Saving Robert de Niro: Jean Reno as Francophone all-American action hero*

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Abstract
This article examines the complexities of both French and American transnational identities as portrayed on screen by Jean Reno. The particular elements of French and American culture and identity at the heart of Reno’s roles in three films (Mission: Impossible, Godzilla, and Ronin) are analysed in order to illustrate that, although feeding on national and cultural stereotype, Reno’s screen persona does not merely engage with a binary opposition between French anti-Americanism and American francophobia but rather is inescapably in dialogue with both Atlantic coasts. This transcultural exchange is further discussed through analysis of Reno’s onscreen relationship with the major American box office stars of these three films, namely Tom Cruise, Matthew Broderick, and Robert de Niro. What emerges from this analysis is a multilayered, transnational star persona, at once embedded in and breaking with transatlantic clichés.

Since his title role in Léon (Besson 1994), the Moroccan-born French actor Jean Reno has carved out an unusual niche for himself as a Francophone all-American hero. This identity has enabled him simultaneously to embody and mock a series of transatlantic clichés in action movies and comedies alike. The focus in this article will be placed on the Hollywood action films in which Reno has appeared, taking as a starting point a trio of films released in the latter half of the 1990s: Mission: Impossible (De Palma 1996), Godzilla (Emmerich 1998) and Ronin (Frankenheimer 1998). The article will analyse the complexities of both the French and American transnational and transatlantic identities which are constructed, examining the ways in which the screen persona that emerges is inescapably in dialogue with both Atlantic coasts, rather than engaging with a simplistic binary backdrop of French anti-Americanism, on the one hand, and American francophobia, on the other. This transcultural dialogue is further developed through Reno’s onscreen relationship with the major American box office stars of the three films focused on here: Tom Cruise in Mission: Impossible, Matthew Broderick in Godzilla, and Robert De Niro whose life Reno ultimately saves in Ronin. What emerges is a multilayered screen persona, transnational insofar as it ‘deliberately blend[s] nations and cultures, rather than erasing cultural specificity’ (Vanderschelden 2007: 38) and at once embedded in, and breaking with, transatlantic clichés.

Keywords
Jean Reno
transnationalism
transculturalism
Mission: Impossible
Léon
Godzilla

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1 Reno was, in fact, born to Spanish parents in Morocco. However, he left Morocco in 1968 ‘to enlist in the French army because...
According to the *New York Daily News*, Reno’s breakthrough on American screens became ‘inevitable’ (Beale 1998) after his popular success in a string of increasingly high profile roles in each of Luc Besson’s 1980s films: *Le Dernier Combat* (1983), *Subway* (1985), *Le Grand Bleu/The Big Blue* (1988) and *Nikita* (1990). It was this last role, as a professional hit man in *Nikita*, which led to his first real US breakthrough in Besson’s 1994 work *Léon*. Here Reno reprises his role as hitman, the eponymous Léon, but he shifts from peripheral figure to melancholic central character in a French-financed but English-language production, starring alongside Gary Oldman and Natalie Portman, in her debut role. *Léon* took over 5 million dollars in its opening weekend in the United States, with more than 3 million spectators going to see it over the course of its French release. It laid the foundations for the ‘action hero outsider’ role Reno has gone on to make his own.

Indeed, although Léon is, in some ways, very much the average gun-toting action hero, his is not the stereotypical ‘hard bodied’ action figure identified by Susan Jeffords (1993). Reno’s Léon is a somewhat taciturn, but highly dependable, hired killer, whose life changes when his young neighbour Mathilda (Portman) comes home to find her family has been murdered by a gang of corrupt police officers led by the unhinged Stansfield (Oldman). Mathilda takes it upon herself to become Léon’s ward and pseudo-apprentice, keen to learn the tricks of his trade in order to exact revenge. Throughout the film, Léon is repeatedly shown exercising but, despite the camera’s focus on the physicality of his performance, Reno’s body is not the chiselled, well-toned physique of a Stallone or a Van Damme. Rather, as Lucy Mazdon (2000: 111) has pointed out, attention is drawn to his clothing, and more precisely to the fact that his clothes seem ill-fitting and serve primarily to underline the awkwardness of Reno’s shape. He wears braces over his vests and t-shirts, his trousers are too short, and his overcoat too big, hanging off a somewhat bulky frame, indicating the possibility of physical vulnerability and imperfection.

