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Tony "Two-Toes": the pragmatics of nicknames in films[1]

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Films frequently employ nicknames not only for villains but also for non-criminal characters. In this paper, I present a classification of nicknames used in films, along with various examples, mostly from crime-related films. I argue that the use of nicknames in films is important not for the sake of reference, but for the sake of an additional narrative told by the nickname as a shorthand description of a character's background (cf. Tony "Two-Toes", "Dirty" Harry, "Doc" Erwin or "Hatchet" Harry Lonsdale). The first role of nicknames is their use as a case of Russell's definite descriptions, which require context to be meaningful, in this case, the film story itself. Such descriptions do not need their object to necessarily exist, but they are still meaningful. This role will be tied to the pragmatic context employed. The second role of film nicknames is to concisely present the audience with a background story, by enriching the identity of a character with additional background information, without unnecessary storytelling. Such a device is connected to the philosophical theory of narrativism, providing an additional layer of the character's identity.

Keywords: nicknames, narrativism, definite descriptions, personal identity, denoting, reference.

Nomen est omen

Nomen est omen, many would agree. I am certain that Charles "The Great", King of the Franks, and Philip I of Castile, "The Handsome" would concur, but I am not sure that Władysław I

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Łokietek/"Elbow-High", King of Poland, and Henry IV of Castile, King of Castile and León, "The Impotent", would sympathize as well. Plautus's saying is especially present in literature, mostly in fairy tales or animated features. An evil character is going to be named in a shady and obvious way, cf. *Scar* (*The Lion King*, Roger Allers/Rob Minkoff, 1994) and Lucifer (*Cinderella*, Clyde Geronimi/Hamilton Luske/Wilfred Jackson, 1950), or the fact that your life choices are mostly predetermined if you were named Cruella de Vil (*One Hundred and One Dalmatians*, Wolfgang Reitherman/Clyde Geronimi/Hamilton Luske, 1961 and *101 Dalmatians*, Stephen Herek, 1996). In ancient epic poetry, epithets – descriptive terms – were used as bynames, in order to further describe and thus differentiate a person or a deity from others. Epithets often turned into antonomasia – a rhetoric figure in which an epithet takes the place of a proper name, for example, "son of Peleus" referred exclusively to Achilles – but were repeatedly used to represent history or significant portions of characters, which is often exemplified by ruler nicknames. There are various occurrences of famous antonomasia examples throughout history. For example, Aristotle is "The Philosopher", Shakespeare is "The Bard", and "The Iron Lady" is Margaret Thatcher.

Films frequently employ nicknames for their characters, sometimes in just a narrow circle of character's friends and family, and sometimes everybody uses a nickname to refer to a character. Nicknames are often added to the combination of a name and a surname, or replace the name in total, which is the case for Noodles in *Once Upon a Time in America* (Sergio Leone, 1984) or Little Caesar for Caesar Enrico "Rico" Bandello in *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931). Everybody has heard of "Rocky" Balboa (*Rocky*, John G. Avildsen, 1976), but not of Robert. Jeffrey Lebowski is a typical case of antonomasia: he is simply "The Dude" (*The Big Lebowski*,

Ethan Coen/Joel Coen, 1998). Their role is either to show familiarity to the character or to be a form of amusement, which often includes defamation. Films like to show both sides of this coin. First, by using a *hypocoristic* (a pet name), you are expressing a relation of familiarity between the characters using the nicknames. Second, when using a nickname that involves character traits or past experiences, there is sometimes no need to tell an extra story. A guy named "Butcher" is certainly not a pleasant ballet dancer with who you would chit-chat about the weather, and one would probably think twice about dating someone nicknamed "Mad Dog". A nickname serves as an additional (and budget-friendly) way to add an extra layer of character history without actually describing anything or info-dumping. Such a notion will be connected to the philosophical theory or narrativism, in which adding an extra piece of information such as nicknames constitutes an additional layer of a character's *personal identity*.

Film nicknames as definite descriptions

Even though they are more frequently used with villains, there are cases where the good guys have nicknames as well. But in a large number of films, it seems to be the case of an additional characterization of shady characters. Consider *Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo/The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* (Sergio Leone, 1966), where Clint Eastwood plays "The Good", a man known only by his nicknames. In the whole *Dollars trilogy* (*A Fistful of Dollars* from 1964, *For a Few Dollars More* from 1965, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugl*y from 1966, all directed by Sergio Leone), his name is not important nor mentioned once (and the critics refer to him as "The Man with No Name" thus providing him with an antonomastical name), but he did earn nicknames such as "Blondie". "The Bad", a borderline-sadistic mercenary, is also known as "Angel Eyes",

while "The Ugly", a cunning and comical Mexican bandit, is actually presented by his full name Tuco Benedicto Pacífico Juan María Ramírez. However, "The Good" calls him "The Rat".

