

AGNIESZKA JAROSZ
University of Wrocław

Approaches to the History of the American Civil War in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* and its Film Adaptation by Victor Fleming

Abstract

Gone With the Wind, a bestseller written in 1936 by Margaret Mitchell is a novel and unique chronicle narrating the events of the American Civil War and the Reconstruction Period, presented from the Southern point of view. The novel and its film adaptation by Victor Fleming are two American masterpieces and both have been objects of numerous research. However, the film seems to have overshadowed the book, as not much research has been done on the latter so far. Although historical information gathered by the author happens to be amazingly abundant and accurate, the novel has been neglected in the field of historical novels. While the novel constitutes (almost a personal) representation of the Civil War era seen by Margaret Mitchell, told from the point of view of a Southerner, the film omits numerous historical details and interprets some of them individually, making it an adaptation of the novel, and not of the history. As a result, the film can be seen as a performance within a performance. Alterations of the historical information presented by the filmmakers could be the result of censorship or lack of recognition of the sensitivity towards understanding the war. In other cases, it could be the result of a deliberate artistic action in order to make the content of the film more melodramatic. The task of adapting the novel of a thousand pages in a film was complex and resulted in a limitation of the content that was to be transferred. Therefore, the film makers chose to limit the historical information. The film centers on the protagonist, Scarlett O'Hara and does not represent the War. In fact, the war only constitutes the background for the plot presented. The film omits and limits some information, which sounds very logical considering the dense form of the novel. The aim of this work is to compare the official historical version of the American Civil War recognized to be "reliable" by historians with its literary and film adaptations and investigate the reflection of the war in both.

Keywords: American Civil War, the Reconstruction Period, Margaret Mitchell, history, film adaptation.

History is an essential element of the national identity of every country, especially cherished by the citizens of countries that have a relatively short history. The United States of America is a fine example. History is particularly fostered in the so-called Southern section, the term referring to the eleven states¹ which seceded from the Union in 1861 and formed the Confederate States of America, the event which directly started the American Civil War (1861–1865). The ignominious defeat the Confederate armies experienced during the War and the “national depression” the whole South suffered from during the Reconstruction Period (1865–1873) have left their marks on the Southerners’ psyche, burdened with the stigma of disgrace. As a result, the USA is engrossed in its own history, which was reflected in the large number of the historical societies established in the country². America’s reverence for history is also reflected in the great number of historical celebrations held in the country, many of them honouring the dead from the American Civil War onward (e.g. Memorial Day). Moreover, there are local holidays celebrated in the Southern section which are not recognized in the Northern states, e.g. July 13th which is devoted to Nathan Bedford Forrest, an American lieutenant general from the Civil War³. Traditionally, the history of the American South and the American Civil War was examined in terms of painstakingly collected records and facts, an approach initiated by modernists who advocated an adherence to realism, empiricism and objectivity. Postmodern historians, however, apply a non-factual approach towards historical research and being aware that something might have been missed, biased or completely misunderstood in the course of research, maintain that what should be examined is not the history of events in general, but the history of certain peoples, regions or events (Khalidi 2008, retrieved on September 23, 2009).

Post-modernism signals the death of such ‘metanarratives’ whose secretly terroristic function was to ground and legitimate the illusion of a ‘universal’ human history. We are now in the process of waking from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and fetish of the totality, into the laid back pluralism of the post-modern, that heterogeneous range of lifestyles and language games which has renounced the nostalgic urge to totalize and legitimate itself... Science and philosophy must jettison their grandiose and metaphysical claims and view themselves more modestly as just another set of narratives. (Eagleton, cited in Khalidi 2008, retrieved on September 23, 2009)

Therefore, history requires historians to pay careful attention, to be impartial and self-critical, and to take into account multiple points of view and various possible versions of the “historical truth.” In other words, “To know the truth of history is to realize its ultimate myth and its inevitable ambiguity” (Basler, cited in Szasz 1974: 554, retrieved on September 15, 2009).

