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Adapting Race from Literature to the Big Screen: The Diverse History of David Copperfield

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Abstract

Colour-blind casting is becoming more popular in the film industry, but its effect on the representation of people of colour (POC) is still relatively unknown. It is evident that ethnic minorities are heavily under-represented or misrepresented in media, but colour-blind casting may be a way to bring change to this. This thesis analyses Armando Iannucci's *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (2019) in which colour-blind casting was employed and aims to bring attention to the effect of race-bending on POC representation. The historical context of Dickens' *David Copperfield* becomes clear by analysing the novel in relation to class. A comparison between Iannucci's film adaptation and Dickens' novel, shows the differences between the works in relation to representation, discrimination, and historical context. Additionally, research and reports on representation and the importance of role models are applied to analyse the effect of colour-blind casting on *David Copperfield* and POC representation. The analysis shows that colour-blind casting is both a beneficial and a flawed way of creating diversity and inclusion in the film industry. While colour-blind casting creates acting opportunities for POC actors and more (healthy) role models for young POC, the race and ethnic history of the race-bended characters and the actors is often overlooked. If not done carefully, colour-blind casting could result in white-washing POC characters.

Key terms: colour-blind casting, race-bending, film adaptation, Armando Iannucci, Charles Dickens, David Copperfield, representation, people of colour (POC)

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Adapting Race from Literature to the Big Screen: The Diverse History of David

Copperfield

Introduction

The modern film industry focusses heavily on creating more diverse and inclusive films, even when the original story's characters are not diverse at all. In 2020, a new film adaptation of Roald Dahl's *The Witches* was released with a much more diverse cast than the well-known 1990 film by Nicolas Roeg. Or Netflix's *Fate: The Winx Saga* (based on *Winx Club*) and *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (based on Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*), two immensely popular series in which characters were changed from white and heterosexual to a diverse cast including multiple races and sexualities. These films and series are only a few of many productions in which the cast is more diverse than the original literary work they are based on. The rise of diversity in films and series raises a lot of questions that are currently being researched or have not been researched yet. Why do producers finally choose to 'diversify' and what effect does this have on original stories, representation, or genre? Are diversified films really diverse if a character's ethnic history is not represented as well?

USC Annenberg reports that, out of 414 analysed shows, films, and series, only 28.3% of all speaking roles are played by actors and actresses of colour and an even smaller percentage of productions, namely 12%, have a balanced cast.¹ This shows that people of colour (POC) are severely under-represented in media. However, colour-blind casting is a development in the film industry that may help fight the under-representation of ethnic minorities. Colour-blind casting allows actors and actresses of any ethnicity, race, gender and/or sexuality to be cast for a role, as producers doing a colour-blind casting try to cast

¹ Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Pieper, "Inclusion or Invisibility? Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment" (USC Annenberg, February 22, 2016), https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2017/04/07/MDSCI_CARD_Report_FINAL_Exec_Summary.pdf, 7

actors who are most fit to play the role because of their abilities rather than their physical resemblances to the original character's physique. POC are not only under-represented, but also misrepresented. Colour-blind casting does not equal qualitative representation, as colour-blind casting does not always account for POC actors' ethnic background and history. Good ethnic minority representation is more than POC actors being cast in originally white roles. Ethnic minority representation should also be qualitative, meaning that a POC character should be just as multi-dimensional and non-stereotypical as a white character of equal significance.² An example of qualitative POC casting in literature-based media is Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Killing Eve* starring Asian-Canadian actress Sandra Oh as Eve Polastri. Sandra Oh's Korean heritage and Canadian nationality were included in her character, by changing Eve's original nationality from English to Korean-Canadian. But does ethnic background matter as much if, for example, a novel is not about race or ethnicity at all?

Armando Iannucci's *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (2019), based on Charles Dickens' synonymous 1849 novel, also employed for colour-blind casting, and contracted British-Indian actor Dev Patel as the film's lead, among thirteen other POC actors and actresses. However, as Dickens' novel is not about race, it is interesting to look into the effect of Iannucci's colour-blind casting on Dickens' story, (qualitative) representation, and the film industry in general. Iannucci's film race-bends characters from various social backgrounds, possibly changing the story's realistic nineteenth-century social standards and ideals. Iannucci, for example, made the decision to cast Nigerian-British actress Nikki Amuka-Bird as Mrs Steerforth, James Steerforth's mother. Her character is an upper-class woman in a rather powerful social position. During the nineteenth-century, this would rarely (if ever) be a position attainable for black women, which may have previously discouraged

² Maryann Erigha, "Race, Gender, Hollywood: Representation in Cultural Production and Digital Media's Potential for Change," *Sociology Compass* 9, no. 1 (2015): pp. 78-89, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12237>.

film producers to hire POC actors for a role portraying a historically impossible social status. However, the importance of POC representation is gaining more acknowledgement and should be researched in relation to historical accuracy and ethnic background. Research shows that (accurate) representation is beneficial for children and teenagers, as role-models can inspire, motivate, and self-enhance people. It is reported that subjects often prefer role models that have similar features, i.e. race, gender or sexuality, as this shows the attainability of a role model's success.^{3,4}

Iannucci's film depicts a vast number of role-model worthy POC characters, but the historical, social context present in Dickens' novel may obstruct the position of role model for some of the characters. Therefore, this thesis argues that race-bending in *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (2019) has both a negative and a (mostly) positive influence on POC representation and diversity in the film industry. It analyses Iannucci's film by firstly comparing the original characters and the race-bended characters in relation to historical context, such as class and racism in the nineteenth century. Then, the research on the importance of representation done by Karunanayake and Nauta and that of Lockwood and Kunda, in addition to studies done by Erigha, the British Film Institute (BFI) and USC Annenberg, will be applied to analyse the effect of race-bending characters, such as David Copperfield and Mrs Steerforth, on representation.⁵ However, as the BFI infographic is

³ Danesh Karunanayake and Margaret M. Nauta, "The Relationship Between Race and Students' Identified Career Role Models and Perceived Role Model Influence," *The Career Development Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (March 2004): pp. 225-234, <https://doi.org/https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2004.tb00644.x>, 230-231.

⁴ Penelope Lockwood and Ziva Kunda, "Superstars and Me: Predicting the Impact of Role Models on the Self.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73, no. 1 (1997): pp. 91-103, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.1.91>, 100-102.

⁵ Maryann Erigha, "Race, Gender, Hollywood: Representation in Cultural Production and Digital Media's Potential for Change," *Sociology Compass* 9, no. 1 (2015): pp. 78-89, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12237>; Danesh Karunanayake and Margaret M. Nauta, "The Relationship Between Race and Students' Identified Career Role Models and Perceived Role Model Influence," *The Career Development Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (March 2004): pp. 225-234, <https://doi.org/https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2004.tb00644.x>; Penelope Lockwood and Ziva Kunda, "Superstars and Me: Predicting the Impact of Role Models on the Self.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73, no. 1 (1997): pp. 91-103, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.1.91>; Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Pieper, "Inclusion or Invisibility? Comprehensive Annenberg

mostly in line with USC Annenberg's report on US media, but does not provide any information on Asian representation, USC Annenberg's report will be used as the main source of information on contemporary ethnic minority representation. Additional to the historical and social context, Iannucci's adaptation will also be analysed in relation to the three translation modes explained by Cahir.⁶

Report on Diversity in Entertainment" (USC Annenberg, February 22, 2016), https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2017/04/07/MDSCI_CARD_Report_FINAL_Exec_Summary.pdf.

