Gone with the Wind (1939)

Heike Paul

dir. Victor Fleming; prod. David O. Selznick; screenplay Sidney Howard; photography Ernest Haller; music Max Steiner. 35 mm, color, 238 mins. Selznick International Pictures, distrib. MGM.

Courtesy of the Everett Collection

Based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning 1936 novel by Southern writer Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* has been as spectacularly successful as it has been controversial. The film was, first and foremost, conceptualized as an adaptation of the novel, and was to remain faithful to the text with »fetishistic reverence« (Leitch 138). Film producer David Selznick demanded to »not vary anything from the book. The book is law; the book is the Bible« (qtd. in Leitch 128). As a result, however, *Gone with the Wind* turned out to be the longest feature film that Hollywood had yet released, heavy on dialogue and sensationally colorful—melodramatic eye candy in times of the Great Depression. The 238-minute film premiered on December 15, 1939, in Atlanta, in »a citywide extravaganza,« and was meticulously documented by Herb Bridges in a photographic essay (Wiley 6). One critic quipped sarcastically: »The inaugural showing of *Gone with the Wind* was the biggest event in Atlanta since Sherman burned down the city« (Wiley 5).

While around 300,000 people flocked to Atlanta's streets for the film's premiere, only white people were invited as guests in a firmly segregated city, and African American members of the cast were discouraged from attending the first screening of the film they helped make (Dickey 28). Even as Hattie McDaniel was the first African American to receive the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress (one of the film's eight Oscars, alongside two honorary awards), she was not allowed to sit with the cast during

the ceremony but was instead seated at a table to the side. Whereas the NAACP, among other groups, protested the film from the very beginning, calling for its boycott, *Gone with the Wind* would become one of the most successful films of all time. Its success confirms, once more, Toni Morrison's contention that American slavery is a »playground for the imagination« in American literature and culture, serving here as the picturesque backdrop for the melodramatic unfolding of *white* romance. Selznick is on record for wanting »to make sure that the production of *Gone with the Wind* would give no offense« to African American viewers (Dickey 29) and for emphasizing that he was »sensitive to the feelings of minority peoples« (Selznick). The film, full of racist stereotypes and white supremacist tropes, clearly defies such lip service.

Gone with the Wind narrates twelve years in the life of Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh)—portrayed as a somewhat idiosyncratic version of the white Southern belle—shortly before, during, and after the American Civil War (1861-65). The film begins in 1861, on the eve of war. The female protagonist lives near Atlanta, on Tara, a plantation owned by her family, with her Irish-born father, her mother, two sisters, and enslaved African Americans laboring in the house and on the fields. Tara is introduced during a scenic sunset as the epitome of a pastoral idyll. Scarlett's infatuation with a man from a neighboring plantation, Ashley Oakes (Leslie Howard), is one-sided, and when he becomes engaged to Melanie Hamilton (Olivia de Havilland), Scarlett is heartbroken. She then meets Rhett Butler (Clark Gable), who mocks and flirts with her. Out of spite, Scarlett marries Melanie's younger brother, Charles, and is soon thereafter widowed when he dies of pneumonia while away at war. Not given to the role of mourning widow, and prone to create social scandal, Scarlett is sent by her mother to the Hamilton residence in Atlanta. In the city, she reencounters Rhett Butler, who is now a blockade runner for the Confederacy. As the war escalates and the South is increasingly under siege, Scarlett finds herself assisting as an Army nurse and taking care of Melanie, who is giving birth. With Rhett's help, Scarlett, Melanie, the baby, and Prissy (played by Butterfly McQueen), an enslaved woman, manage to escape the city under fire during the Atlanta Campaign. However, upon her return to Tara, Scarlett finds the place deserted and mostly destroyed. Her mother has died, and her father is delirious, and he, too, will eventually die in an accident.

In the film's highly politically biased rendering of the Reconstruction Period, it is the former Southern elite who, following the war, must engage in a monumental show of strength to rebuild their homes and infrastructure, while also fighting off carpetbaggers from the North trying to take advantage of the postwar crisis. Ashley returns from the war unharmed and, although they share a passionate kiss, once again rejects Scarlett. In order to be able to pay the Reconstructionist taxes placed on Tara, Scarlett seduces business owner Frank Kennedy, the fiancé of one of her sisters. Their marriage is depicted as Scarlett's business venture, and she succeeds in establishing a lucrative lumber business (which at one point employs convicts in a chain gang). Kennedy dies after a retaliatory skirmish that has him, Ashley, and Rhett engage in a nearby shantytown with a group of men who had molested Scarlett. Quite timely, Rhett proposes to Scarlett, and she, now twice widowed, agrees to marry him. They soon have a daughter, Bonnie Blue, whom her father adores. Scarlett still has a crush on Ashley and rejects Rhett's advances. In fact, she refuses to have sex with him to avoid further pregnancies. When Scarlett and Ashley are found by Ashley's sister in a friendly embrace, rumors run wild. Late at night, Rhett, highly intoxicated, kisses Scarlett against her will and

