The Norms of Realism and the Case of Non-Traditional Casting

Catharine Abell

Faculty of Philosophy, The University of Oxford,

The Queen's College, Oxford

Abstract

This paper concerns the conditions under which realism is an artistic merit in perceptual narratives, and its consequences for the practice of non-traditional casting. Perceptual narratives are narrative representations that perceptually represent at least some of their contents, and include works of film, television, theatre and opera. On certain construals of the conditions under which realism is an artistic merit in such works, non-traditional casting, however morally merited, is often artistically flawed. I defend an alternative view of the conditions under which realism is an artistic merit in perceptual narratives. I identify the two forms of realism at issue in debates about the artistic merits of non-traditional casting, and identify the artistic norms that determine the conditions under which each constitutes an artistic merit. I argue that, independently of the relation between moral merits and artistic merits, non-traditional casting violates these norms less often than is sometimes assumed. Moreover, in certain circumstances, non-traditional casting affects realism in artistically meritorious ways. I conclude by considering the implications of my view for the practice of whitewashing.

Introduction

Realism is often a merit in representational artworks. Here, I am interested in the conditions under which realism is *artistically* meritorious, remaining neutral regarding whether and how artistic merit differs from aesthetic merit. Certain construals of these conditions have controversial implications for *non-traditional casting*, the practice of casting black and minority ethnic, female or disabled actors in roles in which considerations of realism would usually be thought to call for casting white, male or non-disabled actors.[1] For example, the view that realism is a *pro tanto* artistic merit, such that works are always artistically meritorious in so far as they are realistic, entails that non-traditional casting is always an artistic flaw insofar as it diminishes realism. This is compatible with there being good *moral* reasons to practice non-traditional casting, which promises to provide a partial solution to the lack of diversity in contemporary acting roles and resulting unequal opportunities for actors and to improve the extent to which the diverse membership of contemporary society is reflected in the theatre and onscreen. However, if this view is correct, the practice is often artistically flawed.

In what follows, I show that this view, along with others that seem to be endorsed implicitly by those who object to non-traditional casting on grounds of realism, is incorrect. I will defend an alternative view on which, independently of how moral merits are related to artistic merits, non-traditional casting is artistically flawed less often than such views suggest. Moreover, this view shows that, in certain circumstances, non-traditional casting

---

[1] I am not assuming that race or gender are coherent biological categories (see Haslanger 2000). However, I do assume that they are human categories loosely organized around phenotypical characteristics assumed to be commonly displayed by members of those categories, although these characteristics need be neither unique to them, nor genetically significant. Nor am I assuming a medical model of disability. My account is consistent with a view of disabilities as socially-constructed responses to deviations from conventional social norms of health.

affects realism in *artistically meritorious* ways. I will focus on media such as film, television, theatre and opera, in which non-traditional casting is practiced. I will begin, in section one, by distinguishing two distinct forms of realism implicated in discussions of how non-traditional casting affects realism: *extra-narrative realism* and *intra-narrative realism*. In section two, I will describe the practice of non-traditional casting and its effects on extra-narrative and intra-narrative realism respectively. In section three, I will identify the conditions under which extra-narrative realism constitutes an artistic merit. In section four, I will identify the conditions under which intra-narrative realism does so. In section five, I will examine the implications of these conditions for non-traditional casting. In section six, I will examine its implications for *whitewashing*, the practice of casting white actors in roles in which considerations of realism would usually be thought to call for casting black or minority ethnic actors.

The view I defend recognises the fact that, as Jonathan Gilmore notes, works "that essentially depend on the perceptual properties of their vehicles" pose the distinctive problem of determining which of their features belong solely to the work's vehicle of representation and which are also to be attributed to their content (2020: 40). Which features of such works we are to attribute to their content varies from work to work. For example, Gilmore notes that, although in many films we attribute actors' apparent ages to their characters, we do not attribute the small difference in how old Dustin Hoffman and Anne Bancroft appear in *The Graduate* to the characters they play, whom we take to exhibit a much greater difference in age. Likewise, although we usually interpret colour films as sharing their colours with their objects, we do not generally interpret black and white films as doing so.

I argue that to identify, for any given work, which features are to be attributed to its content, we need to take into account contingent facts about the various constraints under which that work was produced. These constraints include the available tools and materials, the operative moral, social, legal and artistic norms, the need to secure audience understanding, and the conventions governing the work's format. All impose restrictions on how realistic the work can be. I argue that artistic norms prescribe realism only within these restrictions. In some cases, the restrictions are such that non-traditional casting conforms better to those norms than any other casting practice.

1. Two Forms of Realism in Perceptual Narratives

Film, television, theatre and opera productions belong to a broader class of representational artworks that I will call *perceptual narratives*. These are narrative representations that *perceptually represent* at least some of their contents. Film and television productions depict some of their contents, while theatre and opera productions dramatically represent some of theirs. Both are perceptual forms of representation. For present purposes, it is not necessary to address the contentious issue of in exactly what sense depiction and dramatic representation are perceptual. Instead, we can characterize perceptual representation negatively, as incorporating all non-symbolic forms of explicit representation. Perceptual representation therefore excludes linguistic representation and symbolism.

Perceptual narratives generally represent some of their contents linguistically. For example, films usually linguistically represent the contents of characters' speech. They may also

represent some of their contents symbolically. For example, a theatre production may represent a character as Christ-like by representing her as riding a donkey. However, films and theatre productions qualify as perceptual representations because they never rely solely on these methods of representation. They generally perceptually represent their characters' appearances and behaviour, the sounds of their voices, and the appearances and sounds of features of their environments.

Perceptual narratives can exhibit a variety of different forms of realism, and which interests us depends on our purposes. The philosophical literature provides accounts of many varieties of realism in perceptual narratives (Hopkins 2016 identifies five). My aim in this section is not to contest these, but to identify and distinguish the two forms of realism at issue in debates about the artistic merits of non-traditional casting. Some accounts characterize a single notion of realism that incorporates both the forms I distinguish (Abell 2007; see also Hopkins's notion of "Accuracy and Precision"). I do not deny that each may contribute to some further, more general, notion of realism. However, it helps to distinguish them here because objections to non-traditional casting differ in which they rely on. The first, extra-narrative realism, concerns how well the contents of perceptual narratives reflect reality, while the second, intra-narrative realism, concerns how much of their contents they represent perceptually.

