

The Breakdown of Heroism in the 1970s: Miserable Men in Franco-Belgian Western Comics

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Abstract In the present landscape of Hollywood movies the image of the cowboy is widely decreased to the nonconforming misfit with infantile features. As the so called golden boy giving some variety to the audience, he became a synonym for otherness. As for the matter of Western comics, the Franco-Belgian cowboys belong to a special hero species. They represent the dismantlement of the flat and flawless Western heroes in the manner of old John Wayne movies. Regarding those failing Western men it is interesting to see in which way political and social circumstances influenced the authors. Although the stories were told on the background of the American west, famous artists like Jean-Michel Charlier expressed via their works dissatisfaction with Americas politicking and criticized international affecting events like the Vietnam War. By comparing different types of Franco-Belgian Western comic protagonists, ranging around outlaws, gunfighters and drunkards as well as mountain men and trappers, the essay interrogates the position of artists and authors towards the political and economic situation during the 1970s. As one of the examples, the portrayed hero of the chronological arranged epic *Lieutenant Blueberry* who, throughout the course of the episodes experiences not only a vehement change in appearance but also in personality will be the principal focus of research.

Key words Western comic; France; anti-hero; Vietnam War

While Italian artists were already very active during the post-war years producing several series being assigned to the Western genre, like the series *Jane Calamity* (1948) by the female artist Linda Buffolente (1924 – 2007), the French-speaking comic artists took their time to notice the short period between 1850 and 1900 of Americas history to be qualified as a source for creating epic stories (Ackermann 34). The French publishers were anxious about the theme of violence, treating it with high sensibility during the time of the war and even during the years afterward. But the use of firearms, plus the conflicts between Native Americans and the white colonizers as the fundamental elements of the Western genre, made it difficult to offer series appropriate for young people.

When Paul Dupuis, son of the publisher Jean Dupuis, commissioned the comic artist Jacques Dumas (1908 – 1995) in 1954 to produce a Western series, the elements of the long before established Adventure and Detective stories had their influ-

ence on *Jerry Spring*, the first remarkable Western comic series of France (Mietz 3). Long before, in 1941, Dumas already had created, under his penname Jijé, together with the author Jean Doisy the Detective series *Jean Valhardi*, with a protagonist decisively influencing not only the future works of fellow artists but also shaping his own narrative techniques. The large blond man solving crimes on an insurance company's instructions distinguishes himself by intelligence and nobility of mind as well as courage. In comparison to American Adventure comic heroes, Valhardi and his successors are acting even more virtuously and they are fighting within a straight defined mission while the motive of the so-called "soldier of fortune" is nearly completely missing.

By constraining the hero to a mission given by a society, an organization or a company, the publishers tried to legitimize the presentation of the violence as necessary and emphasized that the hero is not acting subjectively (Knigge 52). The same goes for France's first Western hero, Jerry Spring, who acted in accordance with the American President or a general. He is a well-dressed U. S. Marshal with a good figure going to great trouble to lend aid unselfishly to the weak and to the victims of persecution. In accordance to his opponents, his facial expressions are always a little fixed, no matter if he is smiling or not. As the perfect hero he is supposed to demonstrate not only his courage to the readers, but his honesty and generosity as well, which makes him appear monotonous and smooth. Like the actor Alan Ladd (1913 – 1964) as the title role Shane in the movie of the same name by George Stevens (1904 – 1975)¹, *Jerry Spring* appears as the mysterious bringer of salvation from nowhere and again, disappears from the scene after the solution of the conflict. By replacing the Western film motives of revenge and the final showdown by the motive of expiation, Jijé managed to create a Western comic series appropriate for the youth.

The American screenwriter Frank Gruber (1904 – 1969), known for his Western and Detective stories, described seven main themes to which each Western film can be assigned: the Union Pacific story, the ranch story, the empire story, Custer's last stand, the outlaw story, the revenge story, and the Marshall story (Cawelti 19). Those themes are also to be found in most of the later French Western comic series and in isolated cases of the *Jerry Spring* series. The stories center on cattle breeding, gold prospectors, occupation and settlement of land, as well as the confrontation with Native Americans. But Jijé doesn't give the role of the criminals and the defeated ones to the Indians. In his work he presents them as the mediators between humans and nature and as peacemakers pointing out wrong and right in human actions. Opponents however are mostly presented through the white settlers, cattle breeders, or greedy gold prospectors (Mietz 6).

But if you disregard the decorative elements of *Jerry Spring*, this series seems, just like *Jean Valhardi*, to belong to the Detective genre. There aren't even accurate hints to be found according to the history's action period because of the nearly complete absence of historical allusions to America's history. Indications of place in general are also avoided by the author who confines himself to give only vague information, letting the reader know that the story takes place in the frontier area of the USA and Mexico.

