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"This picture is not a work of merely local interest": *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind* in the Anglo-American World

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Introduction

- ¹ The United States has been exporting representations of its Civil War (1861–1865) to Britain since the days of the war itself. These have been crossing the Atlantic in various ways: academic studies, artefacts, novels and military writings are just a few examples. However, between the end of the nineteenth century and the coming of age of television, cinema was arguably the leading agent of generating and exporting Civil War images from the United States to Britain. According to one count, for example, between 1897 and 1961, 495 Civil War films were produced in Hollywood, and many of these made it to Britain.¹
- ² Films about the Civil War were an American product that reflected contemporary American affairs. For example, rather than just a film about Abraham Lincoln's life, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (John Cromwell, 1940), was also a film about the Great Depression and about the global conflict between democracy and fascism.² Additionally, Civil War films reflected the war's contested legacy in the United States and took part in shaping and perpetuating parallel and often conflicting narratives of the conflict.³ During the period covered in this article (between the 1910s and the 1940s), reconciliation was the dominant legacy of the Civil War in the United States. This narrative celebrated the reinvigorated unity between North and South after the war. In order to accommodate the Northern legacy alongside that of the Lost Cause, it downplayed the centrality of slavery and the continuous oppression of African Americans.

- 3 In Britain, these films were received in a different cultural environment. Domestic British and American affairs were different, and Britain hardly experienced the conflicts about the legacy of the Civil War the United States knew. In these two areas at least, the American context in which Civil War films were produced and received was foreign to the British. In other words, when Civil War films crossed the Atlantic, they crossed cultural borders.
- 4 This article studies how such borders are crossed by two films that have become landmarks both in cinematic history and in the history of Civil War representations, *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915) and *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939). First, it examines the American context in which the former was produced and shows how it reflected the place the war occupied in the contemporary American memory. The essay then analyses the reception of the film in Britain. In the second part, a similar analysis is made of the American context and the British reception of the latter film. To keep the theme of frontiers and their crossings in focus, the article adopts a classic approach to depict the British audiences' reception, concentrating on how they used American films about an American war to position themselves in relation to the American society.⁴
- 5 By focussing on the crossing of cultural borders by *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*, the article aims to alter the position held so far that the British received these films as part of a familiar experience. Michael Hammond, for example, has suggested that the almost uncontested approval of *The Birth of a Nation* stemmed from the fact that British critics interpreted it in the light of Britain's contemporary experience of the Great War. Their reading of the film, Hammond argued, "shows how familiar the British were with the cultural references in *Birth of a Nation*".⁵ In a similar vein, Helen Taylor has shown that the character of Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* appealed to British and American women alike because they saw in O'Hara familiar characteristics they appropriated.⁶
- 6 The present study does not challenge those illuminating findings. However, observing how the films travel from the American context to the British one suggests a more nuanced view. It shows that, even when they crossed the Atlantic, the American cultural imprint of these films was preserved. In other words, these films kept their foreign, "from across the border" character. It shows further that, for British critics, these films' distinct American character was important to preserve. Accordingly, the main argument is that British viewers interpreted *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind* from a vantage point that consisted of two integrated elements: a contemporary British experience, and the United States as part of this experience. The focus here is on the second of these elements and thus on the extent to which the films, the legacy of the Civil War, and the values that both represented remained, even when appropriated, American and alien to the British audience.

The Birth of a Nation

- 7 Thomas Dixon Jr was a fervent Southern *Lost Cause* soldier in the battle over the Civil War's memory in the United States. In 1905, Dixon – a North Carolinian – wrote *The Clansman*, the novel which formed the basis for *The Birth of a Nation*, to counter Harriet Beecher Stowe's narrative in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.⁷ The latter, Dixon believed, had distorted the history of the war, and through the medium of popular culture helped to

root in the United States an image and memory of a decadent South. In 1914, D. W. Griffith – the son of a Confederate soldier and likewise a Southern exponent – bought the rights to Dixon’s work and launched the production of *The Birth of a Nation*.