Similarly, while other action heroes of the late 1980s and early 1990s are depicted as seductive figures – both within the narrative and in terms of star persona – Reno’s charms are only shown to work on a 12-year-old girl. Indeed, although Besson has repeatedly stated that any sexual interpretations of this relationship are purely in the minds of the critics, aspects of the Mathilda–Léon relationship were edited out of the film, on its initial US release, because they were considered inappropriate (Humbert 2003: 87). Certainly, it is unconventional for the only potential hint of romance or physical attraction in an action film to stem from a relationship between a grown man and a female child. Abele, for instance, draws attention to the fact that Bruce Willis’s action heroes ‘generally end [their] films in the arms of a woman or a child’ (Abele 2002: 449), underlining a key distinction between the roles played in action films by these two groups. The child, in such circumstances, is an innocent saved by the action hero, while it is only from the adult woman that romance or the potential for sexual fulfilment can be drawn.
This is not to say that Léon and Mathilda’s relationship, and, in particular, Mathilda’s expression thereof, goes without comment in Besson’s film. They are forced to leave a hotel they were staying in, for example, when Mathilda deliberately leads the clerk to believe that the two are sexually involved. However, Léon’s role as protector is one he adopts reluctantly and at no time is the viewer led to believe that he may have an ulterior sexual motive for his involvement with the girl. Indeed, the relationship can perhaps be understood more clearly if one takes into consideration Besson’s assertion – naïve or otherwise – that the characters are actually ‘both 12 years old in their minds’ (Jobson 2000).

Returning to considerations of a transatlantic dialogue, we can see the ways in which Léon begins to lay the foundations for Reno’s subsequent unusual transatlantic persona. He plays an action hero and, although he is not explicitly ‘outed’ as a French immigrant, visually he is associated with Mediterranean cultures. The contact who looks after his money and issues him with instructions for contracts is an Italian-American and the film’s opening sequence clearly locates the action in Little Italy. However, despite any popular association there might be between either action heroes or Mediterranean males and romantic seduction, Reno’s persona remains almost asexual throughout. Mathilda’s attentions merely make him embarrassed, spitting out mouthfuls of milk – his favoured beverage – and frequently becoming tongue-tied.

This is not a smooth-talking Mediterranean gigolo, in the mould of, for instance, Reno’s compatriot Vincent Cassel either in Ocean’s Twelve (Soderbergh 2004) or, indeed, as the voice of a lecherous Monsieur Hood in Shrek (Adamson and Jenson 2001). Rather, what we are dealing with here is a far more awkward figure – strong and silent, and yet not the ‘strong but silent’ type. Léon is explicitly constructed as an outsider in terms of the American setting, but, with the Little Italy location, he is an outsider within a realm of other outsiders, peripheral both to and within the peripheries, and yet still engaging with aspects of the mythology of the all-American action hero. Léon’s hits are fellow gangsters, he works according to a strict ‘no women, no kids’ policy, he works alone yet agrees to protect the endangered female lead. Were it not for the fact that his job involves murder, Léon would, in many ways, represent the ideal newcomer to the United States. Diligent, loyal, trustworthy, and caring, he demonstrates what Elizabeth Abele (2002: 447) has described as the action hero’s ‘total identification with his duty’. Indeed, any reluctance Léon initially expressed with regard to his suitability as mentor for Mathilda is quickly superseded by his desire to ensure her safety at any cost.

In terms of action films, his role in Léon was followed by the three key parts which form the focus of analysis here: Mission: Impossible, Godzilla, and Ronin. It is important to note at this stage that all three of these films were released before the events of September 11. They also predate the diplomatic spat between the United States and France, centring around the second Gulf War conflict of 2003, at which point ‘France joined the
ranks of countries subjected to a campaign of widespread bashing from the American population’ (Vaissé 2003: 34). The unconventional Francophone action hero Reno creates across these works is one which was able to emerge in a pre-9/11 transatlantic world, in a way that is, perhaps, much more difficult to imagine post-9/11.