Together with his always cheerful and ready-for-a-laugh companion Pancho, a

chubby Mexican, Jerry picks up the trail of criminals in nearly every episode. While the pair always endeavors to find the guilty ones and to arrest them, they are continuously coming across hints until they manage to find the answer to the mystery. Just like in the case of Detective stories, the climax is always retarded via skillful delivery of information until the sudden turn of events (Ackermann 50). Jijé reunites the elements of Detective comic stories like kidnapping, the search for the missing person, faked alibis, and unsolved murders in a new backdrop. This rather unusual combination was a result of many years of experience Jijé gained during his work on *Jean Valhardi*, and his great love for the nature and the rough country he realized during the time he spent in the USA.²

But Jijé lost all his enthusiasm for the Western genre and the last episodes he created between 1962 and 1964 were afflicted with loss of quality in plot and drawings. A lot of already considered scenarios were reused, the characters became sketchy and some panel backgrounds were even totally blank. Jijé's publisher was forced to look for alternatives which would reduce the printing costs and decided to release the following *Jerry Spring* episodes in red and black instead of full color versions (Schleiter 89). This led to a breaking-off between artist and publisher, and Jijé not only turned his back on his contracting party, but also on the Western genre until *Jerry Spring*'s revival in the episode "Le duel" in 1974.

But from this episode on, all of the series' and character's ingenuousness was gone. Not only did *Jerry Spring* make an appearance without his usually loyal friend Pancho, but also the atmosphere became depressing in every respect. In the manner of the Italo-Western films (also known as Spaghetti-Westerns)³, Jijé set the motive of the army in a wretched condition and the protagonists seem to be exhausted while they trudge through the inhospitable wilderness. The décor seems to be some kind of filthiness which underlines even more the gloomy atmosphere.

The new narrative course in stile Jijé pursued was no accident. Previously, he had returned to the USA where he met the famous Italian Spaghetti-Western film director Sergio Leone (1929 – 1989) and was invited to visit the setting of the movie production of *Il mio nome è Nessuno* (*My Name is Nobody*) where he was introduced to the actor of the leading role, Terence Hill (1939). Jijé was requested to work on a comic version of the movie and he started to work on the drafts right away while he was observing the filming. Nevertheless, the realization of a Western parody as a comic emerged as a difficult task to undertake and Jijé abandoned this comic project without ever getting beyond the planning phase (Hamann 24).

Blueberry—The Undying (But Aging) Legend of the Wild West

But not only the visit to the film setting of *Il mio nome è Nessuno* had a lasting impression on Jijé. During the artist's break of his craft creating Western stories and turning his hand to different genres, his former assistant Jean Giraud, who was once, in 1961, entrusted with the inking of the episode "La route de Coronado" (The Road to Coronado), brought 1963 a Western comic series into being which should have the most determining influence on the Franco-Belgian Western comic creation. The series which should later become known under the title *Lieutenant Blueberry*, started off with

a 48 page embracing episode named “Fort Navajo” released in the 210th issue of the youth magazine *Pilote* (Mietz 1).

Even Giraud’s former tutor Jijé had no choice but to notice this achievement. The increasing popularity of this comic series safeguarded its future and the series was extended to a chronologically arranged epic including the narrative timeframe between 1866 and 1900 of America’s history, while the first episode, “Fort Navajo,” starts off in the year 1881. But this span only refers to the main plot of the series. Afterward the comic was expanded via the appropriate stories called *La Jeunesse de Blueberry* (*The Youth of Blueberry*), taking place in the narrative time between 1861 and 1865, and *Marshal Blueberry*, taking place in the narrative time between 1868 and 1869.

Right from the start, this comic series was planned to be as realistic as possible and while time passed, the protagonist Mike Steve Donovan, alias Mike S. Blueberry, grew older, gathering experience that changed his character. Although he was never presented as the stereotypical upholder of moral standards in terms of *Jerry Spring*, at first he was introduced to the readers as a hero who would show no hesitation, only determination and courage. Apart from Mexicans, he even would bury his dead opponents.

However, his eccentric appearance and his ill-disciplined behavior prove that he is not the classic comic hero. His outward neglect increased. His unshaven, unkempt, and grubby look emphasizes the image of the violent brute he mutated into. But since Giraud was only the illustrator of *Lieutenant Blueberry*, the protagonist’s moral degeneracy at first only emerged in his drawings. But the plots written by Jean-Michel Charlier (1924 – 1989) started to fit the visual disassembly of the protagonist during the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s where Blueberry became a dropout and outsider while he was accused of robbery which led to the dismissal from his military position in the army in the tenth episode “Général tête jaune” (General Yellow Head).