Reference is a relation between tokens and objects. "Clint Eastwood" is a representational token referring to a particular individual, but also "The Man with No Name" refers to a particular film character. Proper names have long been a part of philosophical and linguistic debates. Descriptivist theories, mostly associated with Gottlob Frege (1892) and Bertrand Russell (1911) claimed that some descriptive content is associated with a given use of the name because the speaker associates this content with the name in question (Michaelson and Reimer 2009). Such descriptive content might vary from one speaker to the next. If we apply this to films, a different psychological characterization or memory will differ from audience to audience, but in the case of nicknames, sometimes a person might not get the nickname, or miss the wanted reference. In such cases, the mental content of such definite descriptions would be different in each film spectator, even though it aims at a certain ideal viewer. Compare the "Dago Red" nickname from *M.A.S.H.*, where one needs to know the origin and type of wine in question, unlike cases of physical flaws or appearances which are almost immediately obvious. Namely, "Dago Red" pejoratively refers to affordable and basic table wine, often used in masses, pinpointing the character's Christian background.

The alternative to the descriptivist theory of names – Millianism – dates to John Stuart Mill (1867), where a name's meaning is its referent, which was recently reintroduced by Ruth Barcan Marcus (1961), who sees proper names as tags without any linguistic meaning beyond their

reference. However, even though it may be a powerful linguistic and philosophical theory, in the case of nicknames, the additional descriptive meaning gained by the nickname is more important, I argue, than the reference itself. If the reference was the only thing that mattered, personal names would be enough to introduce characters. We could include hypocoristic names and abbreviations there as real-life scenarios, but cases like the mentioned Nick "The Gouger" Mizoski (*The Secret Six*, George Hill, 1931) or "Hatchet" Harry Lonsdale (*Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, Guy Ritchie, 1998) do not just *refer*, they *tell a story*.

The film nicknames most comfortably fit as a case of definite descriptions. In his theory of definite descriptions, Russell has pinpointed a flaw in reasoning that if definite descriptions are devices of reference, they are *meaningful*. Cases such as *The present King of France is bald* are meaningful, but not *true* since there is no such thing as a present king of France as France is currently a republic. Russell's (1905) theory states that phrases such as "the first man on the Moon" do not have meaning outside the context of the sentence in which they appear since they are not tags or symbols such as proper names. The sentence *The present King of France is bald* should be analyzed as: "there is an object that is the current King of France, everything that is the current King of France is that object, and that object is bald" (Lojkić 2018).[2] In such an analysis, we do not have to claim that something denoted with "the present King of France" needs to exist since, according to Russell (1905), "a denoting phrase is essentially part of a sentence, and does not, like most single words, have any significance on its own account".

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[2] In standard logical notation, that would be stated as: $\exists x((Fx \land \forall y(Fy \rightarrow x = y)) \land Bx)$.

Compared to definite descriptions, nicknames require context the same way the denoting phrases do. Such a context is the context of the film taking place, since "Cockeye" might be Eddie "Cockeye" Cook from *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue* (Arnold Laven, 1957), but also Philip "Cockeye" Stein from *Once Upon a Time in America* (Sergio Leone, 1984). Such characters, of course, do not exist, but propositions and utterances related to their referents are meaningful in the narrative context. In *Slaughter* on *Tenth Avenue*, there is one and only one "Cockeye", different from the one and only "Cockeye" in *Once Upon a Time in America*.

Frankie "Four-Fingers" vs. Frankie "Five Angels"

By choosing to address a person with a nickname rather than a full name, or vice versa, a different pragmatic context is being employed. For example, Allerton (1994), regarding personal names, states that usually, a choice needs to be made between various forms: a more socially distant form (e.g., *Mrs. Jones)*, a solidary one (*Mary*), a compromise form (*Mary Jones)*, or a hypocoristic-like reference in case of family relations (*Auntie Mary*). Frank "Frankie Five Angels" Pentangeli is a character in Coppola's *The Godfather Part II* (1972), who got his nickname by a literal translation of his surname (Greek prefix *penta-* = "five" and Italian *angeli* = "angels"). Referring to Frank Pentangeli as *"Frank Pentangeli"* is different pragmatically than *Frankie "Five Angels"*. The latter usage provides a context of familiarity and closeness, for example, a police officer – in films and real life – would not refer to Frank as *Frankie "Five Angels"*, but an associate would.

