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Michel Arouimi, *Mylène Farmer: le monde comme il tanguie*. Paris: Hermann, 2014. 201 pp. 22.00€. (pb). ISBN: 978-2-7056-8828-8.

Review by Kim Harrison, Independent scholar.

The study of French popular music has gained considerable academic ground over the past twenty years or so, with scholars now approaching the field from a variety of theoretical and interdisciplinary angles and admitting a wider canon of artists. Very little, however, has been published on the work of Mylène Farmer in academic circles—either in a Francophone or Anglophone context. Arouimi's 200-page dive into the universe of Mylène Farmer, then, is to be celebrated on a first level simply for bringing her work to the attention of an academic audience, and thus contributing to a widening of the field of French popular music studies, regardless of one's personal feelings about the recording artist. The book, however, does not serve as a critical introduction to her work, and there is very little in terms of contextualization for the reader who is unfamiliar with Mylène Farmer. Rather, Arouimi provides a fairly standard literary/linguistic analysis of key themes and myths that appear in her songs (and performances). Although, with the exception of a handful of songs, Farmer does not write the music, Arouimi argues that she consciously creates a musical universe, aspiring to a "total art."^[1]

The book comprises a total of five chapters plus a preface (*avant-propos*). Chapter one, "L'ésotérisme aux couleurs de la pop," explores themes that will be reiterated throughout the book: duality, androgyny, the sacred as a response to violence (p. 13). Chapter two, "Être Mylène," looks at the Mylène persona and touches on the duality between the mediated persona and the singer's authentic self. Chapter three, "Une révélation pour le temps présent," further explores themes related to the Mylène image, including religion, war, the apocalypse. Chapters four and five are considerably smaller than the previous, chapter five acting as a conclusion using an analysis of her most recent (at time of press) album *Monkey Me*.^[2] While chapter four, "Si c'est un prince," takes a closer look at what Arouimi describes as those key texts that best illustrate the poetic qualities he has evoked throughout his discussion thus far.^[3]

Arouimi himself admits that he wasn't always a "fan" of Mylène Farmer, but felt drawn to the force of her imagery and exploration of philosophical issues in the 1999 album *Innamoramento* (p. 5). Throughout his five chapters, he attempts to elucidate Farmer's, occasionally obscure song lyrics, urging the reader to share his appreciation for her poetic profundity and "genius."^[4]

Leaving the notion of genius aside for now, his case for Farmer's poetic and philosophical value is well made. He offers ample comparisons and allusions to other literary (and, to a smaller extent, filmic or musical) works, placing Farmer's texts and her treatment of themes within a broader creative context. Rimbaud features heavily in comparative analyses, although some of the comparisons are more convincing than others, it must be said.^[5] What is particularly pleasing to see is Arouimi's use of elements of "text" is not limited to the printed lyrics. He makes reference to the music, accompanying videos, CD covers, and related promotional materials. This broader analysis quite rightly places Farmer's work in the context of popular music, although the suggestion that her songs are "poems" is

always frequently made in the book. Many references explore the lyrical qualities of Farmer's text, studying closely the sounds within the lines and verses as well as the structure of the text on the page (on the printed CD booklets).

As Arouimi himself indicates both in the preface and chapter four, he would have liked to have given a fuller, linguistic analysis of several of Farmer's songs, but was prevented from doing so by copyright issues (p. 5; p. 184). He points readers to both an article in which he does provide such a detailed analysis, as well as to the printed lyrics which can be found on the booklets accompanying the CDs and on the internet.[6] In spite of this logistical limitation, Arouimi provides a solid, insightful discussion of Farmer's texts and her treatment of key themes.

As legitimate as the analyses in this book are, however, I do feel there was a missed opportunity to have brought a more nuanced reading by going beyond the literary/thematic and looking at how Farmer's universe fits into a wider context of French popular music or, more specifically, *la chanson française*. I'll readily admit to not being an expert on Mylène Farmer, but even from the analyses contained in this book, certain comparisons to other Francophone singer-songwriters stand out – Gainsbourg, for example, immediately springs to mind in Arouimi's discussion of duality. Another level of meaning could have been teased out in many of these analyses by examining Farmer's mediated role as a singer-performer, rather than simply a poet or thinker.[7]

Arouimi does briefly allude to other musical artists--Edith Piaf and Michel Polnareff, in particular--but many more could have been referenced, in addition to his allusions to poets, philosophers and writers. Moreover, as noted above, while Arouimi analyses not just the lyrics but other textual elements, his emphasis on the printed text and his insistence on the use of the word "poem" to describe the song lyrics remains problematic. Song lyrics are not, of course, poems, as poetic as they may be. There is little indication in the book of Arouimi's methodology or why he chooses the approach taken here; a nod to the complexities of studying popular music and, in particular, song lyrics, would have been a useful addition to the introductory chapters. Similarly, a discography, bibliography, or further reading suggestions would have proved helpful to the reader given how little is currently available on Mylène Farmer in an academic context.

Nonetheless, this book remains a very welcome addition to the growing body of work from academics on contemporary Francophone recording artists and will be of interest to scholars in both Francophone and Anglophone contexts, in a variety of disciplines, from literature to French studies to popular music studies. The book will also hopefully prompt some scholars to take a closer look at Mylène Farmer and, for those who already include her in their corpus, it will certainly make a valued contribution to their theoretical library.

NOTES

[1] "Mylène semble aspirer à un art total" (p. 5). Arouimi also makes frequent reference to "l'univers de Mylène Farmer" throughout the book.

[2] *Monkey Me* was released in 2012; the album *Interstellaires* was released just after the publication of Arouimi's book, in 2015.

[3] "J'aimerais néanmoins évoquer ces textes majeurs, où se raffinent les qualités poétiques soulignées jusque-là" (p. 183).

[4] Page 5 is the first time Arouimi makes reference to "le génie de Mylène"; he uses the phrase on several other occasions in the book both to refer to Farmer and her composer Laurent Boutonnat (see page 105, "Le génie de Boutonnat...") or various music video producers.

[5] The frequent references to Rimbaud are perhaps not too surprising given that Arouimi published an essay on Rimbaud, in relation to the author of *Les Carnets*, Arion Dume, the same year as his work on Mylène Farmer appeared (*Rimbaud sous la poussière de Dume*, [Paris: Editions l'Harmattan, 2014]).

[6] “J’éviterai dans cet ouvrage une analyse trop linéaire de ces chansons, dont la citation exhaustive n’est pas permise par leurs éditeurs” (p. 5); “J’aurais aimé conclure cet ouvrage en faisant l’analyse mot à mot, de deux poèmes de Mylène. Ce n’est pas possible, pour la raison indiquée dans mon avant-propos” (p. 183). Instead, Aouimi directs his readers to an article of his, in which he did analyze the songs in this way: “Un désir de kabbale: l’univers de Mylène Farmer,” *Perspectives* 16(2009): 231-249.

[7] See page 74, for example, where Arouimi discusses the notion of duality with reference to a “mirror” or painter-subject. The philosophical conclusions he draws are valid, but a reading that considers her role as a performer would have given a more nuanced and deeper interpretation. The theme of duality and the star or performer/real-life dichotomy has been explored by many *chanson* artists, including, notably, Léo Ferré in “L’Idole”, and Gainsbourg in several songs, including those written for France Gall.

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