

The Cultural Conditioning of the Polish Reception of the Czech Cimmerman Hoax

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Abstract: The Polish audiences have first encountered the Czech Cimmerman hoax in the 1970s, and after an almost twenty-year break, Cimmerman returned to them after the turn of the millennium. Despite the admirably rich encounter with Czech culture (and especially its satire) among Polish audiences after 1989, the plays of the Jára Cimmerman Theatre (Divadlo Jára Cimrmana) and the history of this hoax are known only to a small group of enthusiasts. The diverse standpoints of Polish literary reflection characterize Cimmerman's hoax as rooted in the Czech cultural tradition following its ambitions. Cimmerman started as a specific game of hoax played out between the authors and their audience, but otherwise also as a therapeutic folksiness leading to spiritual emptiness and a contradictory questioning, which modernised national revivalist ideals. The lack of understanding of the Cimmerman hoax among Polish audiences could be explained by the focus on different aspects of the



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phenomenon. However, in my opinion, there are other important reasons for the difficulties in transporting this Czech phenomenon into the Polish cultural context. I have encountered the following three issues: the different role played by hoax in both cultures, the discrepancy in the assessment of the Austro-Hungarian period, and the different understanding of the ideals and aesthetics of the Sokol movement. I interpret this according to Hayden White's approach – viewing cultural differences as beneficial, as an opportunity to learn something new from these differences.

Keywords: Czech literature, Czech culture, Cimrman, Polish literary reception, literary hoax

Introduction

Jára Cimrman was introduced in 1966 in the then Czechoslovak Radio's cultural monthly, and in the same year a theatre bearing his name was established in Prague, and became popular relatively quickly. The individual at the center was supposed to be a forgotten Czech genius discovered at that time, to whom the nation owed due appreciation. The prompt revelation of this hoax character of the discovery itself and the figure of Cimrman made this originally rather intimate hoax even more popular. Its popularity within the Czech society has not waned even following the fundamental political, social, economic and cultural changes that took place after the fall of the communist regime in November 1989 and the transition to a pluralistic democracy (see, e.g. Smith, 2007; Brzezińska, 2013; Balcerzak, 2016; B.C., 2017; Cimrman English Theatre).

It is not coincidental that Cimrman's mock questioning of the Czech stereotype of unrecognized national importance is set at the end of the period of the multicultural Austro-Hungarian monarchy and the beginnings of modern Czech identity (see Hugh, 1992; Pynsent, 1994). This has been accepted by many Czechs with enthusiastic approval since the first information about the Czech genius was published as a liberating concept that protects them from succumbing to a false sense of greatness and arrogance, or exaggerated hurt. However, despite the admirably rich engagement of the Polish audiences

with Czech culture (especially its satire) after 1989 (most recently: Kupczak, 2020), only a small group of enthusiasts are familiar with the plays of the Jára Cimrman Theatre (*Divadlo Jára Cimrmana*), and not even all of those fully understand, let alone share the nuances of their humour.

Beginnings of the encounter – 70s' of the 20th Century

The Polish audiences first encountered Cimrman in the 1970s. The poetics of the Jára Cimrman Theatre was briefly outlined in a short piece on small theatres in Czechoslovakia in the monthly magazine "Dialog" (focused on current screen writing) as early as 1970. It included a short excerpt from a seminar on Cimrman and a summary stating:

The magic of the Jára Cimrman Theatre lies primarily in its intellectual acting, unpredictable play of ideas and observations, avoiding rational theses and tendencies (ud, 1970, p. 164).

In 1973, the Polish popular periodical "Literatura na Świecie" (focused on world literature) published an extensive text accompanied by pictures focused on Cimrman entitled the *Forgotten Czech Genius* (Smoljak et al., 1973). The piece was several dozen pages long and begins with fictitious quotes concerning an allegedly newly discovered Czech polymath (e.g. *He was my only patient who was able to evoke a complex in me – Sigmund Freud*), then gives short explanation of the reasons and circumstances for the creation of the character of Cimrman, as well as his fictitious biography and dates. The journal also published clearly fake interviews with Dr Silk about the genius and the open-air museum dedicated to the great genius to be built in Liptákov, as well as parodies of scientific presentations and papers, such as: *Cimrman in the Realm of Music* (including pictures), *Cimrman the Pedagogue*, *Cimrman and Music*, *Opera and the Panama Canal*, *Intrigues of Engineer Goethals*, *Cimrman's Defense Training*, *Cimrman and the Animals*, *The Truth about the Alleged Death of Jára Cimrman*. The series have distinctive graphic resemblance of the style of the ear-