-
- 1 These were: Texas, Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida (Hofstadter 1959: 589).
 - 2 In 1884 the national American Historical Association (AHA) with its headquarters in Washington, D.C. was founded. Its objective was to collect and store historical documents and to advocate, develop and popularize historical studies. Today, being the biggest and the only national association in the country, it supervises the fifty three state historical societies and over two hundred local historical societies that spread throughout the United States and deal with all fields of history (“American Historical Association, The Professional Association for all Historians” 2006, retrieved November 13, 2009).
 - 3 A very controversial celebration in the eyes of the Northerners since Nathan Bedford Forrest was also one of the creators and leaders of the Ku Klux Klan, the organization which aimed at resisting the northern influences imposed during the Reconstruction Period (Chalmers 1987: 73).

Nowadays, however, it is not only historians who tell history. The task of conveying historical messages has been taken up by artists, and historical messages have been enriched with literary and film adaptations. This phenomenon is well illustrated by *Gone With the Wind*, a novel by Margaret Mitchell and its film adaptation by Victor Fleming. Both works constitute individual and subjective interpretations of the historical events of the American Civil War, often opposed by the critics and historians to the factual course of events. The aim of this paper is to compare the official historical version of the American Civil War recognized to be 'trustworthy' by historians with the literary and film adaptations and to examine its reflection therein.

Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, a best-seller written in 1936, is a peculiar novel and a chronicle depicting the events of the American Civil War and the Reconstruction Period presented from the Southern point of view. The novel and the movie, both being American masterpieces, have often been the subject of research. However, the film seems to have overshadowed the book, as not much research concerning the latter has been done so far. The novel has been neglected in the field of historical novels. In such works it is omitted or merely mentioned and labeled 'untrue', but with no further explanation or research. Daniel Aaron (1973: 53) reviews the novel very briefly: "mere documentary authenticity, but provides no evidence." On the other hand, Mitchell is said to be dishonest and to glorify the South (Louis D. Rubin 1980: 108). Both the novel and the film faced serious criticism, being accused of distorting the image of the Civil War and spreading racial attitudes among American society. Although the accusations concerning the racial issue indeed might seem to have been justified, the ones referring to the falsity of the historical information conveyed by both the novel and the film turn out to be groundless from the point of view of the postmodern historical approach applied to contemporary historical studies. While the novel is Mitchell's (almost personal) depiction of the time of the Civil War, described from the point of view of a Southerner⁴, the movie omits numerous historical details and interprets some of them individually, thus becoming an adaptation of the novel, and not of history itself. As a consequence, the movie may be perceived as an interpretation within an interpretation. The alterations of historical information introduced by the film-makers might be the result of censorship or of a lack of recognition of sensitivity toward the understanding of the War. In other cases it is the result of a deliberate artistic intention aiming at subordinating the movie to its melodramatic content.

Gone With the Wind turns out to be hard to classify as a literary genre. The question whether the book is a historical novel or rather a romance set in a historical reality has been raised since the moment the book was published. What is problematic is the plot the historical content is embedded in, which constitutes most of the content in total. The historical information might seem imperceptible in the dense form of the novel, which is over a thousand pages long. However, if focusing only on the historical information collected by Mitchell, it turns out that the material she gathered would be prolific enough to constitute a separate, individual, purely historical novel. Moreover, it would turn out to be quite a trustworthy historical course-book providing information on the history of the American South, in which case the Southern point of view adhered to by the author would no longer be the source of indignation. What evokes outrage is not the content, as it may seem, but the way the author conveys the information.

4 Mitchell was born in Atlanta, Georgia, a state highly affected by the War. Moreover, her both grandfathers fought in the War themselves and therefore the whole family was deeply interested in history; her father was even the president of the Atlanta Historical Society (Garrett 1982: 109). As a result, the author grew up in a society which experienced the failure and defeat of the Old South and whose identity was shaped by the events of the 1860's and 70's.

The way the characters depicted by Mitchell perceive and experience the Civil War and the Reconstruction Period imposes on the reader a certain way of thinking, plays with their emotions and secretly influences their attitudes towards the War and the related issues.