1.1 Extra-Narrative Realism

We sometimes judge a perceptual narrative to be artistically meritorious because its contents accurately reflect the way things are, or to be artistically flawed because they do

not. For example, the film *Jurassic Park* was criticized for representing the Tyrannosaurus Rex as running faster than, according to paleontologists, such dinosaurs were capable of running. The form of realism at issue here is *extra-narrative realism*. It is a measure of how good a guide a perceptual narrative's content is to reality. In particular:

> A perceptual narrative is more *extra-narratively* realistic the more representative of reality its content is.

This must be finessed to address a problem posed by perceptual narratives that represent fictional entities. Representations of fictional characters like Hamlet can be more or less extra-narratively realistic, although there is no actual person they represent, and thus no one of whose nature they can be representative. To accommodate extra-narrative realism in the representation of fictional entities, we must distinguish between realism *qua representation of a particular*, and realism *qua representation of an object of some type*. Realism of the first kind is relevant to fictions only insofar as they represent actual people and things. The form of realism relevant to assessing the extra-narrative realism of representations of fictional characters is realism *qua representation of an object of some type*. An actor's performance in the role of Hamlet can be extra-narratively realistic *qua representation of a son avenging his father's murder*. Representations of existing particulars may also exhibit realism of this form. Whether or not it is extra-narratively realistic *qua representation of Iris Murdoch*, the film *Iris* (2001) is realistic *qua representation of an elderly woman suffering from Alzheimer's disease*. Perceptual narratives exhibit extra-narrative realism of this second form whether or not they represent actual individuals.

How representative of reality the content of a perceptual narrative is, and thus how realistic that perceptual narrative is, depends on two factors. A perceptual narrative may represent some character or actual individual extra-narratively realistically relative to some of the aspects under which it represents them, but not others. For example, a performance of *Hamlet* may be realistic *qua representation of a son avenging his father's murder*, but not *qua representation of an Early Modern Danish prince*. Likewise, *Iris* may be more extra-narratively realistic *qua representation of Iris Murdoch when suffering from Alzheimer's disease* than it is *qua representation of Iris Murdoch as a young woman*. Firstly, therefore, how representative of reality the content of a perceptual narrative is depends on the proportion these aspects relative to which it is extra-narratively realistic. The greater this proportion, the more representative of reality and hence the more extra-narratively realistic that perceptual narrative is. If a perceptual narrative represents a particular under an aspect it does not have, (e.g. Iris Murdoch *as a nun*), it cannot realistically represent its object under that aspect, so this lowers the proportion of aspects relative to which it is extra-narratively realistic and thus diminishes its realism.[2]

Secondly, how extra-narratively realistic a perceptual narrative is depends on the *degree* to which the properties it represents its objects as possessing under each of those aspects are representative of those objects under those aspects. When an aspect in question is a type to

---

[2] There is a notion of realism according to which a film depicts Iris Murdoch *as a nun* more or less realistically, depending on how well it reflects how Iris Murdoch would be if she were a nun. However, this notion of realism, as dependent on counterfactuals, is not at issue in debates about the artistic merits of non-traditional casting. The notion of extra-narrative realism aims to capture the form of realism at issue when audiences object to a physically disabled actor playing the able-bodied King Henry VI on the grounds that it is not realistic. On a counterfactual-dependent notion of realism, casting a physically disabled actor need be no impediment to realism, since such an actor can readily capture how Henry VI would have been had he been physically disabled.

which an object is represented as belonging, this is determined by the proportion of actual objects of that type that have the properties the perceptual narrative represents the object as possessing *qua* member of that type.[3] The greater the proportion, the more representative of objects of that type the properties the perceptual narrative represents its object as possessing *qua* member of that type. Therefore, the more realistic it is.

When the aspects in question are circumstances under which an actual individual is represented, the extra-narrative realism of a perceptual narrative is determined by that individual's actual tendency to exhibit the properties the perceptual narrative represents the individual as possessing in those circumstances under the circumstances in question. The greater the tendency, the more representative of the individual under those circumstances are the properties the perceptual narrative represents the individual as possessing under those circumstances, and thus the more realistic that perceptual narrative is.

Certain properties may be representative of a particular under one set of circumstances, but not another. Fierce independence is representative of Iris Murdoch as a young student, but not of Iris Murdoch as an elderly woman suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Perceptual narratives can be extra-narratively realistic *qua* representations of particulars even when they represent those particulars only under exceptional circumstances. They are extra-

---

[3] There is a notion of realism which is a measure of the proportion of *well-functioning* members of a type that have the properties the perceptual narrative represents an object of that type as possessing, rather than of the proportion of actual members of the type that do so. On this notion, a work that perceptually represents a plant of a certain type as healthy can be realistic, even if all its actual instances have been unhealthy. Again, however, this notion of realism is not at issue in debates about the artistic merits of non-traditional casting. Audiences who object that it is unrealistic for a woman to play an Edwardian doctor do not (usually) do so because they do not think that Edwardian women could have been well-functioning doctors, but because few actual Edwardian doctors were women.

narratively realistic *qua* representations of those particulars under the exceptional circumstances at issue to the extent that the properties they ascribe to those particulars are properties they tended to exhibit under those circumstances.

1.2 Intra-Narrative Realism

We sometimes judge a perceptual narrative to be artistically meritorious because it conveys its content in a richly perceptual way, or to be artistically flawed because it fails to do so. For example, although paleontologists deny that T-Rexes were capable of running as fast as they are represented as running in *Jurassic Park*, original audiences of the film nevertheless praised it for what, at the time, was the unparalleled realism of its CGI representation of a T-Rex running.

The form of realism at issue here is *intra-narrative realism*. It depends on how much content a perceptual narrative represents perceptually:

> A perceptual narrative is more *intra-narratively* realistic the more content it represents perceptually.

How much content it represents perceptually is a measure of the number of features it represents perceptually. These features can be more or less abstract. For example, *Jurassic Park* perceptually represents the T-Rex both as having skin and as having skin of a specific kind. Consequently, although intra-narrative realism is a quantitative measure, it reflects the determinacy with which content is perceptually represented.

