

**RACE REPRESENTATION AND THE TRANSLATION
FROM TEXT TO SCREEN:
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF *CLOUD ATLAS***

Honors Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis project examines the 2012 film *Cloud Atlas* and how the film's portrayals, through its unique use of an ensemble cast, challenge our understandings of socially constructed differences. This analysis examines the thematic significance of the actors' appearance changes throughout the film as they play characters of different genders, ages, races, and classes. It also considers how these changes provide commentary on contemporary society's views of these social groups. Central topics of analysis include the characters portrayed, the time periods in which their storylines are set, and the characters' connections to one another. It also critiques the filmmakers' choices, however, acknowledging the voices of groups that identify problematic elements, such as performative diversity and its use of yellowface—prevalent issues which deserve recognition. This thesis further explores these themes through an additional video essay component, available on Vimeo, discussing the paradox of the film's positive intended messages versus its problematic use of an ensemble cast. This thesis's goal is to provide a bridge that connects the film's embedded message with our understanding of race, gender, and other social strata. It explains why the story helps to amplify the connections between the movie's plot and society's understanding of our many differences. By connecting the key elements and events of the film, this project provides insights regarding the film's disconnect between the intent and the execution of the story and its message on screen.

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Introduction

Released in 2012 and directed by Lana and Lilly Wachowski and Tom Tykwer, the film *Cloud Atlas* is an adaptation of David Mitchell's 2004 novel with the same name. It contains six nested stories, each set in a different year and location. The film and novel both combine several genres including contemporary fiction, science fiction and historical fiction. In the film, these six distinct stories focus on the lives of characters living in the years 1849, 1936, 1973, 2012, 2144 and 2321—with 2012 representing the present day. *Cloud Atlas* is an interesting case study in media representation and reception, due to the discourse following its release among both audiences and critics. A widespread question following the film's release was: Is *Cloud Atlas* a misunderstood masterpiece, or is it an overly grandiose attempt at filmmaking? Public opinion was divided; the film received polarized reviews from both audiences and critics, earning, for example, a 66% rating on Rotten Tomatoes and a score of 55/100 on Metacritic because of the lack of consensus. Opinions of the film tended to be either very positive, praising the film for its ambition and uniqueness, or very negative, criticizing the film referring to it as an "unparalleled disaster" (Marsh, 2012, para. 3). *Time Magazine* and *Village Voice* also both declared it the worst film of 2012 (Jagernauth, 2012). The film also underperformed in the box office, only grossing \$9.4 million its first week in the United States (Subers, 2012).

Cloud Atlas is a story about reincarnation. Each of the characters in this film are reincarnates of souls, and the film shows the various lifetimes they live. This poses a challenge as to how this can be portrayed in film. The novel emphasizes that each main

character in the story has the same comet-shaped birthmark. However, in the form of a film about reincarnation, *Cloud Atlas* demonstrates that more than just one linear soul is being followed and expands on this idea, interconnecting more characters than the novel had discussed as being connected. The filmmakers needed to decide how to portray reincarnation with the limitations of adapting the story to film (Mitchell, 2012) and used an ensemble cast to convey the film's themes of interconnection and relationships across time. The actors in the film therefore play a different character in each of the stories depicted, and the film relies on the recognizability of the actor to demonstrate the element of reincarnation. They often needed to wear elaborate makeup and prosthetics to completely alter their appearances as they portrayed characters of different genders, races, and ages. What does this mean for films that attempt to take on such an ambitious premise? We tend to value creative freedom and innovative filmmaking techniques, but at what point do filmmakers' intentions go beyond experimentation and cross into offensive territory?

People today are paying closer attention to representation in media as the topic is gaining more mainstream attention. The standard for proper representation has expanded to encompass more than just diverse casting, with critical viewers also looking at what roles people of color and other minority groups are being cast in. There needs to be diversity in cast as well as diversity in characters, because the media play a large part in how the world is interpreted. The media can influence mainstream acceptance of more diverse representation, as shown by research such as that by Wallace et al. (2016), who theorized a connection between the television series *24*'s portrayal of the election of a black character, David Palmer, to President of the United States with the results of the

2008 Presidential Election. Overall, however, the lack of representation demonstrates a disconnect between media and audiences, and this can be observed in many genres, not just fictional depictions of contemporary society.

Review of the Literature

To facilitate my analysis of *Cloud Atlas*, I examined relevant literature on the topics of representation in media, methods of film adaptation and race representation in the genre of science fiction. This literature, summarized below, informs my discussion of racial representation, film adaptations, and film casting later in this thesis.

Translating Book to Film

When adapting a novel for the big screen, filmmakers often need to make many changes. Many scholars, such as Lloyd Michaels (1998), Francesca Bianchi (2020), and Joanne McGurk (2014), have examined changes such as those in language, dialogue, the storytelling, and events. Many contributing factors need to be taken into consideration during the process of adapting a novel to create a story which can be told on screen, and as explored in both works by Michaels (1998) and *Cloud Atlas* author David Mitchell (2012), film has limitations that affect the ways in which text is translated to screen.

In an article written for mainstream readers, Mitchell (2012) reflects on his novel's screen adaptation, detailing the process of translating written works to prepare them for film. He describes the original mirror structure of *Cloud Atlas* as "there-and-back" and shared that, because of this, he once believed his novel would never be taken to the big screen. Mitchell compares the film's structure to a pointillist mosaic where the audience is engrossed just long enough into one story and then are immediately presented with another. It is sporadic and shows the audience small pieces of the bigger picture.