ly 20th century press. Some titles of the texts, information or entire pages are set in simple or decorative frames, the texts are accompanied by sketches in pen illustrating creating a humorously incongruous whole, including sketches of Cimrman's incredible inventions, as well as sketches reminiscent of advertising posters of the time. The texts and graphics are supplemented by photographs, and portraits of Cimrman's alleged mother, sister, violin teacher, popular singer and 'influential friends from the USA' (using this provocative caption of the time). There are also photographs of Cimrman's fanciful inventions or a picture of the genius's entire family, but without his portrait, because, as the caption explains, it was cut out by Cimrman himself to be used for his passport. However, there was not much interest in this undoubtedly informed and thorough series of translations of Cimrman's texts among Polish audiences, and the translation was not published until almost thirty years later.

Another article on Czech screen writing which mentions the Jára Cimrman Theatre appeared in the above-mentioned *Dialog* journal in 1977 (Żurowski, 1977). The author describes their performance as *a cabaret of authors' creative intelligence addressed primarily at the intellectuals and students* and pointed out that the shows were repeated *several hundred times to houses bursting in seames*. He concludes his outline of the themes covered in two of the Theatre's plays as follows:

However, it is always only a general framework that is interwoven with a dense web of contemporary allusions [...] and aptly targeted remarks. And so [...] the Cimrman Theatre is one of the few places in which they successfully mock the less and more significant nonsense of a later period [than the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire – added by L.N.V.] (Żurowski, 1977, p. 167).

It is even during this first phase of Polish audiences' encounter with the Cimrman hoax that we may notice a slight change in the tone of assessment – from the initial *little theatre* and *intellectual acting* to publishing of an extensive series of texts accompanied by drawings and photographs in a prestigious periodical devoted to world literature, and emphasizing artistic and intellectual values (*the cabaret of the*

authors' creative intelligence) and a bold critique (*is one of those few places where they successfully mock less and more significant nonsense*).

The next encounter – the turn of the millennium

Following a nineteen-year gap, the Polish audiences started showing a relatively ongoing interest in Cimrman again around the turn of the millennium. A longer extract from the play "The Conquest of the North Pole by a Czech, Karel Němec" (*Dobytí severního pólu Čechem Karlem Němcem*), was published in the cultural periodical „Krasnogruda“ (Cimrman, 1996). In 1997, the Teatr Tradycyjny in Kraków staged the play *Long, Wide and Short-sighted (Dlouhý, Široký a Krátkozraký)* directed by Tadeusz Hankiewicz, and then in 2002, two more plays (Kornaś, 1997; Mikos, 2002; Cimrman, 2002). In 2003, the Jára Cimrman Theatre came to Cracow and staged the *Conquest of the North Pole (Dobytí severního pólu; AMS, 2003)*. In 2014, a mock-documentary about Cimrman's trip to Katowice was made (Zalega, 2014). This was the first Polish creative work inspired by Cimrman's poetics. This film, however, made hardly any impression on Polish audiences. In the new millennium, the phenomenon provoked a range of theoretical articles among Polish scholars. Since 2003, reviews and essays have been published by theatre scholars (Stanisławska, 2003 and Zimna, 2019, 2020), film scholars (Ciszewska, 2020), philosophers (Leszczyński, 2011), but mainly by Polish scholars focusing on the Czech literature (Firlej, 2008; Kardyni-Pelikánová, 2008, 2023; Czaplińska, 2009; Balík, 2010; Balík & Firlej, 2014; Gierowski, 2018, 2020) and students of Czech studies (e.g. Joniak, 2009; Landowka, 2012). The phenomenon even inspired a reflection in the field of cultural tourism (Kołodziejczyk, 2018), as well as a reflection by a well-known Polish promoter of the Czech culture (Szczygieł, 2011, 2012) and other authors (np. Mikos, 2002; Kaczmarek, 2022). Polish literary scholars differ quite significantly in their assessment of importance in focus on particular aspects of the cult from the Czech cultural perspective (in addition to the above-mentioned scholarly texts, see also Balcerzak, 2016).