Ceteris paribus, a colour film is more intra-narratively realistic than a black and white film, because it perceptually represents the colours things have, while the latter does not. A "talkie" is, *ceteris paribus*, more intra-narratively realistic than a silent film because it perceptually represents how things sound, while the latter does not.

It is often part of the content of a black and white film that the things it represents have colours other than black, white and grey and of a silent film that a character utters certain sounds. However, neither represents these aspects of their contents perceptually. They may represent these contents symbolically, as when a character in a black and white film describes the dress she is wearing as red, or when an intertitle in a silent film represents the words a character speaks. Alternatively, they may not represent these aspects of their contents explicitly at all, but do so only implicitly. This occurs when, for example, audiences are left to infer from the fact that a black and white film perceptually represents a character as pricking his finger and wiping it on his shirt that he has stained his shirt red, or from the fact that a silent film perceptually represents a character as covering her ears that her interlocutor is shouting at her. Because only perceptually represented content contributes to intra-narrative realism, contents that perceptual narratives represent symbolically or implicitly do not contribute to their intra-narrative realism.

The intra-narrative realism of perceptual narratives is independent of their extra-narrative realism. To the extent that perceptual narratives have contents that depart from reality, they are extra-narratively irrealistic. However, this need not diminish their intra-narrative realism. Because their intra-narrative realism is a measure of how much content they

represent perceptually, they can exhibit a high degree of intra-narrative realism even when their content is not representative of reality.

2. Non-Traditional Casting

Non-traditional casting includes the practice of casting actors to play particular characters that differ from them in respect of race, gender, or physical capability, such as the Royal Shakespeare Company casting the black actor David Oyelowo to play the white King Henry VI in its 2000 production of *Henry VI*, and Sarah Frankcom casting a woman, Maxine Peake, as Hamlet in her 2014 production at the Royal Exchange. It also includes the practice of casting actors to play characters of types that generally differ from the actors who play them in one of these respects. For example, it includes the BBC casting the black actor Bayo Gbadamosi to play a Victorian soldier in the 2017 episode *The Empress of Mars* of its science-fiction television series *Dr Who*, although the vast majority of Victorian soldiers were white.

When the respects in which actor and character differ are perceptible, instances of non-traditional casting of the first kind diminish the intra-narrative realism of the resultant perceptual narratives. This is because such perceptual narratives accommodate the perceptible differences between actor and character by excluding the relevant characteristics of the actor from the features relevant to determining what they represent perceptually. The RSC's 2000 production does not represent Henry VI as black, and Frankcom's production does not represent Hamlet as female. As a result, those productions are, *ceteris paribus*, less intra-narratively realistic than they would have been had a white

actor been cast as Henry VI and a male been cast as Hamlet and had their perceptible racial and gender characteristics been representationally relevant.

Non-traditional casting of the second kind necessarily diminishes *either* the intra-narrative *or* the extra-narrative realism of the resultant perceptual narratives. If Gbadamosi plays a white Victorian soldier, his perceptible racial characteristics are irrelevant to determining what *The Empress of Mars* perceptually represents, and the episode is, *ceteris paribus*, less intra-narratively realistic than it would have been had the role been played by a white actor. Alternatively, if he plays a black Victorian soldier, the episode's intra-narrative realism is not diminished but its extra-narrative realism is, since few Victorian soldiers were black. [4]

Critics often object to non-traditional casting practices because they diminish realism. Angela Pao notes that:

> Resistant spectators are unsettled rather than stimulated by the violations of
>
> expectations that innovative casting entails. They are distracted by racially mixed

---

[4] Non-traditional casting is often taken to include casting practices that result in characters being represented as having perceptible characteristics that, according to some original source narrative, they do not possess. This includes, for example, casting the black actor Noma Dumezweni to play a black Hermione Granger in John Tiffany's theatre production of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* when, in films of the Harry Potter novels (although not the novels themselves, which are silent on this issue), Hermione is represented as white.

This practice does not diminish intra-narrative realism, since the perceptible attributes of actor and character match. Whether or not it diminishes extra-narrative realism depends on the nature of the character in question. It does so only when it results in characters being represented as having attributes that are not characteristic of the particulars they represent or of the actual instances of the type to which they belong. Insofar as Hermione Granger belongs to a type with actual instances (e.g. academic overachiever), this is a type whose actual instances are neither characteristically white nor characteristically black. Consequently, casting Noma Dumezweni does not diminish extra-narrative realism. By contrast, because Early Modern Danish princes were not characteristically black, casting a black actor to play a black Prince of Denmark in a production of *Hamlet* would diminish extra-narrative realism. In what follows, I ignore this practice, except insofar as it is pursued at the expense of extra-narrative realism.

casts, finding the results implausible (Pao 2011: 2).

The grounds on which critics object to instances of non-traditional casting that diminish extra-narrative realism differ from those on which they object to instances that diminish intra-narrative realism. Since both grounds involve largely implicit conceptions of the conditions under which extra-narrative and intra-narrative realism are artistically meritorious, how convincing they are depends on how they are elaborated.

3 Extra-Narrative Realism and Artistic Merit

Objections to instances of non-traditional casting that diminish extra-narrative realism generally assume that, *ceteris paribus*, perceptual narratives are artistically worse the less extra-narratively realistic they are. For example, the theatre critic John Simon is reported as having said both that "Patinkin is too ethnic to play the role of Leontes. You can't play the king of a Greek or Roman kingdom if you look too ethnic", and that "Blacks do not belong in parts for white actresses, unless they can pass for white. That's wrong—historically and sociologically and logically" (as quoted in Maychick 1989). Likewise, Mark Gatiss, who wrote *The Empress of Mars* protested against the casting of Gbadamosi to play a Victorian soldier because "there weren't any black soldiers in Victoria's army" (as quoted in Turner and Diver 2017).

This assumption can be accommodated by construing extra-narrative realism as a *pro tanto* artistic merit (for this notion, see Gaut 2007: 60-62). This view entails that non-traditional casting is invariably artistically flawed in so far as it diminishes extra-narrative realism.

