

Title: Cinematic Style through Subtitles and Translation: Reading the Hollywood Western in Lucky Luke

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Abstract: Franco-Europe's massively popular comic book series *Lucky Luke* may be read, among others, as a postwar text, a cold-war text, or the authors' love letter to America. But the creation of these albums can also be studied through the lens of the movie-going experience of a French-speaking audience watching a Hollywood Western dubbed or subtitled into French. *Lucky Luke* is a cultural icon of the French, yet it draws heavily on a mythologized American West. This series is, obviously, very visual, yet in a particularly cinematic way. These books are a pictorial representation of Hollywood movies, replete with close-ups, wide angles, establishing shots, and cinemascope-like visuals. But language-specific elements such as musical numbers, text-based visuals like signs, and known geographical names cannot be conveniently overdubbed. Reading *Lucky Luke* in its original French is an experience akin to a film going experience in which place and character names, songs, and signs are all represented in English, as in a near all-encompassing backdrop, with a French overlay on top.

Keywords: *Lucky Luke*; Western films; comics; appropriation; cultural fusion; cowboys; translation; motion pictures; National myths; National identity

Franco-Europe's massively popular *bande dessinée* series *Lucky Luke* may be read, among others, as a postwar text, a cold-war text, or the authors' love letter to America. But these albums can also be read through the lens of the movie-going experience of a French-speaking audience watching a Hollywood Western dubbed or subtitled into French. *Lucky Luke* is a cultural icon of the French, yet it draws heavily on a mythologized American West. This series is, obviously, very visual, yet in particularly cinematic ways. These books are a pictorial representation of Hollywood movies, replete with close-ups, wide angles, establishing shots, and Cinemascope-like visuals. But language-specific elements such as musical numbers, text-based visuals like signs, and known geographical names cannot be conveniently overdubbed or subtitled. Reading *Lucky Luke* in its original French is an experience akin to a film going one in which place and character names, songs, and signs are all represented in English, as in a completed product, with a French overlay added afterwards on top.

As well, a healthy dose of stock Hollywood characters, both good and villainous, find their way onto the page, along with familiar tropes of the Hollywood Western tradition. By looking at these works as a French reception and reflection of a seemingly uniquely American product, we can begin to recognize in the *Lucky Luke* series elements which bring new meaning to our understanding of the historical and national interconnectedness of popular culture.

In the year 1955, the French filmmaker and critic Eric Rohmer wrote in *Cahiers du Cinéma* that America is "one moment astonishingly familiar, the next incomprehensibly opaque to our European eyes. But in front of the screen my impulse has always been to stay as close as I could to that first perspective."¹ He goes on to suggest that Hollywood cinema's essential qualities and strengths, among them "universality," have been the prerogative of the French throughout their history.² *Lucky Luke* displays this duality of an American product appearing familiar and universal from a French perspective.

In what ways do these albums reflect a specifically French European reading of the Hollywood Western? Well, in two ways: it is a text based on the uniquely French experience of watching dubbed or subtitled Westerns in the French language; and, secondly, having an established, popular cultural form and product outlet such as *bande dessinée* to reflect it back outwards, initially to themselves, and thence the wider world. There is this divided, variable sense in the *bande dessinée* of *Lucky Luke*, in which the product is familiar to us all from Hollywood, yet another side that is uniquely a reflection of the French experience of these Hollywood Westerns.

The series originates immediately after the Second World War. The first *Lucky Luke* was published in 1946. Up until now, over 300 million copies of over 87 books have been sold.³ However, until this century, not many of the titles were published in English. The artist and original writer was a Belgian, Maurice de Bevere, “Americanized” as Morris (1923-2001). The series was vastly improved in 1955, when French-born Rene Goscinny (1926-77), of *Astérix* fame, became the writer, with Morris then focusing on the illustration. The series was born and grew up during the heyday of the Hollywood Western, mostly focusing on the film formula of this period (1940s and 50s), but evolving somewhat in later books to accommodate the appearance of Italian Spaghetti Westerns and other less traditional forms of the Western.

