

Introduction

If ever there was a film that needed no introduction, it would be *Gone with the Wind*. Yet that may be just why it does. Seventy years old and still running strong, thanks to television, DVDs, and revivals that roll around as regularly as national holidays, the movie has acquired both the contempt and the indulgence of familiarity. Its characters have lodged in our unconscious like family members. Its images (the staircase, the green velvet curtain dress) and dialogue (“I don’t know nuthin’ ’bout birthin’ babies”) are the stuff of parody and late-night comedy, part of our hearts and funny bones but rarely calling on our more analytical faculties.

David O. Selznick’s grand and grandiose three-and-a-half hour production was Hollywood at its most extravagant, the jewel in the crown of a kind of studio moviemaking that would never again be possible . . . or even desirable. It was 1939, war

was about to break out, most people were still in the midst of the Depression. Yet in an industry relatively immune to the downturn, a whole galaxy of behind-the-scenes genius craftsmen could conjure up entire worlds on a back lot—a parallel universe where the immortals were more seductive, the colors more ravishing than anything in nature, and everything grimy, unkempt, and discordant was swept under the rug. It's a fitting irony that the example par excellence of this studio-confected world was *Gone with the Wind*, a celebration of caste and class from the New World's most democratic medium, the portrait of a never-never land whose harmony and grace depended on the smoothing out of much that was ugly and uncomfortable.

How something so full of contradiction and dissonance appears so seamless and has proved so enduring is a mystery made possible by our investment in the fantasy, often correcting or “improving” on the book or movie. Viewers and readers misremember a scene or character—for example, forgetting or eliminating Rhett's patrician background. And there are the untold (and told) versions of Scarlett and Rhett getting together in the end.

As with many popular films, especially with stars as charismatic as Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable, emotional appeal and secret fantasy run roughshod over ideology, and something in us resists bringing our two warring sides into daylight scrutiny. Both much beloved and taken for granted, *GWTW* (initials recognizable worldwide) has settled into grooves well worn not only

by time but by the way memories fueled by romantic yearnings have formed around it, become indistinguishable not only from our real-life memories but from our very identities.

Of course we want to believe that all things are possible and tomorrow is another day, but at the same time, if we don't want to be stuck forever in Scarlett mode, it might make sense to look again at the movie around her and the part it has played in our lives, personal, political, and social. Investigate it anew for its own intriguing self and for all that has happened, ideologically, politically, cinematically since its opening and, in effect, in its influential wake.

On the downside: as with *Birth of a Nation*, the half-truths of the film both encapsulated and made history: Margaret Mitchell was deeply influenced by D. W. Griffith, and both films' portraits of Reconstruction as an unalloyed horror became the standard view, with the terrors posed by integration more potent than any political countermovement. It awaited later decades and revisionist historians like Eric Foner to set the record straight. *Gone with the Wind's* portrait of a noble South, martyred to a Lost Cause, gave the region a kind of moral ascendancy that allowed it to hold the rest of the country hostage as the "Dixification" virus spread west of the Mississippi and north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Generations of canny politicians, native sons espousing conservative and racist politics, dominated Washington from Reconstruction up until Civil Rights.

On the other hand, Vivien Leigh's Scarlett, in all her selfishness

and intrepidity, is one of the great, iconoclastic figures in movies, a byword for “gumption” and survival, a heroine who grows more astonishing over time. Scarlett’s radical refusal of the rules of Southern Christian ladylike behavior, her horribleness and deceitfulness, her cumulative sins and improprieties blaze forth in a strange and ambiguous villainy. Her flaws are never excused but are somehow extenuated by her remarkable courage and resiliency. Never was there a heroine so admirable, so despicable, and above all so beyond the reach of the double standard that traditionally closes in on women in Hollywood films and allows them so little moral and behavioral leeway. She is eerily timely, channeling the spirit of an age, Mitchell’s youth-obsessed twenties, that resembles ours to a jarring degree. In Scarlett, the post-suffragette flapper meets the postfeminist power girl, a Madonna derivative, morphing easily into the unbridled capitalist and slave driver (literally) of postwar Atlanta. This is the awesomely shrewd businesswoman who subverts the ethics and threatens the masculinity of the dear white honorable, paternalistic Southern gentleman.

Underneath the nostalgia and high romance (romance, take note, that emanates from the male figures rather than the female), there’s something both deeply Southern and deeply American in this wily, sexually repressed, but infinitely resourceful figure: Scarlett embodies the secret masculinization of the outwardly feminine, the uninhibited will to act of every tomboy adolescent, here justified by the rule-bending crisis of war.

It's fascinating to figure out how a film that should never have worked (too many cooks) *did*—in my opinion, largely because of the fire and desperation of three people with strangely overlapping tastes and eccentricities: David Selznick, Margaret Mitchell, and Vivien Leigh.

For those of us who fell under its spell, the range of emotions attached to the film fluctuate over time with the predictable volatility of a love affair and its aftermath, in my own case what we might clinically designate as the Seven Stages of *Gone with the Wind*: Love, Identification, Dependency, Resentment, Embarrassment, Indifference, and then something like Half-Love again, a more grown-up affection informed by a film lover's appreciation of the small miracle by which a mere "woman's film" with a heroine who never quite outgrows adolescence was transfigured into something much larger, something profoundly American, a canvas that contains, if not Walt Whitman's multitudes, at least multiple perspectives.