This transformation of Blueberry’s character would not have been possible without the massive change the publishing business underwent as an effect of the protests in 1968. The strongly circulating underground press, which was a result of the revolt of the students, started a trend noticed in the French comic scene. Also, the editorial department of the comic magazine *Pilote*, hosting the *Lieutenant Blueberry* series, was infected by the ideological disputes. Staff members of the magazine reproached the managing editor for standing up for the wrong party and many members left the magazine in order to work for a rival paper. Comics started to be noticed as a medium that not only functioned as a source for entertainment. The long lasting image of comics as children’s literature, could finally be shed (Holtz-Bacha 119). In view of America’s politicking, France adopted a critical attitude towards the US and many French comic artists vent their spleen with the Vietnam War

via their art as did Giraud with his partner Charlier. They reflected the frustrating impotence of a single one, using Blueberry as a sport of fate who was helplessly carried away by the stream of events. Totally powerless and resigning himself to his fate, he gets bashed up by Confederates many times, which already seems to be a running gag. In the episode “Angel Face,” released in 1975, he even acts like an ordinary criminal, not caring about principles and shooting an opponent in the back without scruple. He lost his faith in the power of resistance and decided to disappear into the crowd, thinking of the world as evil. Finally, with the following three episodes “Nez Cassé” (Broken Nose), “La longue marche” (The Long March) and “La tribu fant? me” (The Ghost Tribe) released between 1980 and 1982, Charlier allows Blueberry to regain little of his self-assurance while he lives with an Apache tribe.

The Children of the Seventies-Trappers, Mountain Men and Postmodern Cowboys

Because of the great impact of *Lieutenant Blueberry*, Dargaud launched 1974 a magazine called *Lucky Luke Mensuel* presenting only stories of the Western genre. The magazine became the platform for two newly released series, “Mac Coy” by scenarist Jean-Pierre Gourmelen (1934) and the Spanish artist Antonio Hernández Palacois (1921 – 2000), and *Jonathan Cartland* by the female scenarist Laurence Harle (1949 – 2005) and the artist Michel Blanc-Dumont (1948).

The story about Lieutenant Alexis Mac Coy is a Western comic that shows betrayal, lies, intrigue, and corruption in different variants. In 1865, after the breakup of the Confederate States of America, he flees from Georgia to Mexico and blunders into the revolution of Benito Juárez against the emperor Maximilian and the French occupation troops. Two years after the war, Mac Coy returns to the states and starts off as a captain in the US Army and Gourmelen and Palacois make him witness G. A. Custer’s last stand against the Sioux and the Cheyenne at Little Big Horn (Janssen 61).

However, the series *Jonathan Cartland* tends to be from a different kind of Western comic. Just like the 1972 series *Buddy Longway*, by Claude de Ribaupierre (1944), alias Derib, *Jonathan Cartland* refers to the myth of the wilderness as a paradise far from any semblance of civilization where only forces of nature dominate. Nevertheless *Buddy Longway* always had a tendency to be more naive, simple, structured, and unconstrained telling a story about a save home. As well in this comic, all the protagonists are designed as realistic human beings (except for the graphic style in the first two episodes, which is redolent of a humorous series Derib worked on before) and the author sets great value upon making his characters express emotions, not only displaying affection, understanding, and love, but also rage and doubt. The female characters have an important part in every episode although they are nearly without exception presented in traditional gender-role allocations. For example, Buddy’s Sioux Native American wife Chinook is often shown in scenes cooking, caring for their two children, Jérémie and Kathleen, and tending to the sick, while her husband goes out hunting and setting traps. She is not a totally passive character in the story and is even capable of defending herself in situations of violent conflicts, but most of the time Buddy returns just soon enough in time with his firearms to avert the

danger, acting as the traditional male guardian and hero.

Chinook is the family part who takes care of their stability and maintains continuity in their everyday life, while Buddy, as the provider of his family, is inclined to react on the constituted situation. On that score, his wife, who is a Sioux woman who has grown up in the wilderness, reminds him to consider the longer-term consequences (Pillooy 59).

Buddy is not an anti-hero; he always seizes the initiative in situations of danger and protects his family and friends without hesitation, notwithstanding if they are white colonizers or American Indians. Nonetheless, he is a fallible human, often presented by Derib as injured, passed out, or basted. Also, he comes with endearing weaknesses, according to his wife with whom he often consults in situations of decision, acknowledging her intuition and her wisdom.

The evil in *Buddy Longway* always makes an appearance in the form of Palefaces. Even if the Native American Indians happen to be guilty of the use of violence, the Palefaces are the cause of the disturbance of the peaceful being-with-one-another, affecting the Indians negatively with fire-water, just as in the episode “L’ eau de feu” (Fire-Water) from 1979. On the other hand Derib always casts a shadow on the military, showing them as mindless humans who are longing for revenge and destruction, while the ordinary troops emerge as subordinates that only care about obeying orders.