When he comes on board as writer, Goscinny brings a strong measure of realism to the texts. The background details and settings, for instance, are painstakingly documented in the stories. Goscinny begins populating the stories with historical figures, such as Jesse James, Billy the Kid, Calamity Jane, and Sarah Bernhardt, all of whom showed up as film characters. He also starts including significantly more historical background in the texts. The stories, for instance, start touching themes such as Native Reservations and tensions relating to these lands; social strains revolving around Chinese migrant workers; the East’s enthusiastic appetite for sensational stories from the West; as well as the overall migration of settlers and labourers. These historical realities tend to remain in the background, however, as, at heart, the stories remained true to their original gun slinging, good guys and bad guys ethos.

We know that there were many screenings of Hollywood Westerns in French, particularly during the peak production period of the 1950s. Some of the biggest Hollywood names were screened in Europe, including John Wayne, Rita Hayworth, Lee Van Cleef, Jimmy Stewart, Tyrone Power, and Henry Fonda. So, a broad familiarity with Hollywood. In the *Lucky Luke* albums we see examples of character types from roles of such actors as these in Westerns from the silent era all the way to new Hollywood of the late 1960s.

As we begin to notice the intertextuality between these two media telling glorified stories of the Old West, we can recognise *Lucky Luke* as a *bande dessinée* version of a cinematic, especially Hollywood-derived, Western. In short, much of Hollywood’s formula for the Western is there on the page. The creators try to capture the Old West as it was understood and imagined during the years in which the series ran. For example: the wide-open vistas; the requisite scenes of a 50s Hollywood film (saloon, gamblers, gunfights); on-screen activities (railway building, stagecoach rides, migration of people and goods, cattle drives); rough characters and those looking for a new life or identity—much of the Hollywood Western legends and mythology appear in the series as they might on the screen.

The stories are populated by characters recognizable to us from the films, including the devious cattle rancher, the grizzled old miner, the prune-like pallbearer, and the shifty gambler. We also meet

heroes and villains, dressed according to Hollywood Western convention in white and black, as well as stock Hollywood characters, there for comic relief, like the squabbling married couple consisting of a meek husband and an overbearing wife. Lucky Luke's horse, Jolly Jumper, calling to mind images of a singing cowboy star's immaculate, screen tested horse, is the perfect trained animal actor. We see familiar Hollywood tropes like saloon fights and saloon dancers, wanted posters, scenes of gambling, chase scenes, and shoot outs. And, of course, every story ends happily, with Lucky Luke riding off into the sunset whistling his tune, as if credits are about to role.

Thus, Morris and Goscinny are clearly conscious of maintaining the conventions of the films. The stories and scenes are often consciously set in familiar film settings like a saloon, a sheriff's office, a snowy mountain, or parched desert. The creators want to ensure that the reader is aware they are being treated to the signifiers of a good old fashioned John Wayne film. In short, we see reflected in the stories by these French speaking creators Rohmer's universality: action, adventure, music, and comic relief.

Roland Barthes has argued that, in comparison to a photograph, "a drawing is more obviously perceived as encoded, since it transposes its model...." The subject of the image, in a drawing, is based on specific features chosen by the artist, and is presented via specific codes which represent cultural codes in the image. For instance these might relate to choices in framing, composition, size of image, perspective, close-up, etc. *Lucky Luke's* Morris often chooses many of these cultural codes in ways that reflect similar choices as ones chosen by Western film directors, for example, wide angle, close up, perspective, etc.

Morris also moves between close-ups, medium shots, and the aforementioned wide angle perspectives much as a film would do. The albums' scenes often progress the way a film's would, too, in that they move from establishing shot, to a series of close-ups, with a variety of medium shots interspersed to vary up the scene.

For the most part, *Lucky Luke* is fairly typical of the style of drawn bands or strips. However, the visual and graphic style of the albums' illustrations is also very often evocative of films. At key moments there is some variation of size of the panels, with wider ones often reminiscent of wide angle shots from big screen Hollywood vistas. These wider panels usually show up in outdoor scenes and establishing "shots" where the wide-open expanses of the "big sky" landscape, often with monumental rock formations, are used to invoke the grandeur of the West, much as the filmmaker sought to capture these settings. These film shots were used as a calling card of Hollywood productions showing off new technologies like Cinemascope, designed to bring in audiences to the theatre, away from the new competition of the 1950s, the TV. Again, we are struck by the visual elements of the original films, which can easily translate into a French-language comic without losing any of the powerful impact this monumental landscape offered the films.

