

Terms That Matter: Naming and Labeling in English-Speaking Cinema

Introduction*

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In a day and age when the President of the United States can brag that he has “the best words” while reveling in hate speech and spewing lies on a daily basis, it may seem like words do not matter anymore, that it does not matter whether they are precise, whether they are hurtful, or even whether they verge on gibberish – as if this reality television presidency were final proof that we really were living in the hyperreal hell where all signs are interchangeable described by Jean Baudrillard.¹ And so we find ourselves endlessly repeating that words do matter, that they still matter, because they make things matter: they mean something; they often have several meanings depending on context; they confer meaning upon things; they hierarchize explicitly or implicitly; they fashion matter (bodies, objects); in short, they fashion the real. Which is why even a sixth-grader’s rhetoric can be so powerful and effective. In Judith Butler’s famous thesis, to which the theme of this issue alludes via the reference to her second book, *Bodies That Matter* (1993), “[t]o claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which it concedes; rather, it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body.”² Terms, the words we employ as critics, fans and scholars to approach our material, matter because they delimit our discourse and fashion the material we are trying to understand. And like the name Jacques Derrida (1993) reflected on, they are acutely problematic because they imply a tension between name and identity³ and, more profoundly, hinge on a dialectic between “nameable” and “unnameable.”⁴

Our uses of these terms matter as well. Butler’s interest in the uses of discourse and notably performativity is indebted as much to Jacques Lacan’s symbolic-real-imaginary triad and Michel Foucault’s archeology of power and the discourses and practices that uphold it, as to the teachings of J.L. Austin,⁵ the linguist whose theorizing of “speech acts” paved the way for the field of pragmatics, i.e., the study of the uses and contexts of meaning-making.

* To cite this article: David Roche, “Terms that Matter: Naming and Labelling in English-Speaking Cinema, Introduction”, in David Roche and Jean-François Baillon, eds., “Terms that Matter: Naming and Labelling in English-Speaking Cinema”, *Film Journal*, 4 (2017). URL: <http://filmjournal.org/fj4-introduction>.

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, *Simulacres et simulation*, Paris, Galilée, [1981, 1985], Michigan: Univeristy of Michigan Press, 1995).

² Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 10.

³ Jacques Derrida, *On the Name* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1995 [1993]), 12-13.

⁴ Derrida, 58.

⁵ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975 [1962]).

The basic tenets of pragmatics underlie much of contemporary theory. It is the premises of pragmatics that inform Rick Altman's seminal book *Film/Genre* (1999), expanding on his 1984 semantic/syntactic theory of film genre, which was already indebted to a linguistic paradigm.⁶ In it, Altman insists that film genres are discursive constructs fashioned by multiple users, including producers, viewers, critics and film genre scholars. Typically, a genre like the musical was born of the iteration of the adjective "musical," until the noun was used on its own in 1933, thus becoming both a genre and a term in its own right.⁷ Genres like film noir and the woman's film were invented by critics and scholars.⁸ Consequently, film genre studies cannot limit their inquiry to the study of specific conventions in pre-constituted corpora, but must recognize that the genre itself is constructed through the identification of these conventions and the selection of the corpus. Altman's demonstration serves as a more general reminder that, regardless of our field and methodology, as critics and scholars, we are not detached from the material we study, but are actively involved in the production of categories, paradigms, taxonomies, typologies, in short of terms, with which we endeavor to illuminate our objects of study, all the while shaping them in the process, not to mention using them to promote a favored methodology and/or ideology, or simply to further our careers. Pragmatics also informs, albeit more covertly, David Bordwell's discussion of "how pragmatic reasoning practices guide the critic's act of assumption, expectation, and exploration" in *Making Meaning* (1989),⁹ as well as Janet Staiger's methodology of reception studies put forth in *Perverse Spectators* (2000), with its insistence on the significance of "contextual factors" in the varied "uses" audiences make of films and television.¹⁰

This issue of *Film Journal* thus seeks to delve into the multiple uses made of names, titles and labels in American and British cinema, and especially to untangle the relationships between these categorizing terms. A name can be used as a title (*Henry V*, Laurence Olivier, 1944; *Lawrence of Arabia*, David Lean, 1962; *Jackie*, Pablo Larraín, 2016; *Chicago*, Rob Marshall, 2002; *Dunkirk*, Christopher Nolan, 2017); a title or a name can become a brand (Disney, Doctor Who, Indiana Jones, Star Wars, a Mike Leigh film); a brand can become a title (The Transformers). The various circulations made manifest in these examples point to their common denominator: the auto-determination of the name, label or brand operates at the nexus of aesthetics, culture and economics. "A proper name," in Roland Barthes's words, "should always be carefully questioned, for the proper name is [...] the prince of signifiers; its connotations are rich, social and symbolic."¹¹ They also suggest that names, like metaphors,

⁶ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London BFI, 1999).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 31-34.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 60-61, 70-77.

