



# From Zigomar to Fantômas: two geniuses of crime, two iconic examples of the sensationalist charms of transmedia popular fiction in the 1900s.

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## **From Zigomar to Fantômas: two geniuses of crime, two iconic examples of the sensationalist charms of transmedia popular fiction in the 1900s.**

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Who remembers Zigomar today ? Who could answer the question printed by *Le Matin* in its advertising pages on 27 November 1909 to hook its readers in an announcement advertising the publication from 7 December of Léon Sazie's next feuilleton, *Zigomar*, with its first part, "Le Maître Invisible": "Who is this man, wearing a scarlet hood which cannot be stained by his victims' blood"? Very few people indeed, except for a few amateurs of popular fiction and a few academics with an interest in the "mauvais genres" of the 1900s, an increasingly remote era of collective memory. In contrast, although he no longer captivates the crowds on paper or on screen like he once did in the days of his multimedia splendour between 1911 and 1914, Fantômas has resisted oblivion better than his likely model, from whom he was cloned by Souvestre and Allain, with a 32-volume saga launched in February 1911 in Arthème Fayard's cult collection, "Le Livre Populaire".

In order to explain the differing fates of two apparently very similar "Genius of Crime" figures, I will situate them within the efflorescence of pre-First World War media culture. This period was both the end trail of the great nineteenth century, with the "civilisation of the newspaper" shedding its last narrative and fictional light, and a launch pad for modernity and the unfolding of the multimedia series. This exemplary case gives us an insight into media culture's sensationalist leanings, right from its very first historical phase, and into its propensity to exploit the joint effects of spectacularisation and fiction as "playful trickery by consent" (Schaeffer, 1999) aimed at seducing the reader-spectator. However, it

will also be useful to question the anthropological motives behind the success of demonic figures such as Zigomar and especially Fantômas, in relation to the societal expectations and fears of their times: at the heart of emerging multimedia modernity was a dark attraction towards crime and out-of-the-norm criminals. Readers were both onlookers and voyeurs, with a libido that demanded fictional sustenance and sensational material based on passions/pulsions. As Jean-Marie Schaeffer has noted, “our malice—which is no less “human” than our kindness—also needs its own fictional sustenance.” (Schaeffer, 2007)

I will therefore begin by highlighting the fact that Zigomar and Fantômas can be understood as two prototypical figures of the rise of a mass culture model using the sensational as a hook. I will then stress how both narratives share as their main pragmatic engine a fictional play based on sensationalist exploits and prestidigitation. Finally, I will briefly point at the anthropological foundations at the root of the diabolical charm belonging to these figures of the out-of-the-norm criminal.

## **1 Two prototypical figures that epitomise the advent of mass culture and its use of the sensational as a hook**

- **Seriality and transmediality**

The two geniuses of crime, both of them members of the phalanx of the “face thieves” (Blonde, 1992) which was highly popular in the 1900s, both enjoyed a huge popularity before 1914. Both acquired iconic status almost immediately through illustration and film: Fantômas became famous with Gino Starace’s cover images for the series published by Fayard between 1911 and 1913; Zigomar was endowed with fascinating features thanks to the efficient work of Georges Vallée (for twenty-eight 128-page booklets published weekly by Ferenczi in 1913), Starace (for Ferenczi’s two 1916 volumes) and Henri Armendol (for the volumes published by Ferenczi in 1922-1923). Zigomar and Fantômas were brought onto the silver screen almost simultaneously by Victorin Jasset with his three films, *Zigomar, roi des voleurs* (1911), *Zigomar contre Nick Carter* (1912), and *Zigomar, peau d’anguille* (1913, in three episodes); and by Louis Feuillades with five serial films in 1913 and 1914: *Fantômas 1. A l’ombre de la guillotine*; *Fantômas 2. Juve contre Fantômas*; *Fantômas 3. Le Mort qui tue*; *Fantômas 4. Fantômas contre Fantômas*; *Fantômas 5. Le Faux Magistrat*.

- **Stories promoted by advertising campaigns that promised passion and high entertainment.**

Both Zigomar’s and Fantômas’ adventures, in writing and on screen, were the object of particularly striking advertising campaigns in the press and on billboards. When Fayard launched its series, the walls of Paris were placarded with posters with his effigy: this omnipresence in the urban space was even stronger with Feuillade’s films. In its rhetoric, the accompanying discourse was, as one might expect, loaded with superlatives and

expressionism, as shown by two advertising pages. The first was published on 23 November 1909, on page 6 of *Le Matin*:

Very soon, *Le Matin* will publish *Zigomar* by Léon Sazie.

