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Fantômas’s shifting identities: From books to screen

ABSTRACT
In 1911 Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre published the first in what would become a series of 32 novels chronicling the sensational crimes of Fantômas, ‘le Maître de l’Épouvante’. The success of the novels led Léon Gaumont to acquire the film rights to the books the following year, and in 1913 the first Fantômas film appeared, directed by Louis Feuillade. Four sequels would follow, and collectively the Fantômas films became one of the masterpieces of early French cinema. This article will examine the representation of identity in both books and films in the context of contemporary developments in forensic identification. It will explore the differences in how books and films approach this subject, and consider to what extent this is determined by the specificities of the two different media.

A little over 100 years ago, in February 1911, the French-reading public were first introduced to a terrifying arch-criminal, the ‘Master of Horror’, the ‘King of Crime’, the diabolical Fantômas. The sensational exploits of this evil genius would keep them entertained for the next two years, chronicled in a series of 32 novels, written by the sports journalists Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain, and published as part of Fayard’s ‘Livre Populaire’ collection. The novels enjoyed huge success, with sales reaching five million. They belong in a long tradition of popular fiction that is centrally concerned with the disruption of
fixed patterns of identity. Like his contemporaries, gentleman-thief Arsène Lupin and escaped convict Chéri-Bibi, both heroes of other popular Belle Époque crime serials, or his nineteenth-century predecessors, Rocambole and Les Habits Noirs, Fantômas is a master of disguise, able at will to slough off old identities and assume new ones. Given his essentially mutable nature, it is unsurprising that Souvestre and Allain’s books should have proved unable to contain their hero who has, over the course of the last century, undergone a series of transmediations, appearing in films, TV series, radio plays, paintings and comic books. He has circulated ceaselessly between different cultural spaces, from the avant-garde (Walz 2000: 42–75 discusses in detail the Fantômas cult among the Surrealists), to the commercial mainstream (as in André Hunebelle’s action comedy trilogy of the 1960s, starring Jean Renais in the title role), to the comic book subculture (there is a Mexican comic called Fantomas, inspired by the Souvestre and Allain series, and which in turn inspired the experimental writer Julio Cortázar’s novella, Fantomas contra los vampiros multinacionales). The most celebrated Fantômas adaptations remain, however, the first: five films directed by Louis Feuillade for Gaumont and released between 1913 and 1914, when the outbreak of the First World War halted production.

The proliferation of adaptations of the original texts, and of texts inspired by adaptations, indicates the extent to which the figure of Fantômas has achieved cult status. This is doubtless linked to one of the fundamental aspects of the Fantômas cosmology. Umberto Eco writes that for a work to become a cult object ‘one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it, so that one can remember only parts of it irrespective of their original relationship with the whole’ (1986: 198). The Fantômas books and films lend themselves particularly well to these operations, for they are characterized by discontinuity and eschew the values of narrative coherence, closure and resolution, embodying what Vicki Callahan in her monograph on Feuillade has termed an aesthetics of ‘dislocation’ (see Callahan 2005: 45–72 for her discussion of the Fantômas films). This aesthetic of dislocation is closely tied to the representation in the books and films of criminal identity. Fantômas offers its public a fiction of a mutable, shifting identity that cannot be arrested, that is not subject to bureaucratic control.

It is this notion of identity that this article will examine, looking at how it is conceptualized in both books and films. In particular, it will explore how the written and filmic texts can be read in the context of changes in police practice in the period, and the development of forensic anthropometrics. This system, pioneered in France by Alphonse Bertillon in the 1880s – hence its French name of Bertillonnage – and widely used for the next 30 years until it was usurped by fingerprinting, used physical measurements to identify criminals. The need for a reliable form of judicial identification had become particularly keenly felt in France in the 1870s, when worries about recidivism rates escalated. Since the abolition of the practice of branding convicts in 1832, the identification of recidivists had proved difficult, and following the destruction of public archives during the Commune it had become possible for people to invent entirely new identities at will, since their birth certificates were not extant. Elsa de Lavergne suggests that this situation was responsible for the ubiquity of the topoi of disguise and misidentification in the nineteenth-century popular novel (see Lavergne 2009: 125–30 on the problem of judicial identity). The development of Bertillonnage went a considerable way to remedying this problem of judicial identification. Of this development Lavergne writes:
This decisive turning point in judicial identification did not, however, sound the death knell for the carnivalesque practices of the popular novel. Characters continue ceaselessly to invent new identities and disguise themselves in the most extreme fashion to escape the police. [...] The question of identity was an existential issue in the nineteenth century, but it had been transformed into mascarade and sometimes even farce by the turn of the century. [...] Novelists then treat these anachronistic practices with a marked ironic distance.