⁶ Linda Costanzo Cahir, "The Nature of Film Translation," in *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), pp. 14-17.

Film adaptations through time

Film adaptations come in many forms, with some of them being an exact copy of a literary work and others changing the literature's story completely to fit in with the target audience's environment. This contrast can be compared to the difference between 'translation' and 'adaptation'. Linda C. Cahir states that the difference between 'to adapt' and 'to translate' lies in the changes made to the original story. 'To adapt' means that an entity's structure or function is changed to fit in with its new environment, whereas 'to translate' means that a text is moved from a language to another.⁷ However, Cahir explains that if we think of literature-based films as a translation of the original story, we would realise that in the case of film adaptation "to translate" would mean that a literary text is moved from the written novel medium as the original "language" to a cinematic medium posing as the new "language".⁸ Cahir continues to elaborate that translation has three general modes. The first being literal translation, which reproduces the book's details as identically as possible.⁹ The second mode is traditional translation, which copies most of the book, such as the plot and scenery, but changes certain details that the film producers interpreted necessary.¹⁰ The final translation mode is radical translation, in which film producers change the original book completely to show their interpretation of the literature and creating a more autonomous work.¹¹ The latter two translation modes are closer to the meaning of adaptation than that of translation. The existence of these translation modes can be seen as one of the reasons why two films based on the same work of literature may be completely different from each other,

⁷ Linda Costanzo Cahir, "The Nature of Film Translation," in *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), pp. 14-17.

⁸ Linda Costanzo Cahir, "The Nature of Film Translation," in *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), pp. 14-17.

⁹ Linda Costanzo Cahir, "The Nature of Film Translation," in *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), pp. 14-17.

¹⁰ Linda Costanzo Cahir, "The Nature of Film Translation," in *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), pp. 14-17.

¹¹ Linda Costanzo Cahir, "The Nature of Film Translation," in *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), pp. 17.

as the filmmakers' interpretation of the literary work has less or more influence depending on the translation mode they used to translate the novel into a film. But how do people perceive film (adaptations)?

Over the past few decades, the film industry has grown and changed immensely. Film adaptation has been around for at least a century. For example, *Alice in Wonderland* being made into a 12-minute-long silent film produced by Cecil Hepworth and Percy Stow in 1903¹² as one of the first literary film adaptations known today. Gregory Semenza and Robert Hasenfratz explain that the earliest British literature-based films can only be understood in the cultural context of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, in which the visual culture was booming with illustration in books and vibrant theatre performances which made the audience long for more visual spectacles. Most literature-based films from that era were previously performed in theatre or seen in illustrated books.¹³ Visual spectacle can also be seen in the 1903 *Alice in Wonderland* adaptation. Even though the film is silent, shot in black-and-white and lacks the technological advances available today, many visual effects were used to 'trick' the audience. Hepworth and Stow used trick photography to create the effect of size-transformation (i.e., Alice shrinking and growing), dematerialization and transformation.¹⁴ This shows that the earliest film adaptations were mostly focussed on giving the audience a more immersive or astonishing experience of a literary work through visual effects. This would mean that people from the early twentieth century most likely found the film adaptation to be of a good quality, as they 'accurately' portrayed the literature's naturally impossible phenomena the audience could previously only imagine while reading, i.e., size

¹² "Alice in Wonderland (1903)," BFI (British Film Institute, 2018), <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/films-tv-people/4ce2b6a6d4dbd>.

¹³ Gregory M. Colón Semenza and Robert Hasenfratz, "Attractions, Tricks, and Fairy Tales: Visual and Theatrical Culture in the Brit-Lit Film, 1896-1907," in *The History of British Literature on Film: 1895-2015* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 27-70.

¹⁴ Gregory M. Colón Semenza and Robert Hasenfratz, "Attractions, Tricks, and Fairy Tales: Visual and Theatrical Culture in the Brit-Lit Film, 1896-1907," in *The History of British Literature on Film: 1895-2015* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 67.

transformation, while also satisfying their wish for a visual spectacle, whereas nowadays the adaptations would be seen as an inaccurate, incomplete translation. The accuracy of the translation from the language of literature into the language of film was less important to the audience and filmmakers or perhaps simply impossible because of shortcomings in the technical aspect of shooting films. This is noticeable in *Alice in Wonderland* (1903), but also in other adaptations such as *Gulliver's Travels* (1902). Neither films could be seen as an independent work of art due to their lack of accuracy¹⁵, one could not understand the complete story without also reading the original literature. To see how the focus on visual spectacle has shifted to accurate representation, the general history of British-literature-based film adaptation and the changes in the audiences' priorities in relation to race portrayal through time should be examined.

A factor not previously discussed is that of race and the use of blackface. Stemming from theatre productions like Shakespeare's *Othello* and the racist act of blackface minstrels, blackface has been commonly used in the entertainment industry from as early as the eighteenth century, especially in the United States. At the time, the US was trying to become a more independent nation without being associated with the UK on both political and cultural grounds.¹⁶ They wanted their culture to represent the American values of independence and individualism and found that the African American population was an important part of the nation's social fabric.¹⁷ This population was often wrongly portrayed in minstrels by white

¹⁵ Gregory M. Colón Semenza and Robert Hasenfratz, "Attractions, Tricks, and Fairy Tales: Visual and Theatrical Culture in the Brit-Lit Film, 1896-1907," in *The History of British Literature on Film: 1895-2015* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 69.

¹⁶ Tim Brooks, "The Origins of Blackface Minstrelsy," in *The Blackface Minstrel Show in Mass Media 20th Century Performances on Radio, Records, Film and Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2020), pp. 7-31, 7.

¹⁷ Tim Brooks, "The Origins of Blackface Minstrelsy," in *The Blackface Minstrel Show in Mass Media 20th Century Performances on Radio, Records, Film and Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2020), pp. 7-31, 7.

men with their faces painted black, also known as the racist phenomenon blackface.¹⁸ Blackface is the racist act of hiding or misrepresenting a character's actual race by using a white actor and face-paint, but this kind of inappropriate misrepresentation comes in many forms. Think of filmmakers using lighting to make a black actor's skin appear lighter or simply 'whitewashing' a character of colour by casting them as a white character instead. An example of this phenomenon's continuous presence in mass media is Orson Welles's 1952 *Othello* film adaptation. In this adaptation Othello's character is portrayed by a bronze-skinned actor, rather than a darker skinned-actor, who is never placed next to his light-skinned female co-actress to hide the contrast between their skin tones.¹⁹ As race is part of the 'universal' factor that the audience found so important in films, the use of blackface, whitewashing and i.e., racial slurs was contested by a growing group of viewers. The growing discontent with racism in film was largely brought to light by the African American civil rights movement, which was highly active during the 1950s and 60s. After World War II, black people finally made their way into the entertainment industry.²⁰ The rising impact of anti-racism movements created another qualification for a high-quality film adaptation, besides its accuracy to translate the literary work, namely that of accurate racial representation.