Wrocław-based Czech literature and language, scholar Zofia Tarajło-Lipowska, includes one paragraph on the Jára Cimrman Theatre in a chapter of her *History of Czech Literature* (Tarajło-Lipowska, 2010) related to the period of the 'Golden Sixties' (Tarajło-Lipowska, 2010, pp. 346–389). She describes the main hero of the plays as follows:

[...] 'the underrated Czech genius Jára Cimrman', a hoax character with the qualities of a 'naïve creator' (Tarajło-Lipowska, 2010, p. 387),

and further remarks that:

The satire contained in these plays was sometimes a criticism of national megalomania [...], but it also used verbal humour and nonsensical aesthetics (Tarajło-Lipowska, 2010, p. 387).

She also mentions the popularity of this phenomenon reaches a wide social spectrum:

Although the 'Cimrman' humour was intellectual, requiring erudition and sharpness, the hoax figure of the 'genius' became widely popular, it can even be said that it crossed social boundaries in that the fictional character was not determined by the creative act (Tarajło-Lipowska, 2010, p. 387).

The last chapter of the book, discussing the more recent period of the history of Czech literature does not mention the topic. A section discussing more recent Czech screen writing only mentions the ongoing popularity of some so-called small-format theatres, such as *Ha-Divadlo*, Divadlo Husa na provázku and *Studio Y* (Tarajło-Lipowska, 2010, p. 429). This book was intended primarily for Polish students of Czech studies and others interested in basic information on history of Czech literature and culture.

The Czech literary scholar Štěpán Balík (study written in Polish) relates the Czech national tradition of mystification to Dadaism and Surrealism. When describing Cimrman's hoax, he makes a cursory remark on Cimrman's similarity to the Polish fictional literary character of the old Marych. He then points out that the popularity of this prototype of Poznań's urban speech and local identity never surpassed its

Polish region, and unlike Cimrman, he was always portrayed as an older man (Balík, 2010, p. 257).

Agata Firlej, a Poznań-based Polish and Czech studies scholar, emphasizes Cimrman's specifically Czech roots, and a strong relation to previous artistic acclaim within Czech culture stating that:

The originality of the Svěrák, Smoljak and Šebánek Theatre lies, paradoxically, in its deep rooting in what is 'quintessentially Czech'. Knowledgeable audiences will recognize the spirit of the avant-garde of: the Semafor [theatre – L.N.V.], the Werich-Voskovec duo or the Devětsil group in an elegant, Habsburg edition. It contains something of circus entertainment and cabaret style, or of a satirical depiction of the idea of national revival (Firlej, 2008).

By relating the character to the evolving national culture, Firlej thus suggests the difficulty in transferring it into a different cultural context.

Both Firlej and Balík co-authored an article where they argued for the different perception of pathos in both cultures – the Czech rejection, and the Polish respect for the extreme emotions and tradition given by the perception of pathos as the only appropriate response to tragic circumstances.

From the beginning of the 20th Century, Czechs have narrated all stories of their own heroism with an ironic commentary. They somehow do not know how to approach pathos; they do not trust it. They use it in narrative on heroism and love – but for the Poles, these two realms are sacred. (Balík & Firlej, 2014, p. 237).

An Opole-based Czech studies scholar, Joanna Czaplińska, referring to Silvie Richtrová, Czech researcher and writer living in Italy, draw attention to a typical Cimrman hoax which Cimrman admits to, and this is accepted by both sides that:

Smoljak and Svěrák's hoax is not a deception of its recipients, but awareness of existence of an unwritten contract in which both parties confirm their conscious participation in this game (Czaplińska, 2009, p. 10).

An important aspect of Cimrman's success was therefore to be a playful conspiracy, i.e. active acceptance of what was offered, the nod from the viewer.

A Brno-based Polish studies scholar, Krystyna Kardyni-Pelikánová, who has focused on aspects of Czech-Polish mutual reception, draws on the opinion of the Czech theatre studies scholar, Vladimír Just, who understood Cimrman's missed opportunities as a 'dead end'. Kardyni-Pelikánová thus perceives Cimrman's hoax as 'spiritual emptiness', arguing:

There is a distinctive and irresistibly entertaining 'common vulgarity' associated with naïve art, pure folksiness in the plays, and thus it also has its dark side: spiritual emptiness (Kardyni-Pelikánová, 2009, p. 87).

Kardyni-Pelikánová associates this 'irresistible entertainment' with the time of its creation – i.e. an ideological period where comments were made through specific political and media hoax – and here she finds laughter therapeutic.