(2009: 126)

Thus Lavergne suggests that the crime novels of the early twentieth century inherited a device that no longer had any connection with social reality. I would suggest, however, that the development of Bertillonage had broader cultural effects than Lavergne allows, and that it inflected the representation of identity in Belle Époque crime fictions in other ways than merely by introducing greater irony into the texts (although, as we shall see, this is a salient feature of the Fantômas books). Before examining how the Fantômas books and films can be read as contesting the discourse of Bertillonage, however, it is first necessary to sketch out some of the main features of the Fantômas universe.

The Fantômas stories revolve around three central characters: the criminal mastermind, Fantômas himself; the police detective Juve; and the journalist Jérôme Fandor, Juve’s ally in the struggle against crime. In addition, there are a number of recurring ancillary characters: Lady Beltham, Fantômas’s mistress; an unfortunate Russian Princess, Sonia Danidoff, who is repeatedly a victim of his crimes; and various apaches, members of the Parisian criminal underworld. The novels make use of a kind of keynote characterization, where the characters are sharply delineated but entirely lacking in depth. Each can be summed up in a few words: Fantômas is evil and clever, Juve dogged and clever, and Fandor is brave, insouciant and gallant. A perfunctory emotional dimension is provided by the Fandor’s various love affairs and the relationship between Juve and Fandor, which mirrors the relationship between a father and son. Even this perfunctory emotional dimension is almost entirely lacking in the films, which considerably streamline the complex plots of the novels and eliminate much of the details of the characters’ lives. Each of the novels recounts Fantômas’s spectacular crimes – audacious robberies, violent murders, even acts of biological terrorism – Juve’s attempts to bring him to justice, and Fantômas’s inevitable escape, effected by a variety of means including hidden passages, prosthetic limbs and swarms of bees. Inevitable because clearly, for the series to continue, Fantômas must remain at liberty. In contrast to the detective story, which ends with the detective triumphantly unmasking the criminal, the Fantômas stories always end with the criminal’s escape.

If detective novels are structured by the question, ‘Whodunit?’, the central mystery that shapes the Fantômas series as a whole is a different, and more unsettling, one: Who is Fantômas? This mystery is set up in the opening lines of the very first novel in the series:

**FANTÔMAS!**
What did you say?
I said ... Fantômas.
What does that mean?
Nothing … and everything!
But, what is it?
Nobody … but yet someone!
And what does he do, this someone?
He scares you!!!

(Souvestre and Allain 1961a: 1)

This brief snatch of dialogue performs a number of functions. First, the interlocutors are anonymous at this point; their identity will be revealed a few paragraphs later. This creates the impression that it is public opinion itself that is speaking; it establishes the notoriety of Fantômas within this fictional reality. It also foregrounds the erasure of identity that is characteristic of the novels; the question of who is speaking is one that remains suspended, albeit temporarily. Moreover, this dialogue, operating almost exclusively in the interrogative and exclamatory modes, establishes the mode in which the series will operate: mystery and sensation. It further establishes that the eponymous character is the source of that mystery. Indeed, at this stage it is not even clear that Fantômas is a character, in the conventional sense. As one of the interlocutors explains: ‘Sometimes he incarnates himself in the person of a specific, even a well-known, individual; sometimes he takes the form of two human beings at once! … Fantômas! He is nowhere and he is everywhere!’ (Souvestre and Allain 1961a: 10). What is at stake here is the question of embodied identity; Fantômas at this point does not seem to be a name that attaches to a specific person. This is reinforced a few pages later, when the young Charles Rambert (who will later become Jérome Fandor), suffers hypnagogic hallucinations in which he sees Fantômas: ‘Sometimes he saw a colossus with a beast’s face, with muscled shoulders; sometimes a pale, thin being, with strange, glowing eyes; sometimes an indefinite form, a phantom …! Fantômas’ (Souvestre and Allain 1961a: 19). Here again the disembodied nature of Fantômas is emphasized, as he appears in three different forms, which move from the solid to the insubstantial, from one monstrous in its hybridity to one terrifying in its indeterminacy. It is appropriate that the punctuation marks most closely associated with Fantômas are suspension points, suggestive of mystery, of a lacuna in knowledge, and that the conjunction that occurs most insistently in connection with him is the disjunctive ‘sometimes … sometimes’ (tantôt … tantôt), which points to his mutability. Fantômas is a name without a body. Rather than an identity, ‘Fantômas’ is a function; it is a means to produce terror and indeterminacy, a principle of transgression.