Compared to the theory of definite descriptions, a causal theory of reference describes how terms

acquire their referents based on evidence. Originating from Saul Kripke (1990), as an alternative

to Russell's definite descriptions, the theory states that in order to refer, one does not have to

have a unique description of the object. For Kripke, the initial reference is established by giving

a name to an object, and names are considered to be *rigid designators* (Kripke 1990, 4):

designating the same object in every possible world,[3] without any implication that the object

actually exists in any of these possible worlds. Kripke (1990, 135) affirms that names spread like

chains from their original baptism, in which they were typically fixed by an ostension or a

description, or the reference is usually determined by a chain, passing the name from link to link.

Devitt's (1974) theory of reference is causal, i.e., using a definite singular term we refer to an

object in virtue of causal connections that run from the object to the use and the user of a

singular term. Devitt also mentions nicknames, which are not bestowed ceremonially, but rather

used, seem apt, and hence catch on, while in criminal and underground police circles, people

often adopt new names. Such a causal theory is more a theory of designation rather than a theory

of names, and for a theory of nicknames, as a subset of the theory of names, I argue that causal

chains are not that relevant in films since they are often either a plot device or a character

history. In the causal history of a particular use of a name, there are other uses of the name.

However, the particular use of a nickname is different from that. Frankie "Five Angels" is given

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[3] In possible-world semantics, a possible world is a certain alternative, a consistent way the world is or could have been. Such a device is often used in modal logic and philosophy of language while dealing with counterfactuals and implications.

without the pragmatic history of use and causality. The connection, however, might be seen as causal towards the personal name of the bearer.

I have mentioned the importance of the *usage* of the name. Regarding pragmatics and context, Strawson's (1950) theory of reference criticizes Russell's theory of descriptions by differentiating between expressions and their "uniquely referring use" (Strawson 1950, 320). Strawson believes that there is nothing inherent to a definite description making it refer in a unique way, for example, "the whale" in "The whale is a mammal" and "The whale struck the ship" is used in a different way (Strawson 1950, 320). For Strawson (1950, 326), the use of some expression, and not an expression itself is what refers: "'mentioning', or 'referring' is not something an expression does; it is something that someone can use an expression to do". Film nicknames could be seen from Strawson's viewpoint as well since we need context in order to interpret them, and we can use the same nickname in a different way, either as a derogatory statement or as a hypocoristic one.

Nicknames as definite descriptions require context, either as the whole film or as a part of a narrative. One other important aspect of film characters is their identity. Philosophy is more concerned with the theory of the identity of a real-life individual, but in the case of films, we could mirror the theory of *narrativism*, in which narratives constitute identities.[4] A narrative determines where a person begins and ends: if one possesses a narrative of one's life, that means

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[4] Along with narrativism, other major theories of identity include psychological-continuity theories, in which a person's persistence is linked to continuity of memories, and brute-physical theories, in which a bodily continuity is needed for identity. See more in Olson 2022.

one can explain the significance of some of their experiences, desires, or actions. That is, it is possible to give a narrative explanation of some of one's mental states (Schroer and Schroer 2014). Olson and Witt (2018) state that narrativist theories imply that one's coming to being depends on how far into the past certain self-constituting narratives extend. I will argue that most film nicknames – excluding regular abbreviations – are here to extend the narrative further and thus (re)constitute the identity of a character. Most narrativist theories state that you have to be the one to tell the story, but in the case of films, the name is really the sign: *it tells the story instead of the character.*

Therefore, we argue that *a descriptive nickname is a way to incorporate an additional story into the film without actually telling it.* That is both a writing choice, by avoiding putting extra information overload, and a pragmatic choice. From a pragmatic perspective, nicknames distribute power within a social group since they can be imposed, or they can be used by agreement (Adams 2009). In Ernst Lubitsch's *Angel* (1937), the character is called *Angel* by agreement, but in some cases, even film characters might disown their nicknames, like Margaret "Hot Lips" in Robert Altman's *M.A.S.H.* (1970).[5]

The first role of a film nickname is to *behave as a definite description in a certain context*. If there are various similar or equally named characters, nicknames are here to differentiate Johnny "Blue Eyes" from Johnny "Brown Eyes", thus instead of having a proper name that could refer to two extra-linguistic objects, we only have one nickname referring to only one object. The

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[5] More in section *The namer* regarding accepting and not accepting nicknames, taking into account the namer's intention.