Comparing the characters of Cimrman and the good soldier Švejk, the Krakow-based Czech studies scholar Piotr Gierowski points out a feature that may have been neglected in Cimrman – the aspect of exclusion. He argues that, if Cimrman is to be interpreted as the *sui generis* 'quintessential Czech', then the category of exclusion, which is often attributed to him, acquires a symbolic meaning and is related to questions about the meaning of Czech or Central European history, which were debated, for instance, by Masaryk, Pekař or Kundera and Kroutvor. In this context, referring to Vladimír Macura, Gierowski understands the figure of Cimrman not only as 'spiritual emptiness' (as Kardyni-Pelikánová perceived him), but also as a phenomenon that:

[...] questions the myths and dreams of the national revival, while at the same time inconspicuously realizing some of them (Gierowski, 2020, p. 101).

Similarly to Firlej mentioned earlier, he relates the topic to the ideas of the national revival, but with a slightly different twist. In this sense, Cimrman did not fulfill the role of someone unmasking the false national feelings of greatness, hurt or arrogance, but on the contrary, he (partially) encouraged this self-centered perspective.

Reasons for the limited engagement of Polish audiences

To summarize the varied views of Polish literary criticism, Cimrman's hoax is perceived as strongly rooted in the Czech cultural milieu and builds on its ambitious cultural traditions, and is based on the specific hoax game played out between the authors and recipients, but also on a therapeutic folksiness leading to spiritual emptiness and the contradictory questioning and enacting of the national revival ideals.

The limited engagement of the Polish audiences with the Cimrman hoax may be sufficiently and convincingly explained by the focus on the different aspects of the phenomenon described above. In my opinion, however, there are other important reasons for the difficulties in transporting this Czech phenomenon into the Polish cultural context. I propose three reasons here: the different role of hoax in both cultures, the discrepancy in the assessment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the different understanding of the Sokol movement's ideals and aesthetics.

1. The role of hoax in culture

When discussing the role of hoax in Czech culture, we need to mention the Czech semiotics expert Vladimír Macura, who convincingly proves the importance of hoax in Czech 19th Century culture. He refers to a number of literary forgeries, but also reminds us of the key role of the hoax aspect in Jungmann's thinking, assuming that a nation is alive as long as its language lives. Creating expert Czech terminology and the publication of so-called high literature was actually a hoax that gave the impression that there were people who needed Czech terminology and intellectually and artistically demanding literature. Although this was not the case at first, we know now that the ideas promoted by Josef Jungmann and the proponents of the national revival movement succeeded thanks to these hoaxes.

The significance of Cimrman's hoax may be perceived through a similar lense – at its inception, it created the impression that the Czechs had a reason to look for their self-awareness in the relatively

recent Austro-Hungarian past, i.e. in the then condemned Western European culture. The acceptance of the Cimrman hoax after its discovery can be understood similarly as the culturally-emancipating rejection of the 19th Century Czech manuscript forgeries (in English see Dobiáš, 2019). Compared to the past purposes of hoax aimed at creating culture, Cimrman hoax aims to provoke self-reflection, understanding of the real, not just the declared Czech cultural values. However, the rejection of forgeries in the 19th Century and embracing hoax in the second half of the 20th Century are intended to have the same effect. Macura mentioned earlier, less known as a prolific hoax writer (Janoušek, 2013), explains this as follows:

The real purpose of a hoax is to demystify (and today's hoax plays demonstrate this). No doubt, this seems a bit far-fetched, but hoax thrives more on the disruption of established forms, literary or cultural, and parodying them. Let us draw attention in particular to the hoax game between Jára da Cimrman, and a large section of the population together with the 'leading experts on Cimrman' (Macura, 1993, p. 19).

Hoax did not play a similar role in Polish culture as it did in Czech culture (see Balík, 2010; Balík& Firlej, 2014; Biełow, 2020). In the 1980s (i.e. a period close to the time of the Czech hoax), the (mostly) Wrocław-based Orange Alternative (Pomarańczowa Alternatywa) movement is known for its now famous activity – painting dwarfs on stains created by the police in public spaces. They painted these stains over with anti-regime slogans and claimed that the anti-regime slogans were theses, and the police painting over was antithesis, and the dwarfs on the stains were a synthesis. These paintings represent comedy and parody, and they are to some degree also hoax. The hoax here, however, is not a structure related to a number of aspects of national identity, enabling a new reflection, but an unambiguously imaginative reflection of the lack of freedom. Even earlier periods in Polish culture, did not present a phenomenon as complex and long-lasting as Cimrman's hoax. Nevertheless, there have been similar phenomena – the poet Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński 'created' a Scottish poet of an eloquent surname Cheat when he was a student, the poets Edward Kozikowski and Emil Zegadłowicz wrote an anthology of black poetry