The question of Fantômas’s identity is one that is never resolved. In each book he adopts numerous disguises, his aliases proliferating wildly. Juve and Fandor are equally dependent on disguise to go about their work, frequently masquerading as apaches. Mystery and suspense are generated by this profusion of disguises, as every new character introduced might potentially be an avatar of one of the three main characters. The reader can never be sure that a given character is who he purports to be. Any character might be Fantômas, until decisively proved not to be. The normal proof that a character is not Fantômas is that he becomes a victim of Fantômas. If in the workaday world we tend to act on the basis that people are who they claim to be, in the world in which Fantômas operates the opposite becomes true. The universe evoked by the books is one of a generalized suspicion.

It is instructive at this point to compare Fantômas with another famous figure from Belle Époque crime fiction, Arsène Lupin. Both series are structured
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around the idea of disguise, as the opening pages of ‘L’Arrestation d’Arsène Lupin’, the first Lupin story, makes clear, introducing its hero as ‘the man of a thousand disguises: by turns a chauffeur, tenor, bookmaker, a wealthy young bounder, an adolescent, an old man, a traveling-salesman from Marseilles, a Russian doctor, a Spanish torrero’ (Leblanc 1907: 18). Like the Fantômas novels, Leblanc’s texts generate their entertainment value by keeping readers guessing as to the identity of their various characters. Unlike Fantômas, however, Lupin has a ‘true’ identity, to which the reader is privy. Indeed, a significant element of the Arsène Lupin saga is its hero’s personal history, about which we learn over the course of the series. We come to understand how a young man called Raoul d’Andrézy became the famous outlaw, Arsène Lupin, and how various formative experiences shaped his destiny. Readers of the Fantômas novels, on the other hand, or spectators of the film, never learn anything about the protagonist’s personal history, never learn his ‘true’ identity. There is no ‘true’ identity.

This leads to certain oddities in the text. For example, one of Fantômas’s assumed identities is Gurn, the lover of Lady Beltham and assassin of Lord Beltham. During one encounter between the two lovers, while Gurn, in hiding from the police, nonetheless risks visiting Lady Beltham’s house, the text informs us that:

The noblewoman thought of the war in the Transvaal, of the battlefield on which, for the first time, she had seen Gurn, the artillery sergeant all blackened with gunpowder! … Then she thought of their return…when a powerful steamer carried them across the blue sea, toward the greyish contours of the British Isles …

(Souvestre and Allain 1961a: 280)

For the reader, Lady Beltham here appears effectively to be vouching for Gurn; she has known him for several years, and can testify to his whereabouts, his activities and his identity. For the story to make sense, Fantômas must in fact be Gurn, but as the series progresses it becomes clear that Gurn is just one of a series of identities, some equally fully-realized. If the apparent impossibility of Fantômas assuming multiple identities at the same time troubles either reader or investigating magistrate, Juve has a simple response: ‘For Fantômas nothing is impossible’ (Souvestre and Allain 1961a: 375).

