate their classroom; or a pregnant lady asked them to bear witness to her child’s christening as godfathers. I examine the textual practices through which responsibility, trust and truth became the Leitmotifs in H&Z readers’ epistolary writing and formed the basis of their para-social relationships (Rojek) with the authors of the travelogues.

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