The central point of *Gone With the Wind* is the American Civil War. The book opens on the day preceding its outbreak and centers around the ideological background of the War, on the would-be course of the War as imagined by the Southern characters and finally on the actual course, its realities and results. The reader sees the War through the eyes of a Southern protagonist, Scarlett O'Hara, whose twelve years of life constitute the framework for the novel (the five-year long war and the first seven years of the Reconstruction Era.) Every character experiences the War differently. Some of them enlist into the army and take part in the warfare, making history happen. Some of them lose their lives in the battleground (e.g. the Tarleton brothers, Scarless's beaux) or die due to wounds or illnesses (e.g. Charles Hamilton, Scarlett's husband, who dies of pneumonia.) Those who stay alive witness the cruelty the war brings, suffer pain and hunger and watch their families and friends die. The female characters and the men who do not go to war also experience the hardships the war causes and face such economic incommodities as shortages of basic products (food, medicines, clothing).

The ideological background of the American Civil War is given much attention by Mitchell. While the cause of the War is commonly simplified and brought down to the slavery issue, the author enumerates many factors which contributed to the growth of the national conflict which reached its climax in the 1860s. The reader learns about the geographical differences between the North and the South, the political problems connected with the forthcoming presidential elections and the socio-economic conditioning of the newly created Confederacy. Interestingly, Mitchell presents the ideological background from different points of view. While the ladies seem to be bored with the topic of war and search for other kinds of entertainment, all the Southern gentlemen are looking forward to the outbreak of the war. However, their experience of military service and knowledge of warring seem to be slim. Moreover, they are certain of the Northerners' military weakness and of the Southern inevitable victory, referring to the political tension between the two sections as a "problem" which will be "solved within a month—why, one battle" (Mitchell 1936: 111). Although many of the characters have their fears, nobody would speak them out for fear of being discriminated against by their compatriots⁵. The only person not to be so enthusiastic and optimistic about the potential war is Rhett Butler who happens to be the only Southerner who has ever traveled to the North. He attempts to make his companions aware that apart from good intentions a war requires some military forces such as arms, shipyards, cannon factories or iron foundries—all the things the South does not have (Mitchell 1936: 112). Such an attitude is considered not to be patriotic and evokes a dispute among the gentlemen. Apart from Butler, they all share the stereotype of the Old South concerning the attitude towards the Yankees' lack of courage and their poor fighting abilities—a myth which is going to be debunked in further chapters. However, while analyzing the passages where Mitchell expresses her attitudes towards the War itself it becomes apparent that she does not approve of it at all. Talking about the Southerners' euphoria about the forthcoming war Mitchell illustrates it ironically, exaggerating its solemnity and idealizing the characters' devotion. Most of the views expressing satisfaction with the War issue are shared by characters of fairly low intelligence (e.g. Gerard O'Hara, Charles Hamilton, the Tarleton brothers). The argumentation they provide, although supposed to be in

⁵ Those who do express their discontent and fears are either considered to have mental problems, such as the old Mr. McRae (Mitchell 1936: 110) or have a stable social position, such as Ashley Wilkes and are not afraid of losing respect.

favour of the Confederate army, turns out to be unreasonable and illogical idle talk. Paradoxically, while expressing the enthusiastic attitudes towards the War Mitchell does not really mean to glorify the South, but aims at exposing the Southerner's naivety and lack of practical preparation for the War, which is going to turn out to be the sole source of their final failure.

The course of the War is not completely covered in the novel. Mitchell chooses to depict the events of paramount importance, such as the year 1862 or 1864, omitting other events she considers to be less significant. She does not provide the reader with merely depictions of the warfare, but presents various aspects of the reality of the war, e.g. she gives accounts of the sanitary conditions the wounded soldiers experience. The end of the War, however, is described in full detail. Mitchell recounts the events, providing particular dates and describing the parts of the day, sometimes even alongside the weather conditions. Before the outbreak of the War, the Southerners consider the Yankees to be cowards and badly trained, failing to realize their military power and economical advantage over the Southern section. However, during the War that view undergoes a significant change resulting from the numerous and ignominious defeats of the Confederates.