Nevertheless, it can allow the possibility of good artistic reasons to practice non-traditional casting at the expense of extra-narrative realism. Extra-narrative realism is just one among a variety of determinants of the overall artistic value of perceptual narratives. Consequently, non-traditional casting can be artistically merited when it helps to realize some other artistic merit that is weightier in the relevant context than extra-narrative realism, because it makes the resultant perceptual narrative better overall than it would have been had traditional casting practices been employed, although it remains artistically flawed in so far as it diminishes extra-narrative realism. For example, a film that represents the US President as female might be artistically meritorious because it is informative about the ways in which the presidency would be different with a female incumbent, although there has never been a female US President and it therefore does so at the expense of extra-narrative realism.

Nevertheless, the particular case in which Gattis objects to non-traditional casting does not seem to be of this kind. There does not seem to be any independent artistic merit that is realized by casting Gbadamosi in the role of a Victorian soldier. If extra-narrative realism is a *pro tanto* artistic merit, therefore, non-traditional casting would indeed be an artistic flaw in this instance.

However, extra-narrative realism is not a *pro tanto* artistic merit. If it were, fantasies would be artistically flawed in so far as they are not representative of reality. Rather, the respects in which failure to be representative of reality constitutes an artistic flaw in a perceptual narrative and being representative of reality constitutes an artistic merit depends on its genre. Works of historical fiction are artistically meritorious if their contents are

representative of people's general appearances and behaviour in the periods and places they represent, and artistically flawed if they are not, although this is not true of fantasies.

Genre-relative norms determine when extra-narrative realism is artistically merited. They are not unique to perceptual narratives, but govern all works in a given genre. They identify the respects in which the contents of works in a given genre should be representative of reality. The norm of extra-narrative realism for historical dramas prescribes their contents to be representative of how people appeared and behaved in the relevant periods and places, but that for fantasies does not. Consequently, historical dramas are rightly criticised for minor inaccuracies in their representations of dress or deportment, while fantasies are not.

The task of identifying the norms of extra-narrative realism for works in specific genres falls to accounts of those individual genres. However, we can abstract away from their genre-specific prescriptions of extra-narrative realism to provide a generic statement of the norm:

> *The norm of extra-narrative realism*: for a work belonging to genre *g*, ensure that its content is representative of reality in the *g*-appropriate respects.

A work must conform to the norm of extra-narrative realism for its genre for its extra-narrative realism to constitute an artistic merit. For its lack of extra-narrative realism to constitute an artistic flaw, a work must violate the relevant norm of extra-narrative realism. This suggests that Gattis was wrong to object to Gbadamosi playing a Victorian soldier. *Dr Who* belongs to the science fiction genre. The respects in which the norm of extra-narrative realism for science fiction requires content to be representative of reality are very limited.

The episode in which Gbadamosi was cast represents Victorian soldiers as attempting to fix their broken space rocket. The soldiers' racial characteristics fall outside the scope of the norm. Conformity to the norm therefore does not preclude casting Gbadamosi in the role.

The norms of extra-narrative realism have *prima facie*, rather than *pro tanto* normative force (see Reisner 2013; Scanlon 1998; 51). *Pro tanto* norms operate invariably, such that works are necessarily flawed in so far as they violate them. By contrast, *prima facie* norms do not operate invariably. Conflicting normative considerations can, not merely outweigh such norms, but undermine their force. A violation of a *prima facie* norm that would otherwise be a flaw can cease to be a flaw when that norm is undermined by conflicting normative considerations.

The *prima facie* norms of extra-narrative realism are undermined when, in context, some other artistic good is weightier than the relevant norm of extra-narrative realism and violating that norm is necessary to realise the relevant artistic good. For example, Michael Haneke's film *Funny Games* (2007) is a thriller, but violates the norm of extra-narrative realism for thrillers: the character Paul breaks the fourth wall and speaks directly to the audience. The film is not artistically flawed in so far as it violates the norm, because there are conflicting normative considerations that undermine the norm. By representing Paul as directly addressing the audience, Haneke succeeds in achieving his aim to "show the viewer his *own position* vis-à-vis violence and its portrayal" (Haneke 2010: 579). Because the film's violation of the norm is necessary to realise the weightier artistic good of showing us our complicity in the portrayal of violence, its violation of that norm is not an artistic flaw. However, this weightier artistic good does not undermine the relevant norm of extra-

narrative realism altogether. It undermines it only *in so far as is necessary to achieve the weightier artistic good*. It therefore remains legitimate to criticise *Funny Games* for further violations of the norm that are not necessary to achieve any weightier artistic good.

4 Intra-Narrative Realism and Artistic Merit

Those who object to non-traditional casting when it diminishes intra-narrative realism tend to do so on epistemological grounds. It is unclear, they claim, what the resultant perceptual narratives represent perceptually and therefore what their contents are. They worry, for example, that casting Oyelowo as Henry VI makes it difficult for audiences to work out whether, in the resulting production, Henry VI is black or white, and casting Peake as Hamlet makes it difficult for audiences to work out whether Hamlet is male or female. This worry is reflected in the theatre director Trevor Nunn's response to criticism of his all-white casting of *The Wars of the Roses*:

> The connections between the characters, and hence the narrative of the plays, are extremely complex, and so everything possible must be done to clarify for an audience who is related by birth to whom. Hence, I decided that, in this instance, these considerations should take precedence over my usual diversity inclination (quoted in Owen 2015).

Nunn's concern is that casting non-white actors might result in them playing the biological relations of characters played by white actors, and this would make it difficult for audiences to work out what the biological relations between characters are.

Christy Mag Uidhir has argued that fiction films that give rise to such epistemic difficulties are aesthetically flawed because they undermine their own aims. He argues that fiction films in which there is a mismatch between the perceptible characteristics of actors and those of the characters they play have the aim of getting audiences to imagine that the characters they represent have certain perceptible characteristics, but then frustrate their own attempts to achieve this aim by using actors with incompatible perceptible characteristics to represent those characters. Such self-undermining, he claims, is a *pro tanto* aesthetic defect (Mag Uidhir 2012: 8).