Mitchell describes five things that differentiate a novel as a written story versus how it needs to be adapted to be portrayed on screen. He talks about the time limitations

of film compared to novels, noting that novels allow the writer to take their time. He states that the “suggestiveness of novels becomes exactitudes in film” (para. 5), explaining that novels often allow for extended detail and have the ability to leave things very open ended. In contrast, film has more concrete visuals, dialogue, and conclusions.

Mitchell also references the adaptation of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* with a point he comically refers to as “Honey, I Shrunk the Cast” (para. 6)—a pattern where lengthy written works have the room to incorporate many characters and the time to develop them, both major and minor characters. In contrast, for film, this luxury of space and time is in short supply, which explains why characters who are substantial in various book series often do not make the cut for a film adaptation. Mitchell further explains that while in novels, music can only be figurative, a great composer who is hired to write a movie’s score can “transform the essence of a book into music and have it waft through like the Holy Spirit” (para. 7). Finally, Mitchell states, “all roads lead to closure” (para. 8). In other words, Mitchell argues that novels do not need to neatly wrap up everything, as there is no “unwritten contract” (para. 8) that promises the audience the author will explain everything which happens to their major characters by the conclusion. Most movies, however, must wrap everything up more neatly.

In sum, a luxury of time heavily influences the differences between writing novels and writing for the screen. Novels provide the author with the ability to extend the many aspects of their stories in the manners in which they wish. Films are restricted by time and limited narrative styles, and most changes for the screen must adhere to average run times. Not only do films need to tell a story, but they also need to focus on what aspects are the most important. Therefore, films only offer one possible viewpoint of the original

work's story, in this sense acting as interpreters for audience members. This differs from novels, in which readers have a more individualized experience interacting with the work, with no limitations as to how long one can spend engaging with the text.

Racial Representation

The main cast of the film consists of predominantly white men, while Halle Berry and Doona Bae are the only minority actors in leading roles. As previously stated in the introduction, *Cloud Atlas* features multi-role performances, making the article "Narrative trans-actions: *Cloud Atlas* 2012 and multi-role performance in the global ensemble" by Donna Peberdy (2014) particularly helpful. Peberdy considers "how the film's unique multi-role, cross-casting performance strategy both reveals the possibilities of transnational cinema but also exposes its limitations" (p.167). Peberdy discusses how the storytelling structure was changed for film: as directors, the Wachowski siblings abandoning the mirror structure of the *Cloud Atlas* novel; the six main protagonists were portrayed by six different actors; and those main actors also took on supporting roles in other timelines. These changes made the relationships between the characters and stories more explicit, and this observation provided by Peberdy is similar to what was discussed by Mitchell himself in his article about film adaptations.

Related to these points, MANAA Vice President Miriam Nakamura-Quan asks, "If, in the making of this complex movie, the creators of *Cloud Atlas* can make creative leaps in time, place, characters, race and gender, why can't they also take a creative leap in the casting?" (MANAA, 2013). Nakamura-Quan's question indirectly highlights that the film's creators were likely to have prioritized casting actors with name recognizability over the casting of actors who accurately fit the characters they were playing.

Furthermore, it opens up a discourse which questions why the film defends its use of yellowface, and how yellowface was more accepted to the film's audience if hypothetically the film were to use blackface and try to claim the film for being artistically groundbreaking for having actors swap racial identities.

Because of the public controversy surrounding *Cloud Atlas*'s portrayals of Asian characters, an examination of the literature on representation is also important as context for this project. Asian under-representation on screen is one facet of a larger issue with a lack of diverse representations in sci-fi and fantasy films. According to data collected by Jason Low (2014) of Lee and Low Books, which focuses on race representation and diversity in children's books, out of the 100 top grossing action and fantasy films in 2014, only 8% starred a protagonist of color (with 6 of these 8 characters portrayed by Will Smith).

Following the release of the film *Cloud Atlas*, the Media Action Network for Asian Americans co-founder and leader Guy Aoki, a Japanese-American civil rights activist, spoke out to share his criticisms of the film. Aoki complimented the film, calling it "an artistically ambitious approach to filmmaking" (MANAA, 2013, para. 1). However, Aoki also argued that the film "reflects the same old racial pecking order that the entertainment industry has been practicing for decades" (MANAA, 2013, para.1). In other words, despite the film's ambitions, the film's depiction of Asian characters and its lack of representation for Asian actors in leading roles are problematic. Noting that Hae Joo Chang is a pivotal character in the story of Somni-451, Aoki noted that that the role was portrayed by actor Jim Sturgess instead of an Asian-American actor. Aoki stated, "an action hero who defies the odds and holds off armies of attackers... would have been a

great, stereotype-busting role for an Asian American actor to play, as Asian American men aren't allowed to be dynamic or heroic very often" (para. 3). Aoki poses the question, "Why weren't there any real Asian male actors portraying any of the major characters in this supposedly racially diverse film?" (para. 6). With this line of questioning, Aoki illustrates the disconnect between the claims of diversity in *Cloud Atlas* and reality. While the story itself is groundbreaking in a sense in which it ties in the importance of the interconnectedness of characters across time, Aoki argues that this claim cannot be made when looking at the groups which are represented in the film's cast and the portrayal of different groups on screen.

