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“You Will Enter into the Century by Reading *Fantômas*”

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“Être de son siècle, quoi, c’est des aventures qui vous font tourner le sang.”
Pierre Souvestre & Marcel Allain, *Le Fiacre de nuit* (*Fantômas* no. 9, 1911)

In February 1994, American and French historians gathered at the University of California at Irvine to exchange papers and perspectives on “Violence and Democracy in France, 1789-1914.” Susanna Barrows, one of my dissertation advisors, insisted I attend to meet a doctoral candidate named Dominique Kalifa, who was completing a thesis under the direction of Michelle Perrot and would be presenting a paper on crime, society, and the press. At the evening reception, I introduced myself to Dominique, babbling on about my dissertation on surrealism and popular culture, and how Apollinaire belonged to a *société des amis* dedicated to an archvillain named Fantômas... Dominique gently interrupted me and, with a cat-who-ate-the-canary grin and a sparkle in his eyes behind black rectangular glasses frames, proclaimed, “Je suis président de la Société des Amis de Fantômas.”

Fantômas was a series of thirty-two crime novels by Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain, published over consecutive months, from February 1911 to September 1913. Throughout the series, Fantômas devises and carries out multiple thefts, murders, and mass atrocities, independently or in concert with criminal gangs. In each novel, the archvillain appears under multiple guises, perpetually evades capture by Inspector Juve of the Sûreté and *La Capitale* reporter Fandor, and miraculously reappears in the next episode. In 1914, avant-garde poets Max Jacob and Guillaume Apollinaire founded the Société des Amis de Fantômas to celebrate the violent lyricism and treasure trove of everyday language embedded in the series. Over the course of the century, the Friends of Fantômas have included, officially or as *confrères*, fans of *romans populaires*, Dadaists, Surrealists, Satraps and Oulipians of the College of 'Pataphysics, and members of Oulipopo (L'Ouvoir de littérature policière potentielle).

While still a graduate student, in 1991 Dominique officially resurrected the Société des Amis de Fantômas (S.A.F.), “80 années au service du crime.” The S.A.F. published *L'Insaisissable. La voix de son Maître (de l'Effroi)*, a bulletin in two series, as a large-sheet circular (Série F, nos. 1-7, 1991-1992) and as a single-fold small booklet (Série A, nos. 1-17, 1993-1997). Editor Bec-de-Gaz (Dominique) encouraged *Safistes* to contribute feature articles and miscellaneous tidbits to the fanzine. Each issue featured original short stories, poems, illustrations, quizzes and puzzles, reprinted articles and aphorisms by Dadaists and Surrealists, and miscellaneous items gathered under the rubrics “Crimes et délits,” “Echos...,” “À travers la presse,” “Dernière heure,” and “Annonces.” The S.A.F. sponsored a “Fête Fantômas” in May 1992, which included a Fantômas film festival and art, literary, and historical expositions, and awarded a “Prix Fantômas” to

Didier Blonde's *Les Voleurs de visages. Sur quelques cas troublants de changements d'identité : Rocambole, Arsène Lupin, Fantômas, & Cie* (Éditions Métailié, 1992). The S.A.F. also launched the *Nouvelle revue des études fantomassiennes* (Éditions Joëlle Losfeld, 1993), although the journal only ran one issue.

After Dominique entered the historical profession, the S.A.F. and *L'Insaisissable* went into hiatus, yet he was already recognized as a respected Fantômas authority. Dominique was a consultant in the preparation of the two-DVD collector's edition of Louis Feuillade's five *Fantômas* films (Gaumont, 1999), and he convened a roundtable of scholars on "Que devient Fantômas?" at BILIPO (Bibliothèque des littératures policières) in conjunction with the "Fantômas et Compagnie" film festival at the Centre Pompidou in 2002. In May 2013, Dominique delivered the opening address, "Écrire l'histoire de Fantômas," at the international conference *Journées Fantômas*, organized by the Université de Limoges with invited scholars from France, Italy, Canada, Hungary, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Dominique's crowning achievement in Fantômas studies is *Tu entreras dans le siècle en lisant Fantômas* (Vendémaire, 2017), delightfully organized as an *abécédaire*, with an Oulipian twist of six additional letters—&, Æ, Ô (avec ou sans?), Ph, ?!, *—to produce a thirty-two-letter alphabet to match the number of novels in the original series. The entry "&" examines the working relationship between co-authors Souvestre and Allain. Dominique affirmed that Souvestre, an acknowledged *homme de lettres* and the sole signatory to the series contract with publisher Arthème Fayard II, was primarily responsible for the series, with co-author Allain riding his coattails. After Souvestre died of a heart attack in February 1914 (not, as Fantômas legend has it, due to Spanish influenza), Allain became the mythologizer who augmented, abridged, and milked the series. The "Bible" entry details how, over the decades, Allain exaggerated *Fantômas* print runs by hundreds of thousands of copies and aggrandized origin stories about the series. "Résurrection" focuses on how Allain continued to cash in on *Fantômas* after Souvestre's death, approving abridged reissues of the original series, writing entirely new *Fantômas* novels, feuilletons, and *bande dessinée* scenarios, as well as generating spin-off crime series—*Femme de proie*, *Tigris*, *Fatala*, *Miss Teria*, and others—popular at the time, but ignored today.