The difference between Lupin and Fantômas is exemplified by the manner in which both manage to outwit the scientific police, and resist identification. In the Fantômas stories, although Juve frequently praises Bertillon’s innovations, they consistently fail to help him apprehend his nemesis. This is partly because Fantômas is able to devise a number of ingenious counter-forensic ploys to outwit the scientific police. For example in the third novel in the series, Fantômas se venge, adapted by Feuillade as Le Mort qui tue/The Dead Man Who Kills, he fashions a pair of gloves out of the skin of another’s hands, thus leaving a trail of misleading fingerprints. But the novels persistently suggest a more radical reason for the failure of the scientific police. At one point in the first novel, in the course of the Fantômas investigation, Juve makes use of the dynamometer recently invented by Bertillon, an instrument that could measure the amount of force used by an individual breaking and entering. Just a few pages later, however, discussing the case with the investigating magistrate, he says of Fantômas that ‘his audacity is without measure, because his strength is incalculable’ (Souvestre and Allain 1961a: 90). For the reader, the
use of ‘without measure’ and ‘incalculable’ retrospectively suggest the futility of using instruments such as the dynamometer to try and capture Fantômas. The entire apparatus of Bertillonnage is useless when it comes to Fantômas. This is not the case for Lupin. When Lupin is arrested in the first book of the series his measurements are recorded. The existence of this record would limit his scope for future criminal action, were it not for one simple fact: he bribes a policeman to falsify the record. Their different responses to Bertillonnage highlight an important distinction between Fantômas and Lupin, which is that the latter has an embodied identity, whereas the former does not.

In emphasizing the ‘incalculable’ and ‘unmeasurable’ qualities of their hero, the Fantômas novels can be read as a challenge to the discourse of anthropometrics, and the broader scientific culture of which it was a part, a science of quantification which asserted that all human problems could be addressed mathematically. This is precisely how Nanette L. Fornabai reads the novels, examining not only representational content, but also their narratological functioning, concluding that they contest the culture of quantification through their refusal of closure and resolution (see Fornabai 2005). I would suggest that rather than think of the Fantômas books as simply challenging the claims of the scientific culture of the Belle Époque, it is perhaps more accurate to think of them as revealing some of the unsettling ideas that inhered within the discourse of Bertillonnage, but that were often disavowed, or disguised. Allan Sekula, in a fascinating essay, has discussed some of the conceptual underpinnings and implications of Bertillonnage. Although Bertillon is often loosely thought of as belonging in the same category as criminologists such as Cesare Lombroso, since both were interested in criminality and the body, the two men actually embody diametrically opposed approaches to conceptualizing criminality. As Sekula explains:

The invention of the modern criminal cannot be dissociated from the construction of a law-abiding body – a body that was either bourgeois or subject to the dominion of the bourgeoisie. The law-abiding body recognized its threatening other in the criminal body, recognized its own acquisitive and aggressive impulses unchecked, and sought to reassure itself in two contradictory ways. The first was the invention of an exceptional criminal who was indistinguishable from the bourgeois, save for a conspicuous lack of moral inhibition: herein lay the figure of the criminal genius. The second was the invention of a criminal who was organically distinct from the bourgeois: a biotype. The science of criminology emerged from this latter operation.

(Sekula 1989: 350–51, original emphasis)

Bertillon was not a criminologist; he did not conceive of the criminal body as being ‘organically different’ from the body of the law-abiding citizen, and was not concerned with defining the criminal type. Rather he was a criminalist. The distinction between the two is explained thus by Sekula: ‘Criminology hunted “the” criminal body. Criminalistics hunted “this” or “that” criminal body’ (1989: 354). Sekula points out that at first blush this process of individuation can be allied to a humanist ideology that affirms the uniqueness of the individual. In fact, however, in so far as it relied heavily on statistical science, particularly the pioneering work of Alphonse Quetelet, who introduced the idea of the ‘average man’ characterized by the mean value of various measured variables following the normal distribution,
Bertillon’s work in fact ‘runs counter to any metaphysical or essentialist doctrine of the self’ (Sekula 1989: 362):

Writing with a co-author in 1909 Bertillon noted that according to the logic of the binomial curve, ‘each observation or each group of observations is to be defined, not by its absolute value, but by its deviation from the arithmetic mean’. Thus even the nominalist Bertillon was forced to recognize the higher reality of the ‘average man’. The individual could be defined only by invoking the powers of this genie. And the individual existed as an individual only by being identified. Individuality as such had no meaning. Viewed ‘objectively’, the self occupied a position that was wholly relative.