The costumes of the characters are another aspect in the series that is borrowed from the films. The representations of clothing are very detailed renderings and signifiers of status within the story. The hero's streamlined costume is reflective of Hollywood's evolving costuming for its star system, primarily starting in the 1920s. As the star system grew, costuming tended to match the whims and preferences of the star in question. Outfits started becoming more colorful and circus-like in overall appearance, while gradually being streamlined in their cut over the following decades. Morris seems to have chosen this less than authentic costuming style for his characters, though the more subdued streamlined

variety, which were prominent in most Westerns outside of the singing, musical ones, mostly from the 1930s to 50s.⁴ Thus Morris and Goscinny were consciously choosing costuming codes brought down to them from these visual messengers from Hollywood.

Thus, *Lucky Luke*'s creators are using Hollywood's cultural codes rather than those of France's. In fact, in the French westerns made in the earlier decades of the 20th century, the costuming is notable in its lack of any of these clothing, with it being mostly akin to French farmers' clothing with straw hats being the main signifier that it is meant to be seen as a Western.

Up to this point we have discussed the many ways that visually the *Lucky Luke* series mimics and reflects back at us various aspects of the generic Hollywood Western. Through familiar themes, characters, backdrops, costumes, settings—in fact all non-dialogue elements—*Lucky Luke* is displaying their creators' thorough consumption of the signifiers of a Hollywood western. Yet throughout the albums, at least in their original French, they are presented as if we are watching a dubbed or subtitled film, an after-factory French overlay on an English product. We see virtually every character name in English: e.g., Lucky Luke, Jolly Jumper, Bloody Bart, Elliot Belt, etc. At times the dialogue is punctured with short English expressions we might hear and understand over the subtitles, such as “whiskey, barman.” Place names are likewise all in English; no effort has been made to provide French alternatives or equivalents. These stories are set in Virginia City, Dalton town, Cheyenne Pass, and Dry Gulch.

The individual scenes themselves are permeated with similar signifiers of an English foundation. Just as most Hollywood Westerns, particularly of the John Wayne/Howard Hawkes variety so popular in the 1950s, have a saloon scene, so too does each *Lucky Luke* album. The names of these saloons in the *bande dessinée*, displayed on signs over their entrances, include the “Small Face Saloon”, “Silver Queen Saloon”, “Queen of Hearts Saloon”. And inside the saloons, we see yet more signifiers of this kind: a sign reading “girls, whiskey, ice cold beer”; a posted notice hanging over the bar informing us that “no credit” is the house rule; and wanted posters throughout, with the dollar amount and outlaw's face prominent, indicating all we need to know about it, whether in English or French. In fact, the only text in French we see is if it is an extended piece of crucial information, such as a snippet of a news article. Otherwise, all text that is incidental or in the background is in English.

And, interestingly, there is often in one of the saloon scenes in the story a dancing and/or singing show being performed on the stage. When the performers are singing, the lyrics are always written in English. In a subtitled, or even dubbed, film, the French audience would still nevertheless hear the English singing. Morris and Goscinny have maintained this duality within their text, again as a nod to the French experience of watching a translated Western, aspects of which the subtitlers have no control.

And finally, we also see in these stories from time to time actor-specific characters, like Lee van Cleef, whose visible familiarity and famous face know no language barrier. Thus we read this text much like a French audience would have experienced a translated Hollywood product, with its stars recognizable to us, if not understood by us in their native language. But such was the internationality of westerns by the 60s. for instance the Italian spaghetti western industry in which van Cleef was a regular player.

In conclusion, we can safely start by saying that we generally think of the Hollywood Western as a uniquely American product. Yet our understanding of the historical and national interconnectedness of popular culture in particular is expanded by studying how such a nationality-specific product can be

claimed by another through representation of its own experiences with it. By looking at these works as a French reception of an American product, the *Lucky Luke* series brings new meaning to our understanding of the global possibilities of culture and in particular Franco-European affection for the American West as portrayed through Hollywood.

¹ Eric Rohmer, "Rediscovering America", in *Cahiers du Cinéma, Volume 1: the 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, ed. Jim Hillier (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 88.

² *Ibid.*, 88, 90.

³ "Lucky Luke Creator Dies" BBC News. Last modified 20 July, 2001, viewed 4 July, 2014, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/1448987.stm>>.

⁴ George N. Fenin and William K. Everson, *The Western: From Silents to Cinerama* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1962), 181.