Arch-Criminal, Modernist, and Anarchist

by Benjamin Welton (November 2020)

The cover illustration for the first volume of Fantômas, Unknown artist, 1911

For the sad and sorry story,

All the grievous inventory,
Nameless acts of harm and violence,
Every one scot-free, alas!
Of the felon Fantômas.

—"Ballad of Fantômas" by Robert Desnos

The Lord of Terror. The Genius of Evil. These are just some of the sobriquets for Fantômas, the titular villain (or anti-hero) of a series of novels written by the French writing duo, Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain. Prior to writing *Fantômas* (1911), Souvestre and Allain were lawyers and journalists in Paris. It was the grand age of the *belle époque*, when Paris was the cultural capital of the Continent. Paris was a city of great energy. The city, to quote the Norton Simon Museum of Pasadena, California, "was at the forefront of urban development and cultural innovation."[1] The city witnessed the rise of the Eiffel Tower, the proliferation of electric lightening, and the growth of the Montmartre as the world's epicenter of art and nightlife.

Paris had its seedy side as well. Decades before the *belle époque*, French poet Charles Baudelaire wrote of Paris as a New Babylon—a place where lonely old women, lost young men, and an army of whores and thieves rubbed shoulders all along the rain swept streets. The unnamed narrator in "The Murderer's Wine" crows about how killing his wife makes him "happy as a king; / The air is pure, the sky superb…"[2] By 1902, crime reporter Arthur Dupin of Paris's *Le Journal* gave a name to the city's criminal subculture. Known as *apaches*, the Belleville-based thugs "specialized in violent tactics, using sudden kicks, sucker punches, and head butts as a prelude to robbing victims."[3] The *apaches* became the figures of many stories in the popular press as well as on the stage. Art critic and avant-garde anarchist Félix Fénéon used the exploits of the *apaches* and the other lowlifes in his book, *Novels in Three Lines*, which collected over a thousand items from the Parisian newspaper *Le Matin* in order to record Paris

in all its bloody glory.

Sensing money to be made out of the *apache* craze, Allain, Souvestre, and their publisher Artheme Fayard reached an agreement about producing a series of detective novels in April 1910. Neither writer had much experience with fiction—Souvestre wrote for the sports newspaper *L'Auto*, while Allain penned articles for the racing publication, *Le Poids lourd*. However this did not stop them from collaborating on a detective novel entitled *La Royalda*, which appeared as a supplement in the magazine *Comoedia*. The novel so impressed Fayard that the two men were signed to write a four-hundred page detective novel every month for thirty-two months.[4] The character that Souvestre and Allain produced, Fantômas, was inspired by a soap advertisement that featured a man in evening clothes hovering above the cityscape of Paris. This image would provide the cover art for the first Fantômas novel, albeit with the pink soap bubbles replaced by a blood-soaked dagger.[5]

Fantômas may have one of the best opening lines in the history of pulp fiction:

"Fantômas."

"What did you say?"

"I said: Fantômas."

"And what does that mean?"

"Nothing . . . Everything!"

The novel introduces Inspector Juve as the figure of authority. Juve is a detective with the Sûreté. At the time, France was one of the leading centers of criminology in the world. Alexandre Lacassagne, a pathology professor, revolutionized the study of ballistics and helped to lay the groundwork for forensic anthropology during the late

nineteenth century. Lacassagne famously solved the July 26, 1889 murder of Toussaint-Augustin Gouffe, a Parisian bailiff, who was killed by his mistress Gabrielle Bompard and an old conman named Michel Eyraud. Lacassagne's measurement of the victim's bones, as well as his discovery of broken thyroid cartilage, helped the French police to discover that the womanizing Gouffe had been strangled via an ingenious pulley system set up in Bompard's apartment.[6] Lacassagne would also play a decisive role in the capture of French serial killer Joseph Vacher, an illiterate and itinerant peasant who raped, sodomized, and sometimes disemboweled eleven male and female shepherds in rural France.

The other major pioneer in criminology, Alphonse Bertillon, appears in the first Fantômas novel as an example of French genius. In reality, Bertillon was a police officer who created what he called "anthropometry," or the application of biometrics and basic forensics to criminal identification. Bertillon's system measured the faces and bodies of Paris's criminals and kept their measurements on index cards. This system would later include the then novel process of mug shots, but it ultimately failed to prove the theories of Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who maintained that criminality was hereditary and related to atavism.