Taking the three roles in turn, it is perhaps in Mission: Impossible that Reno comes closest to embodying a character whose otherness translates into a negative representation. Here Reno plays Franz Krieger, a shady character who is taken on, along with his partner, by Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise), in order to help him gain (illegal) access to the CIA headquarters at Langley, from where Hunt needs to steal computer data. Reno and Cruise are shown crawling along air ducts together and Cruise is then obliged to put his life in Reno’s hands as he is suspended in mid-air on a rope held only by an ever-sweatier Reno. It is perhaps no surprise here, in terms of Hollywood’s traditional depiction of foreign others in action films, that Reno’s character should be constructed as a figure of suspicion. Initially, we are given no explicit reason to mistrust him but Reno’s behaviour in this sequence is clearly designed to ensure that the viewer begins to see his presence as implying a degree of diegetic threat to the American star. In terms of star personae, we have the untouchable Cruise, who has already been betrayed within the narrative framework and is trying to right a wrong, placing his faith in a character who is shown to have the potential for physical weakness. Whereas Cruise appears sleek, precise, and graceful, Reno again looks awkward, straining and sweating unesthetically as he grips the rope – contrast this, for example, with the way in which the beads of sweat form delicately on the rim of Cruise’s glasses – and sneezing in response to the arrival of a rat in the air duct, thus provoking Cruise’s rapid fall towards the floor.

It is the foreign other who proves himself to be untrustworthy. We are also clearly shown that, while Cruise can rely on physical skill and wit to get him out of awkward situations, Reno is forced to resort to brute strength and violence. Cruise ultimately survives the drop and is unceremoniously hauled out of the room. However, as the operation reaches its end, a moment of inattention from Reno results in his knife falling back into the room, landing – point first – in the desk and leaving an undeniable sign of their presence. As the film reaches its climax, our initial suspicions are confirmed. Reno turns out to have been working with the agent who betrayed Cruise in the first place. The knife which falls into the room was responsible for killing a member of Cruise’s team in the initial betrayal, and a key section of the film’s climax involves Reno piloting a helicopter into the Channel Tunnel, ultimately bringing about his own death by concentrating on an attempt to kill Cruise, rather than ensuring his own safe exit from the tunnel. The untrustworthy other thus receives his due come-uppance and Reno’s onscreen persona comes closer than ever before to being a straightforwardly francophobe creation.

However, as much as his role in Mission: Impossible might appear to conform to stereotypes of foreign other as nefarious force, what is interesting
about Reno is that this constitutes the exception, rather than the rule. As he has continued his career in Hollywood action films, his persona has moved beyond this stereotype into a more complex engagement with the transcultural dialogue begun in *Léon*. Indeed, in terms of cinematic mythologies, a reading can be constructed according to which Reno, as well as paying the price onscreen for his attempt on the life of Tom Cruise, has also more than paid his dues to US popular culture in subsequent roles. Having started his American film career with a role which saw him as protector to the actress who would go on to mother Luke Skywalker,³ Reno redeems himself following the attempt on Cruise’s life by going on to save New York⁴ from a giant lizard in *Godzilla* and picking a bullet out of Robert De Niro’s side in *Ronin*. It is to these two films that we will now turn.

On the surface *Godzilla* may appear to be little more than a silly monster movie: Godzilla is pregnant and seeks out New York as suitable nesting ground, destroying skyscrapers and killing umpteen New Yorkers along the way. The US military are, inevitably, valiant in their attempts to destroy the beast. However, geeky scientist Dr. Niko Tatopoulos (Broderick), with assistance from French secret agent Philippe Roaché (Reno), ultimately saves the day. In terms of a transatlantic relationship, what is interesting here is that Godzilla is explicitly constructed as a creature for which the French are responsible. French nuclear testing in the Pacific has resulted in the genetic mutation that is Godzilla and, although he initially poses as an insurance man, Reno’s character is actually an employee of the French government sent to find a solution to the problems caused by his employer.⁵ So while, on the one hand, France is explicitly named as a destructive force, it is nevertheless given an opportunity to redeem its mistakes through the onscreen persona of Jean Reno. And it is important to note that Reno’s character plays his part here by appealing to American popular culture and traditional American values throughout.