This suggests one way of motivating Nunn's response. Applying Mag Uidhir's argument to artistic merit and extending it to perceptual narratives in general suggests that non-traditional casting is artistically defective in so far as it diminishes intra-narrative realism in ways that result in self-undermining perceptual narratives.

The view that self-undermining epistemic difficulties are *pro tanto* artistic demerits is compatible with some instances of non-traditional casting being warranted artistically despite creating such difficulties. They may be warranted if they help to realize independent artistic merits that are weightier in the context at issue. Ayanna Thompson notes that:

> Actors of color have been cast in roles not traditionally associated with race, color or ethnicity in order to make a socio-political statement about the character's subjection, outsider status, untraditional knowledge, and so on (Thompson 2006: 9).

In productions of *Hamilton: An American Musical*, non-white actors were deliberately cast to play the all-white American founding fathers partly to highlight the difficulties the founding fathers faced. The non-traditional casting of productions of *Hamilton* may therefore be warranted artistically, on this view, because it makes effective symbolic use of race. Although its non-traditional casting remains an artistic flaw in so far as it makes it difficult for audiences to work out whether the productions represent the founding fathers as black or white, such symbolism may nevertheless make productions of *Hamilton* better overall than they would have been had they been cast traditionally.

Nevertheless, Nunn was not pursuing any independent artistic merit that could be realized by the non-traditional casting of his production of *The Wars of the Roses*. This view therefore suggests that he was artistically justified in rejecting non-traditional casting, which would result in an artistically flawed production that prescribes audiences to imagine that certain characters are biologically related to one another, while representing those characters in a way that makes it difficult for audiences to imagine that they are biologically related.

However, epistemic difficulties of the kind Mag Uidhir identifies are not *pro tanto* artistic flaws in perceptual narratives. They need not be artistic flaws at all. Whether or not a perceptual narrative poses such epistemic difficulties often depends on how familiar audiences are with its means of representation. To an audience previously exposed only to real-time CCTV recordings, a feature film that did not perceptually represent the durations of the events it represented would pose self-undermining epistemic difficulties. The film would prescribe them to imagine that the events represented have certain durations, while

representing those events using representations whose differing durations make it hard for them to identify the represented durations of events. Such a film does not pose epistemic difficulties for us, because we are familiar with perceptual narratives whose representations of events have durations different from those they represent events as having.

It is implausible that certain features of a perceptual narrative are artistic flaws only relative to specific audiences. Taking its intended or actual audience to determine whether or not a certain feature is a flaw does not overcome the problem, because an audience can become familiar with a means of representation with which it was once unfamiliar. This would therefore suggest, implausibly, that a feature that once constituted an artistic flaw would cease to constitute one once audiences had been exposed to further perceptual narratives employing similar means of representation, enabling them to overcome the epistemic difficulty. Insisting that it remains a flaw because, at the time of production, that audience was unfamiliar with the means of representation in question would be *ad hoc* and would have the counter-intuitive consequence that means of representation, such as film editing, that we value artistically are in fact artistically flawed because, at their inception, they posed epistemic difficulties for audiences.

Whether or not representing events of certain durations by representations with different durations constitutes an artistic flaw depends instead on whether, in the relevant context, it comprises the best use of the available representational resources. The limited length of feature films often prevents them from perceptually representing the durations of the events they represent, since those events frequently have durations that exceed those of the films themselves. When constraints on the length of a perceptual narrative make it

necessary to represent events of certain durations using perceptual representations of shorter durations in order to represent all those events, this need not be an artistic flaw in that perceptual narrative, even if it poses epistemic difficulties for audiences unfamiliar with its method of representation.

The same applies to perceptual narratives that present their actual audiences with epistemic difficulties. In the 416 minute 1997 television dramatization of Anthony Powell's twelve-novel series *A Dance to the Music of Time*, the actor Simon Russell Beale, then in his mid-thirties, played the character Widmerpool from boyhood through to old age. Many other characters are also played by the same actors throughout. This makes it hard for viewers to identify the ages characters are represented as having at any point in the narrative. Nevertheless, it is not an artistic flaw in the series that it uses the same actors throughout, since it was necessary to do so to enable viewers to track the different characters through a very condensed narrative featuring a large cast.

The following norm determines the conditions under which a perceptual narrative's intra-narrative realism constitutes an artistic merit or its lack of intra-narrative realism constitutes a flaw:

> *The norm of intra-narrative realism:* Maximize how much of the story to be told is conveyed by what is represented perceptually, within the operative restrictions.

This norm reflects the advice theatre directors and filmmakers are often given to "show, don't tell". *The story to be told* is the story that a perceptual narrative's makers seek to

represent, whether that story is specified independently by a film or television script, play or novel, or whether it is determined entirely by the makers' representational intentions. A perceptual narrative conveys more of the story to be told by what it represents perceptually the more of that story it either represents perceptually or enables audiences to infer from what it perceptually represents. The norm instructs makers to rely as little as possible on linguistic or symbolic representation to convey that story. Conformity with this norm is compatible with incidental details that are not part of the story to be told being perceptually represented in the resultant perceptual narrative. Indeed, this is often unavoidable in practice, since the story to be told usually underdetermines the content (both explicit and implicit) of the resultant perceptual narrative.

The norm of intra-narrative realism governs makers' choices regarding what to represent perceptually. Makers face such choices because restrictions on what they can represent perceptually often force them to choose between perceptually representing two different aspects of the story to be told. As discussed, the conventions of format that limit the lengths of feature films impose such restrictions.

The materials and tools available for producing perceptual narratives further restrict which aspects of the story to be told they can represent perceptually. Films made before colour film stock was available could not perceptually represent the colours of their objects.

The television dramatization of *A Dance to the Music of Time* shows that the need to secure audience understanding can also restrict which aspects of the story to be told perceptual narratives can represent perceptually. Theatre productions often cannot perceptually

represent characters as facing one another, because actors need to face the front of the stage, even when addressing one another, to enable audiences to hear their words and see their facial expressions. Films set in places in which English is not spoken, but made for predominantly English-speaking audiences cannot perceptually represent the sound of their characters' speech if audiences are to understand what they are saying.

