

NAME AS FATE AND REDEMPTION:  
THE MYTHIC WORLD OF ALFRED HITCHCOCK

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I would like to begin by enumerating some special complications for onomastic analysis when its subject is filmic rather than literary narrative. First, and most obviously, there is a fundamental difference in medium. Film "names" by mirroring or "doubling" the physical world through visual imagery. Where much of the novelist's art can be said to consist precisely in the ordering of propositions--the "naming" of people, places and events--such verbal names are comparatively insignificant in the ordering of filmic action and meaning. Put simply, we tend to recognize film character in a directly physical way--"the cowboy in the white hat," or "the man with the patch over his eye" or "the blonde with the funny laugh"--rather than successively assimilating a series of moral traits and characteristic actions to a particular name, as we do when when we read.

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Second, a further effect of the filmic "doubling" of the visible world is that we often tend to recognize the identity of the actor or "star" over and above the role he or she is playing--even while the narrative is unfolding. This is especially so in the familiar type of popular film (loosely, "Hollywood" film); we recognize a character first of all as "Cary Grant," or "Barbra Streisand," or "Robert Redford." More often than not, this is how we will refer to the characters in our discussion of the film afterward. (The studio system, of course, depended on such recognition--and anticipation.) This interweaving--or, better, "blurring"--has no exact parallel in literary narrative. (The peculiar mingling of fact and fancy in the roman à clef is quite a different case.)

Finally, there is the fact that most narrative films are based on literary sources--primarily novels. Therefore, the characters' names may be viewed, in a certain light, as almost "accidental," extraneous or, at best, secondary to the work of filmic perception which a viewer is called upon to perform. Never in film, for example, could a name by itself exert the sort of permeating, characterizing influence carried by the mere sound of the names of most of the characters in any Dickens novel. Even if the attempt were nothing but faithful reproduction of the literary original--and it very rarely is--the characteristics of a Pip or a Miss Havisham, or a Bradley Headstone--which seem,

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in those novels, to grow out of the names themselves--would depend, in part, on the physical "presence" and style of the actor cast in the part.

All of the above factors tend, obviously, to diminish or restrict the significance of names (not only of character, but of place) in the construction of filmic meaning. Taken together, they go a long way toward explaining why names aren't accorded much attention by reviewers, critics, or even the general audience when they analyze films (though the importance of literary names is not always lost on these same people).

Perhaps this neglect is understandable. There are, after all, many more exciting things to attend to in the film experience than the power of the name. Yet that power persists--adulterated, attenuated, or derived from another source, it is still the power to bring order, to shape and convey narrative meaning. The literary critic, whose role it is to uncover a multiplicity of possible meanings everywhere there are words--as the camera does in any and all objects--ought to recognize this.

In addition to being one of the most prolific and technically accomplished of filmic storytellers, Alfred Hitchcock has managed, in nearly sixty years as a director, to shape a consistent moral vision which has the unity and complexity characteristic of great narrative art. He has been compared more than once to

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Shakespeare--another storyteller who managed to be both profound and popular. Characteristic of the Hitchcock world, as of Shakespeare's, is the conflict of appearance with reality, particularly in terms of the themes of guilt and innocence. A radical moral ambiguity, with all that implies socially, existentially, and theologically, is the hallmark of Hitchcock's vision; just as the ageless motif of the hero, questing for identity, overcoming obstacles, and winning, finally, a place in the community and a woman--not necessarily in that order--is one key to the continuing popularity of his art.

By looking briefly at three films--all among his finest work, each with a very different emotional coloration--I'd like to suggest that names are indeed of central importance in Hitchcockian narrative, and the naming is very much a conscious part of his art.

I have said above that most films are, in effect, adaptations of literary originals. Hitchcock is no exception; except, he does not adapt--he transmutes. The fact that, as we have noted, names generally appear negligible in films marks any change in name from an original source as especially significant.

Strangers on a Train (1951) and The Birds (1963) are both based on literary originals. Strangers on a Train presents a world of moral ambiguity in which innocence becomes guilt through the mechanism of unconscious desire. The plot concerns

an "exchange" of murders (a father for a wife) between a psychopath--the "stranger" of the title-- and a tennis pro who, despite his horrified denials, benefits from, and secretly desired, the murder of his wife. Hitchcock's original was a novel by Patricia Highsmith in which the psychopath is known as "Charles A. Bruno." Hitchcock changes this name to "Bruno Anthony" and has Robert Walker, the actor, wear, throughout the film, a name-plate tie-clip which identifies him: "Bruno."