Juve's investigations are helped by Jérôme Fandor, a young and enterprising journalist for the fictional newspaper, *La Capitale*. Fandor is clearly a stand-in for both Souvestre and Allain, and in the novels he shares as much of the danger as his mentor, M. Juve. Other characters come and go in the novels. Some constants are Lady Beltham, Fantômas's mistress, and Hélène, the arch-criminal's tattooed and opium-smoking daughter. But the true star of the series is its namesake—Fantômas.

Fantômas is a criminal who is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. As a master of disguise, he can be anyone in a crowded room. Sometimes he slinks around in the night in his

all-black get-up. At other times he wears evening clothes or the common street wear of the working-class. Making Fantômas all the more powerful is his army of street thug *apaches* who rarely blanch at carrying out their master's orders. This is no small feat, for Fantômas is shown to be a champion of grotesque and bizarre crime. In one instance he releases thousands of plague-carrying rats on an ocean liner. In another her swaps out perfume with sulfuric acid, thus blinding and burning the unsuspecting customers of a Paris department store. The third novel, *The Corpse Who Kills*, sees Fantômas commit crimes while wearing gloves covered in a dead man's skin. With Fantômas, there was never any boundary or limit to his horror. Worst of all, Fantômas always wins in the end. From the first novel in February 1911 until the last in September 1913, Fantômas manages to get the better of law and order time and time again.

The success of the novels made a film version a no-brainer. Between 1913 and 1914, innovative French director Louis Feuillade produced five film serials featuring the actor René Navarre as the titular villain. The *Fantômas* films are visual delights, and, despite the lapse of time, still have the power to shock and titillate. And that really was the whole purpose of the Fantômas franchise in the first place.