"You have to ask yourself: Would the directors have used blackface on a white actor to play Gyasi's role? I don't think so: That would have outraged African American viewers. But badly done yellowface is still okay," Aoki has stated, further emphasizing the lack of criticism for the use of yellowface in the film (MANAA, 2013). Aoki points out that if the character of Autua (played by David Gyasi) was portrayed by a white actor in blackface, the film would have received rightful backlash. Aoki's comments on the film illustrate the hypocrisy of justifying the use of yellowface in the film as artistic while avoiding other controversial methods of depicting characters of different races.

Representation in Science Fiction

Marissa Lee, cofounder of Racebending.com, has stated that when discussing representation in film, "someone with a lot of intersecting privileged identities (especially straight, white men) will always be able to walk into a multiplex and find a sci-fi/fantasy movie starring someone who shares those identities" (Low, 2014). *Cloud Atlas* is a unique study, as the diverse characters audiences are asking for exist within the film's

storytelling, but their diversity is not reflected in the cast. The film lacks proper representation reflective of the diverse population in the United States.

Science fiction is more than just imagining new worlds, but within itself is a means of critiquing our current society. Many scholars consider this use of science fiction and the importance of representation in the genre, including Adilifu Nama (2010) and Sky Marsen (2004). Especially interesting in regards to *Cloud Atlas* is how the film uses both “real life” and sci-fi identity politics. In the article “Future Im/Perfect: Defining Success and Problematics in Science Fiction,” Wallace et. al (2016) discuss science fiction as a progressive genre and consider the genre’s ability to examine current issues in society but place them in a more abstract setting. They note that the topic of race and racial identity is often used in science fiction, and describe the abstract methods the genre utilizes to do so, stating, “science fiction explores digital identity as a kind of parallel to race: the ‘digital divide’ and liminality between non digital natives and digital natives.” (Litchfield, 2016). Oftentimes, artificial intelligence or alien species are used to represent a discussion of race.

However, while in the early stages of sci-fi these methods were an attempt to depict diversity and inclusion, Wallace et al. (2016) state that these methods too often perpetuated racial stereotypes in their use of aliens to address racism and other social issues. Early sci-fi shows covered topics that normally would not have been presented on television at the time, due to the presumed white majority viewers’ racism and implicit bias; but sci-fi could do so by creating fantasy worlds to critically look at societal issues in indirect ways. It is therefore important to understand that people now hold different standards as to what is acceptable on screen, compared to the standards of audiences in

the past. Wallace et al. (2016) note that outdated science-fiction tropes are still utilized today, and they argue that these tropes stem from the genre's development in a time when the ability to discuss race and gender in society was limited. Using *Star Trek* as a concrete example, the authors claim that to address issues of race in science-fiction, early sci-fi utilized the creation of alien species, androids, and other nonhuman characters to create an analogy for multiracial identity in the storytelling. Although this paved the way for the ability to discuss race and gender related issues in science fiction, they note, it perpetuates racial stereotypes and problematic tropes today, such as directorial decisions that consistently place actors of color in supporting rather than leading roles. For example, Wallace et al. (2016) note that *Star Trek* was praised at its premiere for the Enterprise's pan-racial crew, but today's audiences are more critical of the fact that despite the show's representational progress, the captain was a white male. Over time, though, the series' Captains became more diverse, and we can see an evolution of representation in the many *Star Trek* series that have been released since the original. Critical viewers can acknowledge that while the original *Star Trek* was a progressive depiction for its time, we hold a higher standard today's media to do better.

Also of special relevance to an analysis of *Cloud Atlas*, due to its post-apocalyptic representation of tribal culture in the year 2321, is literature on depictions of tribal cultures in Western films. In "Depiction of Tribal Culture in English Movies: A Critical Analysis," Ravindra Gomaji Vaidrya (2018) analyzes whether dominant Hollywood productions perpetuate discrimination by relying on stereotypes. Vaidya identifies various trends in western Hollywood films' depictions of tribal culture and notes that stereotyped representations are very evident. Films often feature strong implications of a

superiority of the culture of colonizers over the tribal culture. An often-seen narrative shows a tribal culture in a resistance-struggle, needing help from characters outside of the tribe. Another common trend Vaidya identifies is a lack of cultural specificity. Their depictions tend to be more generalized, rather than showing a culturally accurate tribe. Despite the freedom that science fiction allows for creators to explore significant themes, the genre still struggles with proper representation.

Overall, the threads discussed in this literature review—representation in science fiction, racial representation, and the translation from book to film—are useful because they provide the necessary background information required to critically analyze the film. Taken together, the topics help with understanding the film both from a filmmaking perspective as well as a media studies perspective. It provides the proper groundwork for the varying viewpoints in which one would interpret the narrative of the film as well as interpret the choices of the filmmakers.

Methodology

Cloud Atlas, as a work in general, is a complex story which entangles many characters and storylines together, making it important to understand how the directors adapted this work of literature into a feature film. This step is crucial in the preliminary steps of research because it allows one to accumulate a better understanding of the process involved in transforming a text into something which will be told easily on screen. If the film's creators needed to make changes to the original work, such as changes in the order of events told, or if characters are changed, it is best to analyze the film with this understanding in mind and to understand what the filmmakers chose to keep intact, and why that is important.