carries her to the bedroom. The next morning, he apologizes and takes Bonnie with him to live in London. Upon his return (Bonnie had missed her mother), Scarlett reveals to him that she is pregnant. Yet, during another fight between the two of them, she falls down a flight of stairs and consequently has a miscarriage. Soon thereafter, Bonnie tragically dies in a horse-riding accident, while Scarlett's most loyal friend, Melanie, dies from pregnancy complications. Paradoxically, it is only when Ashley is widowed that Scarlett lets go of her infatuation for him and professes her deep love for Rhett. The latter, however, now rejects her, leaving her and Tara to live in Atlanta. The film closes melodramatically with a desperate Scarlett vowing to win him back.

The film has been instrumental in the production and perpetuation of the myth of the »Old South,« along with a trivialization of its system of chattel slavery and a disavowal of the brutalities of that system through melodramatic means. Not coincidentally, it is often linked to the ominous *Birth of a Nation* (1915) by D. W. Griffith, based on a novel by Thomas Dixon, to whom Margaret Mitchell repeatedly expressed admiration and profound gratitude. Whereas Dixon and Griffith certainly share responsibility for the Ku Klux Klan resurgence following the film's release to mass audiences in both North and South, Mitchell and Selznick have contributed to the romanticization of the Southern way of life and cultural imaginary that has thrived, in one way or another, to this day. Throughout the film, the antebellum South figures as a »paradise lost«: a place and time irretrievably destroyed by the Civil War, and the object of the white protagonists' deep, unfulfilled yearning. The film's opening lines anticipate such nostalgia in no uncertain way: »There was a land of cavaliers and cotton fields called the Old South. Here in this pretty world gallantry took its last bow. Here was the last ever to be seen of Knights and their Ladies Fair of Master and of Slave. Look for it only in books, for it is no more than a dream remembered. A Civilization gone with the wind.«

This sense of loss and suffering permeates the film, generating a prototypical, powerful version of the Southern »lost cause« myth, with clear white supremacist leanings. Notions of loss and suffering are never once attached to the bodies of enslaved black people. While placing the trauma firmly with white subject positions, the film features African American characters—Mammy (played by Hattie McDaniel; in the film, we never learn »Mammy's« name), Pork (played by Oscar Polk), and Prissy—only in scenes of servitude: at times competent, often inept. All three are depicted as loyal slaves, serving at the pleasure of the white characters, even after slavery has been officially abolished. The myth of the »happy slaves« (Ahmed) creates scenes of comic relief that are interspersed in the grave drama of white Southern man- and womanhood. Film critic Donald Bogle has identified dominant cinematic African American stereotypes in the film and credits *Gone with the Wind* with a »romanticizing of black realities« regarding its anachronistic servant figures (76). Malcolm X recalls seeing *Gone with the Wind* as a teenager and remembers scenes when Prissy is shown as a caricature, a silly woman unable to fend for herself and given to distortions of the truth. »I was the only Negro in the theater,« he writes, »and when Butterfly McQueen went into her act, I felt like crawling under the rug« (38). Shame, disbelief, and anger, rather than sentimental fellow-feeling, characterize the dominant approach to the film today, as its racial politics have been rigorously criticized. In 2020, HBO added an extended introductory preface by film scholar Jacqueline Stewart, augmenting the earlier preface that read: »*Gone with the Wind* is a product of its time and depicts racial and ethnic prejudices that have, unfortunately, been commonplace in American society. These racist depictions were wrong

then and are wrong today. To create a more just, equitable, and inclusive future we must first acknowledge and understand our history. This picture is presented as it was originally created.« Stewart affirms these lines and goes one step further, problematizing the stereotypical representations of enslaved black people in the film by contextualizing them in the racist discourses that the film merely rehashes: in American culture at large, and in Hollywood in particular. Yet, Stewart describes *Gone with the Wind* as »a film of undeniable cultural significance« and »an enduring work of popular culture that speaks directly to the racial inequalities that persist in media and society today.«

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