La Classe américaine
Film collage and dubbing

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On 31 December 1993, French pay TV channel Canal+ broadcast a 70-minute film called La Classe américaine, directed by Michel Hazanavicius and Dominique Mézerette. They took excerpts from about fifty Warner Bros. productions, edited them to build a story and had the characters (played by A-list actors such as John Wayne and James Stewart) dubbed over by well-known French voice actors, resulting in what is known technically as a ‘détournement’, combining the techniques of film collage and dubbing. This paper sketches the origins and the production context of this very unusual audiovisual object, relying on insights from film theory, with particular reference to adaptation techniques like remixes and collages. The analysis also shows how meaning and humour are created through the montage of originally completely disconnected scenes and the addition of funny or crude dialogues that one would not expect from cinema legends like John Wayne. A final part highlights the film’s cult status and its influence on the creation of more détournements.

Keywords: adaptation, détournement, dubbing, film collage, film remix

1. Introduction

It might seem preposterous to state that there is a French film starring a wide range of cinema legends such as John Wayne, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Paul Newman, Robert Redford, Dustin Hoffman, Lauren Bacall and Orson Welles, among others. Yet, such a film really exists: it is called La Classe américaine (‘American Class’, henceforth LCA) and was directed by Michel Hazanavicius and Dominique Mézerette. This film was created as a tribute to American cinema on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of Warner Bros. For reasons that will become clear, this 70-minute film was broadcast only once on 31 December 1993 on Canal+. 
Canal+ is a pay TV channel that is available in France, Belgium and Switzerland, originally via a decoder and nowadays via a subscription through digital TV providers. Since its launch in November 1984, the channel’s main selling argument has been to premiere a wide range of series and films of both French and American origin (typically blockbusters), while also broadcasting sporting events, sitcoms and satirical talk shows, in addition to children’s shows and cartoons, and successful (adult) animated series (e.g. *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, *South Park*). Canal+ was the first French channel to broadcast series and films in their original version with French subtitles. Although dubbed versions of blockbusters always premiered, the original version would be broadcast later in the week or month. Later, the ‘multilingual version’ option enabled the viewers to make their choice of language as the film was being broadcast.

Taken at face value, one might think that *LCA*, as a made-for-TV production, must have been an enormous waste of money, considering its prestigious ensemble cast and its unique broadcast. However, *LCA* is not actually a film, but rather, as the filmmakers jokingly called it, a ‘flim’. More specifically, it is an instance of an audiovisual ‘détournement’, an art form that creates new meaning by placing given elements in a new, often unexpected context.

The present paper attempts to fill a void in research since, apart from a minor reference in Boillat (2013), no scholarly article has – to my knowledge – dealt with *LCA*. The analysis has the following objectives: to situate the genre of the détournement within the field of film adaptation, to explain the genesis of the *LCA* project, to detail some of its most interesting stylistic features and to comment on its place in contemporary popular culture.

2. Types of film adaptation

There is no denying that films can be altered and adapted in a large number of ways and for a wide range of purposes. A distinction can be made between projects using one source film only, i.e. *remixes*, and, on the other hand, those that use material from at least two sources, i.e. *collages*.

Remixes consist in sound and picture edits and can be linked to what Marie & Thomas (2008) label as ‘film pluriel’ and ‘versions concurrentes’ (‘plural film’ and ‘concurrent versions’), referring to the fact that a given film never exists in strictly one version only. Changes occur for various artistic, commercial or technical reasons, and different versions can be distinguished along various dimensions:
– *chronological*: original release, followed by a special anniversary edition with new scenes and/or special effects, e.g. the 20th anniversary edition of *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (Spielberg 2002);
– *geographical*: release on the national market, then elsewhere in the world, which could imply edits linked to local laws or censorship;
– *linguistic*: original version, followed by translations in various languages (the main techniques being subtitling, dubbing and voiceover), but also ‘multiple versions’, when the same scene was shot in different languages consecutively around 1930 (see Barnier 2004 and Cornu 2014);
– *editorial*: years after an original release, some directors get the rights to rework their films for artistic reasons, adding or deleting scenes, altering dialogues and enhancing some special effects, e.g. George Lucas’s multiple revisions of the original and prequel trilogies of the *Star Wars* saga (1977–2005);
– *material*: depending on the physical carrier on which the film is shown (e.g. cinema reels, Laserdisc, DVD, Blu-ray) or the medium for which it is destined (e.g. TV channels, Video On Demand, airplane edits, etc.) differences can appear, e.g. regarding the format and/or the quality of the pictures;
– *external*: sometimes people who were not involved with a film’s creation can also make some changes of their own, e.g. restorations in film archives, fan reviews and edits such as *The Phantom Edit* (Nichols 2000) on the basis of *The Phantom Menace* (Lucas 1999).

