

A Unique Problem and a Unique Opportunity

On June 8, the Los Angeles Times published an [opinion piece](#) by screenwriter John Ridley titled “Hey, HBO, ‘Gone With the Wind’ romanticizes the horrors of slavery. Take it off your platform for now.”

The next evening, HBO Max did just that.

Whether this was a coincidence, a coordinated effort or a capitulation is irrelevant. What matters is that this is a bona fide example of anti-racism on WarnerMedia’s part. A [statement](#) on the company’s website includes a possible explanation for the decision. “Like many companies, we donate to partner organizations and programs engaged in social justice work. We write checks and yet racial injustice persists. This moment teaches us that money is only a part of the solution.”

According to Ridley – who wrote the screenplay for “12 Years a Slave” – “Gone With the Wind” is its own unique problem. “It is a film that, when it is not ignoring the horrors of slavery, pauses only to perpetuate some of the most painful stereotypes of people of color,” he wrote in his op-ed.

Based on the public’s [reaction](#), you would think HBO Max had staged a book burning. People quoting Orwell and making accusations of “[virtue signaling](#)” is a sure sign that much of the outrage is coming from those who only skim headlines and make knee-jerk assumptions. What WarnerMedia is doing is not censorship – unlike Disney’s controversial decision in 1969 to edit the “[Sunflower](#)” character out of the “Pastoral Symphony” scene in “Fantasia.”

WarnerMedia has made it clear that they are not meddling with the film’s content. “... so when we return the film to HBO Max,

it will return with a discussion of its historical context and a denouncement of those very depictions, but will be presented as it was originally created, because to do otherwise would be the same as claiming these prejudices never existed,” said an HBO Max spokesperson in an interview with [The Verge](#).

Dana Harris-Bridson, Editor in Chief of film industry news website [IndieWire](#) agrees with WarnerMedia’s decision. “In terms of taking it down and giving context to it, I think it’s entirely appropriate. To me it’s no different than NASCAR saying we’re not going to allow the [Confederate flag](#). When you start taking sides like that, those who don’t take sides are going to stand out in sharp relief,” she said.

No ones’ First Amendment rights are being trampled here. It is perfectly within WarnerMedia’s purview to temporarily (or permanently) withdraw that title from the HBO Max platform. They didn’t remove it from Earth. In fact, *Gone With the Wind* became an [Amazon best seller](#) the day after it was removed, possibly due to the [Streisand Effect](#) – a societal reaction to the perception of having something taken away from it. As of this writing, there are 3,658 copies of the film for sale on eBay. It’s available.

Adding contextual content to a film of *Gone With the Wind*’s stature is an original move that will likely generate conversation about racial inequalities in America’s past and present. Meanwhile, the highly controversial Civil War epic “[The Birth of a Nation](#)” is currently viewable on a number of platforms with no disclaimer at all, despite its depiction of the Ku Klux Klan as heroic and African-Americans (some being white actors in blackface) as sexually aggressive, subservient predators.

Does this stop with *Gone With the Wind*? Given a long enough timeline, just about any film could possess some culturally objectionable component, and many do for a number of reasons. The war propaganda in *The Green Berets*, the glorification of

date rape in *Revenge of the Nerds*, the negative depiction of Native Americans in westerns.

Is there enough time, money and willpower to address every culpable project in the [Internet Movie Database's](#) 6.5 million titles? Of course not, but there should be some case-by-case efforts made to provide context to some of the larger offenders. Ridley has acknowledged that there is a difference.

“I would ask that all content providers look at their libraries and make a good-faith effort to separate programming that might be lacking in its representation from that which is blatant in its demonization,” Ridley writes.

Harris-Bridson believes *Gone With the Wind* was such a special case. “It’s the most popular movie in history in terms of box office. It has as big of a target on its back as anything. I wouldn’t be surprised if someone isn’t going through the catalog (WarnerMedia’s) right now to flag other potential candidates and figure out what will need addressing,” she said.

One of the only upsides to the COVID-19 pandemic is that it has hit the world’s pause button and allowed us to reevaluate some status quos. The societal station wagon is not going 70 mph, making this moment a good time to tinker under the hood and change a tire or two. Providing contextualization to a classic like *Gone With the Wind* is just one example. Difficult subjects like racial inequalities in both society and business, police reform, education, climate change – are all on the table now.

WarnerMedia’s decision isn’t cancel culture, it’s counterculture.