called *Yam, yam* (*Niam, niam*, 1923), accompanied by a quasi-scientific introduction. There is also an erotic extract from the national epic, *Pan Tadeusz*, by Adam Mickiewicz, published after the poet's death and its author is as yet uncertain. Stanisław Lem published a book of reviews of non-existent books by non-existent authors under a provokingly telling title *The Perfect Vacuum* (*Doskonała próżnia*, 1971) and a collection of his prefaces to these non-existent books with self-mocking title *The Imaginary Great* (*Wielkość urojona*, 1973). However, these writings were understood mostly not as hoaxes but as literary provocations within the Polish context.

The planting the seeds of significant success of fake manuscripts in modern Czech culture resulted in an ambivalent reception within the Czech cultural context. Apart from voices criticizing achieving praiseworthy goals through lies, there were those who perceived hoax more as an artistic 'festival', testing the reader or viewer sensitivity to artistic freedom. Let us recall the well-known dispute in the Czech „Literární noviny” paper over whether to commemorate the anniversary of Václav Hanka, the main suspect in the as yet uncertain Czech manuscript fraud saga of the 19th century, and the recent significant response and contradictory reactions to a 2004 documentary entitled *The Czech Dream* (*Český sen*), directed by Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda. The film confronts the current Czech society with growing consumerism through a well-thought-out hoax (see Tkaczewski, 2013), disputes over the image of the Czech Republic in relation to the hoax co-authorship of David Černý's satirical, and the sarcastic sculpture „Entropa“ in 2009.

Apart from many critical voices, there is also a decent number of defensive voices within the Czech cultural context. Overall, the assessment of hoax tends to be fairly conciliatory, taking into account its artistic and intellectual values.

Similar to hoax, absurd and nonsense poetics, partly also attributed to Cimrman's hoax, does not have a distinctive tradition in Polish culture, although, undoubtedly, there are some examples and it forms an important part of the culture. This is evident in the Polish tradition of

modern cabaret, which is dominated by satire. However, the famous and acclaimed Polish cabarets (such as Piwnica Pod Baranami in Cracow, particularly of the 1960s and 1970s) scheduled individual performances by famous artists, and there was no single poetic thread connecting them. Two books by the poet Julian Tuwim commenting on his collection of literary curiosities, which has been collected over many years: *Pegaz dęba, czyli panopticum poetyckie* (1950) and *Cicer caule czyli groch z kapustą: Panopticum i archiwum kultury* (vol. 1–3, 1958–1963), no doubt, form an important part of the Polish tradition of absurd and nonsense literature. However, these literary and cultural works have never become widely popular and their poetics has not inspired others. In comparison, Cimrman's hoax has inspired a range of spontaneous cultural phenomena – from fictitious memorials and other installations, to museums, and the frequently mentioned and discussed nomination of Cimrman for the Greatest Czech poll of 2005, organized by the public broadcaster Czech Television based on a license from the British BBC.

2. Perception of the Austria-Hungarian Empire

The perception of Austria, or the Austria-Hungarian Empire is another aspect where the Czech and Polish culture differ. The choice of the end of the Austro-Hungarian period of Czech history as the time where the Cimrman hoax is situated might mean an allusive expression of the Czech solidarity with the Western European culture, and the characters' remarks on 'Austrian oppression' and the 'big Russian brother' may be understood as a sarcastic image of the historical naivety of the Czechs (for the majority of the Czech public, this understanding remained current even after 1989). The Polish historical experience of the loss of statehood after the triple partition of Poland (in 1772, 1793 and 1795) between Prussia, Russia and Austria (Snyder, 2003) enables to interpret the center of gravity of historical trauma differently. While the Prussian and Russian annexations were considered to be very restrictive, the territories annexed by Austria enjoyed the greatest development of the Polish culture. Therefore, the Poles did

not hesitate to stand together with the Austrian army against Russia in the First World War, while the Czechs, on the other hand, saw Austria as the main enemy of national ideals, and therefore some deserted the Austrian army and defected to the Russian opponent. This was completely incomprehensible to the Poles for the reasons described above, and they could only explain this by the Czech opportunism, weak morals, laziness or cowardice. Polish readers perceive Hašek's Švejk as possessing similar traces, and this only confirms their understanding of the traces displayed in Cimrman. Cimrman's allusions to the Austrian traditions came up against the fact that in modern Polish culture ties to French culture are considered as key, and French culture therefore symbolizes Western European culture to modern Poles. In addition, situating Cimrman's plays within the Austro-Hungarian period provided Czech audiences with another important advantage – it was a relatively recent historical period, well-covered at school as a phase of significant emancipation of the modern Czech nation, but at the same time, it provided a safe gap in time from the totalitarian ideology of the era when the Jára Cimrman Theatre was established. The totalitarian period required that art be engaged with its ideology, but Cimrman and other characters could not comment on socialist ideology and criticize capitalism, as the humour and irony of the plays may have been misinterpreted. This liberation of the Cimrman plays from the then obligatory political adoration of the regime was undoubtedly appealing to the audiences.