Mitchell provides the reader with a sharp-eyed depiction of the everyday realities of the Civil War. The reader learns about the habitual activities the civilians attend to and how they deal with the hardships of the War, e.g. how they obtained the basic necessities at the time when their ports were blocked by the enemy's forces⁶. The image of the reality of the War seems to be logically planned, Mitchell remembers about everything—the ideological background, the course and the effects of the war, the everyday life of the Southerners, the traditions⁷, the industrial changes⁸ introduced in the South during and after the War and the collapse of the social hierarchy during the War years. The author does not refrain from covering the down-to-earth conditions of the wounded soldiers either:

The hospitals were filled with dirty, bewhiskered, verminous men who smelled terribly and bore on their bodies wounds hideous enough to turn a Christian's stomach. The hospitals stank of gangrene, the odour assailing her nostrils long before the doors were reached, a sickish sweet smell that clung to her hands and hair and haunted her in her dreams. (Mitchell 1936: 157)

Although the historical content concerning the warfare is abundant and ample, Mitchell depicts it only from the Southern point of view, limiting the action to that connected with the Southerners and their course of life. The author does not cover the hardships the Yankees experience. Neither does she provide information about the traditions or everyday habits of the Northerners. The only portrayals of the Yankees are made in order to create the background for the struggles of the Confederates. No deliberate description of the Northern reality seems to have been intended and the Yankees constitute an accidental group character which turns out to be insignificant.

The mood accompanying the Southerners throughout the War plays an essential role in the novel. Enthusiastic, optimistic and trustful—these are the words describing the Southern mood before

6 The profession of a blockade-runner became very popular and profitable at that time. The occupation is dangerous, but very respectable since it provides the society with basic goods such as tea, sugar, silk, *etc.*

7 It is worth mentioning that on various occasions Mitchell provides the reader with very detailed descriptions of the Confederates' uniforms, which turn out to be accurate and corresponding to the ones the Southerners actually wore during the Civil War (compare Haythornthwaite 1980: 31–97).

8 Mitchell introduces the reader to a very detailed and trustworthy image of Atlanta and the changes the city underwent during the War.

and during the War. The characters believe in their victory until the very end, repeatedly chanting their mantra “One more victory and the war is over” (Mitchell 1936: 528). Moreover, they truly admire their generals and leaders, whom they trust wholeheartedly. The capitulation of the Confederacy after the siege of Atlanta comes as a great shock to the society. The adoration and trust they once felt are replaced by disappointment and hatred. Meanwhile, relations between the Northerners and the Southerners seem to be non-existent from the very beginning. The Southerners view the Yankees as bad-mannered, naïve and lacking intelligence (Mitchell 1936: 19), which helps them to build the myth of inevitable victory over the enemy and makes it even harder to realize the real source of the defeat after the War has been lost. Ashley Wilkes seems to be the only character who draws the right conclusions from what he experiences before the War has even finished:

I see too clearly that we have been betrayed, betrayed by our arrogant Southern selves, believing that one of us could whip a dozen Yankees, believing that King Cotton could rule the world. Betrayed, too, by words and catchphrases, prejudices and hatreds coming from the mouths of those highly placed, those men whom we respected and revered; “King Cotton, Slavery, States’ Rights, Damn’ Yankees.”... What are you fighting for? I think of States’ Rights and cotton and the darkies and the Yankees whom we have been bred up to hate, and I know that none of these is the reason why I am fighting. (Mitchell 1936: 207–208)

Moreover, Mitchell accuses the Confederacy of misinforming society about the War issue, deceiving them and giving empty promises of the forthcoming assistance from other countries. Until 1863 Scarlett believes the propaganda that England and France are going to support the Confederate armies due to the cotton trade relations they used to maintain. However, she soon realizes that “The idea of assistance from abroad is just a newspaper invention to keep up the morale of the South. The Confederacy is doomed” (Mitchell 1936: 235). In addition to this, Mitchell suggests that the society is ill-informed about the real losses of the Confederates. The soldiers do not inform their wives and families about the actual course of the War, trying to protect them and save their illusions of the inevitable victory until the very last moment.

Being very detailed about the historical setting, Mitchell recounts two names of the most popular prison camps—Rock Island, a Yankee prison camp in Illinois and Andersonville, the Confederate camp situated in Georgia (Meredith 1957: 6), both notorious for the cruel and appalling conditions the captives were kept in. According to Mitchell, though, the way the Northerners and the Southerners treated their prisoners differed significantly. In Rock Island “Food was scanty, one blanket did for three men, and the ravages of smallpox, pneumonia and typhoid gave the place the name a pesthouse. Three-fourths of all the men sent there never came out alive” (Mitchell 1936: 849). In Andersonville, in turn, the prisoners were fed on fat pork and dried peas—the only things the Confederates fed on themselves. The author draws the conclusion that while the Confederates provided their prisoners the conditions they could afford themselves, the Yankees misinterpreted that fact and took revenge on the enemy, constricting their captives as cruelly as possible.