- 8 Following Dixon’s narrative, Griffith’s film was an aggressive defence of the South.⁸ However, the film was not about Southern supremacy. Although it was clearly supporting the South, and despite its attack on the North’s aggression, the film conveyed that the South sought peace and cross-sectional White brotherhood. “Liberty and union”, read the film’s final slide, “one and inseparable, *now and forever!*” [emphasized in original]. The film was not about the South being morally or otherwise better than the North, but rather about the South being as good as the North. According to the film, in the horrendous war the South showed that it was no less patriotic than the North and no less brave and moral. And no less than the North, the film showed, the South wanted peace and unity.
- 9 Racist and biased, the significance of the film lay in its faithful reflection of the context within which it was created. As David Blight has shown, by the time of the Civil War’s semi-centennial, between 1911 and 1915, the cultural quarrel between North and South over the conflict’s memory had come to an alleged end with sectional reconciliation emerging as the war’s dominant legacy.⁹ The semi-centennial celebrations marked the transformation of the legacy of the Civil War into an agreed-upon symbol of the United States. *The Birth of a Nation* both mirrored and promoted this spirit; and as such, it reached Britain.
- 10 Premiered in Britain on 27 September 1915, *The Birth of a Nation* was almost unanimously praised. Resistance to and negative criticism of the film were marginal.¹⁰ Part of this endorsement must have stemmed, as Michael Hammond has suggested, from the fact that Britons associated the events and values that they saw on the screen with contemporary British affairs, and primarily with their wartime experience.¹¹ In 1915, sentiments of racial unity, nationalism and sacrifice were put forward. Seeing themselves as undergoing a similar national challenge, the British saw in the Civil War a familiar experience and in *The Birth of a Nation* its visual account. However, evidence suggests that for British viewers there was more to the film than the relevance of the events and values that it presented. For them, a central aspect of the film, which generated both excitement and, to a lesser degree, detachment, was its persistent and un-translatable American foreignness.
- 11 Britons were thrilled to have an overview of a foreign war about which they felt they knew all too little. One of the film’s most exciting features, praised the Bioscope, was that it “does more [...] than present us with a series of mighty historical events. It links those events together and indicates their place as part of one great purpose.”¹² In a similar tone, the *Review of Reviewers* lauded the film “as an absorbing lesson in history [...] [with] a profound educational value. Few Englishmen have more than a nodding acquaintance with the great war of North and South; fewer still know anything of the ghastly time of ‘Reconstruction’ [...]”¹³ Since the days of the war, Americans presented the British public with fragmented information about and partial representations of what were often seen as disconnected wartime events. In 1915, Griffith gathered all these events and projected a single narrative on a single canvas. As such, the film was seen as a first authoritative lesson about a pivotal chapter in American history.
- 12 Although less enthusiastic reviews were more difficult to come across, since the film told the story of a foreign war it also generated a sense of detachment among British

critics. The Athenaeum, for example, stressed that while the film helped "correcting what may be a widely held false idea of the causes which led to the American Civil War [...]", this aspect of the war "does not appeal to us [...]"¹⁴. The British appropriated the abstract notions of unity, patriotism and sacrifice presented in the film, and the Civil War was indeed perceived as a familiar event. However, the British audiences also felt that they were offered an insight into a concrete, historical American war, an unfamiliar, even alien event.

- 13 As a story of a foreign war, it is not surprising that *The Birth of a Nation* generated expressions of indifference of the kind just mentioned. What is surprising, especially considering the British suspicion of American popular culture, was their rarity. What made a foreign war, as such, alluring and fascinating? What "profound educational value" could it have for contemporary Britons? If it was, as the *Observer* noted, a "great American drama", it was indeed very American.¹⁵ That, however, rather than a reason for alienation or even antagonism, was often considered one of the film's most attractive features. "We are introduced", noted one laudatory review, "to every conceivable sphere of life and to every possible class and type of American men and women."¹⁶ The "American odyssey", as one journal called the film, offered the British viewer an observation into the American home and society.
- 14 By 1915, few among the British public had experienced the United States directly and for many it remained distant and mysterious. As an American product and symbol, the film and the Civil War generated both interest and exotic wonder. Thus, *The Times* noted that the screening of an American film in a British theatre was "an event of considerable theatrical interest and significance."¹⁷ The KKK, this reviewer added with admiring puzzlement, was a "[...] strange, romantic, somehow intensely American affair [...] whose members [were] disguised in strange medieval garments [...]"¹⁸. To these reviewers, the film and the war were also interesting because they were American.
- 15 Part of the reason why the British found *The Birth of a Nation* appealing was because it was about the Civil War. The latter, in turn, was appealing since it was seen as a window on the United States. Keeping in mind that at the time the war was being rooted in the United States as a consensual national symbol, and that cinema had been from the start a major means of projecting national images of the United States, this was understandable.¹⁹ At the same time, the United States was appealing because it gained relevance for contemporary Britons and became part of their conception of themselves as a nation. First, in an unprecedented need of its aid, the United States turned highly relevant to the British in the most realpolitik sense. Additionally, the United States appealed to the British on an ideological level as well. As Douglas Lorimer has argued, between the Civil War and the first decades of the twentieth century the notion of an Anglo-Saxon race had emerged with great vigour on both sides of the Atlantic and for many tied the two peoples together.²⁰ This common racial and historical consciousness accounted partly for the positive vision the British had of the United States and of their reaction to *The Birth of a Nation*.
- 16 None of these, however, fully bridged the gap between the American context in which the film and the war had originated and the British context in which they were received. Upon the arrival of *The Birth of a Nation* in Britain, Bioscope typically remarked:

In the first place, it may be as well to point out that this picture is not a work of merely local interest [...] Its value as a wonderfully accurate reconstruction of a definite historical episode is so far transcended by its power and fascination as a mighty epic dealing with abstract human forces that its appeal will not be confined to Americans [...].²¹

- 17 The abstract notions that were imbedded in the film appealed to the British audiences. However, no less appealing, though disturbing at times, was that the film was also a “wonderfully accurate reconstruction of a definite historical episode” that was by no means British, but rather very American.

Gone with the Wind

- 18 In many ways, *Gone with the Wind* was cut from the same cloth as *The Birth of a Nation*. As was the case for Dixon, a major driving force behind Margaret Mitchell’s motivation to write the novel was to resurrect the honour of the South. She, too, found the long shadow of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* threatened the integrity of her region of birth and life.²² The film did not tone down much of these sentiments. Unsurprisingly, then, as Bruce Chadwick has argued, “the fingerprints of ‘*The Birth of a Nation*’ were all over ‘*Gone with the Wind*’.”²³ Like its elder relative, *Gone with the Wind* presented the mid-nineteenth century South as a peaceful, harmonious and idyllic society of slaves and their owners. As in Griffith’s film, this world was destroyed in the war and its aftermath. However, *Gone with the Wind* also differed from *The Birth of a Nation* in two aspects that are relevant to the present study. For one, the film featured few battle scenes, and its emphasis was on the folly of the war and the needless suffering and destruction that it had brought. Another related aspect was that *Gone with the Wind* decidedly turned the focus from the battlefield to the home front, and especially to the image of the Southern woman.
- 19 Historically flawed, the film was an American work of its time. Mitchell wrote the novel at the height of American isolationism and pacifism in the 1930s. The film reflected that spirit and conveyed – as did *The Littlest Rebel* (David Butler, 1935), *So Red the Rose* (King Vidor, 1935) and *Hearts in Bondage* (Lew Ayres, 1936) – that the Civil War, or any war, were not worth the human sacrifice that they claimed. Additionally, although the novel was primarily about the American South, Fleming’s film had made it a national symbol.²⁴ Advocating reconciliation by illustrating the horrors of the war and omitting fraught representations of racial tensions, the film was widely approved of in the United States.²⁵ As such, and like *The Birth of a Nation*, *Gone with the Wind* reached Britain as a consensual American symbol and authoritative account of the most American war.
- 20 In Britain, it has been argued, *Gone with the Wind*, was the “box-office phenomenon of the war years.”²⁶ Moreover, it is entirely plausible that British audiences flocked to the cinemas, at least to some extent, because, as Helen Taylor has shown, they were able to recognize themselves and their experiences in the values and events that the film presented. “[...] As a girl”, recalled one woman who participated in Taylor’s study, “I held up Scarlett as a kind of model for myself, especially in regards to her ‘never give up’ sentiments”.²⁷ “The scenes in the hospital”, wrote a critic, “give a picture of slaughter and desolation not quickly forgotten, particularly in these days.”²⁸ Seeing *Gone with the Wind* through local, contemporary eyes, British viewers appropriated what they thought reflected their experiences.