Furthermore, artistic, moral and legal or social norms superordinate to the norm of intra-narrative realism can restrict which aspects of the story to be told perceptual narratives can represent perceptually. Theatre performances in Shakespeare's day were unable perceptually to represent the distinctively female characteristics of female characters, because social norms prevented women from playing female roles. The artistic norms governing productions of Baroque operas such as Handel's *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* prescribe conformity to a musical score. The fact that such operas were often scored for castrati can therefore prevent modern productions from perceptually representing certain characters as distinctively male because, in the absence of castrati, women are often best equipped to sing those roles. Likewise, moral norms prohibiting the torture of animals prevent films produced using traditional cinematographic methods from perceptually representing animals being tortured. The 1930 Production Code of the Motion Picture Industry, intended to ensure the moral acceptability of films produced for US audiences, prohibited the perceptual representation of "lustful kissing" and sex. Films produced in conformity with the Code therefore could not perceptually represent such activities.

Some restrictions, including these norms, flatly preclude perceptual narratives from perceptually representing their objects as having certain properties. Nevertheless, other

such restrictions necessitate choices because they preclude only the perceptual representation of objects as having certain *combinations* of properties. For example, the need to secure audience understanding does not prevent theatrical productions from perceptually representing characters as facing one another. Often, however, it prevents them from perceptually representing characters both as having certain facial expressions *and* as facing one another because, to perceptually represent characters' facial expressions to the audience, the actors who play them must face the front of the stage. Likewise, the conventional lengths of films and television programmes need not prevent them perceptually from representing the durations of events, but often prevent them from perceptually representing *both* the durations of individual events *and* multiple distinct events, since multiple distinct events can be perceptually represented only by sacrificing the perceptual representation of their durations.

If perceptually representing characters as having certain facial expressions conveys more of the story to be told than perceptually representing them as facing one another (for example, because their facial expressions reveal their attitudes towards events), the norm of intra-narrative realism prescribes perceptually representing characters' facial expressions rather than their bodily relations to one another. Similarly, if perceptually representing a particular sequence of events conveys more of the story to be told than perceptually representing some events in that sequence as having particular durations (for example, because the sequence makes certain subsequent events inevitable), it prescribes perceptually representing the whole sequence of events rather than the durations of particular constituent events.

Some choices do not affect a perceptual narrative's conformity to the norm of intra-narrative realism. This occurs when all the available choices result in equivalent amounts of the story to be told being conveyed by what is perceptually represented. In such cases, the norm of intra-narrative realism sanctions any of these choices. Although biological relations between characters are part of the story to be told by *The Wars of the Roses*, characters' races do not feature in that story. Consequently, the norm sanctions casting non-white actors in some of the roles. Perceptually representing all the characters as white conveys no more of the story to be told than not perceptually representing characters' perceptible racial characteristics. Both cases are compatible with any character being related to *any* other character by birth.

Perceptual narratives must approach conformity to the norm of intra-narrative realism to have artistic merit in virtue of their intra-narrative realism. The closer they approach conformity, the more artistic merit they have. The norm of intra-narrative realism shows that the degree of artistic merit a perceptual narrative exhibits in virtue of its intra-narrative realism does not simply track the degree to which it is intra-narratively realistic. In *Jezabel* (1938), Julie Marsden (played by Bette Davis) wears a red dress to the Olympus Ball, although, as an unmarried woman, she is expected to wear white. That she wears a red dress is crucial to the story to be told. Perceptually representing her dress as red would convey her imminent social suffering. To capture the redness of Marsden's dress within the restrictions of black and white film, the director William Wyler purportedly had Davis wear a bronze dress, because this best enabled the film perceptually to represent the tonal relations between the red dress and the black suits and white dresses of the other guests. The film has artistic merit because it approaches conformity to the norm. An otherwise

identical colour film made with Davis wearing a red dress would be more intra-narratively realistic, but would have no more artistic merit, because its greater realism results from fewer constraints on what it can represent perceptually, not from more effectively maximizing the narrative significance of what it represents perceptually within those constraints.

Absent conflicting artistic considerations, perceptual narratives that violate the norm are artistically flawed because they do so, and more flawed the worse that violation. However, the norm of intra-narrative realism has *prima facie*, rather than *pro tanto* normative force. When there is some other artistic good that, in context, is weightier than the norm of intra-narrative realism, and when it is necessary to violate the norm to realise that artistic good, the norm is undermined in so far as is necessary to realise the weightier artistic good. Because *Hamilton: An American Musical* violates the norm of intra-narrative realism to realize a weightier artistic good, and because it is necessary to violate the norm to achieve that good, *Hamilton*'s failure to conform to the norm of intra-narrative realism is not an artistic flaw *in so far as* that failure is necessary for it to realize the weightier artistic good.

Crucially, choices governed by the norm of intra-narrative realism affect which features of the resultant perceptual narratives are representationally relevant. When a theatre director faces her actors towards the front of the stage solely to perceptually represent characters' facial expressions, the actors' orientations relative to one another are representationally irrelevant. However, if it had conformed better to the norm perceptually to represent characters as facing one another than perceptually to represent their facial expressions, and

the director therefore oriented her actors towards one another, their orientations would have been representationally relevant.

In the introduction, I noted that audiences of perceptual narratives face the difficulty of determining which of their features belong solely to the vehicle of representation and which are also to be attributed to their content. The account I have provided helps to explain how they do this. Audiences work out which features of a perceptual narrative are to be ascribed to its content by drawing on their knowledge of: the tools and materials available for use in its production; the requirements for securing audience understanding; the conventions of format; and superordinate norms that are likely to have governed its production. On this basis, they draw inferences about which content ascriptions fit best with the assumption that its maker was attempting to conform to the norm of intra-narrative realism in producing it, and ascribe to it whichever content best conforms to that assumption. Someone's failure to engage in such inference reveals their own artistic insensitivity, not an artistic flaw in the perceptual narrative in question.

5 Implications for Non-Traditional Casting

Non-traditional casting does not violate any norm of extra-narrative realism, despite diminishing extra-narrative realism, when the resultant perceptual narrative belongs to a genre whose norm of extra-narrative realism does not require its content to be representative of reality in respect of characters' races, genders or physical abilities. It does not violate any norm of extra-narrative realism, for example, for a fantasy film to represent a Victorian aristocrat as black.