Collages, on the other hand, combine excerpts from at least two filmic sources to create a new film in its own right. Such source material, originally created for another purpose, is referred to as ‘found footage’. Several sorts of collages can be distinguished, including historical documentaries, which consist in a careful selection, ordering and editing of archival sequences typically linked together with a narrative voice. Some films use footage from other sources, for instance in order to add a touch of realism (e.g. newsreel footage appearing in a few Second World War films such as *Overlord* [Cooper 1975] and *Cross of Iron* [Peckinpah 1977]) or as a means of creating humour by quoting other films and/or establishing intertextual links (e.g. in the *Dream On* series, the protagonist’s feelings and thoughts are expressed through his memories of clips from black-and-white films, while some of *Family Guy*’s trademark ‘cutaway gags’ sometimes use short excerpts from easily identifiable audiovisual productions). Another type of collage is that of the ‘mashup’, popularized by video sharing platforms such as YouTube, and whose main forms are:
- trailers, e.g. *The Dark Knight 1989 Style*, using the original audio track of the trailer of *The Dark Knight* (Nolan 2008), combined with pictures from *Batman* (Burton 1989);
- supercuts, i.e. a collection of short clips from one or more episodes/films, focusing on one feature such as a stock phrase, for humorous effect, e.g. all the F-words in films such as *Casino* (Scorsese 1995) and *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Scorsese 2013);
- reviews by critics, e.g. YouTubers like the Nostalgia Critic, or the so-called Plinkett reviews on the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy, consisting of comments on films, often edited with new footage;
- films, e.g. the experimental short feature *Just Like The Movies* (Kosakowski 2006) or *Dead Men Don’t Wear Plaid* (Reiner 1982), which uses excerpts from a series of black-and-white films, tied together with specially-shot extra scenes.

A final type of film collage, which is the focus of the present paper, is the *détournement*. This French term can be translated literally as ‘rerouting’ or ‘hijacking’ (“Détournement” 2017), but also as ‘misappropriation’. A *détournement* typically consists in a juxtaposition of excerpts from films which are linked with new, post-synchronized dialogues (i.e. a ‘fake’ or ‘gag dub’1) in order to create a coherent story, most often for humorous purposes. The origins of the genre go back to two members of the Letterist movement, Guy Debord and Gil Joseph Wolman, who in 1956 wrote a manifesto on the discipline with “Mode d’emploi du détournement” (‘A user’s guide to détournement’). In this text, the authors call upon artists to be subversive by recycling either objects (“détournements mineurs”) or works of art (“détournements abusifs”) in contexts where they normally do not belong.

There have been multiple attempts at *détournement* in audiovisual productions. One of the first full-fledged attempts was Woody Allen’s very first feature film, *What’s Up, Tiger Lily?* (1966). This film was an edited version of a Japanese spy film titled *International Secret Police: Key of Keys* (Taniguchi 1965), dubbed over by Allen and other actors in order to create an absurd plot where the protagonist tries to retrieve a stolen egg salad recipe. The film also includes additional scenes directed by Allen. In 1973, René Viénet released *La Dialectique peut-elle casser des briques?* (‘Can dialectics break bricks?’), which is a fake dub of *Crush* (Guangqi 1972) by several prominent professional voice actors such as Patrick Dewaere, Dominique Collignon-Maurin and Jacques Thébaut. The new dialogues replace the

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1. Gag dubs are popular on the Internet (e.g. the Auralnauts and Bad Lip Reading channels on YouTube), often replacing the original dialogues with nonsensical content. So-called ‘gag subs’ aim for the same effect, but keep the original audio track and provide extra subtitles (e.g. the Hitler Rant Parodies channel on YouTube).
original story about an anti-colonialist revolt in Korea with a politically engaged narrative opposing proletarians to capitalist bureaucrats (see also Bovier 2013).