(Sekula 1989: 362, original emphasis)

Thus Bertillon’s work in fact hollowed out the concept of identity, which becomes a function of difference rather than an essence in and of itself.

Sekula’s description of Bertillon’s work resonates with the content of the Fantômas novels in two specific ways. First, the notion of the criminal genius as the evil twin of the law-abiding bourgeois clearly applies to Fantômas. Indeed, he can infiltrate bourgeois milieux as easily as he can the criminal underworld, masquerading sometimes as an apache, sometimes as a liberal professional. In Le Magistrat Cambrioleur, for example, adapted by Feuillade as Le Faux Magistrat/The False Magistrate, Fantômas spends much of the story disguised as Charles Pradier, investigating magistrate. In this novel, the reader for the first time has extended access to Fantômas’s interior life, the most striking aspect of which is how ordinary it is. Fantômas’s mind, far from being a world of monsters and demons, is the mind of a briskly efficient, practical man, albeit one entirely lacking a moral conscience. He is also a man beset by the problems that all employers suffer, constantly involved in wage disputes with his underlings as he seeks to minimize labour costs to maximize profits. Thus, before executing one of his minions he berates him in the following terms: ‘My poor Ribonard, you were becoming too socialist for me, too redistributive. Once and for all you will learn that when Fantômas sets his friends to work, he intends them to leave him the greater part of that work’ (Souvestre and Allain 1962: 559). At a time when, it is often claimed, the figure of the anarchist and that of the criminal had become almost interchangeable in the minds of the French public (see Kalifa 1995: 161–64), Fantômas presents himself as a member of the patronat, seeking to quell the discontent of his employees.

Second, the Fantômas texts, as we have already seen, ‘run counter to any metaphysical or essentialist doctrine of the self’ (Sekula 1989: 362). Given the emptiness of Fantômas himself, there is a curious lacuna at the heart of the texts. In this opening instalment in the series, it is not even clear that Fantômas exists. Only Juve and Fandor are convinced of the material reality of the arch-villain. For others in the book Fantômas is merely a convenient fiction. As one investigating magistrate explains: ‘Fantômas, of course, is just the easy way out, a banal way to close a case!’ (Souvestre and Allain 1961a: 89). Invoking Fantômas is simply a means for the police to explain the inexplicable. If a crime cannot be made sense of, if it cannot be solved, then the name ‘Fantômas’ is attached to it. Thus the mysterious, mystifying, enigmatic and incomprehensible Fantômas is reduced to ‘a banal way to close a case!’ Fantômas seems to haunt both sides of a binary opposition, in this case the
opposition between the classifiable and the unclassifiable. From the police point of view, the word ‘Fantômas’ is what enables crimes to cross from one side of that opposition to the other; he enables them to classify the unclassifiable. In play here is a further opposition between difference and identity, the same opposition that structured Bertillon’s system. In so far as Fantômas has an identity, it emerges out of difference and exclusion. Fantômas is the name given to all those who cannot be identified; he exists at the margin of identity.

If the Fantômas novels expose some of the more unsettling aspects of Bertillonage, the Feuillade films seem, on a first viewing, to seek to contain some of the anxieties that the books unleash, and to present a more stable notion of identity. This effect is chiefly due to the inclusion of a kind of prologue at the beginning of each film, which introduces the actor playing Fantômas, René Navarre, and shows him, in medium close-up, in the different guises he will assume throughout the films. In the second film, Edmund Bréon, who plays Juve, is introduced in the same way. If the reader of the Fantômas novels can never be quite sure whether a character is who they purport to be, the spectator of the film is in possession of this information from the start. Tom Gunning provides several explanations for the inclusion of this prologue. Among these explanations is the fact that early films ‘were subject to special scrutiny by censors and government officials’ (Gunning 1996: 32). The new medium was treated with suspicion by state authorities, concerned about its effects on audiences (on this see also Kalifa 1995: 222–33). Gunning’s reference to this climate of suspicion and censure could perhaps explain a number of other differences between Feuillade’s films and the original Fantômas books, all of which tend to attenuate the unsettling, disturbing and subversive effects of the latter. For example, the iconic image of a masked Fantômas looming over the Parisian sky-line was used both as the cover illustration of the first novel, and as the poster for the first film, but whereas in the former Fantômas holds in his hand a dagger dripping with blood, in the latter his hand is empty (see Figures 1 and 2). The first film also departs from its source text in its ending. In both novel and film Fantômas, as Gurn, is tried and convicted of the murder of Lord Beltham. In both he manages to escape by sending an innocent man to the guillotine in his place. But whereas in the book, Juve realizes what Fantômas has done only after the execution of the innocent man, in the film this tragic ending is averted, as Juve realizes what has happened before the execution itself. Both these changes clearly seek to make the films ‘safer’ for public consumption than the books.