Semenza and Hasenfratz explain that the Brit-Lit films, made between 1979 and the present, often vary so much that the British literature-based film cannot be categorized into one single genre or style as the idea of Britishness is continuously changing due to political

¹⁸ Tim Brooks, "The Origins of Blackface Minstrelsy," in *The Blackface Minstrel Show in Mass Media 20th Century Performances on Radio, Records, Film and Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2020), pp. 7-31, 7.

¹⁹ Laura Reitz-Wilson, "Race and Othello on Film," in *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1213>.

²⁰ Bruce J. Dierenfield, "Origins of the Movement," in *The Civil Rights Movement* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 17-21.

and cultural events that alter the way people think of Britain and its literature.²¹ They conclude their research by showing (and praising) the constant changes in literature-based films by describing Andrea Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* (2011) which is the first film adaptation of Brontë's book in which Heathcliff, originally described as a dark-skinned gypsy in aspect, is portrayed by a mixed-race actor which effectively allows the audience to see an accurate representation of blackness in the late eighteenth-century.²² Semenza and Hasenfratz's example of Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* shows that racism, underrepresentation and inaccurate representation is still present in the contemporary film industry, as the 2011 film adaptation was only the first *Wuthering Heights* adaptation that accurately portrayed Brontë's characters.

As seen in the previous paragraph, ethnic minorities are severely underrepresented in mainstream media. Smith, Choueiti and Pieper, from USC Annenberg, report that out of 109 analysed major US film productions in 2014, at least 55 films had not a single Asian speaking character and 20 films were reported to have no black speaking characters.²³ Besides stating that a large amount of films contained no POC characters at all, USC Annenberg also reports that of all speaking characters in the 109 films assessed for this report only 26.7% was a non-white character.²⁴ This is endorsed by the infographic provided by the British Film Institute (BFI), in which it is stated that 59% of UK films do not have any named black characters.²⁵

Maryann Erigha states in her research on diversity in digital media that there are three types

²¹ Gregory M. Colón Semenza and Robert Hasenfratz, "The Brit-Lit Film after Film, 1979-2015," in *The History of British Literature on Film: 1895-2015* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 319-377, 373-377.

²² Gregory M. Colón Semenza and Robert Hasenfratz, "The Brit-Lit Film after Film, 1979-2015," in *The History of British Literature on Film: 1895-2015* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 319-377, 373-377.

²³ Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Pieper, "Inclusion or Invisibility? Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment" (USC Annenberg, February 22, 2016), https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2017/04/07/MDSCI_CARD_Report_FINAL_Exec_Summary.pdf, 8.

²⁴ Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Pieper, "Inclusion or Invisibility? Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment" (USC Annenberg, February 22, 2016), https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2017/04/07/MDSCI_CARD_Report_FINAL_Exec_Summary.pdf, 7.

²⁵ British Film Institute, "Infographic: The True Picture for Black Actors in the UK Film Industry," British Film Institute, December 19, 2016, <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/black-actors-british-film-industry-statistics>.

of representation: numerical representation, quality of representation and centrality of representation. The first one refers to the number of characters, directors, producers, and writers are of a certain race or gender.²⁶ Erigha continues by stating that the quality of representation, determined by the depth of a character (i.e., not a stereotype), is just as important. Racial minority characters are often misrepresented in a stereotypical way, which is determined by the Hollywood filmmakers.²⁷ In addition, Erigha states the following: “Underrepresentation in core institutions in film and television prevents racial minority directors, writers, actors, and creators from full participation in Hollywood cultural production and also limits the scope of their careers in Hollywood.”²⁸ The last type of representation is less visible on-screen, as the centrality of representation assesses how central a group is to an industry. Women and racial minorities working in the film industry often struggle more than white men to get to the core of the industry.²⁹

Accurate portrayal of ethnic minorities is vital for the existence of role models for young POC. Karunanayake and Nauta state in their study on career role models that most subjects had role models of the same race as themselves. An explanation for this is that people, but especially ethnic minorities, prefer a role model of the same race to figure out how to cope with certain challenges such as defying racist stereotypes.³⁰ The need for role models is further endorsed by Lockwood and Kunda who explain that having a (celebrity) role model can have a positive impact on people. They state that seeing a celebrity with similar features,

²⁶ Maryann Erigha, “Race, Gender, Hollywood: Representation in Cultural Production and Digital Media's Potential for Change,” in *Sociology Compass* 9, no. 1 (2015): pp. 78-89, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12237>.

²⁷ Maryann Erigha, “Race, Gender, Hollywood: Representation in Cultural Production and Digital Media's Potential for Change,” *Sociology Compass* 9, no. 1 (2015): pp. 78-89, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12237>.

²⁸ Maryann Erigha, “Race, Gender, Hollywood: Representation in Cultural Production and Digital Media's Potential for Change,” *Sociology Compass* 9, no. 1 (2015): pp. 83, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12237>.

²⁹ Maryann Erigha, “Race, Gender, Hollywood: Representation in Cultural Production and Digital Media's Potential for Change,” *Sociology Compass* 9, no. 1 (2015): pp. 78-89, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12237>.

³⁰ Danesh Karunanayake and Margaret M. Nauta, “The Relationship Between Race and Students' Identified Career Role Models and Perceived Role Model Influence,” *The Career Development Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (March 2004): pp. 225-234, <https://doi.org/https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2004.tb00644.x>, 230-231.

such as gender, race, or sexuality, being attainably successful can inspire and self-enhance people.³¹ These role model celebrities should however not be peers as this could be demotivating as they have acquired more successes than the subject, which makes the role model's success seem unattainable. Lockwood and Kunda conclude that a role model should preferably be some years older and more advanced in their life in order to inspire the subject.³² The research done by Erigha and that of Karunanayake and Nauta show that a change in the representation of minorities is crucial to disrupt the patterns of inequality in the film industry. This change in representation can sometimes already be seen in contemporary literature-based films and series.

Armando Iannucci's *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (2019), in which Iannucci employed 'colour-blind casting' for Dickens' mostly white characters, is one of many examples of this change. Colour-blind casting is a way to allow actors and actresses from a minority group to be represented in non-stereotypical ways without choosing a white actor over a person of colour (POC) just because the character was originally written as white. Scott Mendelson, who analyses the entertainment industry and writes for Forbes Magazine, argues that using a more diverse cast may be used as a marketing strategy. He explains that whitewashing POC characters is no longer as profitable as it was when, for example, *Othello* (1952) came out as the (target) audience has changed. However, doing the opposite, diversifying and race-bending, may just do the trick.³³ Mary Beltrán endorses Mendelson's statement in her research on multi-racial actors in Hollywood. She refers to blaxploitation

³¹ Penelope Lockwood and Ziva Kunda, "Superstars and Me: Predicting the Impact of Role Models on the Self.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73, no. 1 (1997): pp. 91-103, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.1.91>, 100-102.

³² Penelope Lockwood and Ziva Kunda, "Superstars and Me: Predicting the Impact of Role Models on the Self.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73, no. 1 (1997): pp. 91-103, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.1.91>, 100-102.