Non-traditional casting does not violate the norm of intra-narrative realism, despite diminishing intra-narrative realism, when it does not affect conformity to that norm. For example, it does not affect conformity to the norm of intra-narrative realism to cast black actors to play white characters in a production of *The Wars of the Roses*, because what is represented perceptually does not convey any more of the story to be told when it includes characters' perceptible racial characteristics than when it does not.

There are various conditions under which non-traditional casting is artistically merited, despite diminishing realism. It is merited despite diminishing extra-narrative realism when weightier artistic goods that can be achieved only by non-traditional casting, such as showing how the US presidency would be with a female incumbent, undermine the *prima facie* norm of extra-narrative realism. Likewise, it is artistically merited despite diminishing intra-narrative realism, when weightier artistic goods that require non-traditional casting, such as *Hamilton*'s symbolic use of race, undermine the *prima facie* norm of intra-narrative realism. It is also artistically merited, despite diminishing intra-narrative realism, when the superordinate norms to which the norm of intra-narrative realism is sensitive include artistic norms conformity to which requires non-traditional casting. For example, in the absence of a castrato to play Cesare in Handel's *Giulio Cesare in Egitto,* the superordinate artistic norm requiring conformity to the musical score will often require a female soprano to be cast in the role. In all these cases, non-traditional casting is artistically merited due to factors *independent* of the norms of realism.

However, it can also be artistically merited *because* conformity to *both* the norms of extra-narrative and intra-narrative realism requires it. To see this, consider how the norms interact. Conformity to the operative norms of extra-narrative realism does not alone preclude non-traditional casting. This is true even of the norm governing historical dramas, which imposes very stringent requirements regarding the respects in which their contents must be representative of reality. Any mismatch between the perceptible features of actor and character can be reconciled with the operative norm of extra-narrative realism by construing the relevant features of the actor as representationally irrelevant.

Likewise, conformity to the norm of intra-narrative realism does not alone preclude non-traditional casting. The norm governs how perceptual narratives represent their content, not the nature of their content. Consequently, it is possible to avoid any mismatch between the perceptible features of actor and character by taking it to be part of the story to be told that the character has whichever perceptible features the actor playing that character happens to possess. Casting Maxine Peake as Hamlet does not violate the norm of intra-narrative realism if it is part of the story to be told that Hamlet is female.

Conformity to both norms together, however, does preclude certain instances of non-traditional casting. Consider an historical drama film about the Chicago race riot of 1919. The norm of extra-narrative realism for historical dramas requires the film to be representative of the appearances and behaviour of people of the types who lived in Chicago in 1919. It therefore requires such a film to represent police offers as white since, in 1919, Chicagoan police officers were overwhelmingly white. Alone, this does not preclude non-traditional casting. However, conformity to the norm of intra-narrative realism

plausibly requires the film perceptually to represent the races of its characters, since doing so conveys a great deal of the story to be told, enabling audiences to identify characters' motivations, allegiances, and likely actions. Given the restrictions on content imposed by the norm of extra-narrative realism, the norm of intra-narrative realism therefore prescribes perceptually representing police officers as white. The norms jointly preclude casting a non-white actor to play a police officer in the film.

Nevertheless, conformity to *both* norms sometimes *requires* non-traditional casting, even when conformity to the relevant norm of extra-narrative realism requires representativeness with respect to people's appearances. Conformity to the norm of intra-narrative realism requires maximizing how much of the story to be told is conveyed by what is represented perceptually, given the tools and materials available for its production. These tools and materials include the available pool of actors. Actors are part of the media of theatre, opera, film and television. The actors available can present makers of perceptual narratives with choices regarding which aspects of content perceptually to represent, since they often differ in their abilities perceptually to represent various aspects of content. This is both because their acting skills can differ and because their perceptible characteristics can prevent them from perceptually representing certain features of a character. Conformity to the norms of realism requires casting whichever actor can perceptually represent features of a character that, in combination, convey the most of the story to be told. This may involve significant trade-offs, since there may not be any actor who is able perceptually to represent every feature of a character that it is possible perceptually to represent.

When a character's race, gender or physical ability does not convey as much of the story to be told as certain other of their features, conformity to the norms of realism may therefore require casting an actor who differs perceptibly from that character in respect of race, gender or physical ability, and discounting those features of the actor as representationally irrelevant. This will happen when no other available actor can perceptually represent a combination of the character's features that conveys more of the story to be told. This is arguably the case with Michael Longhurst's 2016 production of *Amadeus* at the Olivier Theatre. Although *Amadeus* is governed by a norm of extra-narrative realism that requires its content to be representative of characters' appearances, and although the composer Salieri was white, Longhurst's decision to cast the black actor Lucien Msamati to play Salieri plausibly conformed to the norms of realism. As Michael Billington observed in his review:

> Msamati is an excellent Salieri. He makes it clear that Salieri's attack on Mozart is a
> perpetuation of a war with a God by whom he feels personally betrayed. Above all,
> Msamati captures the contrast between the public and private Salieri. Outwardly, he
> is the most composed of all composers. Left alone, he beats himself in anguish, not
> least because he is the sole person in Vienna capable of appreciating Mozart's genius
> (Billington 2016).

That Msamati's performance enables audiences to infer Salieri's private motivations and jealousies demonstrates how much of the story to be told Msamati conveys by those features of Salieri he perceptually represents. If no other actor available to play Salieri could have perceptually represented a combination of features that conveyed more of the story to be told, conformity to both norms of realism requires Msamati to be cast in the role. In

such cases, non-traditional casting is artistically meritorious *because* it is prescribed by the norms of realism.

6 Non-Traditional Casting Versus Whitewashing

It might seem to follow from the argument presented above that, under conditions analogous to those in which conformity to the norms of realism requires non-traditional casting, the norms will also require whitewashing. *Whitewashing*, recall, is the practice of casting white actors in roles in which considerations of realism would usually be thought to call for casting black or minority ethnic actors. Neither the norms of extra-narrative realism nor that of intra-narrative realism directly discriminates whitewashing from non-traditional casting. Nevertheless, I will now argue, they reveal various possible differences in the conditions under which each is artistically merited.