Gunning also notes that in including the prologue showing Navarre in his various roles, Feuillade was following an established convention of early cinema, in which an opening sequence would introduce both actors and their roles. Such sequences served to align cinema with theatre, and thus to enhance its cultural prestige. But although the prologues to the Fantômas films might be rather conventional in the context of early cinema, Gunning suggests that they nonetheless exert a rather unsettling effect on the spectator:

The opening shot of the actor without disguising make-up asserts his stable identity as a performer. But the succession of disguises seems to progressively obscure his identity as much as it affirms his skill as an actor and his ability to merge with his role.

(1996: 33)
Gunning concludes that the prologue in fact serves to emphasize the idea of vanishing identity. This is most marked in the prologue to the second film, which climaxes with Navarre pulling on the black hood that Fantômas wears in the films and which almost completely obliterates his features. For Gunning, this hooded figure acts as ‘a visual correlative to an anxiety-causing effacement of individuality’ (1996: 34). We might also add that when Navarre pulls on the black hood, he crosses his arms in front of his chest, tucking his hands beneath his elbows so that no skin is visible. This gesture on the one hand means that he is a block of solid black, with only his eyes visible. But it also strongly resembles a straitjacket. If the books unsettle by stressing the banality of their anti-hero’s psyche, the films – which are less able to explore his psychology – offer instead the image of a madman.

Gunning thus reads the prologue in the context of early film conventions. But the opening shots of Navarre in his various disguises also evoke the conventions of police photography. Photography played a key role in the system of Bertillonage, which combined mugshots with anthropometric data. Indeed, it was Bertillon who first systematized police photography, recognizing the need for consistent lighting and framing were it to be of any use. In recognizing the potential forensic value of photography, Bertillon played a key role in the familiar story of how photography became part of a regulatory regime, a technology of surveillance (for such a Foucauldian account see Tagg 1988: 66–102). But in fact, as Sekula makes clear, photography always
played an accessory role in Bertillon’s system, which was based as much on
the recognition of its limitations, as on an appreciation of its uses:

For Bertillon, the mastery of the criminal body necessitated a massive
campaign of inscription, a transformation of the body’s signs into a text, a
text that pared verbal description down into denotive shorthand, which
was the linked to a numerical series. Thus Bertillon arrested the criminal
body, determined its identity as a body that had already been defined
as criminal, by means that subordinated the image – which remained
necessary but insufficient – to verbal text and numerical series.

(Sekula 1989: 360, original emphases)

Thus Bertillon’s system was not based on unlimited confidence in optical
realism, but on an acceptance of its deficiencies. The image was of little value
unless accompanied by other forms of data.

The prologues to Feuillade’s films allude to the conventions of police
photography, but only in so far as they seem systematically to flout them. First,
the fact that both René Navarre and Edmund Bréon figure in these prologues
functions to imply equivalence between criminal and detective that is in itself
unsettling. In addition, the lighting in the various shots is not standardized,
and the head and facial expression of the subject remain mobile, in defiance
of Bertillon’s strictures, the rationale underpinning which was explained in his
treatise La Photographie judiciaire. In that text Bertillon observes that:

When we first see a new face, it is clear that we are much less concerned
with noting a physical description and memorizing the physiognomic
configuration than attempting to read in its expression the nature of the
emotions, indifferent or passionate, that the individual is experiencing
at that moment in time.