³³ Scott Mendelson, "Whitewashing Doesn't Create Hits. Doing The Opposite Might," *Forbes* (Forbes Magazine, May 12, 2017), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2017/05/11/whitewashing-doesnt-create-hits-doing-the-opposite-may-save-hollywood-from-itself/>.

films from the 1970s, in which producers use black actors to sell their movie to a more diverse audience to show that filmmakers did change their casting according to their audience, but only in a way they would make profit. Beltrán continues to explain that as the US's demographics changed to a more diverse population, Hollywood changed as well. Actors from minority backgrounds seem to appear on-screen more often, as producers try to attract the (diverse) younger generations.³⁴

With Cahir's statements on film translation and adaptation in mind, in addition to the information found on representation, it is worth researching what colour-blind casting means for film adaptation. Iannucci's *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (2019) will pose as an example of the change in minority representation while also examining the changes made to Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* as its literary source.

³⁴ Mary C. Beltrán, "The New Hollywood Racelessness: Only the Fast, Furious, (and Multiracial) Will Survive," *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 2 (2005): pp. 50-67, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2005.0003>.

Dickens and Class

As mentioned in the previous chapter, literature-based films are judged on their accuracy (to the literature) and the audience's contemporary wishes. Therefore, in order to discuss Iannucci's *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (2019), we should explore the film's original 1850 story, *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens. This will highlight how certain aspects such as social class, race and the nineteenth-century British society were presented in the novel after which these can be compared to how Iannucci translated them into film. Being based on a nineteenth-century novel, it is not unexpected for a twenty-first-century film adaptation to be changed somewhat to fit the contemporary audience. This raises the question of how race is represented in the novel. As can be seen in the original illustrations by Hablot Knight Browne, all (illustrated) characters are white.³⁵ This limits the analysis of race and Otherness in the novel, but at the same time emphasizes the lack of representation of people of colour in nineteenth-century literature. In an interview for The Guardian Kevin Loader, the co-producer of Iannucci's film, stresses that Dickens' *David Copperfield* is not a novel about racial politics at all.³⁶ The 'Other' may not be completely absent in *David Copperfield*. Grace Moore explains that, while the Other is not visible in racial minority characters in *David Copperfield*, Dickens does show Otherness through social class and the accompanying discrimination of lower-class people, nearly presenting social class as a race.³⁷ How does Dickens depict the social hierarchy, the accompanying discrimination, and the fluidity of one's social position?

³⁵ Charles Dickens and Jeremy Tambling, *David Copperfield* (London, England: Penguin Classics, 2014).

³⁶ Cath Clarke, "Why Dev Patel in Dickens Could Change Film for Ever," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, August 17, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/aug/17/why-dev-patel-in-dickens-could-change-film-for-ever>.

³⁷ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire: Discourses of Class, Race and Colonialism in the Works of Charles Dickens* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 31.

Sally Mitchell concisely explains the three classes present in the Victorian age. She states that England legally had only two classes, the aristocrats, and the commoners. However, it is generally accepted that the commoners were divided in two classes, rather than one.³⁸ The lowest class among the commoners, was the working class. The working-class people performed the physical, manual labour need to keep England running for barely enough money to survive. They worked in factories, on the land or in middle- and upper-class households as a domestic servant, among other physical occupations.³⁹ Mitchell then continues to explain the middle class's characteristics. She states that the middle class, consisting of the lower middle class and the upper middle class, was a fast-growing class in the nineteenth century, both in number and importance.⁴⁰ The middle class was very diverse, ranging from extremely wealthy bankers to poorer clerical workers. She emphasizes that social class was not based on wealth, but rather on the source of income. Work that required no extensive physical labour, but rather some level of literacy placed one in the (lower) middle class.⁴¹ Additionally, the middle class was also distinguished by their mannerisms and ideals. A middle-class family was expected to maintain a certain house, valued hard work and individual responsibility, and went to church (the Church of England).⁴²

Lastly, Mitchell explains the wealthiest and highest social class, the upper class, consisting of the aristocrats and the landed gentry. Their social status largely came from the ownership of land, through which they earned money by allowing commoners to live on their land for a fee. The aristocrats were the titled families of England, with individuals ranking

³⁸ Sally Mitchell, "The Foundations of Daily Life: Class, Tradition, and Money," in *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 2nd ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), pp. 17-38, 18.

³⁹ Sally Mitchell, "The Foundations of Daily Life: Class, Tradition, and Money," in *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 2nd ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), pp. 17-38, 18-19.

⁴⁰ Sally Mitchell, "The Foundations of Daily Life: Class, Tradition, and Money," in *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 2nd ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), pp. 17-38, 19-21.

⁴¹ Sally Mitchell, "The Foundations of Daily Life: Class, Tradition, and Money," in *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 2nd ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), pp. 17-38, 19-21.

⁴² Sally Mitchell, "The Foundations of Daily Life: Class, Tradition, and Money," in *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 2nd ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), pp. 17-38, 20-21.

from high to low as duke/duchess to baron/baroness. These titles could not be earned through social mobility, but were inherited and passed on i.e., from father to son.⁴³ The aristocrats distanced themselves from the commoners in several ways. They often lived in large country houses away from the commoners and were judged by a separate jury when being held for trial, consisting of other noblemen. Titled members of the upper class could not be arrested for debt, emphasizing their position in law enforcement.⁴⁴ This last statement stresses, again, that social class has little to do with wealth, as even the upper class could end up in debt, while still being regarded as upper-class people.

Charles Dickens' novel implicitly mentions almost every class in nineteenth-century England. While social class was often a fixed position starting from birth, throughout the novel, David has immersive experiences with both the working class and the (lower) middle class as well as the wealthy upper-class. The importance of class in *David Copperfield* can be seen early on in the novel, when Emily explains to David that he is of a better class than she is, as his parents were a gentleman and a lady whereas hers were a fisherman and a fisherman's daughter.⁴⁵ This shows that even though Emily is only a young girl at the time, she already knows the difference between her and her peers. David's time spent working in the wine bottling factory technically positions him in the working class as well, even though he was born in a middle-class family. Arlene Young explains that working-class people in Victorian literature were often depicted as dirty, rough-looking characters. Their merit was indicated through their coarseness and dirt.⁴⁶ The symbolic role of dirt is also visible in *David*

⁴³ Sally Mitchell, "The Foundations of Daily Life: Class, Tradition, and Money," in *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 2nd ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), pp. 17-38, 21-25.

⁴⁴ Sally Mitchell, "The Foundations of Daily Life: Class, Tradition, and Money," in *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 2nd ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), pp. 17-38, 21-25.

⁴⁵ Charles Dickens and Jeremy Tambling, "Chapter III: I Have a Change," in *David Copperfield* (London, England: Penguin Classics, 2014), pp. 39-55, 47.

⁴⁶ Arlene Young, "The Literary Evolution of the Lower Middle Class: The Natural History of the Gent to Little Dorrit," in *Culture, Class and Gender in the Victorian Novel: Gentlemen, Gents and Working Women* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999), pp. 45-86, 48.

Copperfield. David is dirty and wears ragged clothes when he runs away from the bottling factory and arrives at Miss Betsey's house. It is the first thing Miss Betsey and Mr Dick notice about him, before demanding him to be washed immediately.⁴⁷ David loses his working-class status, both by escaping the factory and washing, and regains his middle-class features.