- 21 However, the film also drew some noticeable criticism when it first arrived in Britain in 1940. At times, it even generated antagonism among local viewers. Urging people to boycott the film due to the high prices of the tickets, an angry reader of the *Daily Mirror* stressed that, "Hollywood's a bit optimistic in expecting Britain to pour out what is saved [...] on four hours of the American Civil War, particularly when this country's got quite a war of its own."²⁹ The most poisonous expressions tied together Hollywood, the Civil War and the values that both represented, as being American and stressed that they were foreign, irrelevant and even antagonistic to the contemporary British experience.
- 22 Reviews of this kind accentuated – indeed they were based on the argument – that upon arriving in Britain, *Gone with the Wind* had crossed cultural borders. They also highlighted that some American features in the film could and should not be appropriated. This suggests that Britons saw *Gone with the Wind* not only through their contemporary experience, but also through their experience of the United States. The present analysis examines responses of this kind to two main features in the film: its anti-war message and its representation of gender roles, thus showing that Britons preserved the American character of the film and of the Civil War in order to fashion their national identity in opposition to the American one.
- 23 The film's appeasing message did not escape British critics. However, associating it with their contemporary war experience and not with the American legacy of the Civil War, many expressed unease about such a lesson. For example, Harry Mears, President of the Cinema Exhibitors' Association, wrote in April 1940 that "the horrors of war are so emphasised that the psychological effect upon the public may not be good in times when we are fighting for our existence."³⁰ Mears was at the time deeply involved in a dispute with MGM regarding the terms of distribution of the film in Britain, which is likely to have influenced his views.³¹ However, he was not wide of the mark. "I didn't really enjoy it", noted one Mass-Observation (M-O) diarist about her viewing experience, "I had been warned that it was very sad but it wasn't so much its sadness as the horrible realism of it [...] that made it un-enjoyable to me."³² In a context of anti-war feelings, many British viewers deemed the film and its representation of the Civil War uncomfortable and even dangerous.
- 24 Moreover, since the Civil War was an American emblem, the assault on what was seen as the film's irrelevant aspects or negative effects was often aimed at the United States itself. Edward Wood, for example, attacked the whole genre of Civil War films and remarked in August 1940:
- Many of the films that the British public does not yearn for at any time, and has absolutely no use for just now, depict some phase of the American Civil War, which started in 1861 and finished in 1865. I have lost count of the number of films I have seen with this war as a background, foreground, beginning, middle piece or ending, but I know there were too many for my liking since the present war began. [...] At this particular period of our history American producers have shown a sad lack of knowledge of what the British public wants in sending over such films. A more touchy people might have boycotted these films, but we are notoriously long-suffering in such matters. It cannot be said that films depicting the American Civil War have any educational value for us.³³
- 25 Bearing in mind the words of the angry reader of the *Daily Mirror*, it is clear that Wood, too, was not speaking only for himself. Immersed in a huge-scale conflict while the United States still kept aloof from Europe, British critics used the Civil War and *Gone*

with *the Wind* to express their misgivings about American policies. At the same time, these critics fashioned Britain's identity as a brave nation fighting for its existence vis-à-vis the image they constructed of the United States.

- 26 To an even greater extent, British reviewers fashioned their country's national identity against that of the United States through *Gone with the Wind*'s representations of gender roles. The image of British actress Vivien Leigh, who was cast over hundreds of American actresses who had auditioned for the part of Scarlett O'Hara, played a significant role.³⁴ No coverage of the film was complete without stressing Leigh's British background. Some regretted that Britain had lost a local star to Hollywood;³⁵ others saw it as a welcome symbol of Anglo-American harmony.³⁶ Everybody, however, celebrated Leigh's Britishness.
- 27 Soon, Leigh became the archetypical British woman, and critics began to hone her British femininity against Scarlett's. *Today's Cinema*, for example, described Scarlett's womanhood with evident disdain and stressed that she was "a revelation of a feminine dishonour [...]".³⁷ Another critic regretted that the great film dealt with the life-story "of a hussy."³⁸ Against Scarlett's seemingly flawed femininity, Leigh's British womanhood glowed. *The Picturegoer*, for example, published Leigh's own account of her experience on the set of *Gone with the Wind*. Deliberately distinguishing herself from Scarlett, Leigh said that the latter "needed a good, healthy old-fashioned spanking on a number of occasions and I should have been delighted to give it to her."³⁹ Leigh was fashioned in the British press as a moderate, innocent and motherly woman, i.e., a true British woman and all that Scarlett was not. Such expressions reflected the tension created in Britain during WWII, between efforts to sustain the traditional image of women as soft, domestic and passive, and the growing perception among the public of women as active, strong and resourceful due to their new social position in wartime Britain.⁴⁰ The advent of the American Southern belle played by a British actress provided Britons with an exotic model against which to fashion their perceptions of gender roles, then in evolution.
- 28 The British view of *Gone with the Wind* was not homogenous, certainly not as critics sometimes wished to present it. The public was divided both on the film's pacifist sentiments and on its representation of gender roles, as it was divided over other aspects of the film, such as its representations of racial relations. Some saw its anti-war messages as a legitimate lesson. For example, one reviewer argued:
- A point arises here whether the realism of the war scenes with their attendant tragedies will strike a little too closely at the heart of a nation at war, but even so the latter half, which deals specifically with the personal histories of the characters, will so absorb interest that any such effect will be diverted to less tumultuous emotions. Such scenes could not, in any case, be legitimately cut, for they are the basis of the whole argument and a vivid lesson in humanity's inhumanity.⁴¹
- 29 Similarly, as noted, some saw in Scarlett a role-model whose characteristics they found in themselves. Endeavouring to propel a distinct British identity at a time of uncertainty, expressions in the press concealed the fact that the public was more ambivalent in its views of Scarlett, the Civil War and of the United States.
- 30 This ambivalence mirrored the way in which Britons saw themselves in relation to the United States in the early stages of WWII. Historians have shown that the social and cultural changes that the war brought challenged British perceptions of many aspects of their identity and led them to re-consider some of them. The movement from