(1890: 14)

In order to counterbalance this natural tendency to pay more attention to
the expression than the features themselves, Bertillon suggests that ‘full face
photography […] must aim to preserve, under the uniformity of the pose,
the natural expression of the physiognomy’ (1890: 19). In the prologue to
Feuillade’s films, however, Navarre and Bréon both subtly but perceptibly
change their expression, through squinting, grimacing, and, in the case of
Bréon, puffing out his cheeks at one point. Moreover, the prologue does not
feature a profile shot, which was considered by Bertillon indispensable for
the purposes of identification, as it ‘gives the fixed individuality of each face’
(1890: 17). The application of make-up can alter one’s appearance, but not the
bone structure of a face, clearly visible in profile. Thus the prologue serves to
highlight not the strengths of Bertillon’s system of police photography, but
rather its weaknesses.

More important still, however, is the nature of the transition from one
image to another, through a dissolve. Callahan has suggested that this use
of dissolve foregrounds ‘the essential quality of the cinema as movement’
(2005: 57). Bertillon’s portraits parlés, as Sekula notes, ‘arrested the criminal
body’ (Sekula 1989: 360); they required that the criminal be immobilized,
static, at rest. The prologues to Feuillade’s films rather serve to highlight the
idea of mobility, one of Fantômas’s key characteristics. Physically, Fantômas
is constantly on the move, around Paris and around France; he makes use
of every form of locomotion available to him: steamers, trains and automobiles; he scales walls and leaps fences; he escapes from prison time and time again. But conceptually too, as we have already seen, Fantômas is a figure of mobility, a figure of transgression who seems to defy categorization.

Through the use of the dissolve, Feuillade highlights the specificity of cinema: it is a moving picture. This resonates with representation of Fantômas himself as a figure of mobility. Indeed, the association between Fantômas and the cinema is one that is insisted upon in the final scene of the first film. This scene is a kind of epilogue, which functions to open up the possibility, in fact to assert the necessity, of a sequel. Fantômas, it will be remembered, has managed to cheat justice once more, sending another man to the guillotine in his place. It is surely no coincidence that this man is an actor, Valgrand (played in the film by Volbert), who has disguised himself as Fantômas for a one-man play based on his crimes. The film shows us Valgrand applying his stage make-up, transforming himself into the arch-villain before our eyes. But this transformation, which belongs to the regime of theatre, is almost disastrous, as the stage-actor narrowly avoids being executed. If, as Gunning suggests, the film’s prologue is partly a device that is intended to enhance the cultural prestige of cinema by aligning it with theatre, the film slyly has its revenge, presenting the defeat of the regime of stage by the regime of the screen. For the film’s final tableau associates Fantômas clearly with cinema itself. Juve sits in his office. Through a dissolve, a ghostly image of his nemesis appears before him, and holds out his hands as if to be arrested, only to disappear again. This scene offers a visual image of Fantômas as ‘l’Insaisissable’/‘the elusive one’, one of the epithets that is repeatedly applied to him in the novels. Fantômas is a ghostly, flickering image, one that can never be apprehended, a shadow on the screen.

Thus both films and books can be read as commentaries on Bertillonage, and both excavate certain troubling ideas that inhered within it, and that pointed to its own limitations. They do so, however, in different ways. The books treat Fantômas as a name without a body, a signifier without a stable signified. In Juve contre Fantômas, Juve, frustrated with the progress of his investigation, which has brought him into contact with a number of Fantômas’s accomplices and indeed with the Emperor of Crime himself in various guises, complains to one of his underlings: ‘We see the puppets moving – Loupart, Chaleck, Joséphine […] We don’t see the strings, the string which…’. As is usual when discussing Fantômas, suspension points are used to signify the residual mystery that Juve cannot penetrate, but which he hints at through shifting from the plural to the singular. But his interlocutor replies: ‘…The string that guides them, might be none other than… Fantômas’ (Souvestre and Allain 1961b: 177). The slight oddity of the image is that Fantômas is here described not as the puppet-master, but as the string. He is conceived of not as an identity but as a structure. If he is the string that guides them, he is also the thread that holds them together, the narrative thread itself. Fantômas is not just a character in the story; he is the very stuff of the narrative. In the films, on the other hand, Fantômas, is embodied. He is a character in a more conventional sense, but by alluding to the conventions of police photography, and by exploring the distinction between moving photography, still photography and theatre, the film manages to highlight some of the doubts about optical realism that riddled Bertillonage.