We learn throughout the novel that the lower class is to be ashamed of and not to be seen with when coming from a better social class. This shame is not only visible when speaking of lower-class people around David Copperfield, but also when he reflects on his own position. "and felt my hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my bosom. ... The deep remembrance of the sense I had ... of the shame I felt in my position."⁴⁸ The shame present in this quote appears directly after David begins working at the bottling factory and thus (temporarily) belongs to the working class. The degrading of working-class people is not uncommon in the works of Dickens, Grace Moore explains. She clarifies that while Dickens advocated for the improvement of conditions, he also described the working class as a savage, sub-human group that is totally separated from the rest of society in his novel *Barnaby Rudge*.⁴⁹ However, Peggotty, who seems to be the perfect example of a working-class woman, is never dehumanized. She gets put in her place from time to time, but is mostly described as a woman who is loved and loyal to David at all times. Francis Thompson explains that this may be because domestic servants generally fell between the two commoners classes, the working class, and the middle class. Working in a middle-class environment left domestic servants unincorporated in the working-class culture, while also being isolated individuals within the middle class. Thompson adds that after marriage,

⁴⁷ Charles Dickens and Jeremy Tambling, "Chapter XIII: The Sequel of My Resolution," in *David Copperfield* (London, England: Penguin Classics, 2014), pp. 190-210, 204.

⁴⁸ Charles Dickens and Jeremy Tambling, "Chapter XI: I Begin Life on My Own Account, and Don't like It," in *David Copperfield* (London, England: Penguin Classics, 2014), pp. 164-180, 166.

⁴⁹ Grace Moore, "National Identity," in *Dickens and Empire: Discourses of Class, Race and Colonialism in the Works of Charles Dickens* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), pp. 21-41, 34.

ex-domestic servants often grew into the lower-middle class rather than the working class due to their values and behaviour being completely adapted to the middle class.⁵⁰ The latter is not true for Peggotty, as her husband Mr Barkis is not a middle-class man and unfortunately dies in the novel. Peggotty and her family inherit a large sum of money, but Peggotty immediately returns to her job as a servant (for Miss Betsey). It is interesting that Peggotty throughout the novel always refers to David as 'Master', even when they are virtually of the same class at some points in the novel. This, in addition to her return as a servant, implies that Peggotty believes social class is not fluid and she will always consider David as someone of a higher social position (than her).

Dickens' *David Copperfield* largely takes place in a middle-class environment, starting with David's birth in a middle-class family. The latter can be seen more than once in *David Copperfield*. David describes going to church with his mother and Peggotty, which is also seen in one of the illustrations by Hablot Knight Browne in the second chapter (*Our Pew at Church*)⁵¹, showing David's middle-class position. Another interesting middle-class character in *David Copperfield* is Wilkins Micawber. Arlene Young states that Dickens' depiction of characters such as Micawber is a stereotypical characterization of the (lower) middle class. Dickens emphasizes narrow domesticity and financial marginality, two features of middle-class people, in Micawber through his irresponsible extravagance.⁵² Micawber's character may even appear as Dickens mocking the lower middle class, as David and other people around Micawber are constantly embarrassed by Micawber's actions.

⁵⁰ Francis Michael Longstreth Thompson, "Play," in *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain: 1830-1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 246-306, 247-250.

⁵¹ Charles Dickens and Jeremy Tambling, "Chapter II: I Observe," in *David Copperfield* (London, England: Penguin Classics, 2014), pp. 24-39, 26.

⁵² Arlene Young, "Voices from the Margins: Dickens, Wells and Bennett," in *Culture, Class and Gender in the Victorian Novel: Gentlemen, Gents and Working Women* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999), pp. 87-118, 95-98.

The upper-class in *David Copperfield* is most explicitly introduced when David is sent to Salem House. Mitchell explains that the upper-class sons were often sent to large public schools, which were essentially boarding schools. While these schools were very expensive and mostly reserved for the upper class, upper-middle-class boys were also accepted from time to time. Mitchell describes that boys were examined by the school's headmaster before being accepted.⁵³ This is similar to David being examined before entering Salem House. Salem House was, most likely, a similar boarding school meant for the upper-class sons, in which David and Traddles, as middle-class boys, were accepted as well. David also meets his good friend James Steerforth, who is a stereotypical characterization of the upper class at Salem House. Steerforth is a wealthy, entitled boy, whose charms are so strong that even the sadistic Mr. Creakle does not beat him like he does the other boys. When Steerforth is asked whether the poor are really 'animals and clods, and beings of another order', he replies as follows: "Why, there's a pretty wide separation between them and us ... they are not expected to be as sensitive as we are. ... they have not very fine features, and they may be thankful that, like their coarse rough skins, they are not easily wounded."⁵⁴ This shows another instance of placing lower-class people in the position of the 'Other' by portraying them as a separate and 'savage' community.

Throughout the novel, otherness is regularly seen in lower-class people or through comments made about them, but one character that really stands out as a stereotype for the 'Other', is Uriah Heep. Uriah Heep is introduced as a 'cadaverous face' appearing with red hair at a window.⁵⁵ Characteristics such as red hair were often stereotypically associated with Jewish people in the Victorian era, making Uriah Heep one of the few (if not only) characters

⁵³ Sally Mitchell, "Education," in *Daily Life in Victorian England*, 2nd ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), pp. 169-193, 176-180.

⁵⁴ Charles Dickens and Jeremy Tambling, "Chapter XX: Steerforth's Home," in *David Copperfield* (London, England: Penguin Classics, 2014), pp. 298-306, 303.

⁵⁵ Charles Dickens and Jeremy Tambling, "Chapter XV: I make another Beginning," in *David Copperfield* (London, England: Penguin Classics, 2014), pp. 226-235, 228-229

in the novel whose race is specified.⁵⁶ MacDonald states that throughout the novel, Uriah Heep is constantly used as a scapegoat figure and arguably the main reason for the social disruption in Dickens' novel, as Mr Micawber's statement, when revealing Uriah's actions, removes the blame from the other characters.⁵⁷ Uriah's position as the 'Other' is visible from the start, when David describes him as cadaverous. Uriah's physical appearance, his social position (and the urge to change this) and his (assumed) race are portrayed as reasons for his otherness.⁵⁸ The anger, discrimination and blame aimed at Uriah Heep emphasize his otherness. In comparison to the otherness and discrimination visible in lower-class people in the novel, it can be argued that the portrayal of Uriah Heep is possibly based on anti-Semitism, rather than on social class differences.

While ethnic racial conflict is not explicitly depicted in Dickens' *David Copperfield*, the struggles and disagreements between social classes is more than evident in the novel. An exception on this, is Uriah Heep. His character is a stereotypical representation of a Jewish man, who eventually turns out to be the villain of the novel and the (indirect) cause of all disruptions of daily life. Throughout the novel, David grows from a middle-class boy to a homeless lower-class young man, into the successful grown man he is at the end of the novel. The following chapter will analyse how David's social class(es) and the struggles of the social hierarchy in the nineteenth century are translated into a twenty-first-century film by Armando Iannucci.

⁵⁶ Tara MacDonald, "Red-Headed Animal': Race, Sexuality and Dickens's Uriah Heep," *Critical Survey* 17, no. 2 (January 2005): pp. 48-62, <https://doi.org/10.3167/001115705781004497>, 48-49.