The technique was used in several Canal+ productions, especially in the children’s programmes called Ça Cartoon² (1986–2009), Décoder pas Bunny³ (1989–2000), Canaille Peluche⁴ (1990–1995) and La Grande Supercherie (1992). During these shows, cartoons such as Looney Tunes, Merrie Melodies and Tom & Jerry were introduced by live presenters who explained the shorts’ plots, but were always interrupted by cartoon characters who asked questions to the hosts or made comments or jokes. The programmes were actually collages mixing new footage with excerpts from old cartoons whose original dialogues were replaced by new lines spoken by their ‘official’ French voice actors (e.g. Guy Piérauld and Patrick Guillemin voicing Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck respectively).

Canal+ producer Robert Nador then asked Michel Hazanavicius (who had been working as a screenwriter for Canal+’s successful comedy show Les Nuls) and Dominique Mézerette to come up with small one-off projects that would combine the techniques of collage and fake dubbing. This first resulted in Derrick contre Superman, broadcast on 6 September 1992, whose story involves Inspector Derrick (played by Horst Tappert) trying to save channel La Cinq (the first free commercial channel in France, between 1985 and 1992) from bankruptcy. This 16-minute TV film uses excerpts from American, French and German series such as Belle et Sébastien, Dynasty, Inspector Derrick, The Persuaders, The Prisoner, The Saint and Starsky and Hutch, and features the vocal talents of impersonators Patrick Burgel and Évelyne Grandjean. The intention of the authors was clearly to parody well-known television programmes, as Hazanavicius puts it: “We did this short 15-minute programme where we used TV series heroes such as Maigret and we had them fart and say stupid things” (qtd. in Deprieck & Sautet 2009, translation mine).

Hazanavicius and Mézerette, together with Daniel Lambert, then started working on another, slightly longer project that was co-produced by Nador and Warner Bros. Television, enabling them to make use of some of their catalogue. Ça Détourne, a 39-minute TV film, was first broadcast in December 1992 and unfolds like a regular Ça Cartoon episode, but features both redubbed cartoons and excerpts from American films (e.g. Bullitt [Yates 1968], The Towering Inferno [Allen 1974]). The directors shot new scenes with presenters Philippe Dana and Valérie Payet in order to connect the fragments together.

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2. Wordplay on ‘ça cartonne’ (i.e. ‘it’s working well’) and ‘cartoon’.
3. Wordplay on ‘ne déconne pas’ (i.e. ‘don’t be silly’) and ‘décoder’ (i.e. ‘decode’).
4. Wordplay on ‘Canal+’, ‘canaille’ (i.e. ‘rascal’) and ‘peluche’ (i.e. ‘teddy bear’).
3. Creating *La Classe américaine*

Since both *Derrick contre Superman* and *Ça Détourne* had worked well, Nador decided to go one step further in order to create a feature-length *détournement*. The producer managed to get a written agreement from the CEO of Warner Bros. to make extensive use of their catalogue for a tribute to the company on the occasion of its 70th anniversary. Only one condition had to be met: the filmmakers could not make use of any footage with Clint Eastwood or by Stanley Kubrick. Little did Warner Bros. know that the Frenchmen were actually planning to use their creativity and taste for parody for their homage.

Hazanavicius and Mézerette started the process by watching dozens of films without their soundtrack in order to spot scenes that had comedic potential to use in their film. For instance, Hazanavicius explains how he selected one of the scenes:

There was an excerpt that we absolutely wanted to keep. Charles Bronson was playing an Indian in it. Without the sound, you had the impression that he was saying ‘chips’. This passage was completely uninteresting but it was very funny. (Deprieck & Sautet 2009, translation mine)

In the end, the authors selected excerpts (ranging from just one shot to sequences of about one minute) from about 50 films, among which *4 for Texas* (Aldrich 1963), *Battle of the Bulge* (Annakin 1965), *Bullitt* (Yates 1968), *The Cowboys* (Rydell 1972), *The Crimson Pirate* (Siodmak 1952), *Deliverance* (Boorman 1972), *Firecreek* (McEveety 1968), *The Graduate* (Nichols 1967) and *Ocean’s 11* (Milestone 1960). A large part of the found footage came from *All the President’s Men* (Pakula 1976), whose original characters are the journalists Bernstein and Woodward, who investigated the Watergate scandal.