The mountain man Jonathan Cartland as well turns his back on civilization, detesting the white colonizers for their backstabbing actions, such as using whiskey against the Indians in order to cause uproars between their tribes. Dumont conceived a dislike for the period of demystification, disillusionment, and violence of many Italian Western films and concurred in the new change in trend of some Western films in the early seventies. So films like *Little Big Man* by Arthur Penn, (1922 – 2010) released in 1970, and *Jeremiah Johnson* by Sydney Irwin Pollack (1934 – 2008), released in 1972, with trappers as protagonist who discovered the wilderness as their living environment, became Dumont’s and Harlé’s paragons. It was never their endeavor to copy Charlier or other colleagues; as an alternative they wanted to slip some contemporary events into the story (Dumont 6). That is why *Jonathan Cartland* seems to be more oriented towards ecological aspects than any other series. The end of the Vietnam War and the oil crisis of 1973, which made France decide to make conditional on nuclear energy, affected the interests of Dumont and his generation. He reflected his own opinion via his series, enhancing that the war between different cultures brings no good to mankind and that arrogance and ignorance towards nature and peoples living in close touch with it will only lead to the destruction of one’s own habitat (Janssen 62).

But contrary to Buddy, Jonathan experiences an emotional collapse, like Blueberry did when he went down to the level of a mere criminal. Jonathan’s idyllic family life is destroyed when Shoshone kills his wife and kidnaps his son in the beginning of the story. Until he gets the chance to lead a trek to Oregon, where he has got the opportunity to kill the murderers of his wife, Jonathan does not manage to build up the courage. But the story does not change into the classic revenge story. That is why it would be an exaggeration to talk about Jonathan Cartland as an anti-hero. He be-

came, just like Blueberry, a victim of fate, being tossed into situations he cannot really cope with. His attitude is always a little ambivalent because he is caught in the middle of two cultures. Because Dumont thinks that there cannot be a hero dying and changing the course of events, Jonathan also cannot influence the circumstance he finds himself in, and fails miserably without even trying to get a hold of the situation (Dumont 8).

In 1978 a Western-like comic series was released which was in a great contrast to the other comics of the Western genre. In the first episode, “La Nuit des Rapaces” (“The Night of Predators”), of Hermann Huppen’s series *Jeremiah*, the author needs only two pages to stop the contemporary progress of civilization and show how the nature conquers the country again. Although considered as a comic series



of the *Science Fiction* genre because of the post-apocalyptic story, the setting is redolent of the Wild West. The story centers on the young David Walker, alias Jeremiah, who is searching for his parents, abducted during the racial wars shaking the USA. Only a handful of people survived the inferno, living on farms again, like they did in ancient times, and battling for their existence in a hostile environment while they are trying to reestablish a new society. Together with his cynical and hard-boiled friend Kurdy Melloy, the rather simple-minded and kindhearted Jeremiah roams the post-modern Western setting looking for a job and shelter (Semel 66).

Some scenes, like the ride into an inhospitable town and the duel over a buried treasure, in the second episode “Du sable plein les dents” (Teeth full of Sand), from 1979, even bear a resemblance to some Western films of Sergio Leone (*A Fistful of Dollars* and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*).

Conclusion

The political events of 1968 affected the Franco-Belgian comic artists not only because of the cultural, social and political reforms resulting from the demands of the students and the citizens, but also primarily through the suspension of the July 2, 1949 law regarding the censorship of depictions of violence. The publishing companies and the authors were not constricted in their freedom anymore and were able to enjoy their art. What they at first only were able to publish in secrecy within the limits of the underground-press, reached the general public. The artists used their comics to rise to speak about their opinion on the Vietnam War, the prudish society, ecological destruction, the oil crisis, and other subjects stirring up their emotions. They poured out their frustration over their own powerlessness in the world’s conflicts via the projection of this powerlessness on to the protagonists, who can’t help but only watch how cultures with more highly developed firearms eliminate other cultures in order to con-

quer their living environment. The authors adumbrated how this powerlessness can break a person, causing them to lose faith in the good of mankind and resign themselves to the superior forces.

But their comics are not only a manifestation of frustration, but also an admonition to return to traditional virtues of family life and demonstrating respect to other cultures learning from their experiences and not to repeat one's mistakes.

Notes

1. *Shane* is a 1953 released American Western film produced and directed by George Stevens, based on the 1949 novel of the same name by the author Jack Schaefer (1907 – 1991).
2. 1948 together with his family and his fellow workers Maurice de Bevère (1923 – 2001) and André Franquin (1924 – 1997), Jijé emigrated to the USA in order to cooperate with the local comic book publishers. He also traveled to the West coast, North Mexico and New York and was swayed by the landscapes (Gillain 17).
3. The Italo- or Spaghetti-Western is a sub-genre of the American Western film which became known in the 1970s and received its name according to Italy where most of those films were produced and directed.

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