⁹ David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 7.

¹⁰ Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York/London: New York University Press, 2000), 1.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, "Textual Analysis of a Tale by Edgar Poe," *Poe Studies* 10.1 (June 1977), 1-12. Translated by Donald G. Marshall, "Analyse textuelle d'un conte d'Edgar Poe," *Sémiotique narrative et textuelle*, textes réunis par François Rastier (Paris: Larousse, 1973), 29-5.

often carry “semiotic baggage,”¹² from screenwriters Wes Anderson and Owen Wilson’s Dickensian title, *The Royal Tenenbaums* (Wes Anderson, 2001), to the ironically named protagonist, Joy, in Ken Loach’s naturalist *Poor Cow* (1967).

Of course, naming, labeling and branding are as old as cinema itself. Ratings or classification systems were introduced as early as 1909 in Great Britain, and only in 1968 in the United States and in 1970 in Australia; viewers have certain expectations of what a “U-rated,” “G-rated” or X-rated movie is like, and they have certain uses for them as well. Early silent films and performers were branded with the company’s name: an Edison picture, “the Biograph Girl” (Florence Lawrence), “the Vitagraph Girl” (Florence Turner).¹³ Directors and actors were rechristened, the fashioning of their persona involving both names and bodies, as Sara Pesce shows in this issue in her article on Norma Jean/Marilyn Monroe, pointing to the dialogical relationship between discourse, practice and matter. The development of crossmedia and transmedia franchises, aided by the expansion of media conglomerates, is thus a mere continuation and an intensification of entertainment industry practices rather than a radical novelty. In American exploitation cinema, films have often been retitled for re-release – *Polygamy* (Unusual Pictures, Pat Carlyle, 1936) was re-released as both *Illegal Wives* and *Child Marriage* – while titles sometimes pre-existed the story itself,¹⁴ a production strategy referenced in *Ed Wood* (Tim Burton, 1994) when the aspiring director offers to write, produce and star in what will become *Glen or Glenda* (Edward D. Wood Jr., 1953). Titles are so central to marketing concerns¹⁵ that translations into other languages often propose alternate titles that evoke specific generic or narrative features. The French titles of *I Walked with a Zombie* (RKO, Jacques Tourneur, 1943) and *Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 1978) forsake all poetic conceit in order to package the promise of sensational goods in a single word, *Vaudou* and *Zombie*. *Stagecoach* (Walter Wanger/United Artists, John Ford, 1939) was released in France as *La Chevauchée fantastique*, a title that highlights a specific scene: the ride across the desert with the Apache hot on the travelers’ trail. Distributors of *They Died With Their Boots On* (Warner Bros., Raoul Walsh, 1941) then tapped into the success of *Stagecoach* by calling the 1941 film *La Charge fantastique*, a process that was repeated when *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (Argosy Pictures/RKO, John Ford, 1949) was entitled *La Charge héroïque*, establishing a sense of continuity between the three films for French audiences almost to the point of fabricating a trilogy, although the titles may not invite such connections in other countries. If nowadays foreign films tend to retain their original title more frequently or sometimes include the original title as a subtitle, as for *Les Infiltrés*¹⁶ (*The Departed*) (Martin Scorsese, 2006), marketing strategies that operate via translation persist. The success of the comedy *Very Bad Things* (Peter Berg, 1998), for

¹² Robin Shoaps and Sarah Stanley, “‘Don’t Say Drone’: Hits and Misses in a Rhetorical Project of Naming,” in Star Medzerian Vanguri, *Rhetorics of Names and Naming* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 103-4.

¹³ Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History* (New York: McGraw Hill International, [1994] 2010), 30.

¹⁴ Eric Schaeffer, “*Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*” *A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 59-60.

¹⁵ For the role of titles in the marketing of French films, see Noëlle Rouxel-Cubberly, *Les Titres de film : économie et évolution du titre de film français depuis 1968* (Paris: Michel Houdiard, 2011).