In multiple entries, Dominique establishes sympathies between *Fantômas* and various cultural networks. "Époque (belle?)" sets the historical stage, while "Le Loupart et autres apaches" examines the era's criminal gangs. "Zigomar et autres Génies du crime" connects *Fantômas* to and distinguishes it from other French crime series of the era, such as *Zigomar* by Léon Scazie and *Ténébras, le bandit fantôme* by Arnould Galopin, and internationally alongside Sax Rohmer's *Fu Manchu* and Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse*. The entry "Haro !"—an antiquated exclamation for "alas!" or "help!"—takes aim at literary authors and critics who lamented Souvestre and Allain's hackneyed French, horrid style, and absurd scenarios. For his part, Dominique sided with Apollinaire that *Fantômas* embodied the lyricism of everyday life precisely because it was "written every which way" ("écrit n'importe comment," 95). He explored resonances between the haphazard delights of *Fantômas* and the twentieth-century avant-garde in entries on "Apollinaire," "Desnos," and "Queneau."

In France, Fantômas is best known as a movie archvillain, detailed by Dominique under “Filmographie.” Although silent film aficionados have delighted in the restoration of Louis Feuillade’s five-part series (1913-1914), the most popular *Fantômas* movies are the gadgetry-filled ones from the 1960s directed by André Hunebelle, starring Jean Marais in the double role of Fantômas and Fandor, and the comic actor Louis de Funès playing a buffoonish Inspector Juve. Other feature films include *Fantômas* (Jean Sacha, 1947), *Fantômas contre Fantômas* (Robert Vernay, 1948), and four made-for-television *Fantômas* movies directed by Claude Chabrol and Juan Luis Buñuel (1979), periodically recycled on the Arte channel. Of all the *Fantômas* movie projects dreamed by the avant-garde, the only one fully realized was *Mr. Fantômas, 280 000e chapitre* by Belgian surrealist poet Ernest Mœurman (1937). Characterized by Dominique as “la contribution cinématographique la plus pure au mythe de Fantômas” (p. 82), the film delivers a phantasmagoria of images that narrate Fantômas seducing and killing multiple women, his repeated arrests by and escapes from Sûreté detectives, and his execution by cannon, which dissolves into priests and nuns dancing around a scaffold pole to accordion accompaniment by Inspector Juve.

Fantômas also traversed cultural geographies. Novels from the original series were translated into English, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Flemish, German, Czech, Serbo-Croatian, Turkish, Vietnamese, and perhaps other languages as well. Under “Kriminel,” Dominique charts the metamorphosis of Fantômas into comic book characters, most notably as the masked Italian criminals *Diabolik* and *Kriminal* in the 1960s. The Mexican comics series *Fantomas, la Amenaza Elegante* transformed the villain into a superhero, who was subsequently given a Situationist and anti-imperialist swerve by the Argentine novelist Julio Cortázar in *Fantomas contra los vampiros multinacionales: una utopia realizable* (1975). Fantômas assumed the alias of “Tom-Bob, American Detective” on three occasions, although he never actually landed on U.S. shores. Still, Dominique celebrates the antihero’s enthusiastic reception in America under “*Westwego*.” Seven novels from the original *Fantômas* series were translated into English early in the twentieth century, as were five subsequent novels by Allain alone. Director Edward Sedgwick made a twenty-episode *Fantomas* silent film serial for Fox Film Corporation in 1920, sadly lost today, although a rare press book inspired playwright David White to write the novel *Fantômas in America* (2007). English translations from the original series have continued in the twenty-first century, with the Black Coats Press publication of *The Daughter of Fantômas* (2002) and *The Death of Fantômas* (2017). The evasive antihero also served as the inspiration for the metal band Fantômas, founded by avant-garde musician Mike Patton in 1998.

Fantômania in America reached its zenith with “Fantômas by the Bay” in 2011, a four-day centenary extravaganza organized by Peter Maravelis at City Lights Books in San Francisco, with Dominique as a featured celebrity. In the opening festivities, Dominique chanted the antiphonal “Liturgy of Fantômas” in thirty-two stanzas, while I led the crowd in sacrilegious responses. Chanteuse Jill Tracy and an accordion-playing Daniel Handler performed “The Ballad of Fantômas,” and composer Marcus Ellis distributed CDs of “La marche funèbre à la mémoire de Fantômas.” The Mechanics Institute Library and Chess Club hosted evening presentations, a series of “Fantômas! Agent of Chaos!” lectures, including one delivered by Dominique, and a compilation film, “The Screen Bleeds.” A secret subterranean gathering showcased an *onirique* theatrical piece by puppeteer Janaki Ranpura, and The Slow Poisoner played an excruciatingly long musical set. Dominique and I spent those evenings side-by-side, a most precious memory.

For Dominique Kalifa, Fantômas was more than a Belle Époque character from an arcane crime novel series. From his perspective, as both a fan and historian, Fantômas was nothing less than a mesmerizing *chrononyme*, omnipresent and continually metamorphosing, whose enormous shadow has extended over cultural geographies and inhabited multiple media across our alluring, disturbing, impulsive, and violent century.

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