⁵⁷ Tara MacDonald, "Red-Headed Animal': Race, Sexuality and Dickens's Uriah Heep," *Critical Survey* 17, no. 2 (January 2005): pp. 48-62, <https://doi.org/10.3167/001115705781004497>, 48.

⁵⁸ Tara MacDonald, "Red-Headed Animal': Race, Sexuality and Dickens's Uriah Heep," *Critical Survey* 17, no. 2 (January 2005): pp. 48-62, <https://doi.org/10.3167/001115705781004497>.

Iannucci and David Copperfield: the consequences of colour-blind casting

Adapting a nineteenth-century novel into a twenty-first-century film is certainly a challenge, as ideals, habits and standards have changed immensely over time. As seen in the USC Annenberg report, it is obvious that white people still largely dominate the screen.⁵⁹ Armando Iannucci overthrows this dominance in his film-adaptation of *David Copperfield*. Story-wise, Iannucci's film follows the novel closely. The film even opens with David Copperfield reading out the famous first lines of the book, "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show."⁶⁰ Apart from some inconsistencies in age, schools and deaths, the film follows the book's events very accurately for a film that has to 'summarize' a book of over six hundred pages (depending on the print) within two hours. However, the fact that many originally white characters are portrayed by POC actors and actresses stands out immediately, as British Indian actor Dev Patel portrays David Copperfield. The reason behind casting POC actors and actresses, as stated by Iannucci and Loader in multiple interviews, is because each actor was simply most capable of playing the character they were cast as.⁶¹ But the impact this phenomenon, known as colour-blind casting, has on the film industry and the stories it is applied to is still relatively unknown due to the fact that it has only recently emerged. This chapter will explore the impact colour-blind casting has on an adaptation's accuracy, according to the first chapter, and the impact on the film industry.

⁵⁹ Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Pieper, "Inclusion or Invisibility? Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment" (USC Annenberg, February 22, 2016), https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2017/04/07/MDSCI_CARD_Report_FINAL_Exec_Summary.pdf.

⁶⁰ Charles Dickens and Jeremy Tambling, "Chapter I: I Am Born," in *David Copperfield* (London, England: Penguin Classics, 2014), pp. 14-24, 14.

⁶¹ Kate Erbland, "Dev Patel on the Colorblind Casting of 'David Copperfield' and Why He's Not Chasing the Chance to Play Bond," *IndieWire* (IndieWire, August 26, 2020), <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/08/david-copperfield-dev-patel-armando-iannucci-colorblind-casting-1234582001/>

If we look at Iannucci's film in comparison to Cahir's three modes of translation, the film would fall between the second and third mode, traditional translation and radical translation.⁶² The film is not a literal translation of the book, as some scenes are deleted, merged, or changed. The race-bending of fourteen characters, including the main character could perhaps push the film into a radical translation. Iannucci's colour-blind casting reshapes the book in an unexpected way. But, as the film mostly follows the book's plot, timeline and characters' personalities and the race-bending is one of the only significant details Iannucci changed, it would still lean largely towards a traditional translation.⁶³ In Iannucci's translation, David, for example, does not go to Mr Creakle's school where he is forced to wear a sign saying 'he bites' and meets James Steerforth, but instead has to wear the sign when he works at Mr Murdstone's factory and meets Steerforth much later when David has grown into an adult. Another notable difference with Dickens' novel is the fact that in the film Ham Peggotty and Dora Spenlow both (assumably) survive the story, rather than die a tragic death. Especially Dora's end is an interesting one, she does not get sick but rather tells David that her presence does not make sense and that he should 'write her out'. These (rather small) differences would categorize Iannucci's take on *David Copperfield* as a traditional translation.⁶⁴ However, Iannucci's colour-blind casting has an impact on the film nonetheless and should not go unnoticed by simply categorizing the film as a non-radical translation. Therefore, the following paragraphs will analyse the impact of colour-blind casting in more detail.

As could be seen in the previous chapters, ethnic minorities are severely underrepresented in media. When comparing USC Annenberg's statistics to Iannucci's *David*

⁶² Linda Costanzo Cahir, "The Nature of Film Translation," in *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), pp. 14-17.

⁶³ Linda Costanzo Cahir, "The Nature of Film Translation," in *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), pp. 14-17.

⁶⁴ Linda Costanzo Cahir, "The Nature of Film Translation," in *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2006), pp. 16-17.

Copperfield, it shows that Iannucci's adaptation reaches a higher percentage of POC in the film's cast than the average. Out of all 43 characters credited in the film, 14 are portrayed by non-white actors and actresses, which reveals that 32.5% of the credited actors are POC. According to USC Annenberg's report, this is still below the standard set at 35%, but nonetheless above the average of 26.7% POC characters in films.⁶⁵ Additionally, the BFI Infographic mentions that 80% of British period dramas do not contain any black characters.⁶⁶ Iannucci's film thus proves to be headed in the right direction of representing people of colour, however this is only in the numerical sense. As Maryann Erigha states, representation comes in multiple forms, of which numerical is only one.⁶⁷ The other important form of representation visible in *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (2019) is qualitative representation. Most race-bended characters in the film are multi-faceted characters that do not conform to stereotypical representations of POC.⁶⁸ While the qualitative representation in Iannucci's film is good according to Erigha, the characters lack ethnic background and history. Due to the colour-blind casting David Copperfield, portrayed by Dev Patel, does not seem to experience any racism based on his skin-tone throughout the film, even though this was something that happened commonly in the nineteenth century. Similarly, Mrs Steerforth, portrayed by Nikki Amuka-Bird, has no struggles being part of the upper class as a black woman in Iannucci's adaptation. But how much should ethnic background matter in *David Copperfield* as a story that is not about racial conflict?

⁶⁵ Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Pieper, "Inclusion or Invisibility? Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment" (USC Annenberg, February 22, 2016), https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2017/04/07/MDSCI_CARD_Report_FINAL_Exec_Summary.pdf, 12.

⁶⁶ British Film Institute, "Infographic: The True Picture for Black Actors in the UK Film Industry," British Film Institute, December 19, 2016, <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/black-actors-british-film-industry-statistics>.

⁶⁷ Maryann Erigha, "Race, Gender, Hollywood: Representation in Cultural Production and Digital Media's Potential for Change," *Sociology Compass* 9, no. 1 (2015): pp. 78-83, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12237>.

⁶⁸ Maryann Erigha, "Race, Gender, Hollywood: Representation in Cultural Production and Digital Media's Potential for Change," *Sociology Compass* 9, no. 1 (2015): pp. 78-83, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12237>.

Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* largely belongs to the genre of bildungsroman and is often regarded as Charles Dickens' partial autobiography. The latter is what is interesting in the context of Iannucci's translation of the novel. While it is, of course, possible for any of the characters to be of a different race than white, it is not equally realistic for each of the characters due to social class and discrimination present in Dickens' nineteenth-century England. An example of a less realistic change is Mrs Steerforth, a wealthy upper-class woman in the nineteenth century. Iannucci decided for the character to be portrayed by British-Nigerian actress Nikki Amuka-Bird, which makes Mrs Steerforth's social position an interesting one. Black people have often gone unnoticed in history, but the few sources on black women in Victorian England often describe similar situations. Clare Midgley explains that being freed from slavery did not mean that black women could enjoy the same freedom as white middle-class women. Free black women were left to face the problems of working-class people, rather than be allowed to live a middle-class life.⁶⁹ While this may only be the case for women coming from slavery, as black women from other backgrounds are not specified in Midgley's article, it does show that black women were unable to enter the middle class because of their ethnicity. The position of black people is also confirmed by Peter Fryer, who states that there were very few nineteenth-century British writers speaking up for black people. People of colour were often described as "cruel, dirty, superstitious, selfish, a cannibal, and addicted to fetichism, human sacrifices, sorcery, and slave-dealing, besides being a drunkard, polygamist, a neglecter of domestic ties, a liar and a cheat".⁷⁰ The obvious discrimination against black people would not allow Mrs Steerforth, as a black woman, to be part of the landed gentry. The novel's characteristic realism fades away in the film as Mrs Steerforth does not seem to experience any discrimination based on her ethnicity, but instead

⁶⁹ Clare Midgley, "Anti-Slavery and Feminism in Nineteenth-Century Britain," *Gender & History* 5, no. 3 (1993): pp. 343-362, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.1993.tb00184.x>, p. 353.

⁷⁰ Peter Fryer, Paul Gilroy, and Gary Younge, "The Rise of English Racism," in *Staying Power: the History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), pp. 135-193, 190.

is respected and served as an upper-class woman. What effect could this have and why is it important that black women are also portrayed in a position as Mrs Steerforth's, even if it reduces the story's realism?

While Mrs Steerforth's position (in Iannucci's film) may not make sense in a nineteenth-century environment, but it is nonetheless very important. As previously mentioned, it is stated by Lockwood and Kunda that it is beneficial for young (POC) people to have role models to which they can relate, whom preferably have similar features, such as gender, race or sexuality and are slightly older and (attainably) more successful than the subject.⁷¹ Mrs Steerforth therefore poses as a good role model for (young) black women, as she has established a respectful position in society within a somewhat realistic extent. Amuka-Bird's portrayal of Mrs Steerforth is a good development in the road to black representation, as black women in high social positions are severely underrepresented in films, and media in general, causing them to have few choices for same-race role models.⁷²

Mrs Steerforth is not the only character that makes an excellent candidate for a black role model, Agnes Wickfield, portrayed by Rosalind Eleazar, may be an even more attainably successful black woman. She is much younger than Mrs Steerforth and would therefore perhaps be a more suitable role model for young black girls. While none of these characters show any ethnic background, they still pose as healthy role models for black women as the characters are non-stereotypical and multi-dimensional, defying Erigha's statement on how numerical representation alone should not be seen as 'good' representation and requires the

⁷¹ Penelope Lockwood and Ziva Kunda, "Superstars and Me: Predicting the Impact of Role Models on the Self.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73, no. 1 (1997): pp. 91-103, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.1.91> , 100-102.

⁷² Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Pieper, "Inclusion or Invisibility? Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment" (USC Annenberg, February 22, 2016), https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2017/04/07/MDSCI_CARD_Report_FINAL_Exec_Summary.pdf , 7-9.

addition of qualitative representation.⁷³ However, black women are not the only underrepresented ethnic minority in media. An ethnic minority that often goes unnoticed is Asian people. Iannucci's *The Personal History of David Copperfield* gives multiple Asian actors the opportunity to finally take the spotlight, with Dev Patel being the lead actor of the film.

USC Annenberg reports that 50% of the 109 analysed films had no Asian characters in speaking roles, which is 32% more than the number of films that had no black characters in speaking roles.⁷⁴ The lack of Asian representation in contemporary films often goes unnoticed, along with the racism aimed at Asian people. Shilpa Davé explains that (South) Asian representation in the twentieth century consisted mainly of stereotypes, with Indian animated character Apu from *The Simpsons* being the most well-known Indian man from the 1990s. Before Apu, Davé continues, one of the most famous racial performances of South Asian people was done by Peter Sellers in *The Party* with his face painted brown, or brownface. Even the animated Apu was not voiced by an actual Indian actor, but rather by a white man, Hank Azaria, doing a stereotypical "Indian" accent.⁷⁵ Davé argues that these Indian, and South Asian, stereotypes are based on early films on British imperialism and colonialism in India.⁷⁶ So when and how do Asian actors get represented in media? Brooks and Hébert state that there is quite a difference between the representation of Asian women and that of Asian men. Asian women are often sexualized and portrayed as an idle object existing to serve white men or as the partner in crime for Asian men, the lotus blossom or

⁷³ Maryann Erigha, "Race, Gender, Hollywood: Representation in Cultural Production and Digital Media's Potential for Change," *Sociology Compass* 9, no. 1 (2015): pp. 78-83, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12237>.

⁷⁴ Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Pieper, "Inclusion or Invisibility? Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment" (USC Annenberg, February 22, 2016), https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2017/04/07/MDSCI_CARD_Report_FINAL_Exec_Summary.pdf, 8.

⁷⁵ Shilpa Davé, "South Asians and the Hollywood Party: Peter Sellers and Brownface Performances," in *Indian Accents Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and Film* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), pp. 19-39, 19.

⁷⁶ Shilpa Davé, "South Asians and the Hollywood Party: Peter Sellers and Brownface Performances," in *Indian Accents Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and Film* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), pp. 19-39, 20.

dragon lady.⁷⁷ Asian men on the other hand are depicted as Americanized detectives or the complete opposite, as criminalized characters in the role of corrupt businessmen and threatening foreigners.⁷⁸ The negative representation of Asian people create new stereotypes that continue to be used in contemporary film from time to time. Think of Dan Harmon's *Community* in which Ben Chang, portrayed by Ken Jeong, is always depicted as a hot-headed unstable teacher throughout the series, being put into the role of enemy. However, Dev Patel and Benedict Wong's roles in Iannucci's *The Personal History of David Copperfield* defy the stereotypes and misrepresentations present in films and series such as *Community*.

The depiction of Dev Patel's character David Copperfield and Benedict Wong's character Mr Wickfield are very contrastive. Where David has to work hard to achieve and maintain his social position, Mr Wickfield does not have to work hard at all and is drunk most of the time. Mr Wickfield is treated as an upper-class businessman, even though almost everyone even remotely close to him knows he is a drunk and tries to hide his drinking problem from being revealed to the public. This is, in a way, in line with positioning Asian men in the role of a corrupt businessman. He is however not the antagonist in the film, nor in the novel, putting him in a less negative light. Mr Wickfield's contrast with David enhances the healthy representation of Asian people, as Dev Patel's position as protagonist is even stronger when compared to Mr Wickfield.

David Copperfield's social position may not be as constant as Mr Wickfield's upper-class position, but the audience is always led to believe that David is deprived by external forces, such as Mr Murdstone, his mother's death, or Uriah Heep. David being depicted as a

⁷⁷ Dwight E. Brooks and Lisa P. Hébert, "Gender, Race, and Media Representation," in *Handbook for Gender and Communications*, vol. 16, 2006, pp. 297-317, https://us.corwin.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/11715_Chapter16.pdf, 302.

⁷⁸ Dwight E. Brooks and Lisa P. Hébert, "Gender, Race, and Media Representation," in *Handbook for Gender and Communications*, vol. 16, 2006, pp. 297-317, https://us.corwin.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/11715_Chapter16.pdf, 307.