His Frenchness, however, is repeatedly underlined, most frequently through references to the poor quality coffee Reno’s colleagues persist in offering him. The fact that the coffee is particularly foul in comparison to its French equivalent, is spelled out in one incident which sees Reno complaining that his colleague had promised him French coffee, only for the colleague to respond – in subtitled French, a cinematic indicator of linguistic otherness – that the tin read ‘French blend’. Similarly, when presented with another cup of foul-tasting coffee by a colleague, Reno asks ‘You call this coffee?’, to which his colleague equally sarcastically retorts, ‘I call this America.’ However, rather than lapsing into a somewhat facile gastronomic contest between the two countries, with America the home of fast food and France home to gourmet cuisine, Emmerich constructs a more complex reading of the relationship which, as Verdaguer (2004: 444) points out, does not impede cultural compatibility between the French and American characters onscreen.

This complexity manifests itself in a number of ways and in relation to a series of cultural references. Broderick is fired by the military because he

³ Nathalie Portman plays Queen Amidala in *Star Wars: Episode I The Phantom Menace* (Lucas 1999), *Star Wars: Episode II Attack of the Clones* (Lucas 2002) and *Star Wars: Episode III Revenge of the Sith* (Lucas 2005).

⁴ New York is introduced not only as a geographical location in Emmerich’s film, but also explicitly as a site of culture. When the film’s action shifts to the city, the caption across the bottom of the screen reads: ‘The City That Never Sleeps’, a direct reference to the lyrics of ‘New York, New York’ written by Kamber and Ebb.

⁵ We find here an illustration of a tendency identified by Justin Vaïsse in his 2003 article on American francophobia whereby France becomes a scapegoat for America’s own failures. Responsibility for the existence of Godzilla lies squarely at the door of successive French governments who have carried out nuclear testing in the South Pacific and yet no reference whatsoever is made to American nuclear testing, nor indeed to the dropping of atomic bombs by America on Nagasaki and Hiroshima.
inadvertently leaks information to an ex-girlfriend who works as a journalist, and he finds himself teaming up with Reno. Their collaboration gets off to a shaky start as Reno kidnaps Broderick, before taking him to the French HQ which is shown to house an impressive array of weapons and ammunition. Broderick looks bemused and asks how they managed to get it into the country, to which Reno replies, with a soft, self-satisfied smirk, ‘This is America, you can buy anything.’ Again, we have the outsiders being constructed as a potential source of danger or threat, and yet, actually, all they have done is make cunning use of an existent American sub-culture. Reno’s amusement at Broderick’s question speaks volumes about the impression of American society which is being created, the ultimate consumer society, but one in which goody-two-shoes characters like Broderick’s scientist are able to go about their daily lives unaware of the underside of this die-hard consumerism. Reno and his colleagues are shown to be cunning, but their cunning does not pose a threat. Rather, it is being brought into play in order to save the city, and, by extension, the country and the way of life from the threat posed by Godzilla’s arrival.

Again, we see in Reno a hero who is blind to anything but his duty and whose patriotism, here, unfolds in parallel in relation to both sides of the Atlantic. Reno declares himself a patriot and explains to Broderick that sometimes this patriotism means he must ‘save my country from mistakes it has made itself.’ In this way, he at once appeals to the sense of patriotism traditionally associated with the all-American action hero, while making clear that this type of national pride is not uniquely an American domain. The appeal is rewarded by Broderick’s character’s decision to work with the foreign other, jokingly – but only half-jokingly – stating that he has always wanted to work for the French Foreign Legion. Again, we are dealing here in the currency of cultural imagery. The bravery and the patriotism of the Foreign Legion are recognised by the American scientist (Greek-American, to be specific), in exchange for Reno’s recognition of his country’s errors coupled with his desire to see France’s reputation restored.6

In order to destroy Godzilla, it becomes necessary for Reno, Broderick, and their men to con their way through the US military checkpoints and here, again, Reno makes an explicit appeal to key aspects of American popular culture. Reno is shown inspecting his troops, and, before the somewhat bemused gaze of Broderick, distributing a single stick of chewing gum to each man. The agents, dressed in ill-fitting US army uniforms, proceed to chew their sticks of gum, with jaws hanging open, producing a chorus of gum and saliva. When Broderick asks what purpose the gum serves, Reno replies, straightforwardly, that it ‘makes us look more American’. From Broderick’s response – he immediately says he should do all the talking – it is obvious that the viewers are not supposed to be convinced by this display of ‘Americanism’. However, it points towards a very specific image of America that Reno and his men have obviously integrated. With their helmets, uniforms, and gum, German-born Emmerich gives viewers a visual reminder of the arrival of American GIs in Paris at the end of