These differences are grounded in the moral differences between the two. It would be naïve to assume that non-traditional casting is invariably morally merited. As Thompson notes:

> colorblind casting can still traffic in race-based stereotypes. The casting of Roscoe Lee Brown in … supporting roles, instead of leading ones, unwittingly replicates the stereotype that black men are less threatening when they are presented as sidekicks. And in turn this practice implicitly "races" leading men and lovers, like Romeo, Julius Caesar, Lear, Leontes, and Troilus, as white (Thompson 2006: 11).

Nevertheless, moral norms often favour non-traditional casting, but usually proscribe whitewashing, which exacerbates existing inequalities in opportunities for actors, and

prevents black and minority ethnic communities from seeing people from their own communities in perceptual narratives, even when those perceptual narratives are *about* members of their communities. It would beg the question against those who object to non-traditional casting on artistic grounds to assume that the moral norms that favour certain instances of non-traditional casting are among the superordinate norms to which the norm of intra-narrative realism is sensitive. I have not done so.

It is plausible, however, that moral norms proscribing whitewashing are among these superordinate norms. This would explain why certain instances of non-traditional casting seem to be artistically meritorious but equivalent instances of whitewashing do not. If this were the case, the norms would not prescribe an instance of whitewashing directly analogous to casting Msamati to play Salieri. Conformity to the norm of intra-narrative realism requires maximizing how much of the story to be told is conveyed by what is perceptually represented only within the operative restrictions. If these restrictions include moral norms that preclude casting white actors to play non-white characters, doing so is not artistically merited, even if it would increase how much of the story to be told is conveyed by what is perceptually represented.

The weightier artistic goods that can undermine the *prima facie* norms of realism may also differentiate whitewashing from non-traditional casting. Whether or not they do so depends on how moral merits are related to artistic merits. There are various views on this issue. Autonomists argue that the moral merits or demerits of a work are always independent of its artistic merits and demerits (e.g. Anderson and Dean 1998). Ethicists (e.g. Gaut 2007) and moderate moralists (e.g. Carroll 1996) argue that the moral merits and demerits of a work

can help to determine its artistic value and that, when they do, moral merits are always artistic merits, and moral flaws always artistic flaws. Immoralists agree with ethicists and moderate moralists that moral merits and demerits can help to determine artistic value, but disagree with them in claiming that moral flaws can sometimes constitute artistic *merits* (e.g. John 2006, Eaton 2012). Ethicists and moderate moralists (and immoralists, since they need not insist that artistically relevant moral merits are always artistic demerits) may argue that artistically relevant moral merits include casting a film in a manner that will engage the various members of a diverse society, which is therefore also artistically merited. Suppose that this is correct. Further suppose that casting a film in this way results in the violation of either a norm of extra-narrative realism or the norm of intra-narrative realism (depending on which of its features are representationally relevant). Nevertheless, if there are contexts in which this artistic merit is both weightier than the relevant norm of realism and can be realised only by non-traditional casting, it will render that norm inoperative. Consequently, non-traditional casting of the kind required to realise the artistic good would be artistically merited in those contexts, although equivalent instances of whitewashing would not.

It would require further argument to show that such moral merits are indeed artistic merits and thus that there can be artistic asymmetries of this second kind between whitewashing and non-traditional casting. Nevertheless, it is open to all parties to the debate concerning the relation between a work's moral and its artistic value to agree that moral norms proscribing whitewashing are among the superordinate norms to which the norm of intra-narrative realism is sensitive and thus that whitewashing is not artistically merited even when analogous instances of non-traditional casting are. Moreover, each can embrace the norms presented here. Although these norms show that non-traditional casting practices

that are morally merited can also be artistically merited, they posit only a contingent connection between their moral and their artistic merit.

Acknowledgements

References

Abell, Catharine (2007). Pictorial Realism. *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 81(1), 1-17.

Anderson, James and Dean, Jeffrey (1998). Moderate Autonomism. *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 38(2), 150-166.

Billington, Michael (2016). Amadeus review – stunning production pits Salieri against God, Mozart and his own orchestra. *The Guardian*, 27/10/16, goo.gl/mASL13

Carroll, Noël (1996). Moderate Moralism. *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 36(3), 223-238.

Eaton, Anne (2012). Robust Immoralism. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 70(3), 281-292.

Gaut, Berys (2007). *Art, Emotion and Ethics*. Oxford University Press.

Gilmore, Jonathan (2020). *Apt Imaginings*. Oxford University Press.

Haneke, Michael (2010). Violence and the Media. In Roy Grundmann (Ed.), *A Companion to Michael Haneke*, Wiley-Blackwell (575–579).

Haslanger, Sally (2000). Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be? *Nous*, 34(1), 31-55.

Hopkins, Robert (2016). Realism in film (and other representations). In Katherine Thompson Jones (Ed.) *Current Controversies in Philosophy of Film*. Routledge (76-95).

John, Eileen (2006). Artistic Value and Opportunistic Moralism. In Matthew Kieran (Ed.) *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. Blackwell (332-41).

Mag Uidhir, Christy (2012). The Aesthetics of Actor-Character Race Matching in Film Fictions. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 12(3), 1-17.

Maychick, Dana (1989). Papp Demands Simon's Firing. In Broadway Beat. *The New York Post*, 30/3/89.

Owen, J. (2015). Trevor Nunn defends all-white Shakespeare histories. *The Independent*, 15/8/15, https://goo.gl/ZW4PEQ

Pao, Angela (2011). *No Safe Spaces: Re-casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater*. University of Michigan Press.

Reisner, Andrew (2013). Prima Facie and Pro Tanto Oughts. In Hugh LaFollette (Ed.) *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Scanlon, Thomas M. (1998) *What We Owe to Each Other*. Harvard University Press.

Thompson, Ayanna (2006). Practicing a Theory/Theorizing a Practice: An Introduction to Shakespearean Colorblind Casting. In Ayanna Thompson (Ed.) *Colorblind Shakespeare*. Routledge.

Turner, Camilla and Diver, Tony (2017). Doctor Who writer protested against 'problematic' casting of black actor as Victorian soldier. *The Telegraph*. 11/6/17, https://goo.gl/YKUE9y