This novel, where the vilest of bandits and the most illustrious of policemen battle mercilessly throughout the capital, is a sort of Epic Saga of Crime.

Figures of women—suffering mothers, tragic fiancées, Paris factory girls, creatures of grace and love—are at the heart of this bewitching drama.

ZIGOMAR is a novel of many adventures, revealing the dreadful hidden side of the most thrilling tragedies.

The second, on 27 November 1909, advertised the feuilleton as follows:

Who is this man, wearing a scarlet hood which cannot be stained by his victims' blood?

Is he the chief of the sinister army, clad in dark gowns, that roams around Paris at night to spread terror and death?

Crime after crime remains unpunished [...] Widows and orphans cry and lament, dreading that every sound will announce the apparition of sinister men, mercilessly spreading death and desolation.

From the daughter of the banker Monteil to the pretty Riri, a brave Paris factory girl, women tremble for their loved ones, sons, brothers, fiancés, or husbands...

For them, love is the ransom of crime.

- **Sensationalistic plots drawing from 1900s representations of crime**

*Zigomar* and *Fantômas* both draw from the period's booming media culture, which echoed and amplified a collective obsession with security and a fascination with fantastically scripted criminal news stories, as Dominic Kalifa has demonstrated with brio in his book

*L'Encre et le sang* (Kalifa, 1992). The sensationalist poetics and rhetoric developed by both series are similar to those found in the popular daily newspapers of the time. The opening sequence of *Zigomar*, with its transparent *mise en abyme*, deliberately points at this similarity in style and genre:<sup>1</sup>

That morning, Paris echoed with a shout of collective indignation, terror and anger.

In everyone's hands, on the boulevards, in the streets, in the trams and buses, newspapers with their sensational headlines were feverishly scanned.

The newspaper boys were running around, shouting in their hoarse voices:

- Extra! Extra! Read all about it! Tragedy on rue Le Peletier! A mysterious crime... The murder of the banker Monteil!

The previous night, Michel the office clerk had found his master on the floor, lying in a pool of his own blood, his chest perforated by a stab wound.

Terrified, Michel called for help. [...]

Opening of *Zigomar*, an original novel by Léon Sazie. Book I: *Le Maître invisible*, Chapter 1: "La Signature rouge", *Le Matin*, 7 December 1909, p. 2.

Related in their narration and their themes, both crime adventure stories banked on the same, increasingly blatant narrative devices. In both of them, the Villan fights an exceptional adversary: in one case the pair Juve/Fandor, in the other Paulin Broquet, flanked by Nick Carter in the film versions. The Genius of Crime's brave and perspicacious enemies rival with

<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in his contribution to the recent conference in Limoges (May 2013), Letourneux pointed out that "These hundred or so articles reveal, beyond its documentary usage, the press's role as a matrix that served as a source of inspiration for the series' most sensational episodes. More than "Grand Guignol" theatre, *Rocambole*, or other best-selling feuilletons from previous generations, the main intertext for the stories was provided by the crime pages in contemporary newspapers."

This international phenomenon is clearly emphasized for the English speaking sphere by Alberto Gabriele in his book *Reading Popular Culture in Victorian Print* (2009)

him in the art of disguise and chase him tirelessly... but in vain: in both series, the investigation is little more than an excuse for more duels and endless chases. Indeed in both narratives, both of them “written at random” to quote Appolinaire’s famous words, the endless race against crime knows no end. This is epitomised by the “endings” of both initial series: after sinking to the bottom of the Atlantic in the thirty-second volume, Fantômas is then resuscitated, this time by Marcel Allain on his own. Zigomar may be dead at the end of *Zigomar peau d’anguille* but his corpse has disappeared and the reader is teased with a mysterious “To be continued...”

- **The magnetism of images as a response to the reader’s scopophilia: from illustration to the silver screen.**

As pure products of the media, *Zigomar* and *Fantômas* acknowledge the scopophilia of mass audiences, a characteristic trait of modernity. Both characters are endowed with a fascinating visual identity. In spite of their similarities, the two criminals are distinct, and Fantômas appears to come out the better for the comparison: in spite of his scarlet hood embroidered with a gold Z, Zigomar does not have the same aura as his disciple, and it seems his disguise is less thrilling. The superiority of Fantômas’ otherness is perhaps reflected by the very nature of the two hyperbolic Villains’ iconic masks. With his hood and chasuble, Zigomar is connected to the gothic tradition of the demonic penitent [diapos], whereas Fantômas wears the velvet mask of the modern gentleman-burglar, with a leotard that will become the trademark of Musidora, the Vampires, and of an entire lineage of superheroes in the modern media:

His appearance was fantastical, and the unfortunate Jules felt a shiver run through his entire body...