appeasement to war or the alteration of women's place in society were just two examples of changes that influenced Britons' perception of themselves. At the same time, the rapprochement of the United States – both physically and ideologically – opened the way for closer relations between the peoples, but also for confusion. An M-O survey from 1942 illustrated this when it showed that the United States' entry into WWII generated much confusion and even anger among the British public.⁴² One evident British reaction to the challenges brought by the war and to the involvement of the United States was to highlight Britain's identity in opposition to the United States'. For example, the arrival of about 130,000 segregated African American GIs in Britain became an abundant source of confusion for the population. One response to this situation was to emphasize the idea of Britain as a country that traditionally opposed racial discrimination and to stress that segregation had always been typically American.⁴³

- 31 As American emblems on both sides of the Atlantic, the combination of Hollywood and the Civil War would fit such British expectations particularly well. True, the British showed evident dislike of American cinema, let alone Civil War films. The Cinematograph Film Act (1927), which set quotas to limit the numbers of foreign films arriving in Britain, was one example of the growing antagonism, especially amongst the British elite, toward American cinema.⁴⁴ However, films about the Civil War incorporated some additional Americanism as they dealt with an event that had become a paramount American symbol since the turn of the century. Thus, the *Picturegoer* wrote about *So Red the Rose* that "the American Civil War period does not mean as much to us, obviously, as it does to American audiences, and in consequence one is not deeply moved as one might have been by the action."⁴⁵ On the same film, the *Kinematograph Weekly* said that "much of its subject matter is hardly of sufficient interest to English audiences", and that as such it was "a little too American in sentiments and detail."⁴⁶ These films, according to the reviews, were particularly uninteresting and un-British since they dealt with the Civil War. While less significant Civil War films drew such reviews already in the 1930s, British expressions of detachment from the United States through the representation of the Civil War reached a peak in *Gone with the Wind*.

Conclusion

- 32 When *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind* crossed the Atlantic, they crossed cultural borders. While many of the historical events and values that these films presented were translated according to contemporary British views, some of their features did not undergo such cultural adaptation. The American character of the films was preserved as was the status of the Civil War as an American historical event and symbol. It remains to be explored whether these could have been translated at all. However, we have endeavoured to show here that for the British it was important to maintain the American character of the films and of the Civil War. True, Britons reacted differently to the two films and to the Civil War. Despite some dissenting voices, in the case of *The Birth of a Nation* the British found the American nature of both the film and the war held some appeal and even provided them with a cause for celebrating their national identity. In the case of *Gone with the Wind* the reception was more ambivalent, and some used the film's and the war's American pedigree to draw a

divide between the countries. In both cases, however, that the films and the Civil War were American was essential. It helped the British understand the United States and define themselves against it.

- 33 In many ways, it is still true. Commenting on the issue of racism in British films, Dame Ruth Rendell, Baroness of Babergh and iconic British writer of detective novels, suggested in the House of Lords in 2002 that, "it might be well, too, for theatre management always to keep in mind the bad old days when, for instance, Hollywood film makers, in employing actors of African descent, almost invariably cast them in roles as menials or comic relief. I am thinking in particular of *Gone with the Wind*."⁴⁷ Through the lens of American representations of African Americans in films, Ruth Rendell asked the British to reconsider their attitudes to and representations of race and racism at home. Of course, the United States and its place in the world have been evolving, just as Britain and the Anglo-American relations have. Hollywood Civil War films have changed dramatically as well. *Glory* (Edward Zwick, 1989) and *Lincoln* (Steven Spielberg, 2012), for example, tell very different stories about the Civil War era and the present-day United States from those told in *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*. However, as American symbols, the two films and the Civil War that crossed the Atlantic with them have remained a reference for the British in their efforts to understand themselves within the frame of their "Special Relationship" with the United States.

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