British Indian man does not affect any of these events, as some of the characters in a position superior to David are an ethnic minority as well. Besides the representation of his personality and life-events, his external representation is non-stereotypical as well. Dev Patel is not once seen using the stereotypical “Indian” accent that is often asked from actors with an Indian ethnic background. Once again however, while the representation of David Copperfield by Dev Patel is a good development in Asian representation in the numerical and qualitative sense, according to Erigha, David’s ethnic background and history is left out of the film.⁷⁹ Dev Patel, nonetheless, can be regarded as a good role model for young POC according to Lockwood and Kunda.⁸⁰ His character’s social development is realistic and attainable for most people. Even though his social position, once he has grown into the upper-middle class/upper class, is less attainable for British Indian people in a nineteenth-century context, it is very possible to reach a similar social position in a twenty-first-century context. Additionally, Dev Patel is also a good role model as he does not play just any character in the film, but is the lead actor in a non-stereotypical role who is on-screen for most of the time. Therefore, Iannucci’s decision to cast a British Indian actor in the leading role of *The Personal History of David Copperfield* is a development that led to a healthy representation of the (British) Indian community, but still does not represent the Asian community’s ethnic history in the same way that white history is often represented.

We can conclude from this information that Iannucci’s *The Personal History of David Copperfield* gives an innovative view on casting POC actors and actresses for originally white characters. The original novel’s realism may be compromised due to historical accuracy being changed, but Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield* was never a novel about race. Colour-blind

⁷⁹ Maryann Erigha, “Race, Gender, Hollywood: Representation in Cultural Production and Digital Media’s Potential for Change,” *Sociology Compass* 9, no. 1 (2015): pp. 78-83, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12237>.

⁸⁰ Penelope Lockwood and Ziva Kunda, “Superstars and Me: Predicting the Impact of Role Models on the Self,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73, no. 1 (1997): pp. 91-103, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.1.91>, 100-102.

casting may not be possible for every literature-based film, as some stories require characters to be of a certain race due to the story being about racial oppression. The opportunity for POC actors and actresses to star in literature-based films such as this one may inspire more producers to do a colour-blind casting, as Iannucci's film told Dickens story without changing the story's original atmosphere, feel and personality while starring many non-white actors.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to bring attention to the effect of race-bending in film adaptations such as *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (2019) on the story's historical accuracy, (POC) representation and diversity in the film industry. Based on film-adaptation theory, studies on representation and an analysis of social class in Charles Dickens' novel, it can be concluded that colour-blind casting is both a beneficial as well as a flawed form of POC representation.

The film-adaptation industry has changed a lot over the years, coming from silent films, blackface portrayals and whitewashing, and is now slowly moving towards a more inclusive industry. Therefore, adapting Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* into a twenty-first-century film posed a challenge, as *David Copperfield* is not a novel about racial conflict, but rather filled with the differences and struggles between nineteenth-century social classes. Armando Iannucci employed colour-blind casting for his film-adaptation *The Personal History of David Copperfield* (2019). He did not do this because the film-industry required him to, but simply because he found that the actors he cast were the most suitable actors for their roles.⁸¹ Casting actors for their abilities rather than their physical appearance creates new opportunities for POC actors to be hired for a role, as roles are no longer limited to skin-colour, gender, or sexuality. These opportunities automatically lead to more (numerical) representation of people of colour in media, which is valuable for young POC. As stated by Lockwood and Kunda, it is beneficial for (young) people to have role-models, whom ideally share one or more features with the subject, such as race or gender.⁸² However, numerical

⁸¹ Kate Erbland, "Dev Patel on the Colorblind Casting of 'David Copperfield' and Why He's Not Chasing the Chance to Play Bond," *IndieWire* (IndieWire, August 26, 2020), <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/08/david-copperfield-dev-patel-armando-iannucci-colorblind-casting-1234582001/>

⁸² Penelope Lockwood and Ziva Kunda, "Superstars and Me: Predicting the Impact of Role Models on the Self," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73, no. 1 (1997): pp. 91-103, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.1.91>, 100-102.

representation is not the most ideal representation, according to Erigha, as this may justify having flat and stereotypical POC characters, while still having a ‘diverse’ show or film. Therefore, it is important to also keep qualitative representation in mind and create multi-dimensional POC characters.⁸³ Iannucci’s film’s POC characters are all multi-faceted characters, rendering them as a beneficial numerical and qualitative representation of black and Asian people. It should be kept in mind that the characters in *David Copperfield* and in Iannucci’s adaptation of the novel lack ethnic history. The lack of ethnic history combined with the fact that characters such as Mrs Steerforth would have been unable to attain an upper-class position if they were black in the nineteenth-century British history shows the flaws in POC representation through colour-blind casting and argues against the aspect of realism in Iannucci’s film compared to Dickens’ novel. But as *David Copperfield* was never about race and Iannucci’s film passes the average amount of POC characters in film by having fourteen POC actors portraying non-stereotypical characters, it can be said that Iannucci’s *The Personal History of David Copperfield* takes a step in the right direction of representing POC, for the small price of historical accuracy.

This research clearly states that colour-blind casting is a (relatively) good way to represent minorities in film, as the (currently) attainable success of POC characters creates healthy role models for young POC, but it also raises the question whether this is the case in adaptations in which racial conflict is the main theme as well as this thesis only focusses on one case of colour-blind casting. Colour-blind casting creates many opportunities for POC actors and actresses, as a vast amount of originally white characters are then able to be portrayed by any actor or actress, but more research should be done on the influence of race-banded characters on young POC as seeing POC role models in a context that is not realistic

⁸³ Maryann Erigha, “Race, Gender, Hollywood: Representation in Cultural Production and Digital Media’s Potential for Change,” *Sociology Compass* 9, no. 1 (2015): pp. 78-83, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12237>.

or similar to an average twenty-first-century society may lead to unrealistic standards. Another question that may follow this thesis is whether ‘not seeing race’ is just as negative as casting by race. Perhaps colour-blind casting could (unintentionally) lead to the neglect of POC history and discrimination, where the ethnic background of a character or actor is completely ignored. An example of negative colour-blind casting is *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) in which white actress Scarlett Johansson was cast as the Japanese Motoko Kusanagi because she was seemingly best for the job, resulting in whitewashing a POC character.⁸⁴ Therefore, colour-blind casting should be further researched in order to avoid (unintentional) discrimination against ethnic minorities. It would be beneficial to study more film adaptations in which colour-blind casting has been employed by producers, especially in relation to POC role models and representation in comparison to POC role models and representation in films with original POC characters (in leading roles).

This thesis has contributed to research on the rising popularity of colour-blind casting and the accompanying consequences and argues that ethnic minorities, whom are severely underrepresented, need better, healthy representation in media. Research on race, race-bending and colour-blind casting is still relatively new for which more research still needs to be done to create an understanding of the importance of accurate representation.

⁸⁴ Micha Frazer-Carroll, “It’s Dangerous Not to See Race’: Is Colour-Blind Casting All It’s Cracked up to Be?,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, August 11, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/aug/11/its-dangerous-not-to-see-race-is-colour-blind-casting-all-its-cracked-up-to-be>.

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