

## **Author Biography**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the complexities of both French and American transnational identities as portrayed onscreen by Jean Reno. The significance of the particular elements of French and American culture and identity which feature at the heart of Reno's roles in three films (*Mission: Impossible*, *Godzilla*, and *Ronin*) is analysed in an attempt to illustrate that, while feeding on national and cultural stereotype, the overall persona that emerges is one inescapably in dialogue with both Atlantic coasts, rather than one which engages with the somewhat simplistic binary backdrop of French anti-Americanism and American francophobia. This transcultural dialogue is further discussed through brief 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 these two parallel strands of analysis is a multilayered, transnational screen persona, at once embedded in and breaking with transatlantic clichés.

## **Saving Robert de Niro: Jean Reno as Francophone All-American Action Hero<sup>1</sup>**

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 to simultaneously embody and mock a series of transatlantic clichés in action movies and comedies alike. The focus here will be placed on the Hollywood action films Reno has appeared in, taking as its starting point a trio of late-1990s films – *Mission: Impossible* (De Palma, 1996), *Godzilla* (Emmerich, 1998), and *Ronin* (Frankenheimer, 1998). Through an examination of the type of action hero Reno embodies across these works, analysis will be offered of the complexities of both French *and* American transnational and transatlantic identities which emerge. Rather than engaging with a somewhat simplistic binary backdrop of French anti-Americanism, on the one hand, and American francophobia, on the other, Reno's transatlantic star persona allows his characters to exhibit what Pierre Verdaguer has described as 'qualities which make them culturally compatible with their American counterparts' (Verdaguer 2004: 444).

This article will look at the significance of the specific elements of French and American culture and identity that feature at the heart of Reno's roles in these three films, and at the ways in which the overall persona that emerges is one inescapably in dialogue with both Atlantic coasts. This transcultural dialogue is further developed by 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 in *Ronin* – and what emerges overall is a multilayered,

transnational screen persona, at once embedded in, and breaking with, transatlantic clichés.

Before examining the three core films, it is useful to have a brief overview of Reno's cinematic background and the build-up to his breakthrough in Hollywood which, according to the *New York Daily News*, became 'inevitable' (Beale 1998) after his popular success in a series of big budget French box office hits. His film career began with a small role in *L'Hypothèse du tableau volé/The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting* (Ruiz, 1979), but it was his encounter with Luc Besson at the start of the 1980s which marked the real turning point, beginning with a role in Besson's 1981 short *L'Avant Dernier*. Besson then gave Reno a string of increasingly high profile roles in each of his 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 breakthrough Stateside in Besson's 1994 film *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 US, with more than 3 million spectators going to see it over the course of its French release,<sup>2</sup> and laid the foundations for the 'action hero outsider' role Reno has gone on to make his own.

Reno's Léon is a somewhat taciturn, but highly dependable, hired killer, whose life changes when his young neighbour Mathilda (Natalie Portman) comes home to find her family has been murdered by a gang of deranged police officers led by the

deliciously unhinged Stansfield (Gary 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 seek revenge. 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). We do see him exercising repeatedly but, despite the camera's focus on the overall 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 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 (Mazdon 2000: 111).

Similarly, while other action heroes of the late 1980s and early 1990s are shown to be seductive figures – both within the narrative and in terms of screen 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. Certainly, it is unconventional for the only potential hint of 'romance' in an action film to stem from a relationship between a grown man and a female child, without this being overtly problematised within the narrative. This is not to say that the pair's relationship, and, in particular, Mathilda's expression of it, goes without comment. 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).

Putting this issue to one side, and 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, he is visually 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; explicitly constructed as an outsider in terms of the American setting, but (with the Little Italy location) an outsider within a realm of other outsiders, peripheral to 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 the murder of fellow citizens, Léon would, in many ways, represent the ideal newcomer to the US. Diligent, loyal, trustworthy, and caring, he demonstrates what Elizabeth Abele has described as the action hero’s ‘total identification with his duty’ (Abele 2002: 447).

In terms of action roles – and it is interesting to note that Reno has also maintained a comic filmography on both sides of the Atlantic<sup>3</sup> – 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<sup>th</sup> 2001, and before the ensuing diplomatic spat between the US and France, centring around the second Gulf War conflict of 2003. 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 feel some resentment towards him. In terms of star personae, we have the untouchable Cruise – already betrayed within the narrative framework and 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.

Cruise ultimately survives 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. Again, it is the foreign other who proves himself to be untrustworthy but also we are clearly shown that, while Cruise can rely on physical skill and wit to get him out of awkward situations, Reno is forced to result to brute strength and violence. As the film reaches its climax, these 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 conclusion involves Reno piloting a helicopter into the Channel Tunnel and ultimately bringing about his own death by concentrating on an attempt to kill Cruise, rather than trying to ensure 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 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,<sup>4</sup> Reno redeems himself following the attempt on Cruise's life by going on to save New York<sup>5</sup> 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*, it turns out, 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, it is Matthew Broderick's geeky scientist Dr Niko Tatopoulos, with assistance from Philippe Roaché, Jean Reno's French secret agent, who ultimately save the day. On the surface, a flimsy plot which serves as little more than a fairly feeble excuse for spectacular special effects and wooden acting.<sup>6</sup> However, 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 – it is French nuclear testing in the Pacific which 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 tidy up the mess made by his employer. 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 is always, and 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 – 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 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 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, instead 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 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’, at once appealing to the sense of patriotism which is traditionally associated with the all-American action hero, while making explicitly clear that this type of national pride is not uniquely an American domain. And 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.

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 charming chorus of gum and saliva. When Broderick asks what on earth the point of the gum is, 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 the Occupation, and yet the imagery does not lend itself entirely to this straightforward decoding – rather we have 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.

The poor but amusing impersonation 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. 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 is made interesting here and which further builds on Reno's transatlantic action hero persona.

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 and, again, proving that his Frenchness can do more than simply set him apart within Hollywood cinema. *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 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 on home turf – this time it is De Niro who could, in fact, be constructed as the outsider, the foreign other, although this is avoided through the inclusion of a number of passages which involve conversations between the two male stars conducted in subtitled French, rather than in English. De Niro may be on foreign soil but, overall, he is able to overcome his potential otherness.

Clearly, humorous misunderstandings resulting from this delicate linguistic imbalance would not be inkeeping 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 – indeed, it serves to underline the solidarity that emerges between Reno and De Niro, 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 here, 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, right up to the moment when Reno saves 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, and so on. 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 remember 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), Brits (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 textual and intertextual aspects of American popular culture. 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 that is something he shares with more traditional American action heroes whose focus on duty blinds them to more human pursuits. 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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<sup>2</sup> Figures taken from [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com). Accessed 10 August 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Reno's comic filmography includes such works as *French Kiss* (Kasdan, 1995) and *Just Visiting* (Poiré, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> 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).

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting, however, that at least one rather unexpected piece of academic research has resulted from Emmerich's monster movie in the form of Per Christiansen's analysis of the biological and zoological plausibility of the version of Godzilla depicted.