In order to tie the selected scenes together, the directors chose to recycle the plot of *Citizen Kane* (Welles 1941), which tells the story of Charles Kane (played by Orson Welles) through flashbacks of people who had met him. With hundreds of excerpts at their disposal, taking over that particular storyline proved to be extremely useful from a narratological point of view. Indeed, the flashbacks made it possible to justify the inclusion of a large variety of characters (e.g. cowboys, Indians, pirates), locations (e.g. the sea, the jungle, a canyon, a mountain, the plains, San Francisco, and even a spacecraft) and temporal settings (e.g. the Old West, the 1970s). Besides, using multiple narrators allowed Hazanavicius and Mézerette to have a long list of famous American actors and actresses ‘starring’ in their film, forming one of the most extensive ensemble casts in the history of cinema: Lauren Bacall, Angie Dickinson, Henry Fonda, Clark Gable, Dustin Hoffman, Burt Lancaster, Dean Martin, Robert Mitchum, Paul Newman, Robert
Redford, Frank Sinatra, James Stewart, John Wayne and Orson Welles are all named in the opening credits.

LCA’s central character is George Abitbol (played by John Wayne), who is dubbed ‘the classiest man on earth’. In the middle of a storm on the ocean, Abitbol is apparently assassinated and dies while whispering “Monde de merde!” (‘Shitty world!’). Back in America, a newspaper editor asks journalists Peter (Dustin Hoffman), Steven (Robert Redford) and Dave (Paul Newman) to start investigating Abitbol and his surprising final words. Motivated by a desire to become famous, they go on to interview many of George’s former acquaintances, who turn out to describe him quite negatively, undermining his status of ‘classiest man on earth’. After listening to many pointless anecdotes, they eventually discover that Abitbol has actually survived. At the very end, George reveals the meaning of the ‘shitty world’ phrase.

It is unclear whether the dialogues were written prior to or after the excerpts were edited together, but what we can tell is that so-called ‘detection work’ was carried out, since the end credits mention a detector’s name. In dubbing, detection consists in writing down, on a piece of blank film stock called ‘bande rythmo (graphique)’, lip movements of the characters on the screen, in order to help the translator achieve lip synchrony (‘lip-sync’) when writing the dubbed version’s dialogues (Le Nouvel 2007: 34–37). In the case of LCA, however, detection did not work as a constraint on the translation of text, but on the writing of text. While Hazanavicius and Mézerette are officially credited as LCA’s writers, it is quite likely that other people involved in the project, such as voice actors, contributed lines.5

Unlike Derrick contre Superman (with only two voice actors), but building on Ça Détourne’s voice cast, the new dialogues were performed by a relatively small number of relatively well-known French voice actors. While Raymond Loyer only lent his instantly recognizable voice6 to Wayne, other actors played several roles, e.g. Roger Rudel7 dubbed Fonda, Gable and Sinatra, while Marc Cassot voiced Lancaster, Mitchum, Stewart and Welles, among others. The contribution of other voice actors like Christine Delaroche, Évelyne Grandjean, Patrick Guillemin, Joël Martineau and Jean-Claude Montalban helped not only to create sufficient vocal identities but also to reinforce the cinematic illusion of a well-executed,

5. Many French voice actors have admitted altering the translated dialogues during the studio recording (see e.g. Labate 2010: 49). When I interviewed Marc Cassot on the topic in April 2015, he said he did not remember any particular suggestions, yet he did not exclude the possibility.

6. Raymond Loyer (1916–2004) dubbed John Wayne in 43 films prior to LCA.

7. Roger Rudel (1921–2008) was most famous for dubbing Kirk Douglas so often (in 38 films in total) that he was nicknamed ‘Kirk Doublage’ (‘Kirk Dubbing’).
professional, ‘authentic’ dub. After the dialogues were recorded, a soundtrack featuring both an original score by Laurent Petitgirard and sound effects was added to the images in order to create the final version of the film.