[...] He was clad from head to toe in black jersey, reminiscent of the outfit of a hotel burglar: a sinister garment that allows its wearer to blend into the night, to be almost undetectable in a dark place while any other clothes are bound to reflect the light and attract the eye...

Better than a hotel burglar, in fact, the man had put great care into his costume!

His face was not uncovered: it was entirely disguised beneath a long black hood, a floating mask that prevented his features from being seen and which only revealed, like two ardent coals, the dark reflection of his pupils...

Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain, *Fantômas. Le mort qui tue*, Fayard, Le Livre populaire, April 1911, p. 188

- **Fantômas, a symbol of the shift from the feuilleton to the series: the rise of the modern series**

In actual fact, Fantômas' superiority does not just play out on an iconic level: it is also manifest on the level of poetics. For all its indebtedness to the feuilleton-based writing of the nineteenth-century popular novel, Souvestre and Allain's saga is better adjusted—both in terms of its mode of publication and its narrative poetics—to the demands of seriality; at the beginning of the twentieth century, the series is in the process of becoming a standard format for the culture industries and the reader-spectator-consumer's favourite mode of consumption. In his 2005 article, "*Zigomar*, grand roman sériel (1909-1913)", Dominique Kalifa stresses that "it is as if publication in booklets imposed serialisation, a necessary element for any crime story, on a text [*Zigomar*] that had been designed according to the traditional model of the feuilleton": the twenty-eight small (12 x 16 cm) books of 128 pages were published by Ferenczy following "an artificial periodicity, since none of the volumes actually formed a complete story" (Kalifa, 2005). In actual fact, it was not just that Sazie's work was weakened



in its ability to deliver suspense by the publisher's mechanical truncation of the original feuilleton. From its first instalment in *Le Matin*, Sazie's story often struggled to adjust its narrative architecture to the material constraints of the periodical format, and to create narrative tension by playing on the delaying effect of the daily interruption. By contrast, Souvestre and Allain benefitted from the advantages brought by the formula and editorial formats set by Fayard from the start of the project: it was published monthly in larger, complete volumes. The original *Fantômas* series, published as a feuilleton, was able to simultaneously satisfy two groups of readers: those, hungry for fictional immersion, who were accustomed to the ample, "steam-powered" narrations that had been popularised by the nineteenth century's feuilleton-novel; but also those who responded to the seduction devices that had made for the dime novel's mass, pan-European success in recent years: the serial hero, the unity of theme and narration in each episode, and the promise of more adventures in the same vein. The editorial paratext never failed to insist on this decisive aspect, accompanying the announcement of the next tome to be published with the reassuring mention: "Each volume can be read separately". With around 400 pages to unfold their plots, each based on a chase between marginal protagonists, Souvestre and Allain could also afford to construct each volume according to a more ample narrative curve—whereas Sazie, who needed to fit within the formula of the feuilleton and its outstretched reading tempo, used shorter narrative curves in his crime stories, which were based on a succession of fights—if not to say matches—between the "Broquets" (as they are often called in the novel, by way of antonomasia) and the Zigomars. Thanks to its publication in volumes, the *Fantômas* saga was also more compact in its themes, which made it more recognisably affiliated to a genre. Sazie, on the other hand, was still prone to recycling "ready to dream/ready to tell" materials inherited from the melodrama or the sentimental novel of manners. Unfortunately for Sazie,

his novels peaked as feuilletons at the very time of the boom of the modern series, with the advent of increasingly calibrated collections based on a generic reading contract.

Having thus established the superiority of Fantômas' mediatic impact, I will analyse this impact further by zooming in on the "Master of Fear" – as he was called – alone.

## **2 *Fantômas* : the use of sensationalist *peripeteia* and prestidigitation in building fictional play narrative?**

As storytellers, Souvestre and Allain were clearly indebted to the heritage of nineteenth-century popular culture's taste for sensationalism—one thinks for instance of the marriage of hyper-realistic sets with implausible exploits in the melodramas that reigned supreme in the theatres of the "Boulevard du Crime" in Paris—, a tendency later cultivated by early silent films with their taste for conjuring acts.