What is also interesting is the way Mitchell portrays the armies of the Yankees and the Confederates. While the Yankees are presented as the ones who rape and kill with cruelty while marching through the South, no such events are recounted when the Confederates march through the North⁹. This fact again betrays Mitchell’s personal attachment to the Southern Cause.

⁹ The only crime committed by the Confederates at that time mentioned by Mitchell is looting the corn crops.

Mitchell also covers the first seven years of the Reconstruction Period (1865–1872), ending with the democrats winning the elections and giving hope for a better future. Interestingly enough, the time of the Reconstruction of the South turns out to be an even greater humiliation than the ignominious defeat the Southerners have suffered. With the end of the War the Yankees take control over the Southern section. The changes introduced by the Northern authorities affect all possible aspects of life, depriving the ex-Confederates of their autonomy and independence. Moreover, the decay of the plantations, the impoverishment of their former owners and the emergence of new social groups: scalawags, carpetbaggers and freed blacks, distort the social order of the once chivalric and idealistic South and cause chaos. The social and economic changes imposed by the authorities result in widespread prejudice towards the Yankees and the blacks, which consequently leads to the formation of the Ku Klux Klan organization. Interestingly enough, the circumstances of this event are depicted in a positive light by Mitchell, as the organization aims at “seeking justice” and taking revenge on republicans (black or white) collaborating with the Union. Such an attitude might seem outrageous at first glance, but assuming that the book is written from the Southern point of view it turns out to be understandable. Mitchell does not present events the way they really were, but rather the way they were for the Southerners. The reality of the American Civil War presented in the novel, although seemingly distorted, in fact constitutes a fairly accurate account of the historical events, a kind of a chronicle of the War which, despite the accusations of partiality and subjectivity, according to the postmodern theory of the plurality of historical truth, constitute quite a highly reliable historical source of the American South.

While classifying the novel as a genre turns out to be difficult, the problem does not arise in the case of its film adaptation. The novel, published in 1936, became an overnight success and won Mitchell the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. It became an immediate point of interest to the film industry and it took a month for David O’Selznick, one of the most successful and influential American producers of that time, to buy the movie rights from the author. It is essential to realize that the adaptation of *Gone With the Wind* was never meant to be a historical film. What the producer was hoping for was a good motion picture and a would-be box-office success. Education about the Civil War issue or influencing anybody’s views were not O’Selznick’s targets. He was, however, concerned with the delicate issue of political correctness—being a Jew who had suffered from prejudice himself, he felt inclined to eliminate from the movie all the elements which might have been offensive to any group of people (Behlmer 1972: 148). One of his major concerns was to tone down the political attitude towards the African-Americans portrayed in the movie (and taking part in its creation), so the historical question was left aside. Moreover, it is impossible to talk about anybody’s intentions, since the final version of the movie is the result of a vital collaboration of people of various origins, beliefs and agendas, additionally burdened with the contemporary political situation and censorship. The directors and the writers changed repeatedly—originally George Cukor¹⁰ was to direct the picture, but after a two-year long collaboration he quit (allegedly after a fight with O’Selznick) and was replaced by Victor Fleming. However, although it was Fleming who got the final credit for directing and won the Academy Award for Best Director, there were others directing the picture and not mentioned in the credits (e.g. Sam Shepard). Finally, according to the cast of the film, David O’Selznick was to act

10 Many years later Olivia de Havilland (Melanie Wilkes) confessed that though it was Fleming to be in charge of the film-making, both she and Vivien Leigh (Scarlett O’Hara) would secretly consult Cukor on the artistic interpretations of their roles (Lindsey 1979, retrieved March 03, 2010). According to de Havilland there is more of George Cukor’s vision preserved in the film than of any other people involved in the project.

as director at times, enforcing the realization of his own vision. The same problem concerns the script-writing, which was the result of a group collaboration as well. Although it was Sidney Howard¹¹ who got the credit, there were others who took part in the process of writing, such as Ben Hecht or David O'Selznick himself. Moreover, Mitchell was consulted at times, but allegedly refused to cooperate having been ignored at some point (Lindsey 1979, retrieved on March 3, 2010).