This name change is thematically significant; it opens all the dimensions of moral ambiguity which Hitchcock exploits; that it is impossible to know one's own motives; that what we call innocence may itself be a form of guilt. Identities dissolve, in a characteristic Hitchcockian Doppelgänger motif; Guy and Bruno become reflections of one another's desire. The name change is visually, as well as morally, functional for the specific physical link (established at their first meeting) between the two men is Guy's cigarette lighter, marked "A" to "G." In reality this is a gift from Guy's lover, Ann, but Hitchcock's version makes possible a double reading of these initials: "(Bruno) Anthony to Guy," underscoring the themes we've been discussing, as well as suggesting a homosexual displacement of heterosexuality, which some critics have suggested is present here.<sup>1</sup>

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It is his name, in the opening, that gets Guy into trouble; Bruno's first words are, "Aren't you Guy Haines?" The film's final sequence has Guy Haines return to where we first saw him--on a train, but married, now, to Ann--and answer a priest who asks the same question--"Aren't you Guy Haines?"-- by rather rudely moving away in silence. Though the effect of the scene is comic, the clear suggestion is that to answer to one's name opens a path of moral and existential danger (with the implication, perhaps, that Guy is still tinged with guilt).

The Birds (1963) may be seen as an even darker film. It is Hitchcock's Apocalypse, with nature turning--as in the Daphne Du Maurier short story on which it is based--on man for, perhaps, the final time. The prophetic sense of a final ecological catastrophe is at the center of the story rather than the film, however; Hitchcock is far more interested in his characters and their reactions under stress than in whether or not the world is really ending. He is, as usual, concerned with the moral<sup>5</sup> qualities of human beings, especially the uncertainty of identity and the final achieving of human identity through love. Again, the name changes from the literary original are revealing. Du Maurier's hero is a farmhand named "Nat Hocken"--a traditional "sturdy yeoman" type. Living in a stone cottage somewhere on an unnamed "peninsula" far from London, he represents the individuality and strength which modern bureaucratized society has neglected,

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but which alone is capable of holding out against the terrifying rebellion of nature. His wife is never given a name in the story, but is referred to--in archtypal or feudal terms--as "Nat's wife" or "his wife." Hitchcock not only transposes this story to Bodega Bay, California, a quaint but not unsophisticated fishing village north of San Francisco (where the opening sequence, in fact, takes place), he transforms the characters as well. In this version, the male and female protagonists are not married; indeed, the sexual game-playing that goes on between them, beginning with their first meeting in the city, seems to suggest that a failing in human nature may somehow be responsible for the terrible retribution wrought by the birds.

As in Strangers on a Train, the transformations of the names of the characters are quite significant. "Nat Hocken" becomes "Mitch Brenner," the female lead "Melanie Daniels." Both are cynical, slightly alienated products of urban civilization. The similarity of their first names suggests the existential bond between them; initially, both are, in Hitchcockian terms, imperfect, uncertain identities. Mitch, despite his playboy lawyer demeanor, has already suffered at least one failed relationship, in part because of the Mother with whom he lives, who clings to him out of fear of loneliness. Mitch is in the shadow of his dead father, unable fully to assert a meaningful heterosexual identity; Melanie is a "jet-setter," an irresponsible

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young socialite whose most notorious feat so far has been leaping naked into a Roman fountain. At the opening of the film each is questing for a "true" identity, a meaningful place in the community. Melanie has begun to do charity work, and has even enrolled in a course at Berkeley--in linguistics. The bond suggested by their names helps convince the viewer that they do belong together, despite first appearances (they meet in a quarrel), and, as the film progresses, they do come to trust and, finally, love one another. Under the pressure of the unexplained attacks, each sheds the superficial pose of sophistication and becomes capable of experiencing--and expressing--genuine emotion. The family name "Brenner" (Ger: "burner") also has significance.<sup>2</sup> This works on several levels. As individuals, Mitch and Melanie both "burn" up their old identities; while the larger community--perhaps even, as in Du Maurier's story, the world--is "burning" with the purgative flames of what may be Apocalypse. Visually, fire provides one of the central images of the film, when first, the birds swarm down the fireplace of the Brenner family home, and later, a central section of the town catches fire--due to a combination of human carelessness and bird provocation--and the firemen, under attack from the sky, are forced to turn their hoses not on the flames, but on the birds. The result is a powerful image of the inability of human systems to "extinguish" the natural forces that consume us.

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Strikingly, this scene is shot from the air, literally from the bird's point of view. Fire then signifies both the victory of the birds and the name of the family which Melanie has joined. The ambiguity is appropriate, for communal human love is the only positive force in an unbalanced and possibly doomed world.

North by Northwest (1959), with an original script by Ernest Lehman, is a comedy-thriller which might at first appear to have none of the serious connotations of the other two films. The name-play here appears to be as superficial as it is obvious, underscoring the mythic and fairy tale dimensions of the hero's quest for identity:

"Thornhill" (Cary Grant) must surmount obstacles,  
 "Eve" (Eva Marie Saint) is the maiden he must win,  
 "Van Damm" (James Mason) is the arch-villain, a master  
 spy for the Russians.

Where such names might, in fiction, bring the story dangerously close to comic book or melodrama, the skilled actors named above bring a surprising amount of life to these roles. Moreover, in the film, names themselves are thematized; the necessity for self-naming--assuming responsibility for one's own name and identity--provides the central motif and moral of the narrative.

