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“Cette nouvelle réalité”: at the Mouviez with Raymond Queneau

This article examines Raymond Queneau’s treatment of the American actress, Alice Faye, in the novel, Les Temps mêlés (1941), as well as in the autobiographical text, “Alice Faye au Marigny” (1939). By comparing these textual representations in a scene from the Faye film, On the Avenue (1937), it emerges that the cinema represents a highly significant part of the pluralistic, transitional fictional worlds of Queneau, one which is related to the role of Queneau’s reader.

In a recent article, Christopher Shorely claimed that Raymond Queneau’s representations of social life remain convincing even at their most fantastic because, rather than presenting a complete portrait of a fictional world, they evoke the incomplete lived worlds of fictional characters (30). One of Queneau’s most spectacular tools in bringing these fragmentary fictional worlds to life is the cinema. “The movie house is more than a new novelistic place, much more than a decor. It is a privileged, fundamental scene for the Quenellian novel,” writes Jean-Pierre Martin (“Spectacle” 267). What makes Queneau’s engagement with the movies so unique is the mix of the High and the Low, the intermingling of Culture with burgeoning popular culture (which was not always equally appreciated by other authors of Queneau’s generation — nor ours, for that matter). In this way, disparate worldbuilding elements such as Gnosticism, Hegel, and actress Alice Faye are transmuted by the author into a layered narrative structure marked by a constant proliferation of worlds. The wide scope of these
worlds gives, in the words of Martin, a lower-case “l” back to “Literature” (“Roman” 291-300). Moreover, Queneau was born eight years and one week to the day (February 21, 1903) after the Lumière brothers patented the cinématographe (February 13, 1895). What better place, then, to examine the elaboration of the unique fictional worlds associated with the author’s novels than at the fictional movie theater, where they are already springing into life on the fictional space of a fictional movie screen?

Two novels in particular foreground the role of what Queneau’s characters often refer to as the “mouviez”: Loin de Rueil (published in 1944) and Les Temps mêlés (published in 1941). In Saint Glinglin (published in 1948), Queneau reworked parts of both Les Temps mêlés and his second novel, Gueule de Pierre (1934). I am, of course, glossing over Queneau’s participation on film juries, his work on screenplays (such as Alain Resnais’s Le Chant du styrène), and his occasional turn as an actor (for example, as Clemenceau (!) in Claude Chabrol’s 1963 film Landru), all of which are admirably described in Michel Lecureur’s 2002 biography, Raymond Queneau. In this essay, I will focus on Les Temps mêlés (before its incorporation into Saint Glinglin, although I will make reference to this other work), in which Paul Kougard, smitten with the movie star, Cécile Haye, draws her out of the big screen and into his small town, the appropriately named “Ville Natale.” In this way, the cinema mediates the character’s interactions with multiple metadiegetic fictional worlds. I will argue that spectatorship as presented in Les Temps mêlés informs the broader ontological shifts in character and reader characteristic of Queneau’s work, shifts involving an ongoing cycle of appearance and disappearance (Lecompte 59-74; Longre, “Métamorphoses” 121-125; Longre, Scènes; Martin, “Passant” 137-149; Sorrell, “Découvertes”; Sorrell, “Becoming”; Velguth 107-120). Paul’s experience at the movies reveals the intentional fault lines of Queneau’s fictional worlds, which are constantly shifting under character and reader.

I will also take into consideration an earlier autobiographical text, “Alice Faye au Marigny” (1939), written two years before the publication of Les Temps mêlés, in which Queneau longs for the American actress Alice Faye herself, celebrated for her sultry yet no-nonsense roles in 20th Century Fox musical comedies from 1934-1945. This unpublished text seems to have been the genesis for the plotline of Paul’s