

The New Criterion

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Race-, gender-, and time-blind

by James Bowman

Like so many bygone monuments of art and artistry, Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* would seem to be, to the artists of today, no longer a work of art and no more than a mirror in which they can see only themselves. In yesterday's Times of London, David Aaronovitch celebrates a new cinematic version by Armando Iannucci, *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, which has cast an Indian actor, Dev Patel, in the title role, in addition to several other examples of what is called "race-blind casting." Familiar in theater, where it is often paired with "gender-blind" ditto—as in Glenda Jackson's recent run as King Lear on Broadway—this kind of maneuver has not hitherto had much play in the movies, for reasons Mr. Aaronovitch attempts to explain. "Almost all cinema (in contrast to theatre) is naturalistic," he writes. "It wants you to believe that everything is real. That it could have happened exactly like that. It doesn't want you for a second sitting there and saying, 'that's weird.' And it takes a particular view of what you the filmgoer will accept as realistic."

You will not be surprised to learn that he's not buying this. "In movies," he continues,

you also need the ability to lend yourself to the film-maker, the writer and the actors. In the past four years I have seen Meryl Streep be the poignantly dreadful singer Florence Foster Jenkins, Katharine Graham, the gutsy owner of the *Washington Post*, a vengeful ice mother in *Big Little Lies* and the nasty-kind Aunt March in *Little Women*. We know it's Meryl Streep and each time we let go of the knowledge. Happily.

Therefore, it is suggested, we should be equally happy to forget that it is Dev Patel up there on the silver screen, losing himself as well as us in the illusion that he is really Dickens's little orphan boy made good.

Mr. Aaronovitch thus finds it natural to ignore the fact that any artistic representation, but especially one in film, is not just of people, but of people *in time*. Before there was race- or gender-blind casting, there was time-blind producing, which was at least equally distorting to old books and plays and was as common in movies as in the theatre. In the latter, the vogue for Shakespeare "in modern dress" antedates even the late Jan Kott's insistence on treating Shakespeare as "our contemporary." Nobody minded very much about that—partly because Shakespeare really was, to

an extent unmatched by any other writer, “not of an age but for all time,” in the words of Ben Jonson’s famous tribute. But the meaning of any work of art is inseparable from its context, and perhaps especially from its temporal context.

David Copperfield was and is not just any orphan boy but a *Victorian* orphan boy. Like everybody else in the novel—like everybody else in the real and fictional worlds alike—he is largely a product of the time and place into which he was born. If an exact duplicate of the genetic material of which he was made (assuming, as we are meant to do, that he were a real person) were to be embodied in today’s London, it wouldn’t constitute a person at all recognizable as Dickens’s David Copperfield. Therefore, the self-conscious substitution for Dickens’s David of someone who carries with him an advertisement that he comes from a different time, from different people with different assumptions about the world, must shatter the theatrical illusion, allegedly so important, of being transported to a distinct time and place even further from our own.

It should be obvious that we can never read or hear *David Copperfield*, much less watch a theatrical or cinematic adaptation of the novel, with the same eyes and ears as Dickens’s contemporaries. But we can, in our reading or hearing or watching, learn a lot about what they, as well as Dickens himself, were like, and what they believed or hoped and what they valued. And among the first things we learn is that, in many ways, they were very different kinds of people from ourselves. For one thing, when they went in for virtue-signaling, the virtues they signaled were completely different from those that people of our own time signal.

Messrs. Iannucci and Aaronovitch are both, it seems to me, signaling like mad that they are tolerant and liberal-minded people who would never, never, never make the mistake of thinking that, in the words of the *Times* article’s sub-heading, “character has anything to do with race or skin.” Although such an attitude is nowhere near so rare as they appear to believe, they have to pretend it is in order for their virtue-signal to signal a virtue, and so to validate the claim to social status embedded in it.

Exactly the same thing was going on in Dickens’s time, to judge by the class consciousness with which *David Copperfield* is shot through. Dickens was disposed both to satirize it and to use it to claim status for himself, on behalf of his hero. In other words, *David Copperfield*, properly understood, is both a critique and an affirmation of what might be called “Victorian values.”

The greatest art from all ages has this same double nature. But the virtue-signaling of the “race-blind” casting of the movie version leaves out this self-critical element by distracting our attention from the people of Dickens’s time and transferring it to people and preoccupations of our own time. Like so much of contemporary art that purports to cast a critical eye upon the past, it smacks a bit of moral triumphalism, putting the world on notice of how far we—or at least the enlightened few of us—are superior to the racially homogeneous past. So far, indeed, that we can afford to patronize it by pretending that those quaint old-timey sorts like Dickens were *really* just trying to be like the liberal-minded status-seekers of our own time—though it takes an Armando Iannucci to show them how.

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