context of the film and the current overall narrative also distinguishes the same nicknames in different films, which only become similar by accident. For Strawson (1950, 335), we can use an expression to either refer to something or to attribute something to the object in question. The context of the utterance is "of an importance which it is almost impossible to exaggerate" (Strawson 1950, 336). Strawson mentions the time, the place, the situation, the identity of the speaker, the subjects which form the immediate focus of interest, and the personal histories of both the speaker and those the speaker is addressing (Strawson 1950, 336). This can be connected to the narrative establishment of the identity by talking about the personal histories of the characters. However, I would emphasize that complete knowledge is not necessary here, but just the *disposition*: in the narrative theory of identity, one does not have to be able to tell the full history of one's actions, only to have the disposition to do so if asked or willing (Schroer and Schroer 2014, 468).

The second role of a nickname is to *concisely present the audience with a background story*. That way, an identity of a character is enriched with additional information, but the audience is not encumbered with unnecessary explanations. Such an epithet constitutes the very identity of a character and establishes his background narrative, thus affirming (and confirming) his or her identity. Film nicknames, therefore, have not only linguistic but also philosophical importance in the overall constitution of the narrative.

Nicknames as stylistic choices?

Nicknames are often used to illustrate character traits or backgrounds. For example, in crime-oriented movies, they are more common in illustrating men, which is reasonable taking into account the mafia background in which men are the ones leading the underground business (cf. de Champlain 2004). There are, of course, counterexamples. Marlene Dietrich's character Madeline is known as "Lola-Lola" in *The Blue Angel* (1930), "Shanghai Lily" in *Shanghai Express* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932), "Blonde Venus" in *Blonde Venus* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932), and "Frenchy" in *Destry Rides Again* (George Marshall, 1939). In the same way, mafia members or western outlaws use nicknames to highlight or hide their crime-oriented history, examples like this one show the other side of the gender spectrum, in the roles of saloon dancers or courtesans.

Sometimes the use of nicknames in films might become a standard directorial trait. For example, Quentin Tarantino often employs nicknames in his work. Tarantino's *The Hateful Eight* (2015) is one of the best examples of such practice. John Ruth is known as "The Hangman", pinpointing to his profession, Marco is "The Mexican", Pete is "English Pete", and there are "Grouch" Douglass, General Sanford "Sandy" Smithers, along with Dave "Sweet Dave" and Judy "Six-Horse Judy" ("Cuz I'm the only Judy you've ever seen who can drive a six-horse team?"). Guy Ritchie is famous for his movie nicknames as well. Let us consider the example of *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998). There are, for instance, Nick "The Greek", the mentioned "Hatchet" Harry Lonsdale, and Barry "the Baptist". "Hatchet" Harry is almost self-explanatory, while Barry "The Baptist" was famous for drowning people. More often than not, such usage is

abundant in crime-oriented films, but their purpose is the same in all genres. I will consider this the starting point in my analysis and will now turn to a specific case of real-life crime-oriented nicknames, as a rich source of onomastic data, to see where the inspiration for their movie equivalents might have come.

Mafia nicknames

Even though it might seem like a work of fiction, films do get right the frequency and dominance of underground nicknames. If we get back to the real world, "Cadillac Frank" is one of the famously nicknamed mobsters of the 20th century, and while mobsters acquire nicknames from many different places – such as reports, cops, or friends – some enjoy them, and some, like Cadillac Frank, do not (Wiener 2018). Wiener (2018) compares this case to Al "Scarface" Capone, who was self-conscious about his scar. Some of the famous mob nicknames include Albert "Tick-Tock" Tannenbaum (because of his nervous clock-like banter), Israel "Ice Pick Willie" Alderman (after his murder tool), John "Jackie Nose" D'Amico (because of his rhinoplasty), and Luigi "Baby Shacks" Manocchio (after his baby face and his promiscuity). Sometimes, as we have mentioned, mobsters hated their nicknames, but sometimes it is a matter of pride, like in the case of Vinnie "Aspirins" (Humphreys 2019), who got his nickname by convincing people to do what the mob tells them using a cordless power drill, and thus getting rid of their headaches.