It makes sense then that the two authors' narrative poetics are loaded with habits borrowed from the feuilleton, a set of tricks pulled straight from the great magic wardrobe of the nineteenth-century popular novel. With its baroque twists and proliferations (see J.-C. Vareille, 1994), this form of storytelling privileged paratactic construction over the narration's overall structure.

Matthieu Letourneux has recently shown, after carrying out research in Marcel Allain's archive at the IMEC (Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine), that in order to stimulate their creativity, Souvestre and Allain had created three folders which they called their "box of tricks", where they filed documents to stimulate their imagination and provide material for their stories: newspaper cuttings narrating bizarre stories with sensationalistic potential; police tips and tricks; ideas for future novels. The existence of this mythical "box of tricks" had long been questioned, as Marcel Allain was never short of made-up stories to help build the legend around the undoubtedly heroic achievement that was the frantic, four-handed

invention of the saga of the Master of Fear. This discovery, made a century after the industrialized production of this “Modern-day Aeneid”, reveals how the two novelists found their materials also in funfair sideshows whose very visual sensationalism was based on surprise. For instance, the files contained Horace Hurm’s manual of prestidigitation (Artiaga and Letourneux, 2013, p 125), and images from the the “Cabaret du Néant”. Looking at the context and co-text that presided over his birth<sup>2</sup>, it becomes easier to understand the Master of Crime’s genius for transformation and his talent for astounding the audience with his spectacular apparitions.

- **Apparitions: expressionist scenography and the great terrifying spectacle**

With each of his apparitions, orchestrated like a stage entrance in mechanical play, the text has no scruples in unfolding a set of mythologising symbols, its rhetoric loaded with repetition and hyperboles:

The man was entirely dressed in black. He wore a tight black bodysuit that hugged his figure from head to toes. He was wearing black gloves; his face was hidden behind a black velvet mask and the loose folds of a black hood covered his head...

A figure of horror, a figure of fear, a figure of evil! ...

[...]

- Fantômas! ... It’s Fantômas! ...

Jérôme Fandor was now shouting at the top of his lungs the lugubrious name, the horrific name, the bloody name, the deathly name...

Fantômas!... Fantômas!...

<sup>2</sup> “In the field of live entertainment and leisure, the late nineteenth century was characterised by an extraordinary development of realistic techniques of reproduction, which were often used to create sensationalist effects: photography, phonogram, kinoscopes, and of course the cinematograph were used for all manner of conjuring acts in theatres, side shows, music-halls etc. But other systems—dioramas, the machinal and spectacular theatre of the Grands Boulevards, wax museums—also reflected this popular taste for illusionism.” (Letourneux, Limoges, May 2013).

For a wide approach on this point, see Vanessa Schwartz, 1999.

It was the Genius of Crime, the terrifying Torturer, the Master of fear who was standing up there, appearing to smile, looking amused!

But what was he about to do? What deathly scheme did he have in mind? What plans had he dared to plot?

- Run for your life! Fantômas!... It's Fantômas!...

As soon as Jérôme Fandor shouted the tragic words, which sounded like a tolling bell, a great shiver of terror flew over the entire audience.

Faces became livid. Mouths became distorted. Inhuman, unarticulated moans rose.

The audience had all stood up. They were trampling over each other in the narrow corridors in between the seats in an attempt to run away...

Too late!"

*La Fin de Fantômas*, 892-893

This type of narration, using sensationalism to galvanise its readers, borrowed its themes, expressionism, and emphatic style from mechanical theatre, from the crime pages that were predominant in tabloid press (see Dominique Kalifa's analyses, 1995), and from early cinema: that is, from the three main culture industries that came together in the melting pot of pre-First World War media culture.

A logical addition to this sensationalist repertoire of tropes is the fascination with horror, exemplified by descriptions of mutilated and/or dismembered bodies: in comparison with Fantômas, Zigomar had remained relatively timid in its experimentations with "gore". One could for instance compare the almost euphemistic sobriety of one of Sazie's rare descriptions with the surgical complacency of the description of a beheading in *La Fin de Fantômas*, one of the series' many gory sequences aimed at fascinating the reader-voyeur with flashes of horror and the bypassing of the taboos surrounding the dismemberment of bodies.

The brave man, led by curiosity, opened the package and quickly pushed it away while shouting in terror.

The papers contained a freshly severed woman's head!

The ears were missing... The nose had been cut off and the lips had been torn away.

The head looked horrific, terrifying.