4. Stylistic features

As stated in the previous section, LCA can be considered as a parody of Citizen Kane, and the filmmakers decided to make the reference visible in the film. In one scene at the beginning of the film, journalist Peter suggests Abitbol’s last words could be a reference to a sled, like the word “Rosebud” uttered by Charles Foster Kane on his deathbed in Citizen Kane, which turns out to refer to the brand of a sled he associates with a happy childhood memory. At this point Orson

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ÉDITOR</td>
<td>L’homme le plus classe du monde meurt, et ses dernières paroles c’est “Monde de merde”. Pourquoi il a dit ça? C’est ce que je veux savoir.</td>
<td>The classiest man in the world dies and his last words are “Shitty world”. Why did he say that? That’s what I want to know.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEVEN</td>
<td>Merci, c’est pas facile à trouver.</td>
<td>Thanks, that ain’t easy to find out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDITOR</td>
<td>C’est sûrement un nom. Si c’est une femme, je veux savoir quelle femme, si c’est un cheval, je veux savoir dans quelle course.</td>
<td>It must be a name. If it’s a woman, I want to know which woman, if it’s a horse, I want to know in which race.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PETER</td>
<td>Nous, on pensait que ça pouvait être un traîneau.</td>
<td>We thought it could be a sleigh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WELLES</td>
<td>Bonjour. C’est moi, Orson Welles, et ceci est ma maison que vous voyez, derrière, là. Pas mal, non? C’est français. Je me permets d’interrompre ce film parce qu’on se fout un peu de ma gueule. C’est du vol et du plagiat. J’aime pas trop les voleurs et les fils de pute. Dans ce film le héros meurt au début et des journalistes décident d’enquêter sur ses dernières paroles, comme dans Citizen Kane. J’appelle ça du plagiat. Les journalistes vont interviewer des gens sur le héros. Vous allez voir que les témoignages, ça va être des flashbacks. Je le vois trop arriver. [Gets shot] Argh, Rosebud!</td>
<td>Hi. It’s me, Orson Welles, and this is my house you can see behind me, there. Not bad, huh? It’s French. I take the liberty to interrupt this film because they are fucking with me. It’s theft and plagiarism. I don’t like thieves and sons of bitches. In this film the hero dies at the beginning and journalists decide to investigate his last words, just like in Citizen Kane. I call this plagiarism. The journalists are going to interview people about the hero. I bet that the testimonies are going to be presented as flashbacks. I see them coming only too well. [Gets shot] Argh, Rosebud!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Welles himself interrupts the film to voice his anger, as presented in the excerpt in Table 1.8

The excerpt in Table 1 highlights an important feature of *LCA*: incongruity-based humour. Incongruity arises when “some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our standard mental patterns and normal expectations” (Morreall 2016). Indeed, much of the humour arises from elements that the audience did not expect at all. First, there are many unexpected configurations in the film, such as dialogues involving actors who never worked together (e.g. John Wayne and Paul Newman in the final scene), but also metafictional interruptions like the scene quoted in Table 1 or another involving a spaceship. Second, incongruity is created thanks to the very unusual behaviour displayed by some of the characters: George (and, indirectly, Wayne) is supposed to be the classiest man in the world, yet he uses a rather crude language, as exemplified in the dialogue in Table 2.

Table 2. Dialogue showing lack of class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Dialogues</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christelle</td>
<td>Yves, je te présente George, l’homme le plus classe du monde. George, je te présente Yves, mon ex.</td>
<td>Yves, let me introduce you to George, the classiest man in the world. George, this is Yves, my ex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yves</td>
<td>C’est lui, George? Eh bien bravo. Permet moi de te demander ce que tu fais avec un mec pareil.</td>
<td>Is that George? Well, congratulations. Let me ask you what you’re doing with a guy like that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>Blablabla, j’ai les bonbons qui collent au papier.</td>
<td>Yada yada yada, my sweets are stuck to the wrappers.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christelle</td>
<td>Mon cher Yves, je vais te dire pourquoi je suis avec George. J’aime les hommes qui ont de la classe.</td>
<td>My dearest Yves, I’m going to tell you why I am with George. I like classy men.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>J’ai envie d’aller aux gogues.</td>
<td>I need to go to the shithouse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christelle</td>
<td>Encore que parfois, il arrive que les apparences soient trompeuses.</td>
<td>Even though appearances can be deceiving sometimes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another running gag is that Hughes (Henry Fonda) and Jacques (James Stewart) are repeatedly accused of being homosexuals, despite their denials, as illustrated in the excerpt in Table 3.