This is a narrative analysis informed by a critical media studies perspective that attends to representation including, but not limited to, race and gender. In a narrative analysis, researchers apply interpretations to stories told in media. A narrative analysis looks at the structure of a piece of media to understand the purpose or its meaning (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2016). Researchers do so by taking into consideration the story's structure, the function of the story, or the way in which the story is told, according to the *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory* (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Critical media studies centers around assessing media's power and influence and developing a better understanding of how media transforms our worldview. Representation encompasses which people are depicted in media and what roles they portray.

To inform an in-depth analysis of the *Cloud Atlas* film, I read the original novel to understand the source material and noted the differences and similarities between the original work and the movie adaptation. As I read and took notes on the text, I watched for emergent themes, which shaped my analysis. With these observations, I tracked the changes the film's producers made and developed a detailed background knowledge of the book's structure, story, and writing style, with the goal of understanding the author's original intentions and observed how they were transformed to screen. With this in mind, in this thesis project, I critically analyze the way specific groups are represented in the film and examine what criticisms, if any, exist for these choices, specifically discussing *Cloud Atlas* in the context of sci-fi films in general.

I also incorporated into my methodological approach readings on how to adopt a critical perspective when analyzing media, especially when critiquing media representations. Media portrayals are used to often represent our social realities, and it is

important to understand when media representations are not accurate reflections of society's makeup. Social constructionism in communications studies emphasizes the idea in which people have shared understandings about the makeup of reality, meaning there is an underlying assumption that symbols and other signifiers in media contribute to our shared understanding of society and creates a perception of reality (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). Critical analysis involves understanding that media as a whole shape perception and impose schemas on society and social groups.

In media—not just *Cloud Atlas*—producers and directors do make honest attempts to convey positive messages, but their filmmaking choices are often simultaneously still problematic. This may be due to implicit bias in an industry within which white men are still overrepresented as leaders and decision-makers (Lang, 2020). *Cloud Atlas* overall attempts to defy contemporary society's understanding of our differences, and it is trying to show how all people are connected, regardless of background or identity. The story is dependent on the idea that we are all interconnected, and yet it still appears to feature many of the same issues evident in film regarding representation, such as how *Cloud Atlas* utilizes white actors to play Asian characters. The film is a paradox in the sense that it takes the brilliant story created by David Mitchell, expands its audience, and therefore spreads the message of Mitchell's work; but simultaneously perpetuates the same Hollywood practices the story itself is attempting to defy.

Next, I looked further into representation of race in the film. Along with this narrative analysis, I have created a corresponding video essay (available at Vimeo; see the Appendix for the URL and a complete transcript), which focuses on critically

analyzing the ways the film portrays race. The research for this video essay centered around sources regarding depiction and the importance of representation, and it focuses on the character of Hae Joo Chang. Chang's character is a missed opportunity for Asian representation, as casting an Asian actor as a leading man and action hero, as noted by Guy Aoki, president and co-founder of Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA). The video essay offers a deeper elaboration upon the issues in question with regards to the film, and it references specific scenes in the film which feature Hae Joo Chang and other Asian characters portrayed by non-Asian actors.

This analysis also reexamines my own work written previously about *Cloud Atlas*. In 2019, I wrote my first narrative analysis of *Cloud Atlas*, in which I focused specifically on the use of the ensemble cast and how their transformed appearances contribute to the film's storytelling. My final step of my research involved reflection on my old writing, having new information and new research to apply. The narrative analysis in this thesis is an opportunity to expand my previous research that also serves as a way to self-critique, asking myself if my interpretations of the film has remained the same, or if my interpretations have changed with additional research, giving me an opportunity to expand on previous observations made that I addressed in my prior coursework about *Cloud Atlas*.

Argument

This analysis discusses the general problematic depictions in *Cloud Atlas*, analyzes how the original novel was adapted to film, and provides a narrative analysis focusing on the multi-role performances of the ensemble cast in the film.

Representation and Problematic Elements of Science Fiction

Cloud Atlas nests its six stories together, and each is a different genre, varying from historical fiction and contemporary fiction to science fiction. Although the novel combines metafiction with multiple genres, the film is primarily considered to be sci-fi. *Cloud Atlas* as a film, and science fiction in general as a genre, revolves around discourse about the present by taking real-world issues and placing them in an abstract world. Even though *Cloud Atlas* does not rely on aliens or outer space to drive its narrative, it demonstrates many of the same problematic tropes which exist in more traditional science fiction.

The reflection of contemporary society in science fiction often critiques power structures and offers commentary on our society's understandings of race and gender. According to Pluretti (2016), "science fiction not only provides a space to imagine new worlds, technologies and societies but also a space to critique our current society and technologies... sci-fi narratives have tackled such issues as racial, multiracial, and gender identity and addressed how society defines these entities" (p. 5734). Along with placing these stories in an abstract world, however, science fiction as a genre often perpetuates stereotypes as well as Westernized colonialist narratives of different cultures.