3. The Sokol tradition

When reflecting on the lack of engagement of Polish audiences with the Cimrman hoax, it is also worth noting the difference between the perceptions of the Sokol movement tradition. For Czechs, Sokol is an important part of the Czech history which the Cimrman plays bring into the collective memory of the nation, following a period of its politically motivated demise. (The Czech Sokol movement was founded in 1862 and banned in 1956). As the Polish ethnologist Antoni Kroh points out that, to Czechs, the patriotic aims of the Sokol movement

had their own, not insignificant, aesthetic expression, through which it referred to certain ideals, as its distinctive and very popular public festivals rooted in the chivalric traditions of knights. According to Kroh, this may be understood in two ways: the first is the feeling of elevation and generosity, which makes participation in the celebrations an end in itself, and the second is the conviction that the festivities reminiscent of chivalric traditions will be completed only if the chivalric ideals are fulfilled through a fight for those noble patriotic goals (the Sokol well-known motto may be loosely translated as *Strengthen your arms, To serve your country*) (Kroh, 1998). In comparison, the traditions of the Polish Sokol, founded in 1867 in Lviv, had to deal with not only the problems of upholding the egalitarian ideal among all Sokols (whether of aristocratic or humble origin), but even more fundamentally, to keep the festivities peaceful. There was one incident when following a Sokol festival held in Krakow, the local students organized a riot, apparently to live up to the Sokol traditions. So, Cimrman declaring his enthusiasm for the Sokol tradition thus naturally evokes completely different connotations among the Czech and Polish audiences, and moreover the level of knowledge of the subject in Czech culture is fairly solid, whereas it is very limited among the Poles.

Conclusions

Apart from the three key reasons discussed above, there may be other causes as to why the Cimrman hoax has not engaged many among the Polish audiences as opposed to its popularity among the Czech audiences over the past decades. For instance, there was a difference in the (dis)proportion between the national totalitarian regimes and their opposition at the time Cimrman hoax first appeared. While in Poland prior 1989, independent culture, including the publication of literature, was pretty extensive to such a degree that it is pertinent to refer to it as a second ‘circulation’ (alongside the first, controlled by the regime). In the Czech context, the counter-culture was made up of a relatively small group of people, and therefore the term

samizdat was used to refer to unofficial literature. This stronger repression, which lasted to a large extent until 1989 of the former Czechoslovakia, could also explain the wider popularity of ‘the Czech genius’. Cimrman could have been perceived as a (at first serious, later ridiculous) response to the news from the then favoured, even imposed Soviet (and generally socialist) cultural context. At the time of Cimrman’s ‘conception’ and long after that, it could have been understood as an unmasking antithesis (through its ridiculousness) to the strikingly uncritical, almost fabricated information about geniuses, from the USSR, or the broader so-called socialist camp. Czechs may have understood the obvious play with the Cimrman hoax as a sarcastic reflection of the regime’s obvious ideological manipulation of the time. The cathartic effect of such an interpretation of Cimrman, conditioned by historical circumstances and cultural context, naturally weakened after the change of regime and, even more in its transfer to another culture.

The possible causes of the lack of engagement of Polish audiences with the Czech cultural phenomenon (discussed above) may be related to two key aspects: the cultural conditioning of the engagement and the differences between the two cultures. When Hyaden White highlights that societies tend to perceive relations with the Other in the categories of opposition or negation, as the difference is the key focus. He argues for a non-dualistic discourse in the spirit of the new humanistic thinking (White, 2010, p. 10). Research on the weak reception of a cultural phenomenon (or its absence) reveals the differences of the Other, and these naturally turn the focus on the uniqueness of the two examined cultures. This subsequently leads to a reevaluation of mutual relations, bringing out new themes and reflections on those. In this sense, it is the differences that fulfill the purpose of learning about other cultures – of what is the new and different in them.

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