Here the representation of Bertillonage in the films intersects with the notion of medium specificity, and invites us to think about Feuillade’s
adaptations as adaptations. Writing in praise of the Fantômas books in the *Mercure de France* in 1914, Apollinaire claimed that it was ‘thanks to the vogue conferred upon it by the cinema’, that Souvestre and Allain’s series had found a receptive and enthusiastic readership ‘in several artistic and literary milieus’ (Apollinaire 1914: 422). Apollinaire’s review associates cinema with faddishness, and privileges literature, describing ‘reading popular stories of imagination and adventure’ as ‘a poetic occupation of the greatest interest’ (1914: 422). His comments are implicitly grounded in a traditional view of the hierarchy of the arts, in which literature is more prestigious than cinema. This notion is a minoritarian one, however, and a twenty-first-century cultural critic is more likely to talk of the prestige conferred on the books by the films. The films, after all, have a secure place in the canon of silent cinema, while the books remain defiantly a guilty pleasure. I would suggest this is partly to do with the way in which both books and films display formal self-reflexiveness, but of a very different sort. Linda Hutcheon, in a discussion of Clement Greenberg’s ideas, has pointed out the deeply rooted prejudice that, ‘no art can acquire cultural capital until it has theorized itself as medium-specific with its own formal and signifying possibilities’ (Hutcheon 2006: 34). Certainly, Feuillade’s films are a staging-post in the story of how cinema acquired cultural capital, and display the self-consciousness that Hutcheon describes.

The Souvestre and Allain books, on the other hand, exemplify the tendency Lavergne identifies in turn of the century crime fiction to treat the issue of disguise as a hoary device from the popular novelist’s box of tricks. Thus in the opening discussion in the first novel, the speakers create a genealogy for Fantômas, placing him in the tradition of such ‘mystérieux personnages’/‘mysterious characters’ as Cagliostro and the Man in the Iron Mask (Souvestre and Allain 1961a: 9), both of whom were the subject of adventure novels by Alexandre Dumas. A few pages later, Rambert remarks that ‘it is curious, even extraordinary, that there can be characters as mysterious as Fantômas in this day and age’ (Souvestre and Allain 1961a: 9). The use of the word ‘character’ (‘personnage’ in the French) here stresses the notion that the eponymous anti-hero is a fictive construct. In *Juve contre Fantômas*, a similar idea is invoked when Fandor reproaches Juve for his obsession with Fantômas by saying: ‘Juve, you are still thinking of Rocambole, but Rocambole is dead’ (Souvestre and Allain 1961b: 120), thus presenting Fantômas as the latest avatar of a familiar literary type. These sorts of comments, scattered throughout the novels, ironically acknowledge that the texts are a storehouse of the devices of popular fiction, a treasure trove of all its excesses, its most hackneyed devices and most familiar ruses, which stagger through their sheer accumulation. The most salient characteristic of the texts, and one that is impossible to convey through selective quotation, is their extravagance: implausible, outrageous, unapologetically preposterous, the books acknowledge their relationship with an entire cultural system with a sly wink at the reader.

Feuillade’s films are rather different. As mentioned earlier, the plots of the films are far more streamlined than those of the books, almost austerely Aristotelian in comparison. Moreover, the ironic self-consciousness of the books is gone, for film is a new medium, and this newness militates against the kind of irony that operates in the books. Rather, the films have a seriousness of purpose and a purity of vision that unsettles and unnerves, because it speaks of the mysterious not as something that exists only in old books, but as something that haunts the most ordinary street.
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The interviews contained in Directors: From Stage to Screen and Back Again demonstrate the myriad ways in which a theatre background can engender innovative and stimulating work in film. As unique and idiosyncratic as the personalities they feature, the directors’ conversations with Susan Lehman explore a vast field of topics. Each one traces its subject’s personal artistic journey and explores how he, or she, handled the challenge of moving from stage to screen.

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