The plot explicitly hinges on an exchange of names. The heroic quest is initiated by what appears to be mischance (but is fate) when Thornhill, about to phone his mother, with whom

he has a theater "date," finds that he has inadvertently answered a pageboy's call for "Mr. George Kaplan" (who is, in fact, nonexistent). This plunges him into a bizarre spy adventure in which his life as well as his identity are at hazard, and from which he will eventually emerge triumphant, with Eve as wife (replacing "Mother"). This successful passage to heterosexual and communal identity is underscored vividly by the "magic" power of the socially-approved name at the end of the film. In one of Hitchcock's most famous sequences, Thornhill rescues Eve, who is dangling from her fingernails from the side of Mt. Rushmore, through the simple expedient of offering her his hand while addressing her as "Mrs. Thornhill"--an act of naming which, via "voice overlapping," blends the rescue smoothly into the following shot of Thornhill pulling Eve into bed (actually a Pullman berth which, in the final shot of the film, is just entering a tunnel). Thus, at one stroke, the power of the name appears to effect a "magical" rescue of Eve, authenticates Thornhill's masculine identity, and sanctions their sexual union (and the Freudian joke of the last shot).

The exchange of names which culminates in this sequence is even more complex. Eve has been working as a double-agent with the code name, "Number One" (perhaps suggesting the binary pairing of the Garden, her lack of an "Adam"). On his part, in order to save Eve's life, Thornhill must eventually assume

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willingly the "George Kaplan" identity which has been thrust upon him. Each, in other words, agrees to be known by a false name.

False names abound, as do the ironies associated with them. Thornhill and Eve first meet on a train to Chicago; he is a fugitive, wanted for murder. He assumes Eve doesn't know his identity; in fact, she's been waiting for him, ostensibly "setting him up" for the Van Damm gang, while in actuality, she's working against Van Damm as a CIA agent. Thornhill suavely attempts to introduce himself as "Jack Phillips," but she knows better and, noticing his monogrammed matchbook--"R-0-1," with an outsize "0"--asks about its significance. "It's my trademark..rot," he replies. When she persists by asking, "What's the 0 for?" he answers, "Nothing."

This delicious bit of dialogue contains a telling irony. Thornhill, at this point, is a "nothing." His identity must be won, not simply by overcoming heroic obstacles, but by asserting his own "true name," the authentic token of his individual fate. It is also, as we have seen, the name sanctioned by the community. (Perhaps this suggests that Guy Haines is indeed guilty when he turns away from the minister's gaze and question, "Aren't you Guy Haines?" at the end of Strangers on a Train.) Acronyms--fragmented names--represent the anonymous

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antithesis of such personal identity. When Thornhill wants to know exactly whom he's agreed to work for, the chief American agent--known only as "the Professor"--tells him, "What does it matter which agency I represent? CIA, NSA, FBI...we're all in the same alphabet soup."

The film, of course, redeems its characters from the "alphabet soup" with an unambiguously happy ending. When, after their meeting on the train, Eve identifies herself to Thornhill--"I'm Eve Kendall, twenty-six and unmarried"--she does so with a feigned simplicity. In the end, however, this statement is seen to have contained, in the midst of so much confusion of identities, the only truth that mattered. The romantic love myth subsumes the darker implications which are exploited so effectively by Strangers On a Train and The Birds.

The transformation of "Eve Kendall" to "Mrs. Thornhill" is in fact made possible by that same monogrammed matchbook. Thornhill uses it to convey a warning and help Eve escape from a deathplot hatched by Van Damm who has learned of her identity as an American agent. Thus "ROT"--the very symbol of his anomie--becomes (in a gesture worthy of a fairy tale) the means of redemption, of new identity for both characters. The entire plot can be reduced to a dual chain of name transformations, representing character growth:

1. The immature Roger ("ROT" his trademark)--"Kaplen" (unwillingly)--"Kaplan" (willingly for the sake of another)--Thornhill (mature, married )
2. Eve Kendall ("twenty six and unmarried"), and mistress of Van Damm--"Number One" (US counter-agent supposed double-agent for Van Damm)--"Mrs. Thornhill" (true wife).

Far from an extraneous element, the name has proven to be the fusion point of Hitchcock's popular romantic mythologizing with his personal investigation of the instability of identity in the contemporary urban world. Writing of Stendhal, Jean Starobinski seems to sum up the power, clearly recognized by Hitchcock's films, which inhabits all personal names, in or out of art:

A name is situated symbolically at the confluence of existence "for oneself"--and existence "for others." It is an intimate truth and a public thing. In accepting my name, I accept that there be a common denominator between my inner being and my social being. <sup>3</sup>

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Donald Spoto, The Art of Alfred Hitchcock (New York: 1976), p. 212, refers to this ambiguity of the initials as "part of the homosexual courtship subtext."

<sup>2</sup>Spoto notes this etymology, p. 390. He seems to be the only critic to pay even passing attention to Hitchcockian names.

<sup>3</sup>Starobinski, "Truth in Masquerade," in Issues in Contemporary Literary Criticism (Boston, 1973), Poletta, ed., p. 236.