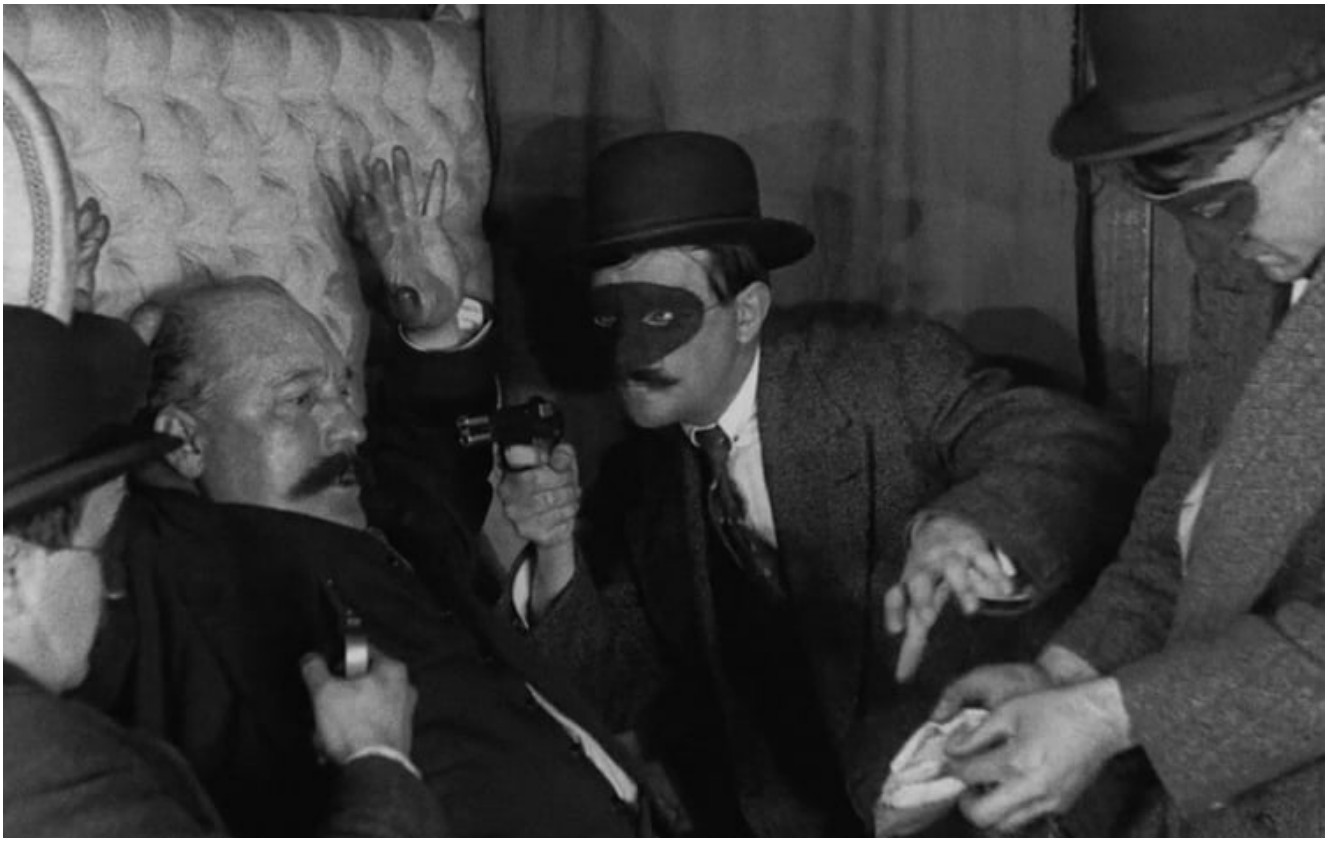

Image from *Juve vs. Fantômas,* 1913, via antipodespress.com

Some rather peculiar parallels run throughout Fantômas. First there is politics. Souvestre and Allain were "Bonapartists," or supporters of the restoration of the House of Bonaparte. French political scientist René Rémond categorized Bonapartism as one of the three currents of French right-wing politics in his book, *The Right Wing in France* (1966). Bonapartism, according to Rémond and others, seeks strong, authoritarian figures to pursue populist and centrist policies ("neither Right nor Left") to unite all of France, regardless of class, around the basic principles of the French Revolution, especially its centralization of the government.[7] Much like their namesake, Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, the Bonapartists of the pre-World War I epoch wanted to temper Jacobin republicanism with nationalism, respect for the Catholic Church and the army, and social conservatism. Feuillade and Fayard belonged to harder right-wing organizations like the monarchist *Action Française*.

A year before the release of the novel *Fantômas*, journalist Gaston Leroux, who worked for the conservative and nationalist *L'Echo de Paris* before switching to *Le Matin*, published *The Phantom of the Opera*. As shown by scholar Jerrold E. Hogle in *The Undergrounds of the Phantom of the Opera*, Erik, the phantom who frightens the attendees of the Paris Opera by utilizing secret passages and cells leftover from the Paris Commune of 1871. Erik, an anomalous "Communard/isolated anarchist"[8] likely served as inspiration for the creation of Fantômas. Both Erik and Fantômas are mysterious criminals who are more cipher than three-dimensional humans. Both also delight in torture and extreme violence, and both are described and named after apparitions. Finally, there is the specter of anarchism, which unites the deformed Erik with the faceless Fantômas.

Anarchist terrorism was a painful problem in France between the 1880s and the years right before the outbreak of World War I. On February 12, 1894, twenty people, most of whom were working-class Parisians enjoyed live music at the Gare St. Lazare train station, were injured and one later died when a bomb detonated. The culprit turned out to be Émile Henry, a direct-action anarchist and the son of a Communard (i.e. participant in the Paris Commune) mother. Henry's actions were in retaliation for the execution of Auguste Vaillant, a fellow anarchist who attacked the Chamber of Deputies with a bomb on December 9, 1893. The 1890s in Paris were a time of high anxiety over anarchist attacks, including the fiery assaults by Ravachol (Francois Koenigstein), a master bomber who was sent to the guillotine on July 11, 1892.

The fear did not dissipate as the nineteenth century became the twentieth. On September 6, 1901, Polish-American anarchist Leon Czolgosz assassinated U.S. President William McKinley in Buffalo, New York by shooting him with a .32-caliber Iver Johnson revolver. Seven years later, the *New York Times* estimated that anarchists averaged one bomb per month in

New York City.[9] In the Midwest and West Coast, the Iron Workers Union set off more than 100 bombs between 1906 and 1911 in order to strike out at capitalism and management. The apex of this violence came when brothers and union activists John J. and James B. McNamara dynamited the offices of the *Los Angeles Times* on October 1, 1910, killing twenty-one and injuring over 100. Italian anarchists became active in the United States after 1914. Inspired by the belief in direct action and "propaganda by the deed," suspected Italian anarchists detonated a massive bomb at the Central Police Station on November 24, 1917 that killed nine Milwaukee police officers and two civilians.[10] 1919 saw at least thirty-six bombings all across the US, while the still unsolved September 16, 1920 bombing of Wall Street that killed forty was likely carried out by Italian anarchists.