Humphreys (2019), however, gives another side to mob nicknames: discretion. Since introductions are typically done on a first-name basis, some gangsters go years without knowing a close colleague's legal last name, unless one is arrested and appears all over the press. Nicknames are most often bestowed by others and not chosen, unlike the case with the Russian mob, where the upper echelon of gangsters can choose their nicknames. Humphreys (2019) mentions the case of a powerful Montreal mafia boss Vito Rizzuto, often referred to as "The Tall Guy", whose associates were known as "Peter Boxcars", "Louie HaHa", "Mickey Bats", "Mickey Boots" and "Patty Muscles". Along with discretion, there is one more extra property of nicknames – differentiating between people who are named the same. Humphreys brings up that in Toronto's underworld, each Giuseppe Cuntrera out of three is delineated by their nickname: "Big Joe" (born in 1960), "Little Joe" (born in 1962), and "Venezuelan Joe" (born in 1956).

Here we must differentiate between names used by mobsters themselves and epithets used by the press. Even though the press called John Papalia "The Enforcer", his true nicknames were "Johnny Paps" and "Johnny Pops" (Humphreys 2019). In anthroponomastics, nicknames are used to express affection, sometimes amusement, but can also be used for defamation of character. In the case of criminal nicknames, we argue that it is actually the case of antonomasia. However, there are two types of antonomasia taking place here. The first one is real antonomasia, in which the nickname is well-known and replaces the name in all spheres. Such is the case of Louis "Louie HaHa" Attanasio Jr. (laughing every time he heard of murder), who was known under that nickname by the media and by the mob. Next, we have one commonplace nickname, and one actual mobster nickname, compared to "Johnny Pops" vs. "The Enforcer".

The last kind is the internalized mobster nickname, unknown to the public. In the case of films, most of the nicknames used to fall into the last kind, since noirs, neo-noirs, and crime-related films in general often portray unknown underground worlds. It is important to note that if the mafia uses nicknames that are harder to connect with original identities, then they are harder to pin down, for example, it would be harder to track someone called "Baby Shacks", as is the case with the mentioned Luigi "Baby Shacks" Manocchio, rather than the mentioned "Louie Haha", in which we at least have a strong case for the first name being revealed.[6]

De Champlain (2004) analyzes The Cosa Nostra as a male-dominated criminal group, where a mafioso has to be of Italian heritage and is governed by a set of rules. Such rules include being the sole provider for their families, not taking drugs, respecting families, and acting as gentlemen (de Champlain 2004). De Champlain mentions that mafiosos do get arrested but are still expected to adhere to the code: nicknames are used to conceal real identities and are often used during introductions, so it is frowned upon to ask for a colleague's real name. This is connected to the code of not approaching any member themselves unless introduced by a third party. By separating business from family, nicknames are going to be used in Cosa Nostra contexts, while regular, civilian names are left for civilian everyday purposes, which could include non-criminal nicknames and hypocoristics as well.

Classification: both sides of the spectrum

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[6] I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

Humphreys (2019) has traced five common roots for a mobster's nickname: appearance, personal traits, past experiences, place of origin, and corruption of his real name. Easton (2009), in his classification of nicknames, also includes these categories, but he further specifies some of them. The physical background can be general, as in Philip the Handsome, but also a specific one, such as Antigonus the One-Eyed. The moral category encompasses epithets such as "the Good" or "the Bad", and there is a specific category just for "the Great" ones, often used by (modest) rulers. Insults are often made in an animalistic way, such as in the case of poor Anne the Mare of Flanders. Occupations are crossing their paths with the mentioned previous history category, along with the behavioral patterns, cf. Louis the Indolent. I will follow Humphreys's classification and exemplify it using films, but I will also broaden the perspective not only to mobsters but to criminals in general or their associates and acquaintances. One of our goals is then to see that the same classification is mirrored for the other side of the law as well, and what is then the general purpose of a nickname in films.

The type of nickname derived from personal appearance is often used, especially to pinpoint an unusual property or a missing body part. Examples from *Eraser* (Chuck Russell, 1996) include Tony "Two-Toes" and J. "Scar". *They Live by Night* (Nicholas Ray, 1948) has a certain bank robber Chicamaw "One-Eye" Mobley, while *The Mark of the Whistler* (William Castle, 1944) showcases a handicap by having a certain "Limpy" Smith, compared to *The Secret Six* (George W. Hill, 1931) where a character named "Dummy" Metz is a mute who runs a distilling operation. *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue* (Arnold Laven, 1957) provides us with Eddie "Cockeye" Cook, *Scarlet Street* (Fritz Lang, 1945) with "Patch-Eye" Higgins, while *Snatch* (Guy Ritchie, 2000) features a diamond dealer "Doug the Head" Denovitz, "Bullet-Tooth" Tony who was shot