8. All transcriptions of the original dialogues and their English translations are mine.
9. The original French expression idiomatically implies that his testicles are sticking to his undies.
Table 3. Dialogue hinting at homosexuality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Dialogues</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hughes</td>
<td>À l’époque, j’étais moi-même cowboy, je vivais avec Jacques, un bon copain. Il y avait rien de sexuel entre nous. Je dis ça parce que je me suis souvent fait traiter de pédale, de salope... et c’est facile de traiter les gens de pédés, tout ça parce que deux garçons vivent ensemble dans un ranch et portent des pantalons en cuir.</td>
<td>Back then, I was a cowboy myself, I was living with Jacques, a good friend of mine. There was nothing sexual between us. I’m telling you that because I’ve often been called a queer, a faggot... and it’s easy to call people queer just because two boys are living together on a ranch and wear leather pants.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another character, Frankie (played by Frank Sinatra), repeatedly appears to be unable to make a decision and always wants to have the last word, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Dialogue showing Frankie’s behaviour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Dialogues</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dino</td>
<td>De toute façon, ça sert à rien de discuter avec toi, tu as toujours raison.</td>
<td>Anyway, it’s pointless to argue with you because you’re always right.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankie</td>
<td>Si, ça sert de discuter. C’est toi qui as toujours raison.</td>
<td>No it is worth arguing about. It’s you who are always right.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of LCA’s humour derives from wordplay, as illustrated in the excerpt in Table 5. In the excerpt, Dino’s friend is surprised that Dino (Dean Martin) met George on a farm; Dino then makes use of the homophony between “à la ferme” (‘at the farm’) and “ah la ferme ta gueule” (‘oh shut your trap’) to assert his superiority.

Table 5. Instance of wordplay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Dialogues</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dino</td>
<td>Où j’ai connu George? C’est une excellente question. À la ferme.</td>
<td>Where did I meet George? It’s an excellent question. At the farm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>La ferme? Quelle ferme?</td>
<td>The farm? Which farm?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dino</td>
<td>Ah la ferme ta gueule toi, ducon, espèce de crétin! Qu’est-ce que tu veux, nous prendre la tête, là? Pauvre con. Oui je l’ai connu à la ferme. On était des cowboys. On vivait à la ferme, ça a rien d’étonnant.</td>
<td>Oh shut your trap, you idiot, you moron! What are you trying to do, bother us all? Dumbass. Yes I met him at the farm. We were cowboys. We were living on the farm, there’s nothing unusual about that.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some characters display linguistic peculiarities. For instance, Dino uses some words from *verlan*, a French argot whose principle is to invert phonemes or
syllables, as in the word “ouf” (from fou, ‘crazy’) in “Je pense que tu es un ouf, toi. Un ouf malade” (‘I think you are crazy. A crazy lunatic.’), probably to make him sound like a hip teenager. Other characters have speech mannerism, for instance Jacques who overuses the word “Absolument” and speaks in an exceedingly formal way when relating his memories to the journalist, which even causes him to make mistakes (‘j’allâme’ instead of ‘j’allai’), as in the example in Table 6.

**Table 6. Instance of formality**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Dialogues</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JACQUES</td>
<td>Absolument. Après déjeuner, il était temps que je me misse à l'ouvrage, j'allâme voir mon ami Dino.</td>
<td>Absolutely. After lunch, it was high time I started working, [so] I went to see my friend Dino.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hughes, on the other hand, is prone to using tautologies to great comic effect, which he remains blissfully unaware of, as in the example in Table 7.