The complex team responsible for the process of film-making makes it impossible to talk about the intentions and views conveyed through the movie. The film is an adaptation of a novel which, although it was based on real events, adapts the historical content to the author's particular point of view. The film, in turn, enhances the sense of distance between facts and fiction and constitutes an individual adaptation of the information "adapted" by Mitchell, thus becoming an adaptation of an adaptation. The final effect is a kind of consensus reached by the producers, script-writers and directors through combining various points of view and this results in a whole new perspective, which turns out to be difficult to analyze. Therefore, such an outcome is impossible either to entirely accept or to entirely reject. The film was supposed to be a good picture and that is how it should be viewed.

The task of adapting a more than one thousand pages long novel into a movie was complex and resulted in a limiting of the content which was to be conveyed. Therefore, the film creators chose to limit the historical information. The film centres around the protagonist, Scarlett O'Hara and does not depict the warfare. In fact, the War only constitutes the setting for the events presented. The historical information, so abundant in the novel, is depicted by the characters and commented on in the dialogues. Basic historical information describing the course of the War and the changes affecting the country are conveyed in the form of textual insertions (historical clips) which repeatedly appear on the screen and must be read by the viewers themselves. What counts in the movie is not history itself, which seems to be introduced to the viewer as if "by the way", but the pure romance. Such an approach saved the directors and the producers a lot of time and money; on the other hand, however, it deprived the reader of the insights into the historical depth that Margaret Mitchell achieved in her work.

The film eliminates and limits some information, which seems logical in the light of the dense form of the novel. However, introducing some new information does not seem to be justified, especially when it is to evoke emotions and influence the viewer's perception of the movie. Such was the case with the opening credits which announce that "there was a land of Cavaliers and Cotton Fields called the Old South" which has already "gone with the wind" (Howard 1939, retrieved on March 14, 2010). Such a phrase does not appear in the novel and was not approved by the author herself since there is a danger it might be misinterpreted by the viewer who, as a result, from the very beginning is expecting a story of the Old Southern land which had ceased to exist due to the Northern aggression.

While Mitchell provides the reader with the complex ideological background of the American Civil War, the film brings it down to the slavery issue. Also the moods and the social relations between the Northerners and the Southerners are simplified. The Southern gentlemen are divided into patriots, blindly believing in the inevitable victory of the Confederacy and who are looking forward to beating the Yankees, and Rhett Butler, who turns out to be the only objective and reasonable concluder, aware of the military weakness of the South. Interestingly enough, Mitchell states very clearly that she herself is aware

11 Howard was given a collaborative assistance from many other authors, whose contribution to the script-writing was either eliminated while shooting the film or is mentioned very seldom. Among them there were Edwin Justin Mayer, John Van Druten, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Jo Swerling (Lambert 1973: 57, retrieved February 16, 2010).

of the military weakness of the South: „before the war there had been few cotton factories, woolen mills, arsenals and machine shops... The South produced statesmen and soldiers, planters and doctors, lawyers and poets, but certainly not engineers or mechanics” (Mitchell 1936: 144).

The film also simplifies the course of War, which is merely mentioned in the dialogues. The siege of Atlanta, for instance, is recapitulated in one short sentence appearing in a historical clip, which is more explicit than any kind of description could be:

The skies rained Death... For thirty-five days a battered Atlanta hung grimly on, hoping for a miracle... Then there fell a silence... more terrifying than the pounding of the cannon... (Howard 1939, retrieved on March 14, 2010)

What the film devotes a lot of attention to is black-white relations. Out of concern for political correctness and the censorship of that time, the name of the Ku Klux Klan does not appear in the movie. In the key moment when Scarlett's second Husband, Frank Kennedy is shot while taking part in one of the Klan's raids, the activity he attends to is referred to as a simple “gathering” and remains meaningful only to a viewer who has read the novel in the first place. What also betrays the real purpose of the gathering are the “robes” the gentlemen have to burn afterwards, which are also significant only to the viewer who is familiar with the novel. Although David O'Selznick took all the necessary measures in order to avoid racial controversies, he did not manage to avoid accusations of being racist. The political situation in the United States then was not helpful either. It was the year 1939, over seventy years after the Civil War and the black cast of the movie was still refused entrance to the movie theatre and could not attend the premiere of the film, being forced to wait outside the building¹². However, it is significant that *Gone With the Wind* is the first movie in which African-Americans were portrayed by actors of those origins, and not by whites covered with black paint.