As mentioned in the literature review, early sci-fi films and television productions tended to address issues of race by presenting alien species, androids, and other nonhuman characters to create an analogy for multiracial identity, which was productive in paving the way to discuss race and gender in science fiction but also problematic for perpetuating stereotypes and tropes (Wallace, 2016). *Cloud Atlas* relies on these abstract

tropes in its storytelling and yet simultaneously perpetuates racist imagery of white actors in elaborate prosthetics as they play Asian characters. For example, the story of *Somni-451* revolves around fighting for the liberation of fabricants, which are bioengineered beings. This familiar idea is also used in other popular sci-fi works, such as the replicants in *Blade Runner* and the clones in the *Star Wars* franchise. To use white actors to depict Asian characters in this allegory from the original novel only perpetuates the issues that the story itself sought to critique. The choice to have these actors play characters of different races perpetuates the issue of the lack of Asian representation in leading roles, as pointed out in Aoki's (2013) criticism of the film.

Western media also often perpetuate stereotyped representation of native people and their culture, and this is also a problematic element of science fiction films, of which *Cloud Atlas* is not an exception. As addressed previously in the literature review, Vaidya (2018) found that films that explore tribal culture often inject a narrative of Western superiority over tribal cultures. He illustrates that "through the narratives of movies record the political activism and consequent battles against the colonizers, cinematic techniques and thematic motifs are employed so as to ultimately degrade the colonial subjects" (p. 305).

In the narrative of *Cloud Atlas*, following the downfall of our technologically advanced civilization, people live in three societal groups: the valley folk, the Kona tribe, and Prescients. Showing that in the downfall of civilization there is a shift to tribal cultures in this post-apocalyptic future, the Kona tribe are cannibalistic, hunting other tribes, such as the valley folk. These tribal societies are an example of primitivism, and the directors depict them with culturally non-specific tribal imagery.

Vaidya (2018) highlights that “certain cinematic conventions and techniques employed in the movies also perpetuate colonial ideology. The costume and make up, for example, assert the exoticness, barbarity and technological inferiority. The aspect of appearance... strengthens the stereotypes of the ‘primitive other’” (p. 310). Although his work critiques the films *Avatar*, *The Emerald Forest*, and *At Play in the Field of the Lord*, the criticism applies well to *Cloud Atlas*’ representation of the Kona tribe, which perpetuates these same issues.

Cloud Atlas depicts the Kona as heavily adorned in body paint and tribal jewelry. The Kona Chief, played by Hugh Grant, wears human jaw bones on his shoulders and other severed human body parts, including a finger and an ear. Meanwhile, the valley folk are farmers, and the elite society, the Prescients, who live off of the Big Isle (present day Hawaii), still have access to advanced technology. The valley folk wear less tribal-inspired garb, and they are the more peaceful people. Therefore, the people with more culturally nonspecific tribal imagery associated with them are more savage, barbaric and less advanced compared to the valley folk.

The contrast between the Prescients and the people still living on-world in this story continues this Westernized narrative that falsely depicts tribal cultures as inferior and less civilized. Meronym (Halle Berry) heals Zachry’s niece with the advanced technology her people have access to. As Vaidya (2018) discusses, oftentimes films’ narratives show tribal people as weaker, in need of saving, or as unable to help themselves without Western intervention from an outsider coming in as savior. In *Cloud Atlas*, this depiction of tribes is meant to show the downfall of civilization, which implies this same concept of tribal cultures being inferior or more “savage,” which creates racist

stereotypes of indigenous people and their cultures in Western media. The vague imagery that is not culturally specific creates a general misconception of tribal cultures, along with the potential appropriation of culturally significant practices or important symbols.

The imagery in media helps to shape the audience's perspective, and worldview, and the use of this imagery can imply negative connotations to viewers, such as an inferiority of tribal cultures compared to western societies. *Cloud Atlas*, at its core, is a story heavily influenced by real-world class struggle, which we see in the story of Somni-451 and the story of Zachry. It is a social commentary, but it still perpetuates imagery which confirms filmmaker biases that the story itself attempts to defy. *Cloud Atlas* attempts to eliminate the social constructs of people's differences, but it continues to utilize problematic tropes which demonstrate a hierarchy of class and privilege, by either using tribal garb to demonstrate a societal regression or casting white actors as Asian characters, as I detail in my video essay (see Appendix for complete details).

Translating Text to Screen

Adaptation is a form of translation, and *Cloud Atlas* was believed to be unfilmable, even according to its author David Mitchell. One of the main issues with translating text to screen is the loss of the original narrative structure of the novel, swapping out the original "there and back" (Mitchell, 2012) structure for something more easily followed on screen. The novel is written in a mirrored structure, moving in chronological order, and then backwards through time in the latter half of the storytelling. This narrative structure is one of the main reasons why Mitchell (2012) believed his novel to be "unfilmable," as discussed in the literature review section of this thesis: in

creating a film from a novel, making changes to the original source material is important for a successful translation of the original text for moviegoers.

The novel *Cloud Atlas* tells six different interwoven stories, and the style in which all six stories are told also are all completely different. For example, the story of Adam Ewing is told through his journal entries, while the story of Robert Frobisher is told through the series of letters he writes to his lover Rufus Sixsmith. To account for this in the film, the film translates this original writing into voiceover narration. The visual of these different writing styles cannot properly be demonstrated on screen, but film is able to emphasize other methods of storytelling on screen which are not able to be explored in text, such as utilizing audio and visuals. Although many details and minor characters needed to be cut for the sake of film, *Cloud Atlas* adds more to the story with the visuals that are created with the use of the ensemble cast.