Back in France, as readers gobbled up copies of the latest Fantômas novels, they also ate up all the newspaper accounts of the Bonnot Gang, an anarchist group that pioneered the getaway car.[11] On December 21, 1911, the gang robbed Société Générale Bank and absconded in a stolen limousine. The gang's driver and namesake, Jules Bonnot, became an anti-hero to many and a downright celebrity to many left-wing agitators in the Third Republic. (Russo-Belgian Communist Victor Serge even wrote paeans to the group.) The Bonnot Gang carried out robberies, bombings, and occasional murder between 1911 and 1912. The gang's use of the latest technology (automobiles, semi-automatic Browning pistols) made it difficult for French law enforcement to defeat them. Eventually the French army was called in, and on April 28, 1912, some five hundred police officers, firemen, infantrymen, military engineers, and gun-toting civilians surrounded Bonnot in a house in the Choisy-le-Roi suburb of Paris. Bonnot fought back and managed to wound three police officers. In response, Police Chief Louis Lépine dynamited the dynamiter. The other members of the Bonnot Gang were either given long sentences in prison or sent directly to the guillotine.

Fantômas is one of these anarchist dynamiters scrubbed clean of politics. Allain and Souvestre both refrained from putting anarcho-Communist talking points into Fantômas's mouth because they did not need to. Every reader in 1911 knew that Fantômas belonged to the black flag legions of the street anarchists. Like Erik in *The Phantom of the Opera*, Fantômas is a fan of dynamite and explosions. He is also a fan of unnecessarily cruel violence and "spectacular" crimes. Fantômas is a terrorist just like Ravachol, the Bonnot Gang, and all the others who participated in what can be considered the West's First War on Terrorism. He is the fictional progenitor of today's Antifa goon squads, although Fantômas is far more intelligent and cunning.

Studying Fantômas is not only great fun (Souvestre and Allain were strong writers), but it serves as a reminder that a certain segment of street-level anarchists will graduate to terrorism. The anti-war demonstrators of the 1960s became the urban guerillas of the 1970s. Antifa will likely follow the same trajectory, possibly becoming the Red Army Faction of the US. It is long past time that the American government take seriously the threat posed by far-left anarchists. France and the United States took care of their earlier anarchists problems through drastic actions (executions, mass deportations), and similar methods made need to reappear again. We cannot let an Antifa cell leader today become the Fantômas of tomorrow. We similarly cannot let a city like Portland fall absolutely to anarchist madness. If it does, then a Fantômas-haunted Paris would like kind and gentle by comparison.

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[1] Norton Simon Museum, "By Day & by Night: Paris in the Belle Époque," https://www.nortonsimon.org/exhibitions/2010-2019/by-day-and-b

y-night-paris-in-the-belle-epoque/.

[2] Charles Baudelaire, “Le Vin de l’assassin (The Murderer’s Wine),” Trans. William Aggeler, *The Flowers of Evil* (Fresno: Academy Library Guild, 1954), https://fleursdumal.org/poem/194.

[3] Thomas and Dorothy Hoobler, *The Crimes of Paris: A True Story of Murder, Theft, and Detection* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009): 38.

[4] Robin Walz, *Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Popular Culture in Early Twentieth-Century Paris* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000): 49.

[5] Walz, *Pulp Surrealism*, 50.

[6] Dolly Stolze, “The Mystery of the Corpse in the Burlap Sack,” *Sapiens*, Mar. 25, 2016, https://www.sapiens.org/biology/alexandre-lacassagne-forensic-anthropology/.

[7] René Rémond, *The Right Wing in France: From 1815 to de Gaulle*, Trans. James M. Laux (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968): 138-139.

[8] Jerrold E. Hogle, *The Undergrounds of the Phantom of the Opera: Sublimation and the Gothuc in Leroux’s Novel and Its Progeny* (New York: Palgrave, 2002): 97.

[9] Stephen Mihm, “America in the grip of terrorism (and the fateful year is 1886),” *The Kansas City Star*, Sept. 22, 2016.

[10] “November 24, 1917 Bombing,” Milwaukee Police Department, https://city.milwaukee.gov/police/About-MPD/Memorial-Page/1917-Bombing.

[11] Jane Hanks, “The first ever getaway car was French,” *The Connexion*, Sept. 27, 2017, https://www.connexionfrance.com/Mag/French-Facts/The-first-eve

r-getaway-car-was-French.

«**Previous Article** **Table of Contents** **Next Article**»

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