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6 It should be noted that, although the focus of this article is on Jean Reno as ‘Francophone all-American action hero’, Broderick’s character’s name is also a clear indicator that his origins lie outwith American national boundaries leading to possible interpretations according to which the nation, in essence, is rescued by two heroic outsiders. However, Broderick’s Dr. Tatopoulos is clearly a Greek-American, speaking English with an American accent, and with absolutely no reference – visual or spoken – made to his family background beyond the name.
the Occupation, and yet the imagery does not lend itself entirely to this straightforward decoding. Rather, we have something far more complex, namely French government agents doing a poor impersonation of American soldiers, in an attempt to trick their way back into New York, in order to liberate the city from the monstrous presence of the lizard.

Rather than Reno’s Frenchness alone constituting a source of amusement or indeed bemusement, it is the ways in which he brings France and French identity into dialogue with America and American identity which are interesting here. The poor but amusing impersonation of US soldiers continues when the agents’ jeeps arrive at the checkpoint and Reno is asked where they are heading. Thus far, we have only heard him speak English with a very recognisably French accent and yet suddenly, here, the words that come out of his constantly chewing lips, are intoned with an accent that is unmistakably modelled on Elvis Presley. Reno has very little to say, but the reference is inescapable and, when they succeed in passing the checkpoint, he turns to the ever more wide-eyed Broderick and offers, by way of explanation, ‘Elvis Presley films. He was The King.’ So the Americans may not know the first thing about how to make a good cup of coffee – or, indeed, that such good cups of coffee should be accompanied by croissants, not donuts – and American English may, to foreign ears, sound as though it is being garbled through mouths filled with chewing gum, but Elvis Presley is rock ‘n’ roll, an untouchable cultural icon who requires no further explanation. This meshing of cultural references further builds on Reno’s action hero persona. He is at once transatlantic, and thus dependent on distinctions between French and American cultures (coffee and croissants versus chewing gum, for instance), and transnational with Elvis, and, by extension, iconic popular culture, serving as a bridge between the two nations.

In our final film, Reno is granted a rare position within the iconography of Hollywood action heroes, as he takes centre-stage alongside Robert De Niro in *Ronin*. Reno is not a secondary figure here, but occupies the onscreen space as much as De Niro does, working very much in tandem with the American star. Again, Reno proves here that his Frenchness can do more than simply set him apart within Hollywood cinema, just as De Niro too, as Italian-American within Hollywood, can be said to have earned a central place in Hollywood iconography precisely by playing the role of the outsider.

*Ronin* is set in France – split between Paris, Nice and Arles – and centres around a complex heist, involving Irish and Russian terrorists and an attempt to recuperate a mysterious silver case. Reno and De Niro are part of a team of international criminals – Reno is French, De Niro plays an American – brought together to try to win possession of the case but, inevitably, their plans are foiled at various points along the way, in order to make way for Frankenheimer’s trademark car chase sequences and action-packed shoot-outs. What is interesting here is that Reno is allowed to act as partner to De Niro in France, rather than in the United States.
This time it is De Niro who could, in fact, be constructed as the outsider, firstly, due to his involvement in criminal activities and, secondly, as the foreign other, but this is avoided. The criminality in itself is not depicted as a marker of otherness as it is not, for instance, placed within a ‘criminal/police’ binary, but rather the narrative unfolds within strata of a criminal world. As for the question of national otherness, the inclusion of a number of conversations between the two male stars conducted in subtitled French, rather than in English, shows that De Niro is able to adapt to his linguistic surroundings. He may be on foreign soil but, overall, De Niro is able to overcome his potential otherness.