In Mitchell's novel, the signifier that identifies connections between characters across time is a comet-shaped birthmark which all six main characters share. With the translation to screen, this original concept is kept in the film but seems to symbolize the connectedness of the characters of the film in a different way. Through portraying each individual cast member as multiple characters, the visual cue of recognizing each actor allows the audience to see reincarnation being represented in the film. However, the birthmarks are not taken out in the film adaptation. I argue that in the film, it is now as though the birthmarks are meant to distinguish them as part of a group of reincarnated souls, rather than one individual soul that is being shown in its journey throughout time. This can be concluded because instead of having a different actor play each protagonist, the filmmakers could have had one actor play each of the six main characters. By having

six actors, each of whom both plays a protagonist and supporting characters, it changes the narrative as to which characters are meant to be connected through reincarnation.

This decision to have the cast play a variety of different characters throughout changes Mitchell's original intention regarding which characters were to be direct reincarnates of others. Although this change may overly complicate an already-intricate story, it also allows for an expansion of how many characters are shown to be interconnected in comparison to the novel. These details can be more apparent, since the characters portrayed by Tom Hanks are easily distinguished as being played by the same actor, or they can be more subtle, having members of the cast in minor roles in other storylines where they are not necessarily focal points of the film. For example, Ben Whishaw plays Robert Frobisher, the composer of the Cloud Atlas Sextet, as well as a record store employee who is greatly moved listening to the work with Louisa Rey in the 1973 storyline. These details add another dimension to the work, creating a more interwoven narrative which incorporates minor characters and minor scenes which otherwise might not be as significant to the plot of the film.

Limitations go along with the screen interpretation of a work, and many of these limitations revolve around a film's running time. There is a luxury of time that goes along with writing a novel. The author has more time to establish world building, character development, and other fine details in their work compared to films having to complete a story within a couple of hours of screen time. This also is true with the film adaptation, even though the film runs for approximately three hours. Much was changed to create a cohesive film, including the narrative structure and the details surrounding the visuals which represent reincarnation and the interconnectedness of characters across time.

Although these changes resulted in problematic portrayals, this also added elements and relationships among characters who hadn't been interconnected in the original work.

Narrative Analysis of *Cloud Atlas* with the Ensemble Cast

Cloud Atlas, both the film and original novel, are almost identical in their intended message. The story centers around reincarnation and demonstrates the interconnectedness of characters throughout time. In the novel, as mentioned previously, the comet-shaped birthmark signifies that the main characters of each timeline are reincarnates of the same soul. Although the film touches upon the comet birthmark, the filmmakers rely on each actor to play multiple roles, and they drastically change their appearances to demonstrate this theme of reincarnation.

A major plot device of Mitchell's original novel is that the main characters of each story are reincarnates of the same soul, and this is distinguished by all six characters sharing the same comet shaped birthmark. Those characters are Adam Ewing (Sturgess), Robert Frobisher (Whishaw), Louisa Rey (Berry), Timothy Cavendish (Broadbent), Somni-451 (Bae) and Zachry (Hanks). However, in translating the text to screen, the filmmakers decided to expand on the original theme of reincarnation and have the cast portray side characters as well in the timelines in which they are not the lead.

This decision expands on the idea of reincarnation, and in a narrative analysis, it can be argued to have added many more elements to the original film. When first analyzing *Cloud Atlas* in 2019, I observed the characters all portrayed by Tom Hanks could be a commentary on punishment in relation to reincarnation. Hanks is the only actor in the cast whose appearance does not change past the point of recognizability. Each character he portrays is a white, cisgendered man. With this observation, I

compared Hanks' characters to the idea of karma. In Buddhism, the concept of karma simply states that bad choices in previous lifetimes affects your soul in its future lifetimes.

Characters portrayed by Hanks are typically antagonistic, with two exceptions being Zachry and Isaac Sachs, a supporting character in the 1973 timeline. If looking at the film through a lens where all characters portrayed by the same actor are reincarnates of the same soul, instead of looking at the birthmarks as the sole factor to demonstrate reincarnation, the characters played by Hanks show that the lifetimes led by that soul are punished for the actions taken in previous lifetime. This punishment includes not being able to experience life through a lens other than what it had experienced originally, never able to experience life from varying perspectives. This can be interpreted as a commentary on the importance of understanding the concept of intersectionality and the varying perspectives of contemporary society.

In contrast to characters portrayed by Hanks, the characters played by Doona Bae demonstrate the rewards of making selfless, good choices. In 1849, both Dr. Henry Goose (Hanks) and Tilda Ewing (Bae) are both white, upper class elites. While Dr. Henry Goose uses his position as a doctor to try to steal from Adam Ewing (Sturgess), Tilda and Adam Ewing make the decision to abandon their known lifestyle and join the abolitionist movement. The soul which embodied Tilda Ewing makes sacrifices and utilizes her position of power in society to fight for the rights of others. The soul in a future lifetime embodies Somni-451, and Somni-451 is deified by future generations in the film, which is demonstrated in the story set in 2321.

The film demonstrates the appeal of experiencing differing lives as a soul moves on from one time into the next. There is a fulfillment in the story when these souls are able to experience completely differing lives. Understanding intersectionality means understanding where individuals lie in the crossroads between their own privileges in society and oppressions they simultaneously face (Coleman, 2019). These souls which make these selfless choices are rewarded by experiencing a variety of different lives and being able to see the world from different lenses. They have the ability to see beyond themselves and therefore are rewarded in their next lifetimes.