six times, and an obsessive gambler Franky "Four-Fingers" (you can guess the origin of this one). *Dead End* (William Wyler, 1937) features a mobster named Hugh "Baby Face" Martin, while *Ocean's 11* (Steven Soderbergh, 1960) presents us with George "Curly" Steffans. A canonical example is, of course, David "Noodles" Aaronson from *Once Upon a Time in America,* who has a gang member nicknamed Philip "Cockeye" Stein, but also a friend "Fat" Moe Gelly. *Rogue Cop* (Roy Rowland, 1954) contributes with a murderer on loose George "Wrinkles" Fallon, but *Cry Vengeance* (Mark Stevens, 1954) is not that harsh on its characters and gives us Johnny "Blue Eyes". Even though it is not stated, a probable reason for Johnny "Blue Eyes" would be the presence of another Johnny with some other eye color. Sometimes the appearance is related to a person's clothes, for example, there is a psychopath named "Socks" Parelli in *The Anderson Tapes* (Sidney Lumet, 1971).

In the case of personal traits, the mentioned *Ocean's Eleven* features "Mushy" O'Connors, confirming the character's sentimental attitude. *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) includes a gun salesman nicknamed "Easy" Andy, while *Underworld* (Josef von Sternberg, 1927) has "Slippy" Lewis. Let us not, of course, forget Roy "Mad Dog" Earle from *High Sierra* (Raoul Walsh, 1941), and "Feathers" McCoy contrasted to "Bull" Weed from *Underworld.*

Past experiences often include ways of killing, using different weapons, or they point to a certain profession. I would like to include personal possessions here as well, for example, a probable reason for "Rolls Royce" Wensel in *Underworld*. One of the most common professions is being a doctor, or being knowledgeable as a metaphor, cf. a criminal mastermind "Doc" Erwin Riedenschneider from *The Asphalt Jungle* (John Huston, 1950) and gigolo "Doctor" Omar from

The Shanghai Gesture (Josef von Sternberg, 1941). Regarding their criminal attitudes, we do not need extra information about "Butcher" Hicks from *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1988) or Louis "Slaughterhouse" Scorpio and Nick "The Gouger" Mizoski from *The Secret Six* since the nicknames – certainly vividly – speak for themselves, as is the case for "Hatchet" Harry Lonsdale from *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (Guy Ritchie, 1998) and Boris "The Blade" Yurinov from *Snatch*. *Inglorious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009) features Lieutenant Aldo "The Apache" Raine whose nickname comes from his penchant for scalping Nazis in Apache Indian tradition, while Sgt. Danny "Bear Jew" Donowitz was notorious for killing prisoners using a baseball bat.

Place of origin is not as common as personal traits or looks, which are common bullying targets, but there are various examples present in films. *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) gives us Virgil "The Turk" Sollozzo, *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946) Olde "Swede" Anderson, and there is Nick "The Greek" in *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*.

Modifications of real names are most common. Even though Humphreys (2019) calls them *corruptions*, this has a certain negative connotation which may imply a transmission error. They are often various shortenings, for example, it is easier to say "Sal" instead of "Salvatore". But they can be longer modifications as well, for example, various characters named "John" can be called "Johnny", or new nicknames might be of the same length, for example, "James McGill" in *Better Call Saul* (Vince Gilligan and Peter Gould, 2015–2022) is referred to as "Jimmy". I would like to include family relations (and metaphorical ones) here as well, such as Mom or Dad, as is the case in real life with various Ma/Pa/Pop mobster nicknames, cf. "Mother" Gin Sling from

The Shanghai Gesture. Classic nicknames are often included in previous categories, such as "Johnny" or "Jimmy", where the best example is again from *The Godfather*, where most of the main characters are better known by their nicknames: Santino "Sonny" Corleone, Frederico "Fredo" Corleone, Michael "Mike(y)" Corleone, Vincent "Vinnie" Corleone, Constanzia "Connie" Corleone, Salvatore "Sal" Tessio, Osvaldo "Ozzie" Altobello, Luigi "Louie" Russo and other members of the mafia.

Sometimes such nicknames are combined with additional descriptions to create a new multi-word nickname, as is the case with "Bad Al" Frieberg in *Thunderbolt* (Josef von Sternberg, 1929), John "Johnny Boy" Civello in *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973) or Richard "Newt" Newton in *The Secret Six.* Another example is Joseph "Proposition Joe" Stewart, referring to a drug lord from *The Wire* (David Simon, 2002–2008), known for his compromises and peaceful solutions.