**Table 7. Tautology**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Dialogues</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HUGHES</td>
<td>On l'a retrouvé assassiné un jour. Il en est mort.</td>
<td>One day he was found, murdered. He died of it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sahiri (2013: 322) considers this quote a prime example of a ‘lapalissade’, i.e. “une affirmation répétitive ridicule énonçant une évidence perceptible immédiatement” (‘a ridiculous repetitive statement describing an immediately perceptible self-evident fact’).

The deliberate mispronunciation of words constitutes another example of language-based incongruity. For instance, Peter claims that the word ‘quiche’ is actually pronounced ‘ouiche’, and all the characters’ names sound French (e.g. ‘George’ pronounced in the same way a French person would say ‘Georges’), or even overly French (e.g. ‘Peter’ pronounced like ‘Pêteur’, i.e. ‘farter’, and ‘Steven’ pronounced as ‘Stèveène’); the same applies to the state of Texas, rendered as ‘Tegzâs’. This could be a nod to a common practice in the French dubbing industry consisting in ‘Frenchifying’ names so that they sound more familiar to the target audience. Related to this is a likely reference to ‘dubbese’ (i.e. rather literal renditions of the original utterances for the sake of lip-synchrony or as a result of bad translations) in a flashback involving Abitbol and “un putain d’énergumène” (‘a bloody stranger’, played by Elvis Presley), as in the literal translations of song lyrics presented in the exchange in Table 8.
Table 8. Elvis Presley scene

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Dialogues</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRESLEY</td>
<td>Aime-moi tendre, aime-moi vrai.</td>
<td>Love me tender, love me true.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEORGE</td>
<td>Ça veut dire quoi ces conneries?</td>
<td>What’s that bullshit all about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRESLEY</td>
<td>Ça veut dire aime-moi tendre et aime-moi vrai.</td>
<td>It means love me tender, love me true.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEORGE</td>
<td>Moi ce que je vois, c’est que dans deux secondes je vais te botter le cul.</td>
<td>What I see is that I’m about to kick your ass in two seconds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRESLEY</td>
<td>Bon écoute, tu peux faire tout ce que tu veux… mais évite de marcher sur mes chaussures en suédine bleue.</td>
<td>All right, listen, you can do anything… but stay off my blue suede shoes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEORGE</td>
<td>C’est quoi ça?</td>
<td>What’s that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRESLEY</td>
<td>Ne sois pas cruel. Un pour l’argent, deux pour le spectacle, et trois pour le caillou.</td>
<td>Don’t be cruel. It’s one for the money, two for the show, and three for the rock.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEORGE</td>
<td>Et voilà, c’était mon souvenir. En tout cas s’il cherchait pour du trouble, il est venu à la bonne place.</td>
<td>Yes, that’s as I recall. One thing’s for sure, if he was looking for trouble, he came to the right place.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of these lines, which do not sound idiomatic in French, are translated quotes from Elvis Presley’s hit songs “Love Me Tender” (1956), “Blue Suede Shoes” (1956) and “Trouble” (1958). This excerpt illustrates only one of many references to pop culture in LCA. Indeed, the détournement also concerns, among others, French singers (Michel Legrand and Alain Souchon), a French TV presenter (Julien Lepers, whose lookalike appears in the film), French places (the Lorraine and Vosges departments), a football club (Juventus, Turin), and films (Citizen Kane, Death Wish [Winner 1974], Deliverance and Gone with the Wind [Fleming 1939]).

Finally, LCA also contains some visual slapstick comedy, e.g. when the film excerpts are edited in such a way that Dave seems to be driving dangerously, causing many accidents, while he is sitting calmly behind the wheel; another example is the repeated use of shots of Peter and Steven running excitedly to their boss to let him know about their findings, but also the reference to the film’s “effets spéciaux minables” (‘crappy special effects’). As mentioned in Section 3, the writers also selected some scenes for their potential for being détourned, as in Table 9, where Abitbol simply beats up a random man before using rude language.

