

Title: Alois Nebel: History and the Gothic in Czech Comics

Author: Jose Alaniz, University of Washington

Email: [jos23@u.washington.edu](mailto:jos23@u.washington.edu)

In their drive to establish graphic narrative as a bona fide literary form and gain a larger share of the publishing market, many Czech comics artists of the last ten years have addressed “serious” historical topics. The originator and locus classicus of this approach is Jaroslav Rudiš and Jaromír 99’s Alois Nebel (2003-2005). Among other things, the authors seek to legitimize comics by linking them quite explicitly to recognizable Czech literary tropes, in particular of the historical novel (the series’ setting recalls Karel Čapek’s 1934 novel *An Ordinary Life*, Bohumil Hrabal’s 1965 novel *Closely Watched Trains* as well as Jiří Menzel’s 1966 film adaptation of the latter). The trilogy’s eponymous hero, a train station attendant in the former Sudetenland, is consigned to witness various traumas of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Czech history; for example, Nebel at one point glimpses – through dense fog – a train carrying people to a concentration camp.

The proposed paper examines a handful of such episodes from the trilogy, particularly part one, *The White Brook* (*Bílý Potok*), for their articulation of historical trauma through a post-colonial Gothic. Nebel (and the work itself) sees history as haunting the present through what Martin Foret calls a “strange timelessness,” figured as fog, barren landscapes, a stark black and white palette and the sort of visual/spatial juxtapositions which the medium of comics readily facilitates, all of which resonate with the trans-linguistic trauma theory of Carey Caruth, Marianne Hirsch and Tabish Khair. Nebel’s visions – which land him in a mental asylum – speak to the painful endurance of Czech history’s “phantom limbs,” figured through a “hybrid” medium which scholars like Hillary Chute argue breaks new ground for the visual-verbal representation of trauma. Alois Nebel thus elevated the status of graphic narrative for skeptical Czech readers by confronting the ghosts of the past.