Not only criminals in need of discretion are endowed with nicknames, but if we turn over to law enforcement and innocent (or at least *mostly* decent) people, we are going to find similar patterns. *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, 1971) stars detectives Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle and Buddy "Cloudy" Russo against the criminal mastermind Alain "Frog One" Charnier. Sally "Angel Face" Connors is a dancer in *City That Never Sleeps* (John H. Auer, 1953), and Dix's love interest in *The Asphalt Jungle* is "Doll" Conovan. You do not need to see the mentioned girls to know that they are beautiful, the nickname is here to inform you in advance.

As for experience combined with personal traits, a canonical example is that of "Dirty Harry" in *Dirty Harry* film series, comprising *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971), *Magnum Force* (Ted Post, 1973), *The Enforcer* (1976), *Sudden Impact* (Clint Eastwood, 1983), and *The Dead Pool* (Buddy Van Horn, 1988). Several explanations are suggested for his nickname in the film. The first one, given by Inspector DiGiorgio, is that he hates everybody and does not play any favorites. Harry Callahan himself states that he is assigned to "every dirty job that comes along", while Inspector Gonzales ponders that "no wonder they call him Dirty Harry (…) always gets the shit end of the stick".

In the category of name corruptions, one can find numerous obvious examples such as Inspector Earlington "Early" Smith in *Magnum Force* or Captain Dan "Mac" McLaren from *Bullets or Ballots* (William Keighley, 1936), but also family relations, such as Sgt. John "Pop" Kelly Sr. in *City That Never Sleeps* or Private "Grandpa" Summerill in *The Star Witness* (William A. Wellman, 1931).

M.A.S.H. (Robert Altman, 1970) is a perfect example of using nicknames as a part of the plot. Places of origins are not often used in films because of their derogatory meanings, but this is exactly what happened in *M.A.S.H.* where Lieutenant Francis John Patrick Mulcahy is nicknamed "Dago Red", which is a derogatory reference to his Italian Irish ancestry, pinpointing the cheap Italian wine used in a Christian mass.

Let us stick with *M.A.S.H.* which features non-criminal characters but is blooming with nicknames. Benjamin Franklin Pierce Jr. was given the nickname "Hawkeye" by his father after

the character in the novel *The Last of the Mohicans*, and it is used as a definite description instead of his name or his surname. Captain John Francis Xavier "Trapper John" McIntyre got his nickname after being caught having sex with a woman on a train, who later claimed that he "trapped" her. The mentioned Major Margaret "Hot Lips" Houlihan got her nickname from Trapper John who learned about her affair with another soldier, Frank Burns. Corporal Walter Eugene O'Reilly is able to hear helicopters before anybody else, which earned him the nickname "Radar". As we can see, most of these nicknames illuminate some past experience known or unbeknownst to us. On the other hand, Captain "Ugly" John Black is pretty much self-explanatory.

Cultural contexts

One clever example of name modification again comes from *The Godfather*: The mentioned Frankie "Five Angels" earned his nickname because of a literal translation of his surname Pentangeli. A similar case is for Joe Pantoliano nicknamed "Joey Pants" from *The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999–2007), and both of these examples can be seen as a certain loan translation to adjust Italian to an American setting.[7] However, it is not just the Italian/American relationships that can be reflected in the resulting naming fusion. For example, in *Better Call Saul*, Gustavo Fring is known as "Gus", combining the Mexican background narrative with the American one. Such names also express the blending of histories and backstories and the fusion of various social contexts.

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[7] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for mentioning this clever example.

I have mentioned Strawson's (1950) emphasis on the use of the expression that is referring to an object, and the importance of context in both the usage and the naming process. "Gus" referring to Gus Grimly from *Fargo* (Noah Hawley, 2014–) does not serve the same purposes as "Gus" referring to Gustavo Fring from both *Better Call Saul* and *Breaking Bad* (Vince Gilligan, 2018–2013). In the first case, it can function either as a non-shortened proper name or a nickname, without any significant cultural emphasis, while in the second case, we are dealing with the name itself bridging the gap between two cultures. Even though "Gustavo" is a Spanish/Mexican name, it is being shortened to its American counterpart, signalizing the blend of two cultures in various characters, and expanding their narrative, i.e., identity. The same goes for Giacomo Aprile known as "Jackie" in *The Sopranos*.

The namer

The mentioned Dago Red nickname, a pejorative name used to refer to cheap wine used in Catholic masses is a pragmatically significant example not only as serving as a nickname but for the act of nicknaming as well, pinpointing the namer's intentions. In this case, it was given by Hawkeye Pierce, who used it as a certain insult. We can contrast this to cases of name modifications: in most of the cases, we were dealing with hypocoristics, i.e., familiar and intimate use of nicknames, symbolizing the speaker's or namer's relationship with the object, i.e., the person that is being (nick)named. The bearer of the nickname can disown the nickname: from a narrativist point, that would be equal to refusing to add such a layer to his or her identity. I have already mentioned that other people can take part in the creation of the narrative as the

identity layer (cf. Schroer and Schroer 2014), but the bearer can decide what to incorporate in his overall narrative defining his or her identity.