All these instances of combined verbal and visual incongruities help create a very humorous film, which undoubtedly greatly contributed to its popular appeal.
5. Legacy and concluding remarks

Days prior to LCA’s broadcast planned for 31 December 1993, some Warner Bros. officials watched the film and realized that it was not what they were expecting (viz. a respectful homage to the company’s extensive film catalogue, presented as a compilation of iconic scenes). Nevertheless, as Hazanavicius explains, Warner Bros. allowed Canal+ to broadcast the film (which the director described as “un truc de sagouins”, i.e. ‘something made by monkeys’) only one time because there had been a contractual agreement, and then the master copy would be locked away in the archives, never to be screened again (Deprieck & Sautet 2009). Because of this, LCA was never released in cinemas and the directors never earned any profits from the film; this also prevented Warner Bros. from suing them for making money on their own film material. As Mézerette puts it: “They had made a mistake by letting us use their pictures. In this story, there has been a succession of cock-ups” (ibid.).

However, despite its unique official broadcast, LCA proved to be so popular that its distribution continued through illegal channels: videotape recordings of the film were exchanged or sold among fans through word-of-mouth. At some point, a Canal+ trainee who was also a fan managed to borrow the Betacam master copy from the archives and made a copy in order to obtain better image quality. Later, thanks to the creation of video sharing platforms such as YouTube and Dailymotion, the film (or excerpts of it) became easily available to all Internet users, increasing its popularity even more. Meanwhile, a diehard fan called Sam Hocevar set out to identify all the détourned films in LCA in order to edit a new, high-definition cut on the basis of remastered DVDs or Blu-rays of the source films; details on the project, together with the full script and cast, are available on Hocevar’s website (cyclim.se).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
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<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>George</strong></td>
<td>Je te connais pas, j’ai rien contre toi, mais il faut que je tape sur quelqu’un. C’est pas de bol pour toi, sinon je garde tout en dedans et c’est pas bon, alors tiens!</td>
<td>I don’t know you, I don’t hate you, but I’ve got to hit someone. Tough luck, but if I don’t I have to hold it in and it’s no good, so here you go!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Man outside</strong></td>
<td>Mais qu’est-ce que c’est que ce raffut?</td>
<td>Where’s that rumpus coming from?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>George</strong></td>
<td>Alors, on peut plus chier tranquille?</td>
<td>So what? Can’t you let me take a shit in peace?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9. George beating someone up in a toilet
Unfortunately, no détournement similar to LCA, featuring film collage, fake dubs and professional voice actors, has been released in France since 1993. It is unknown whether French studios, producers or directors have actually tried to set up projects, but if so, copyright issues are probably one of the reasons that held them back.

However, LCA inspired some fans to create smaller, unauthorized détournements of their own, e.g. Mozinor (www.mozinor.com), who regularly publishes videos using the same technique as Hazanavicius and Mézerette, except that he voices all the characters himself. Lucas Feltain created La Chiasse américaine (‘American diarrhoea’), another hour-long détournement based on excerpts from 1990s and 2000s films, dubbing most characters himself. Nowadays, a few television shows occasionally feature détournement clips, like Made in Groeland’s “Ciné vieux” segment (on Canal+), or use the strategy for the sake of a sketch. Moreover, subtitles of more than a dozen video games make reference to LCA by using some of its lines, e.g. “On va manger des chips! T’entends? Des chips!” (‘We’re going to eat crisps! You got that? Crisps!’) in Grand Theft Auto IV (2008) and “Sexe plus histoires de cul égalent meurtre” (‘Fucking plus sex stories equals murder’) in L.A. Noire (2011). Songs such as “Groovambar” (2000) by the band Le Peuple de l’herbe quote from the film and the Paris-based Belgian journalist Charline Vanoenacker sometimes uses excerpts from LCA in her radio columns.

Over the years LCA has become the epitome of filmic détournement in France, because of its clever use of collage and dubbing techniques, its ability to challenge people to replicate the effort, and its place in popular culture. It might be worth investigating whether any large-scale détournements have been made in other languages and whether they have used similar techniques. Further research could also look into Allen’s (1966) and Viénet’s (1973) films, which were early examples of cinematic détournements. Hopefully the present article will contribute to giving LCA the recognition it deserves as a unique, daring, funny and inspirational film.

Acknowledgments

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Dominique Mézerette (1955–2016), who co-created the film, and Marc Cassot (1923–2016), one of the actors who lent his voice to several characters in La Classe américaine and who I had the chance to briefly interview on 11 April 2015 in Paris.

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