Upon hearing the brave man's cries the neighbours came running until the curious formed a crowd, and finally the police arrived.

*Zigomar*, Book Three « L'heure de la justice », VIII (suite) « La tête coupée » ( 10 April 1910, beginning of the episode)

Oh! For sure, Fantômas had remained the terrifying murderer whose deeds were known the world over!

He was still the skilled assassin whose hand never shakes, who never hesitates, who kills without fail and without mercy! [...]

He had cut the throat halfway through, severing the carotid artery. He had then rummaged through the bleeding flesh with the tip of his knife, reaching the top of the lung, and torn the larynx... Fumier had died without making a single sound...

*La fin de Fantômas*, p 83

If Fantômas can be seen as an emblem of playful narrative inventiveness, it is not just because of its authorial poetics but also because of the pleasure experienced by the reader. Both a partner and a story-player (Migozzi, 2013) the reader engages in a story which is at the same time fascinating and intriguing but also predictable because it

draws from a serial intertextuality, the codes of which he or she is perfectly familiar with.

As Matthieu Letourneux has accurately noted:

This type of construct tends to emphasise the *playfulness* of references to our world, which is reconstructed according to the rules of the spectacle. But the conventions of the game do not entirely exclude a relationship with the real. In a magician's act as in Barnum's freak show, the set-up that plays with macabre fantasy, while the barker emphasises the horror of what he's presenting, are an invitation for the public to play the fictional game, to experience dread or ecstasy. Souvestre and Allain are barkers/novelists: they multiply the horror scenes that act as hyperbolic evocations of Fantômas' virtuoso cruelty, with each crime becoming part of a series of spectacular climaxes. However, these crimes remain connected with horrific real-life events, and the reader is therefore engaged in an immersive reading pact where he is invited to play the fictional game. The reading functions according to a double logic: on the one hand the dramatisation of realistic material, and on the other hand its reformulation into a series of tricks according to the codes of the spectacular. The reader is invited to both play the game of fiction and admire the efficiency of the literary machinery.

In other words, *Fantômas'* readers are necessarily warned and kept in a state of latent vigilance. They know by experience that the Genius of Crime will inevitably return in each volume under a new avatar with some sensational mischief, and they revel in knowing and trying to guess his tricks. But they also take pleasure in letting themselves be surprised by his stratagems... just like the spectators of a conjuring act.

- **A nice symbol and a nice symptom of this poetical model of the attraction of the conjuring act: Allain's taste for the "Cabaret du Néant"**

"Le Cabaret du Néant" was, explains Matthieu Letourneux, a Parisian venue "decorated with coffins and skeletons: the customers could drink their beer ("bier") on a coffin-table and watch a performance of macabre magic (whose climax was the transformation of one of the customers into a skeleton)." He also notes: "The imagery of the 'Cabaret du Néant' was identical to *Fantômas* in its mechanisms, at the intersection between the aesthetics of macabre horror (inherited from the gothic novel and its French counterpart the "roman frénétique") and the logics of the conjuring act where pleasure stemmed precisely from the fictional reading pact: the audience members know that the magician is just an illusionist, but their pleasure resides in letting themselves be fooled in spite of the narration's blatant trickery." (Letourneux, 2013)

In this perspective, the sensationalist tricks recycled by Souvestre and Allain function like "props" that, according to Kendall Walton's theoretical analysis (Walton, 1990), convey and trigger the fictional play.

### **3 Fantômas : the anthropological roots of his demonic charms**

In May 2013 at a conference in Limoges, Dominique Kalifa presented some stimulating interpretations to explain the mythical aura that surrounded the Master of Fear from his very beginnings. Kalifa re-situated Fantômas within the long cohort of the popular novel's celebrated Villains, both before (Melmoth, Lernock le Pirate, the schoolmaster in Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*, Colonel Bozzo in Paul Féval's saga *Les Habits noirs*, Zigomar...) and after him (Ténébras, Fu Manchu). In particular Kalifa highlighted the fact that, in a general historical context where religion was evolving and the Church was moving away from fear as a basis for its teachings, Fantômas' demonic figure borrowed a number of

his fascinating features from the Devil. In other words, in the general context of a secularisation of Hell, it became fiction's role to provide the individual—albeit under a literary, narrative, playful and dreamlike form—with the dreaded but delectable confrontation with the Empire of Evil that had so far taken place in the serious context of the Church. It then becomes easier to understand why Fantômas' gigantism can subjugate all his victims, including his most intrepid opponents:

Juve closed his eyes, as if he had been blinded.