Clearly, humorous misunderstandings resulting from this delicate linguistic imbalance would not be in keeping with the mood of the movie. However, it is important to note that the bilingualism of this central pairing is at no time constructed as a weakness, it does not place De Niro in a position of dependence but instead it serves to underline the solidarity that emerges between the two, as when their Irish employer issues instructions, the detail of which De Niro is unable to follow, but which are quickly translated by Reno. A transatlantic complicity is created here, the likes of which is not to be found in many – if indeed any – Hollywood action films. This is not the one-up-man-ship of Vincent Cassel and George Clooney in Ocean's Twelve, nor the vanity and arrogance of Lambert Wilson's exchanges with Keanu Reeves' Neo in The Matrix Reloaded (Wachowski Brothers 2003). Neither, indeed, is it the Gallic charm of Depardieu slowly, but surely, seducing Andie MacDowell in Green Card (Weir 1990). What we have in Ronin is a rare example of bilingual solidarity enabling a strengthened partnership to emerge without either of the nations represented feeling the need to take the upper hand.

This equal footing develops beyond a purely linguistic realm throughout the film, culminating in the sequence which sees Reno save De Niro’s life. The latter is shot by one of Russian terrorists and it is Reno who drives him, bleeding profusely from his side, to the house of a friend, tucked away in rugged French countryside. Even here, however, it is not straightforwardly a case of Reno taking charge and singlehandedly saving De Niro. Rather, De Niro himself stays conscious throughout the makeshift operation and issues instructions to Reno, telling him where to cut, how to grasp the bullet, which direction to pull in order to extract it. It is only when the bullet is removed that De Niro shows any sign of weakness, asking Reno if he thinks he will be able to stitch him up on his own and saying he thinks he might just pass out. If we think back to Tom Cruise placing his life in Reno’s untrustworthy hands in Mission: Impossible, the situation here is very different. As viewers, we have been given no reason to distrust Reno. Quite the contrary, in fact, since we have seen a respectful closeness developing between Reno and De Niro over the course of the film. Their closeness is particularly remarkable within the context of the international grouping of criminals involved in the operation. It becomes not only a transatlantic partnership situated on one side, or the other, of
the Atlantic, but a transatlantic partnership that is to be trusted above and beyond the potential for treachery exhibited by East Europeans (embodied by Stellan Skarsgård’s ex-KGB East German), Britons (Sean Bean as a rather odious character who is, in fact, dismissed before the operation gets off the ground), and the Irish (as represented by Natasha McElhone as their main contact, and Jonathan Pryce as overall mastermind).

Bearing in mind the atypical transatlantic relationship between Reno and De Niro, and the evolution of the former’s Hollywood persona since *Léon*, we can thus see that the dialogue between Atlantic coasts that Jean Reno represents is one which makes particular sense within a pre-9/11 context. Indeed, there is a rather gloomy irony in the fact that Godzilla’s arrival in New York is described, at one point in the film, as the worst thing to happen to the city since the World Trade Centre bombings of 1993. It is difficult to imagine Reno’s solitary action hero being allowed to continue his development in such close parallel with his American counterparts in the post-9/11 cinematic landscape, or indeed being accorded such a pivotal role in the rescue of aspects of American popular culture. 9/11 has been identified as a turning point in Franco-American relations evoking ‘a renewed sense of patriotism [. . . has] been a driving force behind the recent spike of Francophobia’ (Vaïsse 2003: 42) and it is only very recently that Reno has begun to creep back into any real prominence in Hollywood cinema with his roles in *The Da Vinci Code* (Howard 2006) and *The Pink Panther* (Levy 2006).

Nevertheless, starting with that initial role in *Léon*, Reno’s relationship with Hollywood has differed from that of other French actors of his generation. His action hero’s Frenchness is, at times, gently mocked, or used to provoke a sense of bemusement, but without constructing him simply as a figure of fun, and all the while allowing him to play a vital part in onscreen transatlantic rescue missions. He may be an outsider, but only insofar as he is obliged to ‘relinquish [individual] identity in service to society’ (Abele 2002: 447), he becomes a specific role, rather than an individual able to contribute in his own name to society. His focus on duty blinds him to more human pursuits and these characteristics are shared with more traditional American action heroes. Ultimately, what we see emerging across the films studied here is a quiet action hero, whose parallel appeals to patriotism and popular cultural references embed him firmly within a transcultural and transatlantic dialogue.

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