The Southern point of view acquired by the author due to her origins and personal attachment to history seems indisputable, such as the fact that she was not concerned about political correctness while depicting African-Americans. In fact, the image of the blacks presented in the novel and in the movie seems to be very much alike. Mitchell suggests that they are all characterized by inborn servitude. Moreover, all the blacks seem to lack intelligence, they are unable to speak proper English (using simple sentence structures and making a lot of speech errors), they lie and are unreliable¹³. What is more, most of them are lazy and entirely incapable of acting on their own, which is illustrated after the announcement of the Emancipation Act, when only some of the servants leave their masters and start living on their own. According to both Mitchell and Fleming, most of them were happy with the lives they were leading on the plantations. When it comes to the ones who leave and start new lives, they turn out to be unable to accommodate to the new reality and resort to crime, becoming the direct reason for the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan.

Mitchell confronts the reality of the African-American slaves held on the plantations with that of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which is very popular among the characters of the novel. While the Northerners are appalled at the conditions the slaves live in and intend to learn more about the cruelty they experience,

12 The premiere took place in Atlanta, Georgia, a place so much affected by the American Civil War and overwhelmed by the defeat of the Confederacy, partly blamed on the black slaves.

13 Prissy lies about being able to assist at a childbirth for no particular reason. Later on, she claims to be the one to have assisted Melanie Wilkes while giving birth.

Scarlett cannot understand their interest in the issue, claiming that Stowe's novel has not much in common with the reality of life on the bygone plantations. The Southerners depicted by Mitchell do not seem to resemble the ones depicted by Harriet Beecher Stowe either. All the black home servants Scarlett's family keeps are respected and appreciated by the family and they decide to stay with their masters even after the proclamation of the Emancipation Act. Moreover, no cases of corporal punishment are mentioned throughout the novel¹⁴.

While *Gone With the Wind* was written by a Southerner who depicted the events from an entirely Southern point of view, the film was made by a group of people of various origins and beliefs. As a result, the film depicts the events presented in the novel in a relatively faithful way, toning down the moods and attitudes of the characters depicted in the book and adjusting them to the expectations of a wider audience. Those actions might be perceived as falsifying history. However, it should not appall or evoke outrage, as according to Joseph Freeman (1974):

Everyone falsifies history even if it is only his own personal history. Sometimes the falsification is deliberate, sometimes unconscious; but always the past is altered to suit the needs of the present. The best we can say of any account is not that it is the real truth at last, but that this is how the story appears now. (Freeman, cited in Szasz 1974: 555, retrieved on September 15, 2009)

Taking into consideration *Gone With the Wind* both the reader and the viewer may assume that they will be introduced with the representation of the American Civil War the way it was perceived at the time of the publishing or production. However, while analyzing the historical content of the novel and the movie it is essential to realize that the novel was never to be a history handbook, and the movie was never meant to be a historical picture.

While the plot and the course of the events presented in the novel seem to be transferred to the medium of the film in a relative accordance with the literary original, the historical version of the events depicted seems to be conveyed as if accidentally, without much attention being paid to it. As a result, it is the film which turns out to distort the image of the American Civil War, depriving the viewer of acquiring various points of view while analyzing the matter.

The novel, on the other hand, although seemingly "Southern," turns out to be more complex in fact than the "universal," as it was planned to be, motion picture. Although Mitchell is widely accused of glorifying the antebellum South, it is essential to realize that those accusations are made on the basis of the plot and the events depicted in the novel. The critics do not usually take into account the language Mitchell uses, which seems to be essential while examining the novel's attitudes. I believe that the author's true beliefs are hidden behind the irony and sarcasm the characters are depicted with, being conveyed "between the lines" in the long and ironic narratives. It does not seem accidental that most of the Southern characters turn out to lack intelligence and education, ridiculing the stereotype of the antebellum gentility. Such complexity of attitude is not reflected in the film either.