A hallucinatory vision danced beneath his closed eyelids.

Like a gigantic, fantastical hallucination, he thought he could see the Master of Fear, draped in his black vest, galloping around the world on a demonic horse while everyone ran away before him, screaming with fear, dazed with terror.

*La Fin de Fantômas*, p 895

The sensationalism of the narratives dedicated to Zigomar's and Fantômas' dark glory might therefore have deep anthropological motives—and this hypothesis is not incompatible with my earlier interpretations concerning the sensationalist tropism in mass-media fiction. Sensationalism might also be explained by the fact that these outlaw figures were predisposed to embody the drives and passions buried within each of their reader-spectators. Fantômas in particular is an example of the classic mechanism of Aristotelian catharsis present at the heart of any immersion in a story: he provides the reader with the extreme pleasure of being able to identify, even clandestinely, even in an infra-conscious manner, with a supremely a-moral character who is free from any form of social discipline. It then becomes easier to understand why Fantômas was considered an emblem of libertarian resistance to social control. Or why the Surrealists cherished and celebrated his iconoclast violence, making him an allegory



for the Unconscious. This hypothesis was supported from a very early date by Jean-Claude Vareille (Vareille, 1989), who had taken notice of Fantômas' modernity...

And this is where the character's and the text's modernity shines through.

Fantômas has no existence beyond his appearance: appearance *is* his being.

Fantômas only has one essence: that of his mask. This is why we can only contemplate his successive avatars. (p. 144)

Beyond the question of the costume, what is at play here on a deeper level appears to touch, through the emblem of disguise, on the abysses of identity—a deep societal obsession in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth. In response to this typical of turn-of-the-century anxiety and to the “Belle Epoque”'s thirst for ink and blood, Zigomar offers a proposition based on the archaic imagination of the underworld, a blend of masked figures that embody millennial fears: gypsies, criminal cults or organised crime.<sup>3</sup> And yet the masked gang's frightening rites do not stop Paulin Brocquet from unmasking Zigomar and putting an end to the masquerade of his otherness. In contrast, Fantômas is never identified, to the point of soliciting this remarkable cry from Juve, his most fearless opponent: “Fantômas is always someone, sometimes two persons, but never himself!” (*La Main coupée*, p. 241)

According to Jean-Claude Vareille, this perpetually evanescent identity was the foundation for Fantômas' unprecedented power to disturb:

[...] He is indeed an emanation from what we will, for lack of a better term,

call “the unconscious”. He is “the other”, the perpetually other, the one who

<sup>3</sup> We are the Ramogiz! Ragomiz that by tradition, reversing the name, we call ourselves Zigomar! Zigomar! That is the cry of the Ramogiz! A cry that has travelled through centuries! It is the name of the one no-one has ever seen, the one no-one knows but whose power can be felt by all... It is the name of the one who, immortal as the sun, can be born again everyday, can be different while remaining the same, can even die without stopping to live, can go dark without stopping to shine: it is Zigomar!... (9 January 1910)

cannot be grasped in spite of his hallucinatory presence. (Vareille, 1989, p. 142-143)

Fantômas would be superior therefore to Zigomar because of his fantasy potential as a great libertarian predator: a fundamentally rebellious character who foils any attempt at controlling identity. Fantômas is much more rewarding a character than Zigomar in terms of pulsion. He is much more efficient, including in the hyperbolic display of macabre scenes, in satisfying that part of the reader which Vincent Jouve (Jouve, 1992), quoting Michel Picard (Picard, 1987), suggests calling the “read”, which consents, if not to “the dark side of the force”, at least to its perpetual rebirth: as Daniel Couégnas (Couégnas, 1992) notes, “consenting to the perpetuation of Evil means allowing for the series to continue.”<sup>4</sup>

All things considered, from a historical perspective, Fantômas is probably the first of the malefic superheroes whose dark legend was shaped by the culture industries in print and on screen. These industries have appreciated how profitable it can be to indulge mass audiences’ appetite for strong emotions and for encounters—murky and troubling beyond their undeniably playful dimension—with heroes who have joined the dark side of the force. Fantômas’ success in the early twentieth century and his longevity are symptoms of the sensationalism at work over the last two centuries in the forms and dynamics of contemporary and modern media culture.

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<sup>4</sup> Couégnas then adds: “Paraliterature exacerbates the antagonism between the moral discourse and the pleasure of reading, which are nonetheless accomplices!” (pp. 177-178)

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