Another addition the film provides is the representation of soulmates through the characters portrayed by Jim Sturgess and Doona Bae. Sturgess and Bae portray Adam and Tilda Ewing, as well as Somni-451 and Hae Joo Chang. The Ewings join the abolitionist movement, and Somni-451 and Hae Joo Chang are revolutionaries for the rights of fabricants in Neo-Seoul. These two couples differ in race, but not in their life's aspirations. It is like their souls are rewarded for their actions towards the betterment of the world as a whole as they are reunited in the final timeline of the film in Somni-451 and Hae Joo Chang.

Cloud Atlas shows how the souls who make bad decisions and act in selfish ways must suffer being perpetually stuck living such similar lives over and over. The movie presents this by keeping the characters the same race and gender throughout the film. Souls with a life's purpose, who work to make themselves better, are rewarded by being able to experience varying lives. They have the gift of being able to see life from more perspectives than just one. This in turn makes them wiser, and more powerful as time goes on.

Discussion

To understand the filming choices of *Cloud Atlas*, it is important to look at the underlying meaning. The filmmakers attempted to defy the typical societal understandings of gender and race, and though it fell short, it was innovative in its use of an ensemble cast to represent reincarnation. It expressed the appeal of experiencing differing lives as a soul moves from one timeline into the next. When viewed from this perspective, the actors were not portraying different people, but rather the inner soul.

The theme of reincarnation can be read as having anti-racist implications, because it depicts characters that experience negative karma as perpetually experiencing life as one identity (cisgendered white male in the case of the characters portrayed by Tom Hanks) and those who have more positive karma experiences have the opportunity to live out their many lives through varying identities. It presents the idea of the ability to experience life from the perspective of multiple identities (such as shifts in race and gender) as the reward for righteous actions in previous lifetimes. It conveys the idea that the accumulation of these multi-identity experiences is the goal of souls trying to lead a fulfilling life.

While altering the appearance of the actors appears not to have been intended to be racist, the casting and use of choices such as yellowface nonetheless perpetuates issues of lack of representation and overall problematic tropes in the film industry and in science fiction as a genre. Intent matters less than impact, and the voices of marginalized community members must be centered in any conversation of the film's accomplishments and limitations. The film ambitiously attempts to break down social barriers through the

multi-role performances of the ensemble cast, but in its attempts, it creates a disconnect between the story and its depiction on screen. The filmmakers cast white actors to play what would have been groundbreaking roles--roles that would have defied stereotypes common in casting actors of color of various ethnic groups. In other words, the directors of *Cloud Atlas* missed an opportunity to improve on-screen representation through their film, and this disconnect is a result of the multi-performance style they employed for the film's storytelling.

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Appendix

Transcript of the Video Essay “Race Representation in Cloud Atlas” by Nicole Coates

Note: As of April 24, 2021, the video essay can be viewed online at the following URL:

<https://vimeo.com/541171343>

[Narrator Nicole Coates]

Opens with scenes which introduce each plot of the film in chronological order.

Cloud Atlas is an intricate story which ties together six different plots that each occur during a different era of time. The film, which was released in 2012, is an adaptation of the 2004 novel written by David Mitchell. The story is heavily driven by the idea of reincarnation, and to present this on film, the actors’ appearances change drastically, playing characters of different ages, genders, and races. The goal is to help the audience understand which characters are reincarnates of each other on screen.

The story challenges our societal understandings of genders, ages, races, classes, and other social strata. This analysis examines the thematic significance of the appearance changes throughout the film adaptation as the actors play different characters. An ensemble cast is used in order to convey the film’s themes of interconnection and relationships across time. The actors in the film therefore play a different character in each of the stories depicted, and the film relies on the recognizability of the actor to demonstrate the element of reincarnation. This means the actors often wear very elaborate makeup and prosthetics to completely alter their appearances as they portray each character.

[Narrator]

Scene of Louisa Rey driving through the protestors.

Although Cloud Atlas as a story conveys a powerful message regarding race and other social constructs as we understand them, the movie is flawed in the sense that despite the intentions, it perpetuates stereotypes in its depiction of Asian characters.

[Narrator]

Somni-451 final interviewer, showing James D'Arcy as the Archivist

The ensemble cast predominantly consists of white male actors, despite diversity being a large part of how the film was advertised.

Bridge Scene, begins with a zoom-in of Jim Sturgess as Hae-Joo Chang.

Roles such as Hae Joo Chang, which would have been groundbreaking for Asian representation, were instead played by non-Asian actors who wore prosthetics.

[Narrator]

Scene which depicts Neo Seoul and demonstrates Hae Joo Chang being a heroic character.

In the year 2144 in the futuristic dystopian Korea, Neo Seoul, Hae Joo Chang, portrayed by Jim Sturgess, is a major character in one of the storylines of the film. He is a member of the Union Revolutionary Group who aids the timeline's main protagonist Somni-451. *[close-up footage of Doona Bae as Somni-451 as transitional shot]*

[Narrator]

[Scene of fabricants waking up from their chambers to demonstrate the definition of fabricant.]

Somni is a fabricant who witnesses the murder of another fabricant who was also part of the same movement.