To sum up, while analyzing the novel and the film from the historical point of view, one comes to a conclusion that the images of the Civil War and its reality presented by both Margaret Mitchell and Victor Fleming constitute to some extent sources of historical knowledge of the American South—not of the common history of the Civil War, though. In terms of historical accuracy, though, it is the book which

¹⁴ The only black slave to be hurt by a white person is Prissy who is punished by Scarlett for having lied about her ability to assist at a childbirth, mentioned above. However, Scarlett does not bully or hurt her servant in a way that is described in the Stowe's novel, but only slaps her once.

turns out to be more complex and reliable. Mitchell provides the reader with numerous historical facts and abundant descriptions of the Wartime reality which the film relegates to the background, eliminating most of the information conveyed by Mitchell and adapting only that which is most significant. It is essential to remember, though, that according to postmodern historians accusing the authors of falsifying history is groundless. What Mitchell does is not telling the history of the United States, but the American South and its people exclusively, the way that she knows it.

References

- Fleming, Victor (dir.) [1939] *Gone With the Wind* (Motion Picture). With Vivien Leigh, Clark Gable, Leslie Howard and Olivia de Havilland. Produced by David O'Selznick for MGM.
- Mitchell, Margaret (1936) *Gone with The Wind*. New York: Macmillan.

Secondary sources

- Aaron, Daniel (1973) *The Unwritten War. American Writers and the Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Behlmer, Rudy (1972) *Memo from David O'Selznick*. New York: Viking Press.
- Chalmers, David Mark (1987) *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (3rd ed.). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Garrett, Franklin M., Harold H. Martin (1982) *Atlanta and Environs: A Chronicle of Its People and Events*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Haythornthwaite, Philip (1980) *Uniforms of the American Civil War in Colour 1861–65*. Blandford: Blandford Press.
- Hofstadter, Richard (1959) *The American Republic. Vol. I*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Meredith, Roy (1957) *This Was Andersonville*. New York: Bonanza Books.
- Rubin, Louis D., Jr., (ed.) (1980) *The American South: Portrait of a Culture*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

Internet sources

- "American Historical Association, The Professional Association for all Historians" (2006) Retrieved on November 13, 2009 from <<http://www.historians.org/info/index.cfm#What>>. Last Updated: December 13, 2011.
- Basler, Roy cited in Szasz, Ferenc M. (1974, August) "The Many Meanings of History, Part 1," *The History Teacher* Vol. 7, No. 4. University of New Mexico: Society for History Education; 552–563. Retrieved on September 15, 2009 from <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/492061>>.
- Eagleton, T. cited in. Khalidi, Manzoor A. (2008, April) "Postmodernism: A Reaction to the Terrorism of the Modernist Philosophical Thought." *Market Forces*. Retrieved on September 23, 2009 from <http://www.researchgate.net/publication/26540385_Postmodernism_A_Reaction_to_the_Terrorism_of_the_Modernist_Philosophical_Thought>.
- Freeman, Joseph cited in Szasz, Ferenc M. (1974, August) "The Many Meanings of History, Part 1," *The History Teacher* Vol. 7, No. 4. University of New Mexico: Society for History Education; 552–563. Retrieved on September 15, 2009 from <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/492061>>.
- Howard, Sydney (1939) *Gone With the Wind—the Script*. Retrieved on March 14, 2010 from <http://www.scarletonline.com/Gone_with_the_Wind_script.htm>.

- Khalidi, Manzoor A. (2008, April) "Postmodernism: A Reaction to the Terrorism of the Modernist Philosophical Thought." *Market Force*. Retrieved on September 23, 2009 from <http://www.researchgate.net/publication/26540385_Postmodernism_A_Reaction_to_the_Terrorism_of_the_Modernist_Philosophical_Thought>.
- Lambert, Gavin (1973, March) "The Making of Gone With the Wind, Part II." *The Atlantic Monthly*, 57. Retrieved on February 16, 2010 from <<http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/73mar/wind2.htm>>.
- Lindsey, Robert (1979, December 31) "Reunion Recalls Those Gone With the Wind." *The New York Times*. Retrieved on March 3, 2010 from <<http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/movies/bestpictures/wind-ar7.html>>.
- Szasz, Ferenc M. (1974, August) "The Many Meanings of History, Part 1," *The History Teacher* Vol. 7, No. 4. University of New Mexico: Society for History Education; 552–563. Retrieved on September 15, 2009 from <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/492061>>.