Sometimes such nicknames can be flattering and sometimes not, for example, "Hot Lips" might seem flattering without knowing the initial context in which the naming took place, but the overall intention is pejorative. It is not uncommon for characters to use the adopted nicknames (provided they like them or have no choice over the decision) even in official contexts. In *Better Call Saul*, a lawyer Charles McGill often goes by "Chuck", Ignazio Varga, a member of the Mexican cartel, is known by a standard Spanish nickname "Nacho", while a cartel criminal Eduardo Salamanca goes by a fairly common Spanish shortening "Lalo" and his cousin Alberto Salamanca by "Tuco". The namer's unfamiliarity with the culture or language can be seen in nicknames that were difficult to pronounce, for example, Roland Pryzbylewski is known as "Prez" in *The Wire*.

From a pragmatic standpoint, the act of naming can be seen as a *performative* action. For Austin (1962, 5), performatives are utterances such as promising, betting, swearing, or performing a marriage ceremony, in which by uttering something, one is actually *doing* something. The act of saying "I do" is confirming the marriage ceremony. Austin (1962, 5) emphasizes the right speaker with the right intentions under the right circumstances: my saying "I do" right now does not mean I am instantly married, the context has to be the right one. However, in the nicknaming context, the nickname might catch on or not, as if it going to retroactively be decided that the original context was the right one.[8] But what about intentions? The namer intended to provide

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[8] Of course, it is not the bearer's decision when a nickname catches on. A perfect example is in *Seinfeld* (Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld, 1989–1998), where in the episode *The Maid* (season 9, episode 10), George tries to get a nickname at work "T-Bone" by ordering a T-bone steak and talking how much he loves eating them, but a co-worker does the same and gets the nickname. George reacts by flailing around while holding a banana, which leads

the person with a new nickname, but it might be a derogatory or a pejorative one. Such an act will still be a performative act, but if it catches on, and the person nicknamed refuses it, we are dealing with both the rejection of socially prescribed narrative (i.e., identity) and the rejection of the "right" circumstances at the beginning of the naming "ceremony", invalidating the original step.

Discussion

In numerous film examples, we have seen that nicknames are most commonly used in crime-oriented films, in order to better illustrate the background of shady characters. However, there are similar uses employed for other characters and non-crime movies (cf. *M.A.S.H.* with abundant examples), but in both cases, they are used for a narrativist purpose: to form an additional layer of the identity of characters. The best examples of such practice are cases of referring to a character's traits or history, such as Barry "The Baptist" in Ritchie's *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998). By using a nickname, I argue that philosophical narrativism acts as a background framework to establish the character's identity by telling a shorthand story.

Since these characters do not exist, pragmatic and philosophical theories should take into account the logical background as well. Therefore, seeing nicknames as a certain kind of definite descriptions does not necessitate the existence of such characters but is able to attribute and assign properties to a certain object, i. e., a film character. Characters can choose nicknames for themselves, agree with the ones assigned, or have them imposed upon them, similar to how

to him being called "Koko the Monkey". In such cases, the bearer would reject the nickname as a part of his identity. If the first one caught on, the bearer, George, would have accepted it, and it would have been a part of his narrative.

people act in pragmatic contexts as well (cf. Adams 2013). In all these cases, they are adding an additional identity layer to the character, by adding a part of their story as a background (compare the cases of past experience in the previous section or heritage-related nicknames) or by adding the way other characters see the character (personality traits or looks). In the first case, narrativist theory amounts to the standard choice of a person telling his or her life story. In the second case, other people can form the identity of a person by providing additional information. However, since the bearer is the one to decide about her identity, a character might disown (Margaret "Hot Lips") or embrace ("Radar" O'Reilly) the nickname given.

The goal of this paper was to analyze the use and context of nicknames employed in various films, which are often neglected not only in film studies, but in linguistics, philosophy, and onomastics, which mostly focus on personal names. I have put crime-oriented films in the center of attention, which seemed to quantitatively provide the best examples for the points given, but the framework is applicable to any genre. The use connected to different genres, or related to gender and ethnicity, are currently out of the scope of this paper, but I welcome future research on the promising topics.

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Disclosure statement

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