[Chang interacting with Somni-451 at the apartment and showing her the Timothy Cavendish film]

Chang helps hide Somni-451, shows her banned literature and films, and the pair fall in love.

[Narrator]

[Returns to final interview scene to emphasize the Archivist, another character which is a white male actor in yellowface.]

Following the film's release, Guy Aoki, co-founder and president of the Media Action Network for Asian American Actors voiced his opinion on casting a white actor in the role of Hae Joo Chang.

[Narrator]

[Chase scene with Hae-Joo Chang and Somni-451, highlighting the elaborate world of Neo Seoul]

Aoki complimented the film and said "it's an artistically ambitious approach to filmmaking." However, despite the ambition of the film, Aoki observed that "Unfortunately, it reflects the same old racial pecking order that the entertainment industry has been practicing for decades."

Aoki said, "Cloud Atlas missed a great opportunity. The Korea story's protagonist is an Asian man—an action hero who defies the odds and holds off armies of attackers. He's the one who liberates Doona Bae from her repressive life and encourages her to join the resistance against the government. It would have been a great, stereotype-busting role for an Asian American actor to play, as Asian American men aren't allowed to be dynamic or heroic very often. But instead, they cast Jim Sturgess in yellowface."

[Narrator]

[Hae-Joo Chang and Somni-451 in the apartment, shows the cherry blossoms and other traditional Asian imagery of the space.]

In her essay "Representation," Mary Beltran explains, "While we are less likely to see obviously racist, sexist, or otherwise xenophobic images or media narratives today, social inequities and the stigmatization of some groups still are manifest in a variety of ways in films, television, and other entertainment media." Cloud Atlas, despite the beautiful story about interconnectedness of people, it still is an imperfect film, and falls into many of the same problematic elements we see in film. The portrayal of Hae Joo Chang is a missed opportunity for Asian American representation.

[Narrator]

[Cuts back to the interview scene and focuses on the Archivist's device]

Although Cloud Atlas nests its six stories together, and these six stories are all a different genre varying from historical fiction, contemporary fiction, to science fiction. *[brief clips of Cavendish and Frobisher plots to demonstrate the variety of genres]*

The novel combines metafiction with multiple genres, but the film is primarily considered to be sci-fi. *Cloud Atlas* as a film, and science fiction in general as a genre, revolves around discourse about the present by taking real world issues and placing them in an abstract world.

[scenes of Neo Seoul to correspond with narration regarding science fiction]

Even though *Cloud Atlas* does not rely on aliens or outer space to drive its narrative, it demonstrates many of the same problematic tropes which exist in more traditional science fiction.

[Narrator]

[scene of Spock, Kirk and Kahn, from The Wrath of Kahn to provide earlier sci-fi example]

In early science fiction, it is important to understand that as a modern audience people now hold different standards as to what was acceptable compared to audiences in the past. The outdated science-fiction tropes which are still utilized today stem from the ability to discuss race and gender in society in which the conversation was limited. In the essay “Future Im/Perfect: Defining Success and Problematics in Science Fiction Expressions of Racial Identity,” Ryan Wallace uses *Star Trek* as a concrete example. In order to address issues of race in science-fiction, early sci-fi would utilize creating alien species, androids, and other nonhuman characters to create an analogy for multiracial identity in the storytelling. Although this paved the way for the ability to discuss race and gender related issues in science fiction, it perpetuates racial stereotypes and problematic tropes.

[Narrator]

[Clips of Hae Joo Chang and Somni-451 chase scene]

Not only does *Cloud Atlas* does not rely on these abstract tropes, the film perpetuates imagery of white actors in elaborate prosthetics as they play Asian characters in an allegory about race.

[Clip showing Somni-451 and her life as a fabricant]

The story of *Somni-451* revolves around fighting for the liberation of fabricants, which are bioengineered beings, a familiar idea which is also used in other popular sci-fi works such as the replicants in *Blade Runner*,

[*Blade Runner* scene which first introduces Rachel]

[Deckard]

“Must be expensive”

[Rachel]

“Very. I’m Rachel.”

[Narrator]

[Clip from Star Wars: Attack of the Clones, important information regarding the creation of clones by one of the engineers]

or clones in the Star Wars franchise.

[Obi-Wan Kenobi]

“You had mentioned growth exceleration.” *[pans to young clones in a futuristic, technologically advanced classroom]*

[Engineer]

“Oh yes. It’s essential. Otherwise’ it would take a lifetime to grow. Now it takes only half the time.”

[Obi-Wan Kenobi]

“I see.”

[transitions to adult clones, all dressed the same, eating in unison]

[Engineer]

“They are totally obedient. Taking any order with question. We modified their genetic structure to make them less independent than the original host.”

[cuts back to Cloud Atlas, final interview conversation]

[Narrator]

To use white actors to depict Asian characters in the allegory from the original novel only perpetuates the issues that the story itself is trying to critique.

[cuts to Somni-451’s declaration/manifesto]

[Somni-451]

“Our lives are not our own. From womb to tomb, we are bound to others, past and present. And by each crime and every kindness, we birth our future.”

[Narrator]

[scenes depicting the life of fabricants in Neo Seoul]

The choice to have these actors play characters of different races perpetuates the issue of the lack of Asian representation in leading roles as originally pointed out in Aoki’s criticism of the film.

[ends with a zoom in of Somni-451 and then cut to black]

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