¹⁶ The French title points back to the French title of another movie by Scorsese, *Goodfellas* (1990), entitled *Les Affranchis*.

instance, led foreign marketing departments to attach the “Very Bad” label to comedies such as *The Hangover* (Todd Phillips, 2009), *The Other Guys* (Adam McKay, 2010) and *Daddy’s Home* (Sean Sanders, 2015), which became *Very Bad Trip*, *Very Bad Cops* and *Very Bad Dads* in France.

The articles that follow investigate the pragmatics of naming and labeling in classical and contemporary American and British cinema from a broad range of perspectives: adaptation studies, film genre studies, film history and star studies.

Sara Pesce shows how the story of Marilyn/Norma’s names traces the arc of the star’s trajectory. Her persona was grounded in the melodramatic tensions between the two names: the radiance of the commodified pin-up become sophisticated self-entrepreneur encapsulated in Marilyn Monroe, the sense of contingency and victimization in Norma Jean, a birth name already steeped in Hollywood history. Pesce posits that the actress’s lasting stardom owes much to her birth name, which evoked the truth inside the artifice.

Jean-Guy P. Ducreux’s article offers a typology of superhero names in film and television. He moves beyond the dichotomy between their real names and heronyms to examine the tensions between their “power names,” “common names,” “affect names,” “stage names” and “commercial names.” Although Ducreux wonders whether superhero names have not become brands above all, he demonstrates how the tensions can be used productively, for instance through the clever inversion in a film like *The Dark Knight Rises* (Christopher Nolan, 2012) where media discourse turns “Bruce Wayne” into a power name.

Shannon Wells-Lassagne examines the fate of Dickensian names in *Great Expectations* (Alfonso Cuarón, 1998), where the plot, as in screenwriter Mitch Glazer’s previous Dickens adaptation *Scrooged* (Richard Donner, 1988), is transposed to the contemporary United States, an Americanization that starts with the renaming of Pip after the narrator of Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). The use of more realistic names eschews not only the iconic status of the original names, but more generally the comic grotesque Dickens is famous for. Wells-Lassagne ultimately argues that the realist objective is ultimately contradicted by the film’s emphasis on subjectivity and the fairy tale conventions it taps into.

Patrick Cattrysse’s article sums up arguments concerning film genre and adaptation studies developed in his recent book, *Descriptive Adaptation Studies*.¹⁷ He suggests that theories of definition offer conceptual tools that could improve academic discourse. More precisely, the distinction between the real aspect of a definition – pertaining to the whatness of the thing – and the nominal aspect of a definition – referring to the whatness of the definition – and the distinction also between stipulative and lexical definitions could help clarify and improve terminology and language use. A clearer distinction between these four concepts involves a number of epistemological consequences. One important implication concerns the need (or not) for generalizing conclusions to be based on corpus based research.

Taina Tuhkanen pursues the discussion concerning the relevance of defining the Southern as a film genre started in her book *Demain sera un autre jour*.¹⁸ She suggests that,

¹⁷ Patrick Cattrysse, *Descriptive Adaptation Studies: Epistemological and Methodological Issues* (Antwerpen: Garant, 2014).

¹⁸ Taina Tuhkanen, *Demain sera un autre jour : Le Sud et ses héroïnes à l’écran* (Pertuis: Rouge Profond, 2013).

despite the fact that the most influential films were adaptations of books identified as Southern literature, part of the reason why the Southern, unlike the Western, failed to evolve into a full-fledged film genre in the 1930s-1940s has to do with another label Hollywood wanted to avoid: that of racism. Indeed, even critics like Larry Langman and David Ebner, who attempted to construct the genre, linked it to the region's problematic history by suggesting a Southern film had to pass the "Confederate test."¹⁹ Tuhkunen ultimately contends that, pragmatically speaking, the Southern exists as a sort of unnamed, unavowed and fundamentally hybrid film genre that should be viewed as a flexible framework of overlapping conventions.

Finally, Georges Fournier unravels the linguistic, cultural and economic implications of the terminology used to describe British documentary fictions, such as works for television directed by Ken Loach and Peter Kosminsky. Considering the documentary fiction as a genre, he notes that the amalgamation that produces a word like "docudrama" is, in effect, a subtraction, with the new term not benefiting from the aesthetic strengths of either term. Fournier then explores how television broadcasters, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, used these informative reconstructions as prompts to debate controversial events. However, even today, documentary fictions, because they blur the borders between fact and fiction, remain problematic in the industry and the question has been complicated by outsourcing and reality television.

¹⁹ Larry Langman and David Ebner, *Hollywood